

Norman Robertson

The quiet giant of Canadian diplomacy



Ambassador Robertson with U.S. President Eisenhower in Washington, 1957

The date was January 28, 1941. Shortly after noon in the offices of the Department of External Affairs, Under-Secretary of State O.D. Skelton suffered a heart attack and died. At this crucial moment in its history, Canada had lost one of its greatest architects of foreign policy, and Prime Minister Mackenzie King had lost his closest confidante.

One of the greatest servants this country has ever had.

—Pierre Elliot Trudeau

The news reached King by 3:00 P.M. By 4:30, he had named Skelton's successor: 37-year-old Norman A. Robertson. A tall Vancouver-born diplomat with a strong track record in trade and economic issues, the new Under-Secretary had previously worked closely with King.

The ascent of one so young to the summit of an important government department would be an unusual event even today. Sixty years ago it was extraordinary.

But then, so was Norman Robertson. He had a prodigious intellect that gave him an early head start on his peers. He was a University of British Columbia freshman at 15, a Rhodes Scholar at 18, a Brookings Institution graduate at 23 and a third secretary in the Department of External Affairs at 24. In the late 1930s, he was the senior departmental representative in critical trade negotiations with Britain and the United States. Thus in 1941, although he was younger than other plausible candidates to succeed Skelton (including Lester B. Pearson), he was on virtually equal footing with them in seniority.

As head of External Affairs from 1941 to 1946, Robertson helped steer Canadian foreign policy in new directions while managing the massive wartime expansion of the Department. Under his leadership, Canadian diplomats asserted a greater role for Canada in directing the war effort and shaping the postwar peace. Robertson was the senior Canadian official at the 1945 San Francisco Conference, where the United Nations was founded.

In matters of personal style, Robertson was cheerfully unorthodox. Casual in dress and deportment (he wrote once of his distaste for "piped vests and white spats" and the "select silk hat brigade"), Robertson was nevertheless a consummate public servant, tactful, considerate to colleagues and a masterful consensus builder. While he would argue down to the wire against policy proposals with which he disagreed,

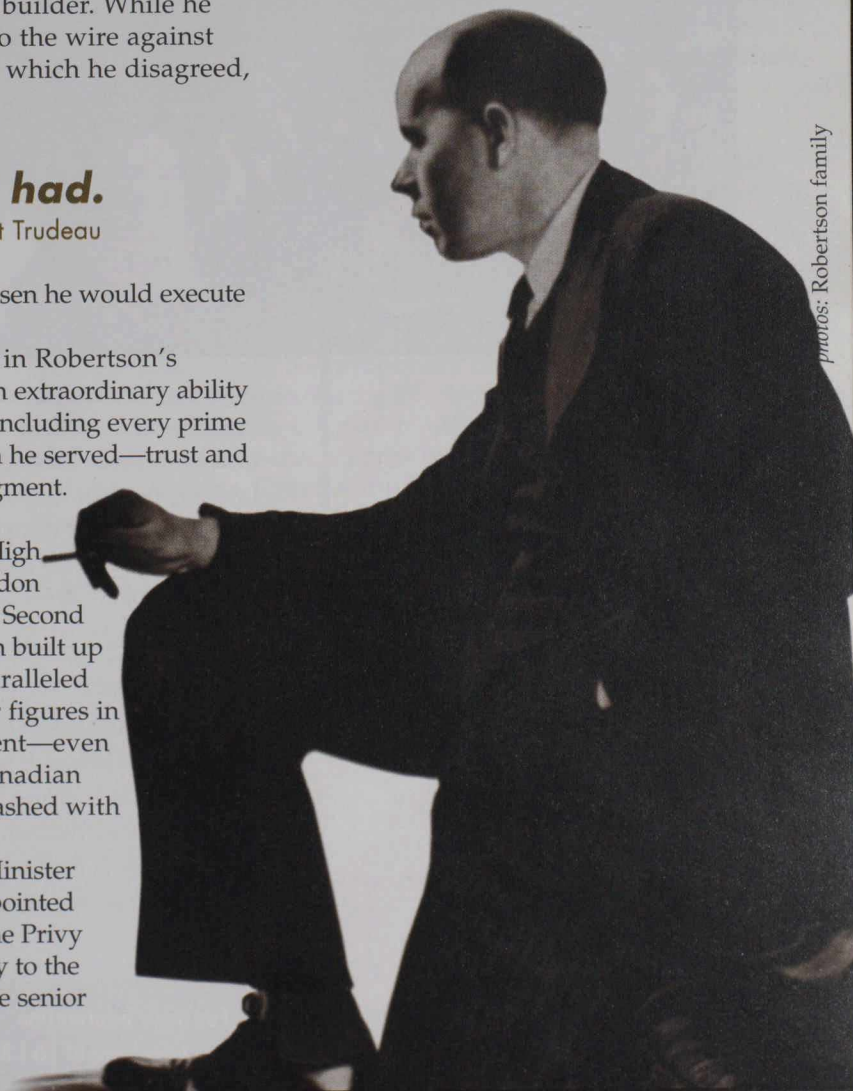
once a policy was chosen he would execute it to the letter.

The other factor in Robertson's meteoric climb was an extraordinary ability to inspire in others—including every prime minister under whom he served—trust and confidence in his judgment.

This extended to foreign contacts. As High Commissioner to London immediately after the Second World War, Robertson built up relationships of unparalleled closeness with senior figures in the British government—even while upholding Canadian interests that often clashed with those of his hosts.

In 1949, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent appointed Robertson Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet—in effect, the senior

official in the Public Service. In 1952 Robertson returned to London, where he served as High Commissioner for nearly five more years. After a brief posting to Washington as Canada's Ambassador to the United States, he came back to Ottawa for an unprecedented second term as Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs. That tenure coincided with the turbulent and divisive period of the Diefenbaker government. Through it all, Robertson steered a calm and careful course, until ill health forced him to resign. Up to his death in 1968, he was consulted frequently on key questions related to Canada's international affairs. ●



photos: Robertson family

Norman Robertson at the peak of his influence during the Second World War