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THE IMPLICATIONS OF A FREE SOCIETY

Address by Mr. L. B. Pearson,
Secretary of State for External Affairs
at the Opening Meeting of the 18th Annual
Conference of the Canadian Institute on Public
Affairs, Lake Couchiching, August 13, 1949.

The theme of your Conference, although it lends itself to much speculation as to what is a "free society", is a challenge to every student of public affairs and every participant in public life; indeed to every citizen. The government of our free society, which has its roots in Greek humanism and Christian morality, is based on operative principles which were largely defined in the 18th and 19th centuries. These principles are now threatened from two directions. The source of one danger is to be found in the social consequences of modern technical development. Society has become so complex, and the responsibilities of government so specialized that, with the best will in the world, we sometimes find it hard to preserve intact the free institutions which we so greatly cherish. The other threat is contrived and deliberate. The whole conception of government by consent, as we understand that term, is under attack by a group within our own community and by strong and powerful nations outside which argue that its values are false and its results are evil. The measures we must take to protect ourselves against these forces often place us in the danger of betraying the principles upon which our political institutions are established. How, then, are we to arrange our economic life, to make best use of the productive capacities of the nation, to conduct our foreign affairs, to prepare our defences against external dangers, to strengthen our political institutions against those who attack them from within, and at the same time maintain and extend the free society in which we live and which we hold to be the best guarantee of a vigorous national life?

This is not only a long-term problem for the political scientist. It is an urgent question which daily, in a dozen ways and in the most practical terms, confronts everyone in the country — newspaper editors, business managers, trade union leaders, members of parliament, cabinet ministers, civil servants, professional men and women, agricultural leaders, provincial and municipal authorities; and indeed every citizen. I am sure that everyone present has encountered this question in some of the various ways in which it appears. In my own particular field of responsibility, foreign relations, the problem takes many forms with which I am all too familiar. How, for example, can small states or relatively small states preserve some form of national identity and, at the same time, maintain the welfare of their citizens in a world dominated by giants? How can we transfer to the field of international organization the principles of government by consent which prevail in our own national life? How can we maintain these principles internationally, without dangerously narrowing the limits of international organization, when they are constantly under attack by aggressive totalitarian communism, and especially when this attack is supported by the power of the Soviet State? How can we