

1957

1963

LEARNING
TO ADAPT

³⁷ This cartoon reflects the uneasiness felt in both the Department of External Affairs and the Diefenbaker government when the Liberal party's long hold on power ended in 1957. (Source: Les Callan Estate, Library and Archives Canada, e008443938)

In 1957, a tired Liberal government was defeated by the Progressive Conservatives under John Diefenbaker, who solidified his grip on power in the 1958 general election by winning a substantial majority of seats in Parliament. For the first time since 1930, the Department had to deal with a prime minister who was not sympathetic to its cause. Diefenbaker was deeply suspicious of External Affairs and its senior officers, whom he derided as “Pearsonalities.”

Although Diefenbaker had had some foreign affairs experience during his long parliamentary career, he (and his Cabinet colleagues) did not have Pearson's depth of knowledge and so faced a learning curve that the Department worked to accommodate. The Department had to adjust as well to the new Prime Minister's different priorities, such as his greater emphasis on the

Commonwealth and a fondness for harsh language on Cold War issues.

The process of adjustment was made easier when the clerk of the Privy Council, Robert Bryce, whom Diefenbaker came to trust, arranged for the first-ever appointment of a senior liaison officer to the Prime Minister's Office. Basil Robinson earned Diefenbaker's confidence, and was thus able to keep the Prime Minister aware of departmental thinking and keep the Department informed of what the Prime Minister wanted.

Diefenbaker himself took on the External Affairs portfolio until he could find a suitable minister. To do so he went outside his caucus, recruiting the president of the University of Toronto, Sidney Smith, a distinguished public figure.