

It is often thought that virtually all the most senior civil servants in Ottawa during the Second World War and through the post-War period were partisan Liberals. As a generalization, I believe that to be shaky in the extreme. As applied to Norman Robertson, I know it to be false. It is true that he was appointed to the Department of External Affairs in 1929 by Mackenzie King. But it is also true that he served as loyally and conscientiously under the governments of R.B. Bennett and John Diefenbaker as he did under the governments of Mackenzie King, Louis St Laurent and L.B. Pearson. To have acted otherwise would have seemed to him a stain on his honour as a civil servant, which he took very seriously. Incidentally, he once confided in me that he always had himself inscribed in his diplomatic passport as a "civil servant", rather than as a "diplomat", a small but significant fact that says a good deal about him, as I shall try to illustrate later. It is also relevant that there was no Secretary of State for External Affairs for whom he had a warmer regard or under whom he served more happily than Howard Green, the Conservative M.P. for Vancouver-Quadra.

The reason why he is often thought of as a Liberal, I suppose, is that the period of his greatest influence and importance coincided with the period when he served Mackenzie King most closely, from January 1941, when he succeeded O.D. Skelton as Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, until September 1946, when he became High Commissioner in London. Indeed, during that period there were few individuals, if any, who were closer to the Prime Minister or saw him more constantly than Norman Robertson. But it would be mistaken to assume from the closeness of that relationship that it was accompanied by personal or partisan commitment. On that point I can offer some direct evidence to the contrary.

When Mackenzie King died in July of 1950, Norman and Jetty Robertson were staying with my wife and myself at my parents' summer place on an island a little north of Pointe-au-Baril in Georgian Bay. The day the news arrived, Norman and I had gone by outboard-motor the mile or two to the general store to get the mail and gas and groceries. It was there that he received word of Mackenzie King's death and of the arrangements for the funeral and learnt that he was to be a literary executor, as well as honorary pall-bearer. Clearly he would have to return to Ottawa without delay. But in the meantime we went back to the island. After I had started the motor and it had stopped coughing and kicking, I turned to Norman and made the kind of anodyne remark about

the late Prime Minister that the circumstances seemed to require. I will never forget his reply. He said quite simply: "I never saw a touch of greatness in him". That remark, coming from someone in such a good position to judge, has stayed with me ever since and has inevitably coloured my view of all the assessments that have been made over the years of Mackenzie King as man and leader.

### Other countries

I realize that I should also say at least a little about his attitudes towards other countries, and particularly towards other countries that loomed large in Canada's foreign relations during the period when he had wide responsibility for them at one post or another. My starting-point is the belief that almost all diplomats, in my experience, however hotly they might deny it, are prejudiced, and often deeply prejudiced, against one country or another. They are anti-American, or anti-French, or anti-British, or anti-Arab, or anti-Israeli. Norman Robertson was one of the very few diplomats of my acquaintance in whom I could never detect any of that kind of underlying prejudice. If his term as Ambassador in Washington was not the happiest period in his career, I could never find any trace of anti-Americanism in him. That should not be surprising in one who had studied at the Brookings Institution and who had taught, not once but twice, at Harvard, returning at his own request in 1933-1934 on a year's leave of absence. In London he was completely at ease; and I doubt whether relations between government departments in Ottawa and in Whitehall have ever been closer than they were during his two terms as High Commissioner. What may not be so well known is that he felt almost equally at ease and at home in Paris. I was with him there in the late fall of 1958 for a meeting of the North Atlantic Council and for a meeting afterwards of Canadian heads of mission in Europe. We found time for walks together through the city, and I was constantly being surprised by his knowledge of what had happened in this or that *arrondissement* and of what famous writer or musician had lived in this street or that. And he enjoyed few holidays more than those he spent with his old friend, Darsie Gillie, who for many years was Paris correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* and had a flat on the Île St Louis.

What about his attitude towards the Soviet Union, it may be asked. On that topic I do not feel myself sufficiently qualified to be categorical. But, looking back, it seems to me that he was only as anti-Soviet as he was forced to be by events. There, too, his funda-

*Few individuals  
were closer  
to Prime Minister*