

INTRODUCTION

In 1949, the crucial event in Canada's national politics was the election which took place on June 27th. After a pre-election swing through Western Canada, in which he honed his political skills and acquired the nickname "Uncle Louis," Louis St. Laurent led the incumbent Liberal Party in what was only his second general election as a candidate and his first campaign as party leader and Prime Minister. His principal adversary was George Drew, the former Premier of Ontario, who had decisively won the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party in October 1948, but whose initial national electoral foray was a disastrous blend of shrill rhetoric and inept strategy. The result was a rout. The Liberals under St. Laurent won nearly half the popular vote and close to three-quarters of the seats in the House of Commons, a remarkable triumph which fell just short of William Lyon Mackenzie King's great victory of 1940.

For the most part, Canada's external relations were noncontroversial—before, during and after the 1949 election. The most significant post-war development to that point in Canada's foreign and defence policy, its participation in the North Atlantic Treaty, was confirmed almost unanimously by the House of Commons in a pre-dissolution rush of parliamentary business. St. Laurent decided not to attend the meeting of Prime Ministers in London in April 1949 which considered India's relationship with the rest of the Commonwealth. The Secretary of State for External Affairs, Lester Pearson, who represented Canada at that gathering, kept his overseas itinerary to a minimum on the firm advice of his political associates and advisers. In early June, St. Laurent declared that there were "no outstanding issues in this election" and it soon became apparent that Canadians welcomed his assurance that a government which he led would "continue to work for peace and security, for complete recognition of Canadian nationhood and the development of all aspects of our national life." Drew's complaint that Canada had turned its back on the British market in favour of continental trade simply begged the question of what alternative course of action Drew could propose.¹ Certainly some decisions concerning Canada's policy in international relations were deferred until after the election, but this often had more to do with the inattention of politicians out on the hustings than with fear of officials that recommendations would be disputed or contradicted. In effect, the electoral outcome confirmed the partnership between St. Laurent and Pearson which had been so vital to the direction of Canada's external affairs since they were first associated as minister and deputy in September 1946.

That personal association and rapport, which had facilitated Pearson's entry into politics in September 1948, was reinforced by a broad understanding and agreement on foreign policy questions. That gave Pearson an unusual degree of latitude as Secretary of State, which he was careful not to abuse by presumption, indifference or insensitivity. A further advantage for Pearson as minister was his familiarity with the Department of External Affairs. Pearson had been a member of the foreign service for two decades and Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs for two years. His mastery of his portfolio was unquestioned and unsurprising. This knowledge and experience was vital to the conduct of Canada's international relations and to the leadership of the Department.

¹J. Murray Beck, *Pendulum of Power: Canada's Federal Elections* (Scarborough, 1968), pp. 259–75.