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Perspective

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Canada's Major Parties

by Raymond Moley

THE first Prime Minister of the Dominion of Canada took office almost exactly 88 years ago. He was Sir John A. Macdonald. He was a Conservative, no doubt patterning his party after the party re-created by Disraeli in Britain. Macdonald's Conservative Party has controlled the government 44 of those 88 years. The Liberals have held control for the same length of time. There is a further mathematical coincidence in the fact that during exactly half of the Liberal years the Prime Minister was W.L. Mackenzie King.

During the entire period from 1867 to the first world war the essential sources of Conservative strength were the major capitalistic institutions so necessary in developing a new nation. Conservatism also had great strength in Quebec with its powerful Catholic population.

But in the first world war, Sir Robert Borden, the Conservative Prime Minister, sponsored general conscription, and as a result Quebec has since been lost to the party. King, a rising Liberal politician then, was lucky in avoiding the conscription issue. It is also true that the Conservative Party has had little or no consistent policy since. R.B. Bennett, the Conservative who supplanted King in 1930, ended up by espousing a New Deal for Canada based upon the model so successfully launched by F.D.R. in the United States.

In 1942 the Conservative Party moved farther to the left in announcing a program of labor and social legislation. It also selected as its leader John Bracken, who came from midwestern Canada and was the head of a minor party called "Progressive." The result was a change in name to Progressive Conservative. Only in the current clash of the parties in the Ottawa Parliament, where Progressive Conservative leader George Drew has vigorously opposed enlarging the powers of the Defense Production Minister, have I seen any evidence of a division on real principle.

Almost the only survivor of the old and authentic conservatism is former Prime Minister Arthur Meighen,

sometimes called the Herbert Hoover of Canada. I found in my interview with him and in his writings that eloquent defense of established institutions, of close relations with Britain, and that fear of state power characteristic of Conservative governments of the past.

Mackenzie King will, like F.D.R., be the object of fierce debate for a generation. Despite his colorless personality, he had an amazing sense of timing and of public opinion. He and his party talked big about radical reform but in practice were conservative. Perhaps that is why Liberalism in Canada, as in the United States, has come to mean many things to many men. Moreover, since the

estrangement of Quebec and the capture of the three Western provinces by socialism and Social Credit, the Liberal Party is about the only national party in Canada. It has adopted just enough of the program of a welfare state to be able to claim the support of humanitarian elements. It adopted crop supports, unemployment insurance, family allowances, grants to the provinces for health services, national housing, and pensions for the aged and blind. These measures are frugally administered.

King encouraged the creation and strengthening of the National Liberal Federation, a nationwide association of citizens sympathetic with the Liberal Party. Like the National Union in Britain, it has no legal authority over the Liberal Party in Parliament. But it is very important to the Prime Minister and the members of his government as a means not only of providing a kindred spirit among voters in the provinces but of keeping the parliamentary party apprised of the opinions and temper of the country. There is also a Progressive Conservative Association, with much the same tasks as the Liberal Federation.

STUDENTS of Canadian politics, however, have noted that the party organizations are largely dormant between elections. This is in sharp contrast with the situation prevailing in Britain and is not unlike our own American habit of political neglect.

Newsweek, August 1, 1955

MEIGHEN PAPERS, Series 6 (M.G. 26, I, Volume 225)

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