

Revival and Change

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On the Cusp of Change

THE 1957 AND 1958 Canadian general elections were unlike any that had gone before. They were fought between a prairie populist recently chosen to lead a party whose relatively small electoral base owed more to the city of Toronto and parts of rural Ontario than to any other region in the country; a governing party with close links to corporate Canada whose skillful accommodation of regional and sectional interests had enabled it to retain power for an unprecedented twenty-two years; and two small but persistent regional parties whose impact on federal public policy was in one case spotty, in the other non-existent.

When the 1957 election was called, the governing Liberals had been in office for over two decades. They were widely expected to be returned with their sixth straight majority win. The fragmented opposition was divided among three parties – the Progressive Conservatives, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), and Social Credit – each dependent on a different regional support base. None was considered likely to mount a successful challenge to the Liberals.

But as the two campaigns progressed, it became clear that these elections would be remembered as “Diefenbaker elections,” for John

Diefenbaker, the new Conservative leader, overshadowed his opponents. Since John A. Macdonald's time, party leaders have invariably been the central focus of a party's election campaign. Diefenbaker, however, stood in a class of his own. He seized the opportunity offered by the new communications technology – television – and used it to great effect. As he criss-crossed the country in 1957 and 1958, his campaign gained momentum and his rallies attracted ever larger and more supportive audiences. They were roughly akin to secular versions of evangelical revival meetings, with boisterous and enthusiastic crowds. His speeches, well reported by the press, captured the mood of the country. He painted a picture of Liberal arrogance and, by contrast, of hope for Canada if he and the Progressive Conservatives gained office.

By the end of the second election, the Liberals had been reduced to their smallest number of seats in Parliament since Confederation, the CCF had lost both its leader and all but eight Members of Parliament, and Social Credit was wiped out completely. It was a rout unmatched in Canadian history to that point. This is the story of those elections, the government and opposition they produced, the issues that defined the six-year period of the government's life, and the eventual contribution of the Diefenbaker government to Canadian politics and society. Diefenbaker's government changed the country – for better or worse – in several respects, perhaps in no way more than in the configuration of its party system. Ultimately, the story of those elections serves as an object lesson of what lay ahead for all parties, specifically the inherent difficulty of building and maintaining a coalition of prairie voters predisposed to populist conservatism, Central Canadian and West Coast metropolitan electors, and Quebec nationalists.

Diefenbaker revitalized his largely dormant party; dominated the campaigns by focusing relentlessly on the Liberals' arrogance and alleged abuse of power; used television to reach a vastly larger audience of potential voters than ever before; captured the support

of Canadians who in the past would never have considered voting for the Conservatives, let alone a prairie populist, but who bought into his “visions” of northern development and of “One Canada”; and engaged the electorate to such an extent that, in tandem with the unprecedented shifts in voting behaviour, the levels of voter turnout reached record highs that remain unmatched to this day. Later Conservative prime ministers regarded him as a hero. Stephen Harper, for example, named an icebreaker and a government building after Diefenbaker and believed “no other prime minister of any stripe did more for the cause of fairness and equality and inclusion than John Diefenbaker.”¹

Diefenbaker’s One Canada refrain appears throughout this book, for good reason. It was central to his belief system. At its core, it unabashedly endorsed “an egalitarian and individualistic ethos,” for individual equality was the “bedrock” of his political philosophy.² It introduced a new way for Canadians to view society and their place in it. Accordingly, it found favour with many who became “followers” of John Diefenbaker, some of them short-term followers, others lasting. Nowhere did the One Canada message resonate more than on the prairies, and its lasting effect has been the existence of a distinctive political constituency for the Progressive Conservatives and their heirs in that region. The downside of the One Canada principle became painfully obvious, however, over the course of Diefenbaker’s six years in office, for it all but ensured that the prime minister was incapable of accommodating Quebec in the early years of the Quiet Revolution.

Unlike the single-election studies in this series, this book considers the two consecutive elections of 1957 and 1958, and the extent to which they constitute turning points in Canadian political history. The elections have been lumped together as two parts of the same whole, as it were, for in the short run they not only were held within months of each another but also amounted to two stages of a single process of removing the Liberals from office. The

following eight chapters explore the Conservative victories, the party's six years in office, and its fall from grace in 1962 and 1963. [Chapter 2](#) describes the party system heading into 1957, and [Chapters 3, 4, and 5](#) examine the major players, the issues, and the outcome of the 1957 election. [Chapter 6](#) looks at the principal players and the campaign in 1958, and [Chapter 7](#) explores the challenges faced by the government, its failures and defeat, and the post-1958 reorganization of the three opposition parties. [Chapter 8](#) reviews the Diefenbaker government's legacies, and the final chapter summarizes the changes that the parties and the party system underwent as a result of the "Diefenbaker Revolution."

To understand what shaped the party system before the 1957 and 1958 elections, we need to go back a few years and briefly describe the economy, changes on the international and domestic fronts, demographic shifts, and the party system. Coming out of the Second World War in 1945, Canada was on the cusp of a major social and economic revolution. Within a decade, it would add a political revolution to that list.

The Economy

Canada had emerged from the war as an industrial powerhouse. Industries of all sorts, ranging from chemical and automotive assembly plants to garment factories and agricultural commodities, had been converted to the production of military equipment, armaments, and food supplies needed by Canada and its allies for the war effort. To help manage and direct the economy, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's government created twenty-eight federal Crown corporations and established strict wage and price controls.

The overall direction of the war economy was entrusted to C.D. Howe (1886–1960), minister of the newly created Department of Munitions and Supply. A professional engineer by training, Howe had emigrated to Canada from the United States in 1908. Following

a short stint as a professor of engineering at Dalhousie University, he succeeded as a businessman whose company built several large grain elevators, the majority in Western Canada. He entered Parliament in 1935 and became one of the most powerful ministers in Canadian history. Over the course of his twenty-two uninterrupted years in the cabinets of Mackenzie King and Louis St. Laurent, he served as minister of numerous departments and as the chief of several Crown corporations founded during the war.³

Over the course of the Second World War (1939–45), Canadian firms produced “more than 800,000 military transport vehicles, 50,000 tanks, 40,000 field, naval, and anti-aircraft guns, and 1,700,000 small arms.”⁴ Canadian factories assembled 16,000 training and combat aircraft, and, through the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, 131,000 pilots, flight engineers, and other air crew members were trained for the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and allied air forces. Between 1939 and 1945, more than a million Canadian men and women served full time in the armed services.

These were notable achievements for a country of roughly 11.5 million people. Understandably, they led to substantial changes in the economic and social fabric of the country that, in the immediate aftermath of the war, brought Canada to a new and in many ways unfamiliar point, both internationally and domestically. Canada in the second half of the twentieth century never returned to what it had been in the first half.

International and Domestic Changes

On the international front, Canada played an important part in establishing several multilateral organizations, notably the United Nations (UN) in 1945 and, as the Cold War began to heat up, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. The country’s influence abroad can be judged by the fact that Canada became a signatory party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (a

document drafted in large part by Canadian legal scholar John Humphrey) in 1948 and played an instrumental role in the transformation of the British Commonwealth to the Commonwealth of Nations in 1949. Less than five years after the end of the Second World War, Canada entered the Korean War (1950–53) along with other UN member countries. The Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, Lester Pearson (who would soon become leader of the Liberal Party of Canada), was elected president of the seventh session of the UN General Assembly in 1952. It can safely be said that in the first decade following the war, Canada “pulled its weight” internationally.

Canada’s foreign relations have not always played much role, if any, at election time. Such was not the case, however, in late 1956 and in the run-up to the June 1957 election, when the strength of the Western alliance was tested for first time since the Second World War by the Suez Crisis. As we shall see in [Chapter 4](#), how the Liberal government and the Conservatives in opposition reacted to that clash played an important part in the election campaign.

On the domestic postwar front, party politics at the federal level continued much as they had over the previous decade. The Liberals, no longer led by Mackenzie King, won a sizable majority in 1949 with Louis St. Laurent as leader. The three parties on the opposition benches were all returned to the Commons in 1949, but with fewer seats than they had won in the previous election. Nothing much had changed from the 1945 election, apart from the parties’ relative strength in Parliament. Perhaps most important was the fact that the Liberals guided a booming economy and retained the close links with corporate Canada that had been established during the war. This made fundraising relatively easy (and lucrative) for the party at election time.

The federal election of 1953 produced results similar to those of 1949. The Liberals retained office, though with a smaller majority; the Progressive Conservatives once again became the official

opposition with a slightly larger number of seats; and the CCF and Social Credit remained on the opposition benches with a modest increase in the number of districts each won. Much of the media shared the view commonly held by the Liberals that they would be returned to office in the 1957 election.

Demographic Shifts

The party system may not have changed materially in the decade following the Second World War, but the size, location, and demographic composition of the Canadian population had. In the early years of the twentieth century, 63 percent of Canada's population of 5.4 million were classified as rural and 37 percent as urban. By the time of the 1957 election, these percentages had been reversed. The 1956 census determined that two-thirds of the country's population of 16 million resided in urban communities, and one-third in rural Canada.⁵

The out-migration from prairie farms during the Depression and drought of the 1930s accounts for part of the population shift, as does the postwar return of military personnel (many originally from farms and small towns) to the major cities, but a substantial portion of the jump in population resulted from the country's postwar immigration policies. They were driven both by labour shortages in the larger provinces and by programs aimed at resettling displaced persons and refugees from war-torn Europe. In the decade following the war, Canada admitted a total of 1.39 million immigrants, refugees, and displaced persons, almost all of them from the United Kingdom and continental Europe. Added to that were an estimated 35,000 Hungarians in the aftermath of the 1956 uprising in that country. An often-unstated premise underlying Canada's immigration programs at the time was a preference for a "white-only" policy. In the somewhat oblique language of the time, Mackenzie King acknowledged as much in a 1947 speech in the Commons. He pointedly ruled out anything but a "European only" immigration

policy so as to preclude “large-scale immigration from the Orient [as it] would change the fundamental composition of the Canadian population.”⁶ As we shall see, one of the successes of the Diefenbaker government was its changes to the country’s immigration regulations that effectively ended the white-only policy.

Norms and Values

Canada’s “European only” immigration policy pretty well said it all. It went a long way in defining what postwar Canada was like. There was an enduring attachment to Britain and the monarchy in most parts of the Dominion, save for francophone Quebec, although by the mid-1950s an attachment to the United States had started to become more pronounced, both in government policies and public preferences. Reflecting the puritanical attitudes of the day in much of the country, strict Sabbatarian laws applied to work, shopping, professional sports, entertainment, and the like. Men dominated politics, commerce, and the professions, whereas women, if they worked outside the home at all, typically found employment as nurses, teachers, and office secretaries or clerks. Scant attention was paid to Indigenous people, as their appalling socio-economic conditions sadly confirmed. And on the political front, preferences often mirrored those of one’s parents and one’s religious affiliation. As Richard Johnston has determined, “for much of the twentieth century, the best single predictor of major-party support in Canadian elections was religious denomination, with Catholics much more likely than non-Catholics to support the Liberals and shun the Conservatives.”⁷ Many of these aspects of Canadian society underwent a slow process of change during the Diefenbaker years.

The Upset

In all, things looked propitious for the Liberals in advance of the 1957 election. They had benefited from a strong postwar economy, a sizable jump in European immigration, generous and consistent

electoral support in Quebec, and a cozy relationship with corporate Canada. But they faced an obstacle of their own making as the election approached: hubris. That character flaw, widespread among the Liberals, provided a valuable entry point for the three parties challenging them. Of the three, none was better at seizing the opportunity than the Conservatives under Diefenbaker.

First elected to Parliament in 1940, John Diefenbaker (1895–1979) was known for his oratorical skills, having practised law in Saskatchewan for many years, arguing persuasively on behalf of defendants in criminal cases. Working out of his one-man law office in the town of Wakaw and, later, in partnership in a small firm in the city of Prince Albert, he had gained a reputation as an articulate and convincing advocate for “the little guy,” or, as he liked to say, “the average Canadian.” Described as a “rogue” and “renewed” within his own party, Diefenbaker nonetheless easily won the Progressive Conservative leadership in December 1956, capturing the votes of the rank-and-file convention delegates, who ignored the advice of senior party members.

Even more than the opposition benches in Parliament, the 1957 and 1958 general election campaigns were ideal for Diefenbaker’s silver-tongued and theatrical speech making. His style of campaigning was a clear break from the recent past. It came as a refreshing contrast to the dour and wearisome style of long-time Liberal prime minister Mackenzie King, who had retired from public life barely nine years earlier, and even to King’s successor, Louis St. Laurent, whose folksy and engaging style of campaigning in his first two elections as Liberal prime minister (1949 and 1953) lost some of its edge as he became uncharacteristically defensive and combative as the 1957 campaign wore on.

The simple, direct themes and slogans that the Conservatives presented in both elections matched the kind of campaign that Diefenbaker’s closest advisers felt were suited to his oratorical skills. In 1957, it was “Time for a Change,” with the two smaller parties

adding their voices to the same refrain, making it something of a chorus on the campaign trail. By contrast, Conservative strategy and advertising in 1958 focused almost entirely on the new prime minister, whose populist approach to politics complemented his charismatic appeal on the hustings. The party's 1958 campaign amounted to little more than a John Diefenbaker campaign, captured best by its messianic message to voters to "Follow John." And follow John they did, handing the Conservatives a massive victory.

As noted, television was the "new kid on the media block" in the early to mid-1950s. Diefenbaker saw its potential to reach countless voters who would never attend a partisan rally or pay much attention to campaign coverage in their daily newspaper. As a bonus for the Conservatives, television was a medium suited to Diefenbaker's flamboyant, colourful, accusatory style of speech making. The Tory leader's success in using the new medium to his and his party's advantage, together with the almost simultaneous rise of public relations professionals and advertising specialists in the political arena, meant that politicians of the future could speak directly to vastly larger, and in many cases more dispersed and isolated, audiences. From Diefenbaker's time onward, strategists have crafted campaigns with sound bites and commercials targeting specific groups of voters. Parties have also structured their daily press releases, media interviews, and photo-ops around making the evening television news. Diefenbaker led the way on this too.

Except for Newfoundland and Labrador, where they won only two of the province's seven seats, the Conservatives in 1958 won every parliamentary seat in some provinces or a decisive majority of seats in all others. There was no better demonstration of how the party system had been turned upside down in 1958 than the Conservative success in Quebec. Diefenbaker accomplished in that election what no Tory leader had to that point in the twentieth century, leading his party to victory in two-thirds of Quebec's seventy-five ridings.

The 1957 and 1958 elections proved to be watershed moments for the Liberals and the two smaller parties. The Liberals, now led by Lester Pearson, reinvented themselves in their period out of office. By convening a policy conference and attracting new blood to the party, Pearson oversaw a fundamental rebranding of Liberalism by making the party more reformist and slightly left-of-centre than during the time of Mackenzie King and Louis St. Laurent. The Liberals were about to begin another largely uninterrupted twenty-year stint in office.⁸

The two minor parties followed different paths after their dismal showing in 1958. The CCF joined forces with organized labour and re-created itself in 1961 as the New Democratic Party. It has had a continuous presence on both the federal and provincial scene and has enjoyed a measure of success in parts of Canada that had rebuffed the old agrarian protest party. Those new centres of support have more than compensated for the loss of its former power base, Saskatchewan. Social Credit, on the other hand, had a short-lived resurgence from 1962 to 1979 (albeit in a different guise), thanks to a shift in support from its long-term base of Alberta to rural Quebec. Eventually reduced to garnering less than 2 percent of the popular vote and electing no Social Credit candidates, the party disappeared from the federal scene.

What Came of It?

The Diefenbaker government held office for six years, and by the sixth year it was in considerable disarray. Following the Conservatives' defeat both in the Commons and at the polls in 1963, judgments of all sorts poured in. To some, the Tory leader was a hero who stood up to vested interests, who looked out for the "average Canadian" as he said he would, and whose commitment to equality for all Canadians challenged the idea of special status or treatment for any province, group, or individual. To others, Diefenbaker's overarching commitment to individual equality denied the reality

of Canada and impaired relations between Quebec and the rest of Canada, and between Central Canada and the West. The controversy over Diefenbaker's leadership lives on.⁹

In the political sphere, three changes that took place during the Diefenbaker years had a lasting impact on parties and the party system. First, Canadian politics up to 1957–58 was as close as possible to being the exclusive preserve of white, middle-aged men. Diefenbaker took the first small steps to change that by bringing into his caucus and cabinet a more diverse social mix. This set a precedent for later parties, leaders, and prime ministers. “Diversity” and “inclusion” are now very much a part not only of the language of politics but also of the institutional structures of parties and governments.

Second, the fallout from the intra-party disputes over Diefenbaker's leadership in the 1960s led to an adjustment of some significance in the internal structure of the two major parties. Both Conservatives and Liberals amended their constitutions to allow for periodic reviews of the leader's performance. For the Liberals, the move was prompted by the younger, more activist members of the party who wanted a say over party leadership. The top-down control of the Liberal apparatus of the Mackenzie King–St. Laurent era ended. For the Conservatives, the change was prompted by unrest over Diefenbaker's continued leadership after the party's defeat in 1963. A successful rebellion was launched by the extra-parliamentary party, a national leadership convention was convened, and Diefenbaker was replaced after eleven years at the helm. As with the Liberals, the step signalled a shift in internal party centres of power, from the caucus, party leadership, and executive officers, to rank-and-file constituency activists.¹⁰

Third, the most significant of the turning points of the Diefenbaker period arose from the shift in the parties' respective bases of electoral support. In the case of the Conservatives, it amounted to a dwindling of support in their long-time bastions of the city of

Toronto (“Tory Toronto”) and parts of rural southern Ontario; a shift westward in support; the development of a more distinctly conservative, but nonetheless populist, prairie political culture; and a return to something approaching the status quo ante for Progressive Conservatives in Quebec. It also spelled the beginning of what has amounted to a substantial cleavage between urban and rural Canada. For the Liberals, the metropolitan Toronto region (later dubbed “905” after its telephone area code) has, with the occasional interlude, become largely theirs since the end of the Diefenbaker government. By regaining their dominant position in Quebec and making major inroads in Ontario, the Liberals were once again the party to beat during the Lester Pearson/Pierre Trudeau years and beyond.

The Diefenbaker government undertook several initiatives that have had a lasting impact on Canada. To meet the objections of several provinces, programs such as federal-provincial financial transfer arrangements and the nascent hospitalization insurance plan were altered. The prime minister’s “average Canadian” and “One Canada” appeals proved to be attractive to “individuals and regions aggrieved that they had not participated in the prosperity of the postwar boom” and to those “who felt marginalized by the central provinces’ domination of the corridors of political and economic power.”¹¹ Accordingly, policies designed to promote regional economic development were well received. Regulatory agencies to oversee the broadcasting and energy sectors of the economy were established. The reports of two Royal Commissions appointed by the Diefenbaker government, whose principal recommendations were later implemented by the Liberals, led in one case to a much-needed restructuring of the rail and airline transportation regime and in another to the adoption of Canada’s universal, publicly funded medical care plan. Enhanced agricultural support programs and sales of Canadian grain to new and untapped markets, notably China, were begun. Significant immigration policy changes signalled

the end of the white-only practices of the past. Diefenbaker was determined to grant the vote to Status Indians and delivered on this in 1960. Major infrastructure projects were launched, in part to fulfill campaign promises, in part to encourage the future development of Canada's largely untapped natural resources of the North, and in part to try to offset in some measure the effects of the ongoing economic recession. Canada played an important role in establishing the multinational World Food Bank and in bringing about South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth over the issue of apartheid. The Canadian Bill of Rights adopted by Parliament in 1960 helped in its own, limited way to inform Canadians about rights and freedoms.

As notable as some of these changes were, criticisms were nonetheless levelled at the government from many quarters. The Tories were faulted for their ham-fisted attempt to fire the governor of the Bank of Canada in 1961 over the bank's tight monetary policy. The cancellation in 1959 of the Avro Arrow supersonic jet interceptor airplane – a cancellation the previous Liberal government would likely have carried out had it remained in office – was considered a fatal blow to Canada's aerospace industry. It led to sizable job losses, largely in the Toronto area, where the jets were to have been manufactured, that made it impossible for the Conservatives to hold on to the seats they won in 1958 in much of southern Ontario. The government's delay in meeting its obligations under the joint Canadian-American NORAD defence agreement in the early stages of the Cuban Missile Crisis enraged President John F. Kennedy, fed into Diefenbaker's latent anti-Americanism, and contributed to considerable cabinet unrest over Diefenbaker's handling of the issue. This was soon followed by the deeply divisive question of arming the Bomarc missiles on Canadian soil with nuclear warheads. Diefenbaker appeared increasingly distrustful of some cabinet colleagues, senior members of the public service, the Kennedy administration, and reporters of long standing in the Ottawa press

gallery. After a year-long recession in 1960–61, followed by a run on the Canadian dollar, the government was in a free fall. Three cabinet ministers, all of whom had supported Diefenbaker in his successful run for the Tory leadership in 1956, resigned in advance of the 1963 election, which saw the Liberals under Lester Pearson voted back into office.

Quebec represented Diefenbaker's greatest challenge – and lost opportunity – on the political front. Although they had won two-thirds of the province's seats and nearly one-half of its popular vote in 1958, the Conservative Party failed to establish any semblance of a permanent presence there. Diefenbaker had little apparent interest in, or knowledge of, the province, and with an activist, reform-minded Liberal government elected in Quebec in 1960, it was clear that the prime minister's message of "One Canada" would fall on largely deaf ears as the province embarked on its Quiet Revolution.

By 1962–63 it had become obvious that Diefenbaker understood the Prairies better than any other part of the country, a fact reflected in his well-honed knack of speaking to "prairie folk" as one of their own. He had a familiarity with the social mix of prairie society and the hardship many – Indigenous and newcomers – had endured. Small towns, different languages, and varying ancestral roots defined the region, and he played to these successfully. But his strength in that region proved to be his weakness elsewhere, as attested by his failure to maintain a strong presence in Quebec and in metropolitan Toronto in the 1962 and 1963 general elections. His prairie populism did not serve him well outside his own environs.

The 1962 and 1963 elections serve as opposite bookends, as it were, to the 1957 and 1958 elections, encapsulating the Diefenbaker era. What follows is an account of the changes that brought the later bookends about, as well as an exploration of this book's principal themes: the challenges that "One Canada" presents in a country as varied as Canada, and the fact that the turning point in Canada's

electoral history resulted from two elections that were uniquely “Diefenbaker elections.” What happened over the period between 1957–58 and 1962–63 and, more important, what was notably different about that six-year period from what had come before?

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