

With his conference now in jeopardy, Lloyd George quickly removed the question from the agenda. But in the end, the Canadian view prevailed. At the Washington Conference in 1921, the Anglo-Japanese Treaty was replaced with a virtually unenforceable set of multilateral disarmament agreements designed to strengthen Pacific stability. These were cold comfort in Australia, where the Canadian victory rankled for a long time.

Any possibility that the rift between Canada and Australia might be repaired evaporated with the election of W.L. Mackenzie King as Canada's tenth prime minister in December 1921. A Liberal protégé of Laurier, King shared the former prime minister's determination to avoid external entanglements that would weaken the bonds that held French and English Canada together. Despite his cautious temperament and his relative inexperience, King boldly seized every opportunity during his first year in office to assert Canada's authority over its foreign policy. When it was decided to convene an imperial conference in the spring of 1923, King resolved to use the occasion to repudiate the whole notion of an imperial foreign policy. The prospect of challenging the British Empire during his first overseas assignment filled the self-effacing prime minister with dread. "I am filled with terror," he confided to his diary, "at the thought of having to speak many times and [at] my inability to work out themes."¹¹

What King lacked as a public speaker, he more than made up for in dogged persistence. No sooner had Lord Curzon introduced the question of imperial foreign policy than the Canadian prime minister rose in his place to declare his government's intention to "pursue a foreign policy of its own."¹² He was immediately confronted by the new Australian prime minister. Tall, handsome and athletic, Stanley M. Bruce was the perfect foil for the middle-aged and drab Mackenzie King. Vigorously, Bruce rejected the idea that each part of the empire might shape a foreign policy of its own. "If the discussion continues on the present basis," he exclaimed, "we are going to achieve nothing at all with regard to consultation on foreign affairs."¹³

That, of course, was precisely King's objective, and as the conference proceeded, he opposed every effort to reach agreed positions on individual questions of foreign and defence policy. In these detailed discussions, King and Bruce clashed once again. The Australian's repeated efforts to secure Canadian support for a resolution endorsing Britain's plans for the defence of Singapore and the Suez Canal were turned aside. By the end of the conference, King's victory was complete. In a final burst of activity, he amended the meeting's concluding resolution on foreign relations to reflect his conviction that imperial conferences were consultative, not policy-making, bodies. King's success ended the experiment with a common foreign policy and signalled the emergence of the modern Commonwealth. It also added to the growing gulf separating Canada and Australia. King's attitude towards the empire was incomprehensible to many Australian observers. The young R.G. Casey, then serving as an Australian