

Edited by Patrice Dutil

# THE UNEXPECTED LOUIS ST-LAURENT

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## THE UNEXPECTED LOUIS ST-LAURENT



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# Introduction

## Louis St-Laurent's Leadership in History

PATRICE DUTIL

One thing is certain ... no finer human being ever governed Canada and none has been so thoroughly misunderstood as St-Laurent.

– Bruce Hutchison, 1964<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 1961, four years after leaving office, Louis St-Laurent granted a series of interviews to CBC journalist Jeanne Sauvé at his summer house in St. Patrick's, now known as St-Patrice and part of Rivière-du-Loup,<sup>2</sup> a pleasant two-hour drive north of Quebec City. It is a rare document: it would be the only time he ever granted such a favour after he left office. He was almost eighty years old at that point but had not lost a bit of his verve. His head moved vigorously from left to right as he talked, almost as if he read the horizons of his precise beliefs. The signature pout-and-shrug was just as evident as it always had been, and he was thoughtful as he answered Sauvé's questions directly. It was summer, and the interview was recorded outside, in a garden refreshed by the breezes off the St. Lawrence River. The former prime minister was dressed like a country gentleman, with a light suit and a dark bow tie. His clear horn-rimmed glasses were fashionable (he ditched the black specs that had been his trademark through the 1950s), and even though the broadcast was black-and-white, viewers could see the traces of a light suntan on his high forehead, barely concealed by the white hair. He seemed a man at ease.

Sauvé's interview started with a number of compelling questions about the joys and drawbacks of political life, and his answers said a lot about who he was.

Yes, he regretted the treatment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War when he was minister of justice, and he admitted that “mistakes were made” though he vividly recalled that the fears of Japanese invasion were real.<sup>3</sup> He did not regret his government’s attitude towards the pipeline project, even though it may have cost the Liberals the election of 1957. “We had perhaps become accustomed to carrying on as a board of directors and that displeased a part of the Canadian public,” he admitted. But the project was essential for prosperity, he insisted. If he had regrets, he did not display them.

Sauvé peppered him with questions in the hope of getting him to reveal his political mind. Why did he accept Mackenzie King’s invitation to join the government in 1941? It was, he responded, a question of duty. One son had enlisted in the navy; a daughter was in the Canadian Women’s Army Corps. He’d been asked to serve by the prime minister and he could not say no, even though his wife was ill at the time and needed help. Politics was hardly a vocation, he said. He was happy his father had been defeated long before, in the 1904 provincial election, because the family simply was not ready for it at the time. It would have been too much of a demand on his mother, and Moïse’s obligations to his family would have been diminished. Sauvé asked him whether there was much merit in political life. St-Laurent thought about his answer for a moment and conceded a small “yes”: politics had merit in that an individual could be involved in some interesting issues, and yes, there could be enjoyment if the public was interested in the issues being discussed. He added that there was satisfaction in “being useful” but warned that the feeling might just be an illusion. Jeanne Sauvé then asked him whether he had enjoyed power. Again, he hesitated. “No, I don’t think so” he said, “[it] is not really power ... it is the satisfaction of getting a number of people to work together harmoniously and to achieve certain results.” When asked about what quality made him popular, St-Laurent again shrugged, not without some genuinely sincere shyness. Canadians were disposed to the idea that being a Catholic and of “French descent” did not prevent him from being a “likeable chap.” The cadence of his English would have been recognized in Yarmouth, Toronto, any town in the Prairies, or Victoria. Sometimes defensive, sometimes more assertive, CBC viewers watched a remarkable man candidly relive the previous twenty years of his life. Strangely, inexplicably, Radio-Canada’s audience was not given a similar opportunity to see the former prime minister express himself to a fellow francophone.

Louis St-Laurent was a quiet, shy man. With Sauvé, he seemed comfortable among his flowers and played remarkably well to the cool medium of television (which must have been a surprise to those who had seen his wooden performances in the 1957 election campaign). He was a serious man, and his answers

were offered honestly; no one in his long life ever said the opposite. He believed in what he felt and he said what he believed. He could be blunt and straightforward. Most people appreciated that quality, though some saw it as cold and humourless: threats to resign coming from ministers or staff were met with a stony silence and the assurance that government could operate quite well without them.

He did unexpected things. He was a practical man but time and again showed he was also idealistic. He was rooted in a traditional French-Canadian mentality that respected authority and traditions but proved to have an openness of mind that allowed for originality, intuition, and flexibility. He was quite happy to challenge conventions, it turned out. His personal messenger/driver throughout his years in Ottawa was Aldérie GrosLouis, a Huron-Wendat from the Loretteville Reserve near Quebec City who accompanied him everywhere – including during the whirlwind world trip of 1954. GrosLouis happened to be celebrating his sixty-ninth birthday on the way to Japan, and “the boss” arranged for cake and champagne to be served in his honour.<sup>4</sup> Those qualities made him many friends not only in politics but also in life. He had a knack for assessing situations quickly and could just as quickly formulate a clear course of action. But at the same time, he had the maturity to understand that different viewpoints could be valid. Jean Thérèse Riley begins her account of Louis St-Laurent, her grandfather, by recalling a daring argument she had with Canada’s prime minister as a young girl. She remembers the unique mixture of seriousness and fun and his remarkable ability to relate to and influence the vast gamut of people he met. His capacity to communicate, to be versatile, and his undeniable charisma gave him the confidence to assume power. It was that ability to adapt and to try new things that made Louis St-Laurent a trail-blazer in many areas of policy and governance. He had modernized Canada in so many ways that the astuteness of his policies and politics was beyond question. In matters of the military, immigration, significant infrastructures (such as the St. Lawrence Seaway or the Trans-Canada Highway), regional development, justice, arts, university funding, pension and old age assistance reform, the creation of the Registered Retirement Savings Plan (RRSP), support for the disabled, housing, federal-provincial relations (including negotiating the entry of Newfoundland and Labrador into Confederation), international affairs, and national symbolism, to name but a few policy areas, he had decidedly moved Canada into a brand new, modern era. Sauvé did not ask about any of this in her CBC interview.

In November 1941, Mackenzie King asked St-Laurent to join the cabinet. It was unexpected. He hesitated for many days, recognizing that duty called

him to do what the prime minister asked. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on that fateful Sunday morning of 6 December put paid to any doubts, and he was sworn in at Rideau Hall a few days later. Within seven years, in November 1948, he reached the top of Disraeli's proverbial "greasy pole" with the driest hands possible. Seven months later, he led the Liberals to their greatest victory in history. In 1953, steady through eventful reforms and the Korean War, he captained the red team to another, albeit diminished, triumph. In 1955, an article in *Macleans*' magazine declared him the "greatest vote getter Canada has ever seen."<sup>5</sup> In 1957, most thought Canada's best-known great-grandfather would win again and lead the Liberals to a third consecutive decade in power. Canada's economy was on fire for most of his mandate, his team had shone through the Suez Crisis (although many voters were upset, believing that St-Laurent had shown Britain and France grave disrespect), and prospects looked bright. In March, a Gallup Poll showed that 46.8 percent of voters intended to vote Liberal – more than enough for a comfortable majority.<sup>6</sup> But things went sour, and, at seventy-six years of age, Louis St-Laurent lost some of the fire in the belly that was essential for the good fight. Then, very suddenly in the last weeks of the campaign, a surprising Diefenbakermania took hold, and the party was over. St-Laurent and the Liberals won the popular vote, and he could have pushed to form a minority government with the support of Major James Coldwell's CCF, much like King had done with the Progressives in 1925 (or Trudeau would in 1972 with the NDP). But he was exhausted, and his party was too. He announced his retirement in November 1957, almost nine years to the day after assuming the prime ministership.

Ashamed, personally hurt, and filled with guilt, Louis St-Laurent quietly disappeared from the scene. Canada moved on and entered nothing short of a social and cultural revolution in the 1960s. Louis St-Laurent now belonged to another century, it seemed, perhaps one even older than the First World War generation. He convinced himself that he only had answers to questions people no longer asked, and he became silent. He returned to Quebec City and the magnificent home he loved on the Grande Allée, noiselessly returned to work in the family firm, and resumed teaching a few courses at Laval University's law school. With his unobtrusiveness, he lost none of his dignity or his sincere idealism. A few people who knew him worked on books that would be flattering of his time in office, but the memory of him disappeared with the 1960s. He was the man in the double-breasted suit in an age that decidedly favoured the single-breasted, modern look. He was bow ties and homburg when Canada was open-collared and bare-headed. He was radio when television was now "the medium."

Louis St-Laurent (1882–1973), Canada’s prime minister from 1948 to 1957, remains an enigmatic figure. He came to electoral politics late in life, immediately vaulted into the Mackenzie King cabinet as minister of justice at a time when Canada was already heavily invested in the Second World War. He became prime minister at age sixty-six, a statesman already, far more than a politician. He was much older than any other person, before or since, in assuming the post. His government was extraordinarily creative, and the traces of its decisions are still vibrant seventy years later, if largely taken for granted. For sure, he governed in a time of prosperity in the West. One is tempted to summarize this time in Canada by referring to how Australian writers Stella Lees and June Senyard entitled their book: *The 1950s: How Australia Became a Modern Society, and Everyone Got a House and Car*.<sup>7</sup> Canadians were more inclined towards revolutionary Tupperware than the politics of the left and were quite happy with the evolution of liberalism as it sought to expand social and economic programs.<sup>8</sup> On that front, the St-Laurent government did not disappoint as it introduced a variety of poverty-reduction programs for the elderly, the disabled, and the long-term unemployed. Some thought Ottawa miserly, others thought it was going too far, and there is no doubt that many voters did indeed turn to a more populist right as the decade progressed (notably those who also supported the Union Nationale in Quebec and the Social Credit Party in Alberta, both provincially and across Canada). But the reality is that Canada under Louis St-Laurent continued its ambitious march towards an unprecedented number of social and cultural programs that prepared the way for the revolutionary 1960s – even while it balanced its budget before the 1957 showdown and practically retired the national debt.



Few people have actually articulated a judgment on St-Laurent’s tenure in office. There is no doubt that, in his day, many of the leading journalists – mostly leaning Liberal – liked him and his government a great deal.<sup>9</sup> The journalist Bruce Hutchison, one of the most influential writers in the 1950s and 1960s, called St-Laurent an “amateur in politics” but admired the man’s intelligence – “as resourceful as Meighen’s and far superior to King’s.”<sup>10</sup> Dale C. Thomson, who worked as his aide in the Prime Minister’s Office from 1953 to 1957 and then for a few months before St-Laurent’s retirement, wrote a glowing biography of the man that was published in 1967, Canada’s centennial year. In Thomson’s eyes, St-Laurent incarnated everything that was truly “Canadian.” He meant national unity at a time when dis-unity was increasingly menacing. The established order was being challenged on many fronts: by the rising

labour unions, by women, Indigenous peoples, minorities, and, not least, by the *Québécois* who were already taking the first steps of their Quiet Revolution. For a nationalistic English-Canadian audience, Thomson's book delivered reliably on its promise of a comprehensive biography devoted to a man who loved Canada. It echoed what the journalist Bruce Hutchison had written a few years before, observing that St-Laurent "was Canadian, the most truly Canadian of all our prime ministers up to his time. He felt no nostalgia for the old lands of Europe nor any sense of isolation from the rest of his country in Quebec. Canada was the centre and workshop of his mind, as natural to him as his breath."<sup>11</sup>

Some Toronto historians were less impressed. Donald Creighton was so infuriated by the Americanization of Canada under the Liberal governments of the 1940s and 1950s that he took refuge in writing a biography of Sir John A. Macdonald in order to rediscover the real nature of the country. In his assessment of those years, *The Forked Road: Canada, 1939-75* (published in the landmark Canadian Centenary Series in 1976), he had hardly anything to say about St-Laurent, but he often paused to note how the prime minister was hostile to anything that smacked of British institutions or practice. A historian who was so willing to give John A. Macdonald personal credit refused to accord the same consideration to St-Laurent, who was dismissed as a charmless "company chairman" who had a "harsh, nasal accent." Everything seemed to be the product of "natural economic and social forces," and the prime minister's name was not even mentioned in the concluding chapter.<sup>12</sup> Twenty years later, Michael Bliss's impressive and impressionistic study of Canadian prime ministers showed that Creighton's severe judgment had rubbed off on the University of Toronto campus. Bliss did not even include a chapter on St-Laurent; instead, he allotted only a few pages in an informal addendum to the chapter on Mackenzie King. Bliss was, in fact, hostile. He described St-Laurent as "aristocratic, aloof, and, whenever removed from Ottawa, out of touch." In St-Laurent, Bliss only saw a "package" developed and delivered by a public relations firm, a spent force within four years of achieving power, who should have retired long before 1957.<sup>13</sup>

Not all of the University of Toronto was antagonistic towards St-Laurent. Robert Bothwell was more appreciative, observing, in his entry for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, that St-Laurent possessed "the best characteristics of a prime minister but few of the best attributes of a politician." Bothwell interpreted St-Laurent as an activist, "at home and abroad," who offered "something new and modern." He argued that, "more than any prime minister since, St-Laurent dominated his cabinet and his party."

Historians and political scientists have generated an impressive literature on government policies during the period of the 1940s and 1950s – especially

when it comes to Canada's foreign and military policy – but they have had more trouble in assessing the personal role of Louis St-Laurent in these affairs. In the rankings of scholars organized by *Maclean's* magazine in 1997, 2011, and 2016, he has ranged from a remarkable fourth place to seventh place. Today, he and his government have been accused of thoughtless arrogance and, in the words of the current prime minister, of “purposeful” neglect in their management of tuberculosis among the Inuit. This was not just an issue of bad policy, in Justin Trudeau's view, it was also about treating the Indigenous peoples of the North as “inferior” and forcing them “into settlements where disease and infection ran rampant,” reflecting practices that were “a piece of the larger history of destructive colonialism.”<sup>14</sup> There is no point in denying that St-Laurent's moment in power constituted an overwhelming turning point in the lives of these peoples. The realities of colonial invasion and all that it brought in terms of cultural disorientation and disease, which had started in the Americas in 1492, had finally caught up with the North some five hundred years later. Life there was forever changed. Still, Trudeau's judgment was misleading given the circumstances of the times.

St-Laurent's government did make mistakes. While innovative in so many aspects of public life, his administration did little as residential schools for Indigenous children continued to thrive; people were being put to death for the crimes they committed; and pollution grew exponentially. The government sometimes lacked imagination. It was not very active on the issue of creating a memorial in Ottawa to honour those who fought and died during the Second World War.<sup>15</sup> It could commit follies. In a fit of ideological pique, it suddenly refused entry to the great American bass baritone Paul Robeson on the grounds that he posed a threat as some sort of communist agitator.<sup>16</sup> It could even be a little goofy, as demonstrated by an aborted program to import yaks in order to help develop the Inuit economy.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the harshest assessment of the St-Laurent government was articulated by Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse in their book *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945–1957*, which documents how parts of the St-Laurent government worked to repress communism and leftist organizations in this country.<sup>18</sup> The reality remains that St-Laurent's government did not permit the excesses of American McCarthyism to take hold.

To read some accounts from this period, St-Laurent would be something akin to “Chauncey Gardiner,” the lead figure in Jerzy Kozinski's novel *Being There* (1970), who finds temporary success and recognition by accidentally being in the right place at the right time. Many scholars have considered St-Laurent to be the lucky inheritor of a “golden” economy and of the policy legacy

left by Mackenzie King. In terms of management, many saw him more as a natural, stand-offish “chairman of the board” who could leave the initiative to others than as an energetic innovator. In *Louis St. Laurent: Canadian*, Thomson wrote a sympathetic biography at a time when the concept of “Canadian” was coming under sharp scrutiny in Quebec, as that province struggled with a new identity, and among English Canadians, who were increasingly concerned about the cultural and economic importance of the United States in their home affairs. Thomson acknowledged that he had depended on a key minister, John Whitney Pickersgill (but “Jack” to practically everybody and “Pick” to his friends), for facts and interpretation.

Pickersgill contributed his own assessment of the 1950s Liberals with his *My Years with Louis St Laurent* (1975), a warm memory of a leader who was above all things consequential to his country’s politics. Pickersgill appreciated the influence of the man, noting that he had “as fine an intelligence as was ever applied to the problems of government in Canada. He left it a richer, a more generous and more united country than it had been before he became prime minister.” But as historians dug deeper in the 1950s, they lost sight of the prime minister and of the coherence he gave to his country. Reginald Whitaker’s heavily detailed *The Government Party: Organizing and Financing the Liberal Party of Canada, 1930–58* only mentions St-Laurent in passing.<sup>19</sup> In much the same way, Jack Granatstein’s splendid studies of the public service leadership, *The Ottawa Men: The Civil Service Mandarins, 1935–1957* and *A Man of Influence: Norman A. Robertson and Canadian Statecraft, 1929–1968*, only rarely mention St-Laurent. “He was courteous, considerate of his staff, but still a bit aloof,” Granatstein observed, “when he wanted information, he wanted it quickly and succinctly, and he preferred to have options laid out with recommended courses of action.” These were the habits of a high-ranking executive who put a premium both on speedy decisions and on substance. That meshed well with most government executives but not very well with the creative, bookish types like the eminent Robertson.<sup>20</sup>

People who have studied St-Laurent, his works, and his government can find him innovative, while others find him to be nothing more than the beneficiary of the banquet laid before him by Mackenzie King’s postwar policies, a very supportive press corps, and the archly talented public service of the post-war period. That view is deeply unsatisfactory to me. Leadership is extraordinarily difficult. King pointed to St-Laurent because he suspected he had the requisite talent. Policy entrepreneurs such as C.D. Howe liked St-Laurent’s style and “his quality for quickly mastering the information set before him and his faculty for making quick decisions.” Howe liked this style of leadership – the

new prime minister, in the words of Howe's biographers, "understood the vagaries of life; he was not a man to waste time with idle reproaches when things went awry. Propriety and efficiency were what he wanted."<sup>21</sup> For the rest, it was clear that he commanded respect and enjoyed the support that came with having so much talent around the executive table, although he might have blushed upon hearing, time and again, George Drew accusing him of running government like a "dictatorship." St-Laurent also knew how to operate with seasoned public-sector leaders and delegated authority adroitly. He managed, to borrow Fred I. Greenstein's description of Dwight Eisenhower's style, with a "hidden hand."<sup>22</sup> Diefenbaker – who had access to the same team of highly efficient and imaginative people as had St-Laurent – demonstrated vividly, through sheer incompetence, that it took more than knowing how to turn on the engine of government to be successful. Beyond his deep-seated (and not altogether incorrect) suspicion that the bureaucracy was contaminated with "Personalties," he demonstrated few abilities to manage talent and to direct the country.<sup>23</sup>

Desmond Morton, yet another University of Toronto historian, remembered meeting Prime Minister St-Laurent when accompanying his mother on a walk in Ottawa. Brief glances were exchanged, nothing more, but the civility of the moment forever impressed the boy. "It is perhaps my proudest memory of Canada," he wrote fifty years later.<sup>24</sup> He reviewed the St-Laurent record and concluded in a magazine article published in 2003 that the prime minister himself played an active part in its success. "His era was such a golden age that many Canadians believed that peace, order and good government was their natural destiny," he concluded. "They would learn their error."<sup>25</sup> The reality is that the story of the St-Laurent government is full of contingents, full of alternative political and policy choices. Choices had to be made and St-Laurent, as prime minister, made them – it was he who had the dominant voice in Canadian politics. Nothing was automatic or predetermined by structures and policy imperatives.

It is high time for a critical reassessment. For all his successes and unique features, it has been over fifty years since St-Laurent and his government were treated by a book-length study, and my ardent hope is that this volume will introduce him to a new generation of readers. How character and circumstance blended themselves in Louis St-Laurent in the late 1940s and 1950s to move Canada into an new era of modern policy-making is a topic that has not been addressed, and that is the *raison d'être* of this book. It is a challenging task because St-Laurent is practically impossible to know. He left no memoirs, hardly published, and his preserved archives consist mostly of routine administrative missives; few documents written by his own hand exist. The task of

identifying and understanding his ideas and ambitions must be executed through other means.

St-Laurent's political and administrative philosophy is at once challenging to define yet also relatively simple, much in the tradition of Canadian prime ministers. It does not help that St-Laurent was not boastful. His approach to management could easily qualify him for the ultra-modern label of "servant leader" – a leader who sees his task as that of helping his colleagues, removing the obstacles in their way, in order to allow the collective to get things done. This modesty shaped him not because he did not believe in his accomplishments but because he was convinced his accomplishments, both personal and professional, spoke for themselves. He grew up in a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves. His secret was that he had nothing to prove: an exceptional quality in a politician and probably one that only comes with age. St-Laurent was raised that way and stayed that way. He was never comfortable with the brash or with the conceited.<sup>26</sup> Thomson argued that St-Laurent was an "Edwardian Liberal,"<sup>27</sup> a politician who deeply believed that government could do great things, but that social goodness could only be realized in a country that favoured economic growth. He was, for his time, a social progressive who might have been touched by the Liberal progressivism that coursed through the veins of Quebec,<sup>28</sup> affected by the most reformist Catholic thinking of his time (reminded of this by his sister Kathleen who had become a nun and his brother Nil who was ordained a priest) but marked by a strong fiscal conservatism. He wanted to be seen with people of different skin tones and inevitably played a role in overturning Canada's long-standing "White Only" immigration policy (albeit only by allowing a trickle of immigrants from the West Indies and the South Asian continent). In response to a letter on the desirability of more women in Parliament, St-Laurent responded that "ce serait une excellente chose," but he reminded his correspondent that women had to campaign hard for nominations and for seats. He was encouraging, even resigned to the reality that women could be better candidates than men: "Si les femmes se mêlent plus activement de la chose publique, elles s'imposeront graduellement et seront éventuellement choisies, dans certains endroits, de préférence à des hommes."<sup>29</sup>

Ambitious for his country and for Canada's place in the world, St-Laurent was hardly a placeholder. In hindsight, we can say that his time in power was like a bridge between two worlds: the prewar Canada that was tentative, often neutralist in foreign affairs, and a new, more modern Canada that was more open to government involvement in the economy, in culture, and in world

affairs. Louis St-Laurent openly talked about “values” in directing Canada’s behaviour in the world. He was anti-communist, for sure, but he was also a humanist and an ardent believer in peace. He believed that Canada should have a strong military and showed that he meant it by rapidly expanding it during the 1950s. He believed in the North – and that if it was going to be Canadian, it had to be defended as such. It was during his time in government that Canada dotted its northern landscape with three necklaces of distant early warning (DEW) stations.

It was also a time when the United States – through massive capital investments in Canada but also through cinema, popular music, books and magazines, and radio and television – made its presence felt in Canadian homes as never before. St-Laurent was chosen to replace Mackenzie King at a time when Canada was changing dramatically in terms of demographics (the baby boom and, later, massive immigration), and in the eyes of his peers he was the best person to captain the ship. He became prime minister only months after *Refus Global* was published. This parallel may appear as a stretch to some, but it is worthy of consideration. *Refus Global*, written by Paul-Émile Borduas, was a passionate cri de coeur against the cultural oppression of colonial mentalities as well as against the religious and business establishments that dominated Montreal. It was signed by sixteen young Québécois artists and intellectuals, including Paul-Émile Borduas, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Marcelle Ferron, and Françoise Sullivan. Six months later, in the winter of 1949, sailors of the Royal Canadian Navy mutinied, first on the HMCS *Athabasca* and then aboard the *Crescent* (anchored in Nanjing, China) and the *Magnificent*, an aircraft carrier operating in the Caribbean.<sup>30</sup> In the winter of 1949, the Canadian Seamen’s Union (CSU) also started a general strike, and miners walked off the job at four asbestos mines in the Eastern Townships, near Asbestos, Quebec, and Thetford Mines.<sup>31</sup> It would last four months. In 1951, 249 strikes broke out in Canada, a new record. Fewer strikes took place the following year, but the number of working days lost reached almost three million.<sup>32</sup> Those figures would not be reached again until the Diefenbaker years.

There is no evidence St-Laurent would have accepted the arguments of the *Refus Global*, let alone that he read it, but much like its authors he had a remarkable capacity to imagine a new Canada. The sailors’ mutiny was adroitly managed by military commanders, and the CSU, long led by communist sympathizers, was quickly put down by a rival union (with some help from the RCMP). The number of strikes – surely an indicator of malaise – dropped as the 1950s progressed. Still, the spirit of *Refus Global*, the mutineers, and the strikers

was something St-Laurent would have recognized and accepted. Things had to change, and St-Laurent was energetic enough and entrepreneurial enough to make things happen and modernize Canada in ways that met public needs.

This book is thus a rediscovery of how Louis St-Laurent unexpectedly revealed himself in power. In my introductory chapter, which aims to provide an overview of St-Laurent's life and the key accomplishments of his administration, I argue that his approach to the affairs of state was one that married both idealism and realism – an approach to life's challenges that can be seen through the theories of the French philosopher, part-time diplomat, and Nobel Prize winner Henri Bergson (1859–1941). In a nutshell, Bergson argued that a person's thinking is guided by the rationality that is acquired through lived experience: the highs, lows and learning derived from poverty, war, success, and ruin that are absorbed over the years and that create intuition – a key component of decision making. At the same time, motivations can be guided by sympathies, the ability of a person to put themselves in the place of others. How sympathies, ideals, and the hard realities of lived experience mix provide a clue to a person's decisions. St-Laurent's personality and government, I argue, demonstrate a powerfully original mix: policies that were hard and fast when it came to protecting capital and in defending Canada in the face of rising communist forces in the world, yet at the same time relentless innovation born of the conviction that better ideals could be realistically accomplished in a wide variety of fields. It was St-Laurent's unique intuition – one he sought in colleagues as much as in policy – that time was of the essence, that things had to change in order to ensure that Canada took its place in the “modern” world, offering a decent response to the needs of its citizens, which included the financial essentials necessary for a good life, safety, a sense of belonging, dignity, and respect, and the hope that democracy could work for the benefit of the majority.

The book is organized into three broad parts – style, structure, and substance – that I find especially helpful in trying to understand political development. To begin with style: in Canada, the prime minister enjoys enormous personal latitude in exercising power. Each man (the one woman did not serve long enough to leave an imprint) brought to governance a certain set of habits and preferences, the product of his personality and his family. This is no small matter, though many “scientists” in the field of politics will contest its validity. I'm not one of those, and I am utterly convinced that it does make a difference. Each man has brought his interests and his passions to the job as well as his dislikes. Each brought a philosophy of work to bear on his daily activities. Will he consult? When and how often? How widely? For how long? Who will he

listen to, and who will he ignore? How quickly are decisions made? Where do party matters place in his hierarchy of priorities?<sup>33</sup> These are all matters of personal choice, and they matter enormously to biographers who are sensitive to the very human aspect of governance. The contributors to Part 1 review how Louis St-Laurent interacted with the people in his entourage. Jean Thérèse Riley looks at the man and his family from a family insider's perspective. Stephen Azzi analyzes the dynamic around the cabinet table. Robert Bothwell interprets the complex relationships with the senior ranks – the mandarins – of the government of Canada's public service. Paul Litt identifies how different aspects of his style were manipulated by image-makers and perceived by the press.

There is another element of style that is probed in this book, one that relates more to governance. By this I mean the choice of policy instruments. One can catch a fly by swatting it with a newspaper or by installing adhesive paper that will trap the insect. The same goes with policy – will governments use a carrot to induce a certain sort of behaviour or a stick? These chapters on “structures” also reveal the contours of St-Laurent's administrative style.

Structure matters enormously in the life of prime ministers, and, in Part 2, authors appraise how St-Laurent shaped the governance and administration of issues during his time in power. To what degree did he set the policy-making agenda? In what sense did his approach to the structures of government, to the substance of policy and to the style of management, have an impact on the success and failures of his administration? The structures of federalism, for example, were topics of great interest to St-Laurent. Robert Wardhaugh and Barry Ferguson assess his particular role in the Rowell-Sirois Commission, a royal inquiry into the nature of Canada's federal-provincial relations. Mary Janigan scrutinizes his role in establishing an equalization formula to distribute funds to poorer provinces that was nothing short of revolutionary, and P.E. Bryden questions more broadly his approach to intergovernmental relations. In this section, his rapport with regions is also examined. David MacKenzie looks at the mechanics of winning Newfoundlanders over to the cause of Confederation in 1949. Michel Beaulieu takes a look at how, in his many speeches, Louis St-Laurent viewed the “regions” of Canada. Whitney Lackenbauer focuses on the Arctic, a new frontier for Canadians in the aftermath of the Second World War that proved of great interest to St-Laurent and his government as they fortified defence mechanisms. He places the policies regarding the assistance of the Inuit, who were dying of tuberculosis, in their proper historical context. This section also looks at administrative structures. Luc Juillet and Luc Bernier scrutinize St-Laurent's choice of instruments, ranging from cabinet

positions to the growth of the Canadian civil service. Greg Marchildon describes the emerging hospitalization insurance issue through an intergovernmental relations lens and discusses how Louis St-Laurent hesitantly grappled with it.

Part 3 deals with substantive matters. These chapters bear a great deal of similarity to the chapters on “structural” issues like federalism and administration but are more intensely focused on borderless policy and political matters. In this area, to borrow the language of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, one could see St-Laurent as keenly interested in building “symbolic” and “cultural” capital. Canada, for St-Laurent, was not merely an “imagined community” but one that had to recognize itself for what it was. It started with something simple, like insisting early in his first term that the expression “the Dominion of Canada,” which smacked of the colonial past, be abandoned in favour of Canada *tout court*, but it went further. Xavier Gélinas reviews how St-Laurent managed issues of concern to French Canadians and Québécois, and scrutinizes some of the factors that raised real concerns in some Quebec circles. Many thought that St-Laurent had done little to advance the cause of French Canada within Confederation and within the public service.<sup>34</sup> Christopher McCreery surveys the impact St-Laurent had in Canadianizing key institutions of governance and culture. Philip Girard takes a look at an altogether different form of cultural capital: the nature of Louis St-Laurent’s approach to justice. It was he who led the arguments in favour of making the Supreme Court of Canada the final court of appeal, ending for good any recourse to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. Girard also probes judicial appointments, knowing well how deeply involved St-Laurent had been in the legal community all his life. Alone among those who served as prime minister, St-Laurent could easily have been nominated to the Supreme Court and served as chief justice. And I look at altogether different substantial issues: the politics of Louis St-Laurent and his success in attracting different voting coalitions to support the Liberal Party. In a follow-up chapter co-written with Peter M. Ryan, I broaden the lens to discuss the change in policy platforms among the four dominant parties of the time: the Liberal Party of Canada, the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada, the Social Credit Party of Canada, and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF).

Also in this section, Abril Liberatori contributes a chapter on the changes and continuities of the St-Laurent practice of immigration policy, and J.R. Miller explains the government’s policy regarding Indigenous peoples. Adam Chapnick discusses the many ideas Louis St-Laurent articulated in the famous Gray Lecture he delivered the year before he became prime minister. Finally, Greg Donaghy captures how policy substance was incarnated by St-Laurent as he undertook a trip around the world in 1954 – yet another “first” in the annals

of the prime ministership in Canada. The Hon. Jean Charest rounds out this collection in a postscript, which draws out some of the key elements of “township thinking” – the *mentalité* of the people of his *terroir* and how it shaped St-Laurent’s thinking as well as his own.

Together, these chapters create a composite portrait of Louis St-Laurent’s politics and policies that accents the complications of his times. They each make an effort to measure the prime minister’s role and come to different conclusions. None leaves doubt, however, that St-Laurent was engaged with his government, and they stand against the notion that his government had no vision and little purpose in its doings. Instead, what emerges from these pages is a government of conviction and direction, one that is adventurous and enterprising in some instances and yet reluctant and cautious in others. The best explanation is that the St-Laurent government operated not only in a time of growth but also in a time of growing conservatism – an electoral force that, for the most part, it respected (though perhaps not sufficiently when it came to the Suez Crisis). Nevertheless, the St-Laurent government had a lasting impact. It demonstrates that the modest goal of “getting a number of people to work together harmoniously to achieve certain results” can yield enormous good for the people of the country. St-Laurent’s government was transformative. Power revealed him to be someone remarkable in the service of his country.

## Notes

- 1 Bruce Hutchison, *Mr. Prime Minister, 1867–1964* (Toronto: Longman’s, 1964), 286.
- 2 The house was purchased in 1950. It was near the home John A. Macdonald had bought and refurbished in the 1880s.
- 3 St-Laurent would have undoubtedly favoured the ardent defence of the Canadian position as articulated by J.L. Granatstein and Gregory A. Johnson in “The Evacuation of the Japanese-Canadians, 1942: A Realist Critique,” in *On Guard for Thee: War, Ethnicity and the Canadian State, 1939–1945*, ed. Norman Hillmer, Bohdan Kordan, and Lubomyr Luciuk, 1 (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1988), 101–29.
- 4 See *Maclean’s*, September 1957, 4. I am indebted to Donald B. Smith for this insight.
- 5 Ian Scandlers, “How the Prime Minister Became Uncle Louis,” *Maclean’s*, 1 January 1955.
- 6 John English, *The Worldly Years: The Life of Lester Pearson*, vol. 2, 1949–1972 (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1992), 185.
- 7 Stella Lees and June Senyard, *The 1950s: How Australia Became a Modern Society, and Everyone Got a House and Car* (Victoria: Hyland House Publishing, 1987).
- 8 See Jennifer A. Delton, *Rethinking the 1950s: How Anticommunism and the Cold War Made America Liberal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 9 See Patrick Brennan, *Reporting the Nation’s Business: Press-Government Relations during the Liberal Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).
- 10 Bruce Hutchison, *Mr. Prime Minister, 1867–1964* (Toronto: Longman’s, 1964), 285.

- 11 Ibid., 287.
- 12 Donald Creighton, *The Forked Road: Canada, 1939–75* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 283.
- 13 Michael Bliss, *Right Honourable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998), 181–82.
- 14 *Statement of Apology on Behalf of the Government of Canada to Inuit for the Management of the Tuberculosis Epidemic from the 1940s–1960s*, 8 March 2019, Iqaluit, Nunavut. It is worth noting that the prime minister opened his remarks by declaring “We have to know our history.”
- 15 See Tim Cook, *The Fight for History: 75 Years of Forgetting, Remembering, and Remaking Canada’s Second World War* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2020).
- 16 See Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “Paul Robeson in Canada: A Border Story,” *Labour/Le Travail* 51 (Spring, 2003): 177–221.
- 17 Davis Meren, “Commend Me the Yak’: The Colombo Plan, the Inuit of Ungava, and ‘Developing’ Canada’s North,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 50, 102 (2017): 343–70.
- 18 Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945–1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).
- 19 Reginald Whitaker, *The Government Party: Organizing and Financing the Liberal Party of Canada, 1930–58* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).
- 20 J.L. Granatstein, *A Man of Influence: Norman A. Robertson and Canadian Statecraft, 1929–1968* (Ottawa: Deneau Publishers, 1982), 251.
- 21 Robert Bothwell and William Kilbourn, *C.D. Howe: A Biography* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), 225.
- 22 Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
- 23 This was not entirely without reason. See Asa McKercher, “No, Prime Minister: Revisiting Diefenbaker and the ‘Personalties,’” *Canadian Journal of History* 52, 2 (2017): 264–89. See also *Reassessing the Rogue Tory: Canadian Foreign Relations in the Diefenbaker Era*, ed. Janice Cavell and Ryan M. Touhey (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018).
- 24 Desmond Morton, “Uncle Louis and a Golden Age for Canada: A Time of Prosperity at Home and Influence Abroad” *Policy Options* (June–July 2003): 51.
- 25 Ibid., 55.
- 26 I owe much of this reflection to David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), particularly as he discusses Dwight Eisenhower and George Marshall, two of St-Laurent’s contemporaries who also shared very similar characters.
- 27 Dale C. Thomson, “The Political Ideas of Louis St. Laurent,” in *The Political Ideas of Prime Ministers of Canada*, ed. Marcel Hamelin (Ottawa: Editions de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1969), 141.
- 28 See Patrice Dutil, *Devil’s Advocate: Godfroy Langlois and the Politics of Liberal Progressivism in Laurier’s Quebec* (Montreal: Robert Davies, 1994).
- 29 Louis St-Laurent to Madame Doyon, 23 April 1949, Library and Archives Canada, Louis St-Laurent Papers, MG 26 L59.
- 30 See Richard Gimblett, “The Mutiny That Never Was,” *Dorchester Review* 9, 1 (2019): 55–62.
- 31 See Jim Green, *Against the Tide: The Story of the Canadian Seamen’s Union* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1986); and William Kaplan, *Everything That Floats: Pat Sullivan, Hal Banks, and the Canadian Seamen’s Unions of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

- 32 See Charles Lipton, *The Trade Union Movement in Canada, 1827–1959*, 4th ed. (Toronto: NC Press, 1978), 306–7.
- 33 Reginald Whitaker makes the argument that St-Laurent cared very little about the party structure, happily leaving it to others. I think this is indeed true. Whitaker also makes the argument that St-Laurent gave ascendancy to his ministers. Here, I do not agree. See Whitaker, *Government Party*, 408–10.
- 34 In a revealing anecdote, Ramsay Cook recalls a conversation with Pierre Elliott Trudeau in February 1968 in which the latter speaks of his concern about being subject to the same criticisms levelled at the French Canadian prime ministers that had preceded him: “Will they call me un *roi nègre*: will I fall under the same criticisms as Laurier and will I get the Uncle Louis image?” Cook elsewhere says that Michel Brunet, the noted Université de Montréal historian and *nationaliste*, had flatly told him that he considered St-Laurent a *vendu*. See Ramsay Cook, *The Teeth of Time: Remembering Pierre Elliott Trudeau* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 47, 137.

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