

Canada's
PRIME MINISTERS and the Shaping of a
NATIONAL IDENTITY

Raymond B. Blake



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Postwar Beginnings

W.L. Mackenzie King, 1945–48

IN THE LATE AFTERNOON of Friday, 6 August 1948, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King (1874–1950) gingerly mastered the few steps leading to the stage of the Coliseum in Ottawa. For the first time since 1919, Liberals had gathered to select a new leader. In that year, they had chosen King to succeed Sir Wilfrid Laurier, and he had become prime minister two years later, when the Liberal Party won the December election. Although ousted from office in 1930, at the beginning of the Great Depression, he was back in 1935 to shepherd the nation through the remaining years of the global economic crisis and then through almost six years of total war in Europe and Asia. He understood and effectively responded to the temper of his times and to the anxieties and hopes of Canadians, arguably more than any other prime minister.¹ Over many years and through many crises, he witnessed first-hand how relentlessly fragmentation, division, and disunity – of race, language, religion, region, and even ideology – bedevilled Canada. With the Second World War turning in the Allies' favour by 1943, determined to secure postwar social cohesion, King embarked on a search for new ideas and a new narrative through which Canadians could reimagine themselves and their nation.

The Liberals assembled in the Coliseum cheered boisterously as their outgoing leader took the podium. In his goodbye address, reiterating his dream for a renewed Canada, King revisited his favourite theme, “liberalism.” Entitled “Unity, Security, Freedom: Fundamental Principles of Liberalism,” his farewell speech was printed by the National Liberal Federation of Canada (NLF) and distributed widely by the party. King repeatedly invoked the principles of liberalism, even during a radio broadcast in December 1946.² As he explained to his audience in the Coliseum, liberalism was fundamentally concerned with equality of opportunity, human well-being, the preservation and extension of freedom, the pursuit of social justice, and the promotion of the happiness of the vast majority of people. As “the bulwark of freedom,” it had allowed Canadians to experience “the extension of freedom in every sphere of our national life.” Basic



W.L. Mackenzie King addressing the national Liberal convention, Ottawa, 6 August 1948 | National Film Board of Canada, Photothèque, C-031319, Library and Archives Canada

human rights such as religious and economic freedoms, freedom of the press, and justice for all were possible because Canadians had made a commitment to liberal values. Those values, King declared, were “doubly important in a country the size of [Canada], and with its peoples of diverse origins and occupations.” Moreover, liberalism allowed the state to intervene in the economy and provide protections for all citizens through social security, “which must ever hold a foremost place” in Canada.³

Canadians, of course, fervently desired a lasting peace, and here, too, King found solace in liberalism as the basis of freedom everywhere, allowing Canada to promote friendship and goodwill among all nations, provide assistance to

those “less fortunate,” and encourage greater international trade abroad and full employment at home. He was deeply troubled by the recent international trend toward totalitarianism, which he saw as a serious threat to world peace. Liberalism gave no countenance to any form of dictatorship, he asserted, and he advised Canadians to combat the menace of communism everywhere, insisting that only by embracing liberalism and participating in world affairs could they overcome its evils. Quoting himself (as he often did) from a speech to the NLF the previous year, King proclaimed, “Wherever we may go, wherever we may be, we [must] remain our brothers’ keepers ... At home and abroad, we have an obligation to lend our individual and national efforts to furthering, to the extent of our abilities, more in the way ... of social justice [and to ensure that] inequalities and obvious injustices are removed.” Canada had a duty to help preserve the “freedom of men and women of our own and other lands.” Freedom was the prerequisite for banishing fear from people’s lives. This was a cornerstone of Canada’s new national identity and its new narrative: only in the absence of fear could Canadians participate enthusiastically in the type of society and economy that was essential for prosperity and security. Through its commitment to liberal values, Canada stood as a symbol to the world as a tolerant, progressive nation.⁴ King concluded his final oration as prime minister to thunderous applause.

By the time King left politics, he had largely succeeded, if not in redefining Canada for the next generation, then at least in identifying what needed to be done.⁵ Under his leadership, Canadians welcomed the introduction of significant social welfare measures, notably family allowances, unemployment insurance, and veterans’ benefits. Canada had forged a new role for itself in the world, and King had voiced the first hopes for new national symbols, as well as a novel approach to immigration and citizenship. He had put into words Canada’s postwar national and international aspirations. Now, his work done, the leadership of his party and the hopes for that new Canada passed to Louis St-Laurent, whom the delegates chose as his successor.

Undoubtedly, King’s variant of liberalism was flexible, and many have claimed that ideas factored only marginally into his political actions.⁶ Even his official biographer, R. MacGregor Dawson, argues that he “was always reluctant to venture into the unknown” and was “slow to admit that he had a duty as leader to exert a moderate pressure in the direction in which he believed the country should move.”⁷ The man did not generate new ideas, it has been said, only astutely responding to the pressing issues of the day with enough substance to keep Canadians voting for him. King, writes F.R. Scott, did “nothing by halves which [could] be done by quarters,”⁸ while suggesting that he had no vision for Canada and that his policies were designed only for political expediency. Let

me here submit that reading the speeches of King, especially those from midway through the Second War World and up to his retirement from politics, challenges those interpretations.⁹ King's speeches and rhetoric after 1943, when his focus increasingly shifted to postwar planning and reconstruction rather than to waging the war itself, demonstrate how he began the process of reshaping Canada's national identity and national narrative. King was very particular about the content of his speeches and often complained that what had been written for him to deliver was unacceptable. For instance, in readying to address the nation after the Allied victory in Europe, "it gave him a feeling of indignation" to think that the words his staff had prepared for him captured the gratitude "of the Canadian people to her fighting forces at the moment of victory. I would be damned forever in the eyes of the army and the Canadian people if I let [words] of the kind go as an expression of what Canada feels at the time." And so, he reworked the text, "trying to locate a few very helpful phrases in some of [his] other speeches."¹⁰

Encouraging Canadians to accept a modern, more liberal direction was a remarkable transformation for King. After spending nearly forty years in public life, he would hardly have been expected to chart a new identity for the country. His nationalism was shaped during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two world wars within a generation and the Great Depression, however, had made him deeply aware of how chauvinism and jingoism had contributed to the extreme nationalism that produced Europe's autocracies. Therefore, he increasingly spoke to Canadians about the necessity of adopting new approaches, even if he privately expressed grave reservations about some of the vision upon which he pontificated in public. Fear of disunity and political fragmentation motivated him to think differently about the nation. His speeches started to take a stand on some of the sensitive and politically divisive issues, offering Canadians a new outlook on immigration and promoting a more engaged foreign policy – away from the isolationism of the interwar period. Despite his attachment to the Commonwealth, for example, King believed that if Canada wished to secure unity, its traditional British identity must give way to something more inclusive. Yet, in no way did he express or indeed entertain a desire to burn down the house and start afresh. His rhetoric mixed anxiety and caution with courage. In addressing immigration, for instance, he proclaimed the need to be inclusive, but he also retained elements of exclusion that he believed Canadians wanted to preserve.

On 8 May 1945, the war in Europe was finally over. King lost no time in telling Canadians what they were to expect of their country going forward. On 30 May, he gave a nationwide radio broadcast entitled "Government Planning for War and Peace," in which he announced that the time had come to turn the page on

what it meant to be Canadian. He characterized the war as a “Great Divide” between “an old order of things” that had passed and a “new order” that would usher in new beginnings. While campaigning in Saint John, New Brunswick, the following week, he told his listeners that a great “social revolution” was under way, adding, “the man or woman who fails to see that is not looking squarely at the problems of today.”¹¹

King built a new national narrative and gave Canadians a new identity. An ambitious program of federal social reconstruction was launched under his leadership, and it altered not only the role of the government, but also Canadians’ notion of their citizenship and their country. The “new order” had three major components. First was the introduction of the welfare state. King instructed Canadians to see themselves, by virtue of being Canadian, as citizens who were entitled not only to political and constitutional rights, but also to social and economic rights. Second was a commitment to internationalism. Somewhat ironically, as he had long eschewed foreign entanglements, King called upon Canadians to reject isolationism. He became a keen supporter of the new liberal international order, even if privately he continued to worry that perhaps Canada was going too far in this direction. Third was the promotion of a more inclusive national identity, with a more welcoming immigration policy and an incremental repudiation of Canada as singularly British, together with the beginnings of a search for new national symbols. This was the conversation that King had with Canadians, as he invited them to reimagine their country.

Social Citizenship as National Identity

Canada was among the earliest nations to embrace Keynesianism to meet the economic and social needs of citizens. During the Great Depression, a belief had emerged that the free market had consistently failed. Many months before the outbreak of the Second World War, King was publicly championing the dawn of a new era. As he explained, “poverty and adversity, want and misery are the enemies which Liberalism will seek to banish from the land.”¹² He had nourished such concerns for a very long time; indeed, in 1918, the year the Great War ended, he had published a book titled *Industry and Humanity: A Study in the Principles Underlying Industrial Reconstruction* that might not have provided a blueprint for the welfare state that had emerged by the time he left office in 1948 but did provide a vision for a new industrial and social order that would improve the welfare of the working class and bring greater social justice to all Canadians. Of course, neither King and the Liberals nor the Conservatives, Canada’s other dominant party, were willing to champion democratic socialism, as advocated in the popular 1933 Regina Manifesto.¹³ However, he did share some of its aspirations, especially the hope that the state would intervene in the

economy to provide some measure of protection to workers.¹⁴ Together with other Canadian politicians, King slowly concluded that, if workers were to be expected to share equally in the burdens and obligations of citizenship, they and their families deserved a better life than had so far been available to them. Already in his 1939 budget, he had suggested that the hold of classical economics on Canadian fiscal policy was loosening. The outbreak of war that September accelerated the movement to deficit financing and a more planned economy.¹⁵ As so often, here, too, King privately worried about new and aggressive public spending, but with a great “social revolution” unfolding, he knew he had to respond to it. His ambitious plan of social reconstruction was maintained through high levels of federal taxation and direct fiscal transfers to citizens, and it brought a changed spirit of political purpose and a new conception of political citizenship and national identity.¹⁶

Reshaping Canada’s identity had begun with Ottawa’s attention to social rights during the Second World War. From then on, the government was expected to intervene in the job market to protect workers and to provide a decent life for families.¹⁷ King’s new national policy had a transformative effect.¹⁸ With his social welfare measures, expansion of social rights, and embrace of social security, he transformed the role of the state and ushered in a new contract between the individual citizen and the state. He laid the foundations of a new Canadian identity for ever after. One could argue that at least partially, this was a response to “the times.” Democratic socialist ideas were taking root in Canada, especially in the rise of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), and novel ideas were coming from the venerable Conservative Party, which became the Progressive Conservative Party in 1942 to reflect its new approach to social welfare. In no way, however, was King willing to support a planned, socialized economy, although that notion had been gaining popularity elsewhere, notably in Great Britain under Prime Minister Clement Attlee. But he was persuaded, often through the efforts of senior bureaucrats and those who had their fingers on the pulse of the nation’s citizens, that the state must provide greater protection to workers and their families.¹⁹ King realized that the redistributive nature of social programs such as support for families, unemployment insurance, and later, protection against the devastating consequences of ill health would strengthen Canadians’ attachment to the nation and to each other, encouraging them to see themselves as members of a single community. Social programs became an instrument of statecraft for a new Canada, presented as a modern welfare state to both Canadians and the international community. As Janine Brodie points out, the federal government had strategically offered the promise of a pan-Canadian social citizenship as a remedy for various challenges to the dilemma of managing a diverse nation.²⁰ Canadians would become one

of the few peoples around the world to regard the welfare state as a defining national characteristic.

Understanding better than most leaders the importance of building a new world order after the Second World War, King was among the first to translate the entitlements of social citizenship into effective legislative arrangements, about which he spoke constantly. Astutely, very early on he had turned his attention to postwar planning. Just three months after Canada's declaration of war, he appointed a Cabinet Committee on Demobilization and Re-establishment, led by Ian Mackenzie, minister of pensions and national health. By August 1940, Canada had an unemployment insurance program. King agreed that Mackenzie's committee should turn to postwar reconstruction more generally, as international consensus was coalescing around a revised relationship between state and citizen and the importance of social security to the new world order.²¹ Two years into the war, during a 4 September 1941 address at the Lord Mayor's Luncheon in the London Guildhall, King warned that the promise of a new world order would be merely rhetorical if governments waited until the war was over to embark on its realization.²² The following year, in Toronto, at the convention of the American Federation of Labor, he noted that rebuilding countries after the destruction of war would create massive employment opportunities, but he also suggested that nations must do more than create jobs. They had to eliminate the fear of unemployment and the sense of insecurity among workers. "Until these fears have been eliminated the war for freedom will not be won," he said. Moreover, "The era of freedom will be achieved only as social security and human welfare becomes the main concern of men and nations."²³

"I have been thinking a good deal ... of the future," King remarked in January 1943, as he planned his legislative agenda, in full awareness that social security had become very important in Canada and, indeed, throughout the Commonwealth.²⁴ He recorded in his diary, "I should be happy indeed if I could round out my career with legislation in the nature of social security." However, he struggled in preparing the speech that would open Parliament on 28 January 1943 but found the right wording in his *Industry and Humanity*, published almost twenty-five years earlier. He concluded, "I have gone further in this speech from the Throne and declaration of policy than in any for a long time past. It should really help to mark an epoch in the development of the Liberal policy in Canada."²⁵ Determined to set the proper tone for Canada's return to peace as the war had turned in favour of the Allies, King himself made the final edits. In looking forward to peace, he proclaimed that it was "in the general interest that freedom from fear and from want should be the assured possession of all [Canadians]." He observed that through federal and provincial legislation,

Canada already had some social security measures, including unemployment insurance, pensions for the aged, the blind, and disabled veterans, workers' compensation, and widows' and mothers' allowances, as well as some assistance to hospitals, but that there was no nationwide plan of social security. He asserted that "a comprehensive national scheme of social insurance should be worked out at once, which will constitute a charter of social security for the whole of Canada."²⁶ His proposals resembled those of Britain's Beveridge Report, which declared war on the five "Giant Evils" of "want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness."²⁷

King fought that battle more fiercely than any before and, in doing so, promised a new Canada, one that would "provide insurance against the inevitable consequences of economic and social hazards." To that end, a Special Select Committee of the House of Commons on Social Security was formed almost immediately. It worked in parallel to the federal Advisory Committee on Reconstruction, chaired by F. Cyril James, the principal of McGill University, whose mandate was to consider the economic and social implications of Canada's transition from war to peace, and it operated under the Cabinet Committee on Demobilization and Re-establishment.²⁸ The advisory committee was tasked to study and report on the most practicable measures to provide a comprehensive national social insurance scheme that would include health insurance.²⁹ Leonard Marsh, also of McGill, and a co-founder of the League for Social Reconstruction, became its research director. Marsh produced the *Report on Social Security for Canada*, which was presented to the House of Commons on 15 March 1943. Described as the single-most important document in the development of Canada's welfare state, the Marsh Report recommended a comprehensive, integrated social security system, similar to the one suggested by Beveridge, that would provide citizens with a minimum level of purchasing power, even when illness, unemployment, or other conditions, such as age, made earning a wage impossible.³⁰

Aware of the considerable excitement that Marsh had generated, King also realized that many of his senior officials and younger colleagues shared Marsh's view on social security.³¹ Brooke Claxton, one of the rising stars King had brought into the Liberal Party and made his parliamentary assistant, and later his minister of national health and welfare, advised him that social security could be part of a new policy for Canada. Arnold Danford Patrick Heeney, clerk of the Privy Council, also advised King of the importance of early action on social security, as did F. Cyril James, who urged him, after submitting his committee's final report in September 1943, to give immediate consideration to social security if Canada intended to adopt a realistic approach to postwar reconstruction.³² In the September 1943 issue of *Canadian Forum*, social welfare advocates

Martin Cohn and Elisabeth Wallace wrote that “social security is, with just cause, a popular slogan ... and good propaganda. A constructive welfare program is of cardinal importance to any party interested in the fundamentals of good government, and not least to a socialist party.”³³ In numerous letters, individuals and organizations urged King to move quickly on implementing a national social security program. One written by Howard A. Hall, solicitor for the Corporation of the Township of York, is illustrative: “Should your Government announce its decision to proceed along those lines [as in the Beveridge Report] it will receive the general and favourable approval of the people throughout the country.”³⁴ Like various other world leaders, King publicly extolled the principle of social security and promised important initiatives in the field as a means of preserving human dignity, maintaining world peace, and fulfilling the pledges made to those who risked their lives and lost limbs, family, and friends defending Canada in the Second World War.

King read the postwar mood accurately. Canadians were concerned about the future, and he knew they had no intention of accepting a return to pre-war conditions. A memorandum from the Wartime Information Board reported to him that Canadians were excited by the prospects of social security spending.³⁵ And, as a weekly survey conducted by the board observed, more than 160 newspapers across the country had published editorials on the Marsh Report in the first week of its release. Some right-leaning papers, such as the *Ottawa Morning Journal* and the *Toronto Telegram*, warned that the report’s recommendations would bankrupt the country if implemented, but by far most commentators offered enthusiastic support. The *Globe and Mail*, hardly committed to social democracy, termed the report a “worthwhile document,” adding, “there must be protection against the evil days [that] are bound to come to some in any system of free enterprise.” Perhaps the *Woodstock Sentinel-Review* read the public mood best, in stating, “The people want social security; they want to be assured that if they give their lives to the country, in working or in fighting, they shall not be in want.”³⁶

Family Allowances: Creating a New Canadian Narrative

Probably the biggest and most immediate impact of the new social citizenship agenda was the introduction of family allowances. King wished to strengthen the family as an institution after the devastation caused by the Depression and war. By 1943, he was thinking seriously about introducing a monthly payment for families with children. Benefits would be paid without regard to family income, as he believed that all Canadian children were worthy of public support. Wage rates, as had been noted when family allowances were introduced in other countries, took no account of family size or a worker’s family responsibilities.

The Marsh Report had pointed out that children were often the chief cause of poverty for many families and that they commonly lived in unhealthy homes due to insufficient household income.

Family allowances would be among Ottawa's largest continuing expenditures. Nevertheless, there was considerable support for the program in King's government. Norman Robertson, undersecretary of state for external affairs, whose advice King valued, pointed out that family allowances were inevitable in the long run, and in the short term they would go far in satisfying both labour's demand for higher incomes and the burgeoning international push for greater social justice. They would also add to Canada's international prestige.³⁷ Advice from Graham Towers also mattered to the prime minister. As governor of the Bank of Canada, Towers thought that family allowances would keep unemployment rates in check, control inflation, and allow the government to provide Canadians with a reasonable minimum of social security. Children, he submitted, were the most vulnerable members of society, and investing in their health and education was a "productive national invention" that would properly prepare the next generation of Canadians.³⁸ There was mounting interest in family allowances in the powerful Department of Finance. Its Economic Advisory Committee (EAC) was an influential group of senior officials; chaired by William Clifford Clark, the deputy minister of finance, it reported to the prime minister. On 16 July 1943, EAC secretary Robert Broughton Bryce drafted a memorandum recommending that a family allowance system be implemented in January. The memo stated that family allowances were "widely recognized as an important element in modern systems of social security" and "would be the most convincing possible evidence of the government's intention to proceed with progressive measures."³⁹ Liberal-friendly newspapers were reporting that King was considering family allowances as a form of government aid for the maintenance of dependent children.⁴⁰ At a National Liberal Federation meeting in September, King urged delegates to support the idea of an activist state that would deliver social security, and he then introduced the promise of a national social insurance scheme that would protect against unemployment, accidents, ill health, old age, and blindness.⁴¹ Yet, privately, and even in Cabinet, he had his doubts. He was concerned about the costs of the new social order and even briefly wondered whether family allowances were indeed the best choice for Canada.⁴² But his hesitation was fleeting. In fact, he made family allowances the most important initiative of the fifth session of the nineteenth Parliament, which opened on 27 January 1944. In its Speech from the Throne, King outlined plans for a comprehensive social security program, including nationwide health insurance and contributory old age pensions. As a first step in showing his commitment to a new social citizenship, he announced family allowances.⁴³ The press showered

him with praise: *Saturday Night* claimed that his Throne Speech made Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal appear "amateurish, unorganized and timid."⁴⁴

Bill 161 to enact family allowances was introduced in Parliament on 25 July 1944. King took the occasion to present his vision of Canada, with a new narrative. "The family and the home are the foundations of national life," he began. The family allowance was designed to "aid in ensuring a minimum of well-being to the children of the nation and to help gain for them a closer approach to equality of opportunity in the battle of life." Wages were not calibrated according to the family responsibilities of workers, but workers with children were "performing the greatest of all national services by ensuring the survival of the nation. It is only fair that the financial burden of this national service be shared by all."⁴⁵ Bill 161 passed second reading unanimously. Charles "Chubby" Power, a senior Quebec minister, prepared a short leaflet providing a condensed version of King's speech for distribution in time for the August 1944 Quebec election. Within weeks, the NLF disseminated nearly 200,000 copies of the speech across Canada.⁴⁶ Then, in preparation for the federal election on 11 June 1945, the NLF put together a thirty-page document for local candidates that discussed all aspects of the program, including its connections to a wider social security agenda for Canada.⁴⁷ Throughout the election campaign, King maintained that family allowances would protect families and the home, which he called "the nursery of the nation."⁴⁸ Speaking to nearly ten thousand people in Montreal, he said that he had devoted his entire political career to social reform and added, "I should like to see established in our country, before I die, what may honestly be referred to as a national minimum standard of human well-being for all."⁴⁹

Social security seemed like a winning strategy, and King repeatedly informed Canadians, "My life interests, I need not tell you, have been with the cause of peace and with the promotion of human welfare and social reform."⁵⁰ But the June election proved disappointing – winning five seats short of a majority, the Liberals were reduced to forming a minority government, and King himself lost his own Prince Albert seat (later winning a by-election in safe Glengarry, Ontario). With the help of Independent Liberals (who had opposed conscription but could join with King now that the war in Europe was over), he claimed a narrow victory, with a majority of just 9 in the 245-seat House of Commons. Without exit and other forms of polling, it is difficult to gauge how the Liberal rhetoric of a new social order affected the election. Still, it is noteworthy that the two other major parties, the Progressive Conservatives and the CCF, also embraced social security in 1945. The Conservatives committed themselves to improving benefits in the family allowances program – and to social security as both a social obligation and a national responsibility. They had fared well, except in Quebec, where their support for conscription was remembered and

they won only a single seat. Campaigning with the slogan “Work, Security and Freedom for All,” the CCF won twenty-eight seats and 15.5 percent of the popular vote. In a survey taken around the time of the election, the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion found that 95 percent of interviewees were aware of family allowances and were supportive of them.⁵¹

Prime Minister King’s new national identity was both rhetorical and real. There were substantive accomplishments for sure, notably family allowances and unemployment insurance, but King and his Liberal administrations never quite delivered the new welfare state that they had promised. In the 1945 election campaign, King had encouraged voters to help him “Build a New Social Order,” which included a generous \$750 million veterans’ benefits package to provide land, jobs, and support for the entrepreneurial spirit of Canada’s returned soldiers; \$400 million for social housing; \$250 million for family allowances; and a variety of supports for industry and agriculture. But after the election, his enthusiasm for the new social citizenship waned.⁵² Some have argued, convincingly, that this generally cautious man had gone as far as he felt he could and that he had no real desire to implement the full program, including a national health insurance plan and improved pensions for the elderly, let alone a more centralized federation, which assuredly would have roused considerable provincial opposition.⁵³

Even if King had become less keen on social citizenship, he often referred to it in the years that followed, continuing to promote a national minimum of social security and human welfare. Speaking in the House of Commons in May 1948, he expressed regret that “little progress” had been made on that front. Demonstrating his ongoing commitment to social security, however, he then introduced a program of national health grants, first discussed in 1939. Its purpose was to assist provinces in improving their health care services and in developing new programs that he hoped would lead to detailed planning for hospitals and for medical care insurance. The King government also provided low-interest loans for provinces to build hospitals. Those policies differed markedly from what many had expected King to deliver in health care, but he continued to insist that “what those expenditures may mean in the preservation of health, in the saving of human life, to say nothing of the lessening of human suffering and misery and not infrequent despair, is beyond calculation.” He even described the measures as representing the first steps in the development of a comprehensive health insurance plan for all Canadians.⁵⁴

Many Canadians certainly believed that King had constructed a new Canada that encompassed social citizenship and that their relationship with the state had changed, whereby they would be provided with a basic level of social and economic security. This belief became essential to the national narrative, and

many Canadians felt that, simply as citizens, they were now entitled to clearly defined benefits. Only when looking back can one get a sense of just how remarkable that journey was. Canadians often set pen to paper to let their prime minister know how much they celebrated the new Canada. Thousands of them – up to seventy-five thousand each month during the first year in which the family allowance cheques were distributed to mothers – wrote to him and the government to express their gratitude for the commitment to social security. In family allowances, they believed that King had fashioned a particularly Canadian identity for the postwar period. Writing from Hudson Heights, Quebec, Anna E. Wilson praised him as personifying Canadianism: “You have attempted to find a way in which human beings can maintain the native dignity and self-respect that is the right of all men and yet participate in the material benefits with which this country is so blessed.”⁵⁵ As King had hoped, family allowances strengthened the bond between citizen and state. Citizenship had become social as well as constitutional and had moved from encompassing a narrow range of political rights to including the promise of extensive entitlements in health, education, and welfare.⁵⁶ It was unlikely that Canadians would be returning to the low tax levels of the pre-war period, as such programs as family allowances, particularly, signalled that the whole nation and each and every taxpayer had a vital interest in the welfare and quality of life of every child.⁵⁷ Together with other social programs, the allowances transformed the national narrative, and Prime Minister King was at the centre of it all. Even as it also strengthened the economy, the expansion of social rights became a hallmark of a new identity and narrative for Canada, both at home and abroad.

Canada in the Postwar World: Changing the Narrative

The historian Margaret MacMillan aptly notes, “The four horsemen of the apocalypse – pestilence, war, famine and death – so familiar during the Middle Ages, appeared again in the modern world.”⁵⁸ Six years of war had resulted in 60 million deaths of both military personnel and civilians, including the genocide of 6 million Jews; additional millions were displaced, including hundreds of thousands of orphaned children. In both Europe and Asia, great cities had been reduced to rubble. That both France and Britain, the ancestral homelands of many Canadians, faced bankruptcy and widespread despair was simply unfathomable. King had seen the international devastation up close, and he urged Canadians to look beyond their own borders and contribute to a new world order where peace must reign supreme. He was convinced that if Canadians focused only on their own interests and ignored the international situation, they would be denigrating the moral values on which Canada was built, particularly those of mutual tolerance, racial cooperation, and the equality

of all citizens. Adam Chapnick, a professor of defence studies at the Royal Military College of Canada, offers a succinct summary of how the war changed Canada: “When the Second World War began, Canadians were governed by a prime minister who was afraid of international commitments,” but during the war, Canadians “abandon[ed] their ambivalence toward the world outside of North America [and] reinvented themselves as concerned and responsible global citizens.”⁵⁹

Promoting an engaged and aggressive foreign policy that featured Canada as an exceptional nation – indeed, as an example to the troubled world – was among King’s primary instruments in constructing a new Canada and a new national narrative, always in the interests of unity. He wanted Canadians to contribute to a postwar solution that would be good for all humanity, and he was adamant in insisting that war could be avoided only if nations promoted justice for all their citizens and better opportunities for all people, both at home and abroad.⁶⁰ The involvement of Canada in world affairs, he frequently asserted, was crucial to the “establishment of conditions under which all peoples may enjoy equality of opportunity and a sense of security.”⁶¹ The threat to world peace, he repeatedly submitted, could be removed only through the international involvement of all peace-loving nations. Canada had no aspirations to become an imperial power or to assume the features of a nationalistic state that sought advantage only for itself. Its sole interest was the maintenance of peace and in contributing to the new world order. It was determined that the world would never again come under the “domination of the law of blood and death.” As King suggested at a civic dinner in Toronto on 12 June 1948, Canada could teach nations “that no man liveth to himself and no nation liveth to itself: we are all members, one of another.”⁶²

As already noted, King was keenly aware that there would be no going back to pre-war conditions. In formulating Canada’s new postwar identity, he needed to reject his own – and Canada’s – earlier isolationist sentiments.⁶³ Canadians must appreciate that the Second World War had changed the international profile of themselves and of their nation. He explained that since the Great War, Canada had acquired not merely a “national status,” but also an international one. It was “no longer a nation concerned almost wholly, or even mainly, with domestic affairs [but had become one of] the foremost of the lesser world powers.” It had joined the “foremost ranks among industrial powers,” second among the world’s exporters, fourth in terms of military capacity, and fourth in its contribution to the Allied victory and to creating a free world. This, he repeatedly told Canadians, meant that Canada had to accept new responsibilities, as its voice and counsel were increasingly being sought internationally. Publicly, King embraced the functional principle that would shape Canada’s postwar

foreign policy. Always a champion of Canadian autonomy within the Commonwealth, by midway through the war, he was insisting that Canada have representation on international decision-making bodies in areas where it had made a significant contribution, even if privately he worried about what that would actually mean in the future.⁶⁴ He began to speak of Canada as a major player on the international stage. Over and over, he reminded Canadians of their enormous contribution in defeating Nazi Germany, and he would describe Canada as a great liberator that had freed “nation after nation from the yoke of the oppressor.”⁶⁵ Canadians had helped “to relieve the suffering and to rehabilitate those nations which were so terribly devastated by war.” King was particularly pleased that Canada was able to help Britain financially in its postwar rebuilding and to have generously assisted “the starving peoples of Europe” on their road to recovery. He claimed that “Canada’s voice has come to be the voice of one of the great powers in the world.” Canada was working for the “good of other nations,” as well as its own.⁶⁶ In his 1947 Dominion Day address to Parliament, marking the eightieth anniversary of Confederation, King stated that Canada had developed “not only into a great nation but as well into a great world power.”⁶⁷ His pronouncements, Chapnick notes, “were remarked upon around the globe,” earning him a “degree of celebrity” in the diplomatic community. His comments about official Canadian thinking in international relations “persisted,” even as he actually worked to limit Canada’s global commitments.⁶⁸

The world had become increasingly “interdependent,” King would explain.⁶⁹ As a result, “nations, like men must learn to co-operate, to bear one another’s burdens. Mutual aid is the key to peace and security.”⁷⁰ In his estimation, Canada was destined to help the world attain lasting peace.⁷¹ He attempted to construct a new narrative for Canadians and their role in world affairs. Moreover, the maintenance of peace could not be left to the big powers. Fearing that the Soviet Union and the United States were bent on ruling the world, King stated that Canada did not “wish to see any one, two, three or four countries dominate the peace.” Even before he participated in laying the constitutional framework for the United Nations Organization in San Francisco, he pledged to Canadians that he would “exert the utmost effort” to secure for Canada a recognition of its standing among the international community: “It is the view of the government that the constitutional position within the [UN] Organization of important secondary countries should be clarified, and that the delegation from Canada should exert the utmost effort to ensure due recognition of *their relative standing among the nations of the world.*” Time and time again, King pointed out to Canadians that their country had committed so greatly to the war effort not only to end the conflict as quickly as possible, but also “to have a voice in the

making of the peace.”⁷² Canada and countries of similar rank had but one wish: to make peace permanent. King repeatedly stressed that Canada was not an imperial power and that it did not seek any material or strategic gain at the peace conferences, but only the maintenance of peace for generations to come.⁷³

He admitted to having learned since 1939 “the supreme lesson that Humanity should no longer be made to serve selfish national ends, whether these ends be world domination or merely isolated self-defence.” The old order was passing away, and “Canada will not be an isolationist.” King talked of the new world order, not as a mechanical or legalistic device, but as a “spirit” that would find “its place in the minds and hearts of [humanity].” Attending the conference on establishing the UN, in the spring of 1945, he asserted that Canada’s purpose there was simple, namely to “bring into being, as soon as possible a Charter of world security.” In a CBC Radio broadcast from San Francisco that April, he told Canadians that they had a duty to “help bring into being a world community in which social security and human welfare will become a part of the inheritance of mankind.” Above all, “the people of Canada must be firm in their resolve to do whatever lies in their power to insure that the world will not be engulfed for a third time by a tidal war of savagery and despotism.”⁷⁴ On 8 May, V-E Day, still in San Francisco, he released a second radio broadcast. In his jubilant announcement to Canadians of victory in Europe, he repeated much of what he had said at the UN plenary session: Canada would stand with other nations in defence of freedom, and it was committed to forging with the international community “a mighty instrument for world security ... [We] are seeking to secure for peoples everywhere, and for generations yet unborn, the opportunities of a more abundant life.” The speech was repeated in French by Louis St-Laurent, the minister of justice, and carried over the largest network ever arranged by the CBC to that point. The following day, it appeared in the *Ottawa Morning Citizen*.⁷⁵

On 26 June 1945, at the official signing of the UN Charter, which was ratified and came into force on 24 October, King said that the occasion marked “the dawn of a new era in the history of the world,” one where the “hope of the future lies in the recognition of the profound truths that the interests of mankind are one and that the claims of humanity are supreme.”⁷⁶ Having helped bring the UN into being, he expected Canadians to share such a view – as they had during the two world wars – in their participation in the various UN activities and in continuing to shape the new world order. Even so, he believed that Canada had more important things to do internationally than seek a seat on the first Security Council; nevertheless, when the UN faced a credibility crisis in 1947, Canada launched a successful bid for a two-year position on the council. Back in May 1945, in a speech entitled “International Co-operation Essential to Peace,

Security and Prosperity,” King told an Edmonton audience that Canada’s support for the UN was recognition that it mattered in the world community. Political isolation and economic nationalism would destroy the great victory just won by the Allies: “No isolation, economic or political, is possible ... No country, today, can cut itself off from the world.”⁷⁷

Prime Minister King talked candidly about his own transformation in matters of international affairs. On 30 January 1947, the third session of the twentieth Parliament opened. A few days later, in his “Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne,” which was printed and widely distributed nationally, King reflected pointedly on Canada’s new international priorities. Throughout much of his career, he acknowledged, his focus had been almost exclusively on domestic affairs; international concerns had been among the “last” considered. That was no longer prudent, and Canadians must now realize “that times have changed and that the great problems which our parliaments are called upon to consider today are not so much domestic day-to-day affairs as they are great international questions which have a bearing upon the future peace and prosperity of the world.”⁷⁸ Although he would later introduce a distinctive Canadian citizenship, he suggested that his was a “world citizenship,” which he described as a “sense of responsibility to a world community.”⁷⁹ “Whether we like it or not,” he declared, “the future of our country is wrapped up with the future of all countries.” King sought to assure Canadians that if they continued to embrace that vision and the courage of their founders and to cherish the ideals expressed since Confederation, Canada “will make a great and, it may be, a decisive contribution to the preservation of human freedom and to the establishment of enduring peace.”⁸⁰ Thus, it could no longer remain aloof from international affairs; it had to join the international community to “render aggression impossible in the future.” Its own security was dependent on international cooperation, and this was the “corner stone of our external policy.”⁸¹ As just one indication of Canada’s commitment to international affairs, the prime minister pointed out that it had participated in only seventeen international conferences in 1939 but had joined ninety-eight such gatherings in 1946.⁸² Perhaps more importantly, it had been a leader in drafting the United Nations Charter, and its involvement and counsel were increasingly welcomed, indeed sought, by the international community.⁸³

At the UN General Assembly in Paris, on 27 September 1948, King, who was still prime minister until 15 November, declared (again) that all nations must have an international outlook: “If this world of ours is to escape destruction, international relationships, characterized by antagonism and coercion, must make way for a world community which recognizes that over all nations is humanity.”⁸⁴ He lamented the British, Soviet, and American disagreement

concerning the future of Berlin – this in the midst of the almost year-long Berlin Airlift, a critical crisis in the early Cold War – rightly fearful that such quarrels foreshadowed the dangers that might plague the postwar world.⁸⁵ Reporters in Canada described his chastising of former allies as “the first moral call” to the world. He implored UN delegates to choose the “relief of humanity” over “violent conquest,” warning that their actions and choices could plunge “the world into the darkness of anarchy” or they could move “towards the light of ordered freedom and universal peace.” Canadians were eager to contribute to the reconstruction of Europe, and King pledged Canada’s support through various means to “the peoples who had suffered most from the war to rebuild their homes, restore their agriculture, [and] restart their industries so that these countries would become part of the world economy and world community again.” Canada was already a leading supplier and a firm supporter of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, an international relief agency created in 1943 to assist victims of the war.⁸⁶ Unequivocally, “Our country has spared no effort to help bind up the wounds and to rescue from starvation and disease, the stricken peoples of war-ravaged lands.”⁸⁷

King reminded Canadians that they should be proud that their “export credits [were] unparalleled in their magnitude in relation to the wealth and population of our country.” World security could be attained only if all nations followed Canada’s lead and “committed to the common good, that can be achieved only when each individual does his part, and when each nation does its part to further the common good, and have an attitude of good-will towards all.”⁸⁸ Canadians had to see their nation as a major player, helping to restore world markets, not just because that was good for its exports, but also because “the restoration of a world economy will be a major contribution to lasting peace.”⁸⁹ Canadians had to believe that their country was sparing no effort to rebuild the world.⁹⁰ Not only was it committed to promoting the great principles set forth in the UN Charter, but King also said that it was willing to maintain a superior military force to help preserve freedom, while acknowledging that “force has not in itself the power to create better conditions” and keep the world safe from such evils as communism forever. That could happen only if nations such as Canada provided for the “equitable distribution of the world’s wealth.” Canada had a responsibility to help preserve the “freedom of men and women of our own and other lands.”⁹¹

King often suggested that Canadians could be an example to the world: “We are not a people who seek to foster class distinctions, or special privilege,” he asserted with pride. “We are prepared to live and let live. Our ambition is not to rule over other nations, nor do we wish to be ruled by any of them. We love freedom, and we seek for all who comprise our Nation, an ever-larger measure

of equality of opportunity.” Such attributes were not only the essence of democracy, where the emphasis was on the freedom of the individual, but they were also the desire of all humankind. King claimed that no country wanted to live with “regimentation” and “uniformity,” but that all states sought in human relations, as in nature, unity in diversity, long a familiar trope in Canadian rhetoric. Canada’s extensive history of managing diverse communities, he insisted, “is exactly what the whole world needs most today.” As it struggled with the problem of how to live amicably, it could look to Canada for guidance and inspiration. “We in Canada,” he stated, “have solved that problem, or nearly so.”⁹²

The unity of Canada, King insisted, belonged to all humankind. Such a nationality served humanity, and as he informed new Canadians during their swearing-in ceremony on 2 January 1947, only when “nationality serves Humanity can mankind hope to substitute co-operation for conflict, in the relations between the nations of the world.”⁹³ Later that year, at the Annual Field Day of the Waterloo County Federation of Agriculture, he asked Canadians to preserve the

spirit of tolerance, of understanding and good-will among men and women of different origins, occupations, races and creeds, which had become a recognized characteristic of the Canadian way of life, [and] we will do as much for the advancement of good relations throughout the world, as it would be possible for us to do in any other way. There is no force like the force of example.

The people of Canada should be proud to say, “I am Canadian,” I am good, and I am an example to the world.⁹⁴

Distinctive National Symbols and a New Approach to Immigration

Prime Minister King constantly reminded Canadians that theirs was a sovereign and independent country, and he was delighted that they “had ceased to speak apologetically when they referred to Canada as a nation.” He felt they should take great pride in Canada’s emergence with “complete nationhood” that controlled its own affairs.⁹⁵ To this end, he thought it important to differentiate Canada from other members of the Commonwealth and from Britain but to do so without severing ties to the Crown. One way of accomplishing that goal was to reconstruct existing symbols and create new ones to show Canada as an independent nation, no longer subordinate to Britain, even while it remained part of the Commonwealth and its constitution remained with the British Parliament – essentially because Canadians could not agree upon the machinery for amending it. Simply put, King insisted, “the reality of Canadian nationhood had long been achieved,” only its “appearance, the outward symbols of nationhood were still lacking.”⁹⁶

Not long after V-E Day, in an address entitled “Employment, Prosperity, and National Unity,” which he gave in Winnipeg, King announced that the laws governing Canadian nationality, citizenship, and identity were in a “somewhat confused and uncertain state” and thus needed to be “corrected.”⁹⁷ In aid of this, he focused on four components: a new flag; phasing out use of the word “dominion,” including renaming Dominion Day, which was Canada’s national day, as Canada Day; a Citizenship Act to create the legal status of Canadian citizen, separating it from the status of British subject; and changes to immigration policy. He also talked about the importance of creating a national pantheon or series of monuments and commemorative sites in Ottawa “to help give expression to what Canada as a nation is likely to become in the course of years”: under the auspices of the Federal District Commission, already before the war and again in 1945, King tasked the well-known French landscape architect and town planner Jacques Gréber to propose a plan for the national capital area; however, those initiatives reached fruition only long after King’s death.⁹⁸

King’s Winnipeg speech, made on 24 May, Victoria Day, and broadcast across the nation, drew considerable applause for his promise to “properly define” Canadian citizenship. Interestingly, enthusiasm was more subdued when he proposed a new flag. To show that he was not getting too far ahead of the electorate, he quickly added that Canada would “continue, of course, to honour the Union Jack as a symbol of the British Commonwealth and Empire.” That comment, he later noted in his diary, “brought forth much more applause than the reference to a distinctive Canadian flag.”⁹⁹ Nevertheless, despite the cool reception to the flag idea, King promised one, on 6 September 1945, in his first Speech from the Throne after V-E Day, having led the Liberals to victory in the June election. The war had been won with significant help from Canada, as he reiterated, and he insisted that the time had come for Canada, like other nations of the world and, indeed, other Commonwealth nations, to possess its own flag. He promised to task a select committee of the House of Commons and the Senate with considering a suitable design. In the meantime, he reassured Canadians that the Red Ensign, which had been carried into battle by their army and flown from the Peace Tower in Ottawa on V-E Day and Victory in Japan Day, would be displayed wherever there was a need to fly a distinctive Canadian flag.¹⁰⁰ He must have sensed that the issue would be divisive and that pursuing the change could threaten national unity. In fact, a national poll taken in March 1944 had found Canadians to be very much divided on the flag. When asked if they wished to keep the Red Ensign, design a new flag incorporating the Union Jack, or opt for a completely new design without the Union Jack, 28 percent opted for the Union Jack, 40 percent wanted a new flag that featured some element of it, and 27 percent favoured a completely new design. When Quebecers

were excluded from the results, 80 percent of respondents expressed a desire either to keep the Union Jack or to incorporate the Union Jack into a new design. Only 32 percent of Quebec respondents wished either to maintain the Union Jack or to incorporate it [the Union Jack] into a new flag, whereas 63 percent said they wanted a flag without the Union Jack.¹⁰¹ Even so, in a CBC national broadcast made just after Dominion Day 1946, King insisted “these symbols of our unity as a nation are of growing significance to the vast majority of Canadians.”¹⁰²

Similarly, he wanted the government usage to be “Canada” rather than “Dominion of Canada.” In December 1945, Norman Robertson, one of his senior advisers, prepared a lengthy memorandum outlining why that course would be perfectly acceptable and why the use of “Dominion of Canada” was not strictly correct. According to section 3 of the British North America Act, Queen Victoria was authorized to proclaim that the union of the various colonies “shall form and be One Dominion under the name of Canada.” The designation “Dominion of Canada” was widely used after Confederation to distinguish the new country from the colonies of the two Canadas (East and West) that had existed before 1867. Robertson also noted that “Canada” was being used in all Department of External Affairs documents and that foreign governments had adopted it in their exchanges with Canada. Indeed, in 1939, Ottawa had officially informed the United States that “Canada” should be used in a treaty the countries were then negotiating. Two years later, a similar message was relayed to British authorities. Although Robertson admitted that “dominion” had “acquired the general connotation of a status distinctly more than colonial, but still somewhat less than fully national,” he recommended to King that the use of “Dominion of Canada” be “discouraged” in favour of “Canada.”¹⁰³ For King, “dominion” was synonymous with inequality, and discarding it was part of the scaffolding upon which a new national identity and narrative could be built. As things turned out, a new flag would not be adopted during his mandate, although he continued to mention the necessity of having one.¹⁰⁴ He also had little success in excluding “Dominion” from Canada’s name.¹⁰⁵

Accordingly, King had no greater success with changing Dominion Day to Canada Day, although he supported an initiative in Parliament to rename the annual celebrations of the birth of Canada each 1 July. On 4 April 1946, Philias Côté, the Liberal member for Matapedia-Matane, introduced a private member’s bill to effect such a change. King believed that there was considerable support for the legislation, especially in Quebec, and he instructed the Leader of the House “to go right ahead and put the Bill through.” The new designation would strengthen national unity, he believed, even if it raised the ire of those who maintained a strong attachment to their British heritage. Côté’s initiative fitted nicely with King’s plans. The bill passed second and third readings, becoming

one of the few private members' bills to make it out of the Commons that year. Fourteen of King's Cabinet ministers supported it, but Progressive Conservatives and Social Credit were opposed, along with a few English-speaking Liberals. Quebec Liberals were particularly elated, feeling that the change was an important step toward a more inclusive Canadianism. King congratulated Côté: "I am pleased at this being a part of what has been achieved in rounding out Canada as a country in the years of my administration."¹⁰⁶ But his endorsement could not save the bill. On 30 April, it moved to the Senate, which sent it to the Standing Committee on Banking, Trade and Commerce. The committee proposed several amendments that effectively killed the measure as, procedurally, the House of Commons could not consider Senate amendments to private members' bills. Thus, Côté's bill was defeated.¹⁰⁷ King blamed himself and his haste to recast Canada's identity: "We had made a mistake last year in having too many matters relating to Canada dealt with at once," he told his caucus on 4 February 1947. "I had been disappointed to discover that there was a large section of the country that did not approve of the report of the Committee on the Flag though it was nearly unanimous," he said. He then "suggested we leave the matter alone for the present. Also, that it was better not to bring up another Canada Day."¹⁰⁸ He realized that some of his plans to remove existing symbols, such as the old flag and the official name of the 1 July holiday, would meet strong opposition.¹⁰⁹ Yet, by attempting to do so, he had demonstrated that he was committed to reshaping the national narrative and the national identity.

King had more success with his promise "to revise and clarify the definition of Canadian citizenship" and to bring the legislation respecting national status, naturalization, and immigration into conformity with it.¹¹⁰ The Canadian Citizenship Act, which came into force on 1 January 1947, was an important moment in the development of Canada's identity, and it involved no prior consultation with Britain and the other dominions. The act created a category of nationality that was separate from British subjecthood, an initiative that would later be replicated by other dominions.¹¹¹ At Canada's inaugural citizenship ceremony that same month, King himself received the first citizenship certificate on behalf of all Canadians. During the nationwide CBC Radio broadcast of the proceedings, he reminded Canadians that the ceremony was another symbol of their evolving national identity, of which they should all be proud: "Citizenship is the highest honour a nation can confer upon an individual who has not been born into this heritage." Although some countries were older than Canada, Canadians had greater reason to be proud of their nation. Since 1867, widely scattered communities "have been welded into a single country." Canadians from diverse racial origins had struggled to overcome division, and many newcomers arrived who "have felt no binding claim to the land of their adoption."

Yet, Canada was not founded on a “superiority of a single race or a single language,” but “only on the faith that two of the proudest races in the world, despite barriers of tongue and creed, could work together, in mutual tolerance and mutual respect, to develop a common nationality.” They then “admitted thousands who were born of other racial stock, and who speak other tongues,” and they, too, found in Canada “not domination and slavery, but equality and freedom.” The Canadian Citizenship Act would bring unity to a nation of diversity and establish a new conception of being Canadian, one without any sense of superiority and not based on a single race or a single language. King reminded his listeners that if they remained committed to mutual tolerance and acceptance of diversity, equality for all, and racial cooperation, or what he saw as the basis of Canadian citizenship, the Canadian nationality would serve as an example for humanity everywhere.¹¹²

His reconstruction of the national identity also confronted Canada’s discriminatory immigration policy, albeit gingerly. He called for a revival of mass immigration, which had been curtailed during the Great Depression and the Second World War.¹¹³ His intent was “to enlarge the population of the country. It would be dangerous for a small population to attempt to hold so great a heritage as ours.”¹¹⁴ There was little doubt that the immigration strategy would continue to be dictated by economics, by the ability to absorb labour into the economy, and by maintaining Canada as a primarily white society. Yet, King pointed out, it had been unambiguously discriminatory since 1867. He addressed the contradiction between Canada’s liberal democratic principles and its promotion of international human rights, on the one hand, and its exclusionary immigration policy, on the other. Add to that the atrocities of the war, especially the Holocaust, and King realized that the policy was difficult to defend and awkward to sustain. Something had to change. The lessons of the war and the new UN Charter helped remove references to attracting the “right stock” of immigrant. Canadians had a moral obligation to address the problem of persons displaced by war, but for King the current problem was primarily in Europe – and immigrants from there would easily be integrated into Canadian society. He reassured Canadians that their preference for migrants from the British Isles and northern Europe would not be threatened. He could not move completely beyond the pressures of domestic considerations or put Canada at the forefront of fundamental human rights when he addressed immigration policy. Even so, he had already told Parliament in 1943, for example, that the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act, known colloquially as the “Exclusion Act” because it prohibited entry into Canada of all Chinese, was a “mistake.”¹¹⁵ Pressure from the Committee for the Repeal of the Chinese Immigration Act, a group supported by both Chinese settlers and non-Chinese Canadians, prompted him, on 1 May

1947, to announce the repeal of both the 1923 legislation and Order-in-Council 1378, thus removing all discrimination against Chinese immigrants on the basis of their race.¹¹⁶

In public, King acknowledged that the prejudice and hatred manifested during the war necessitated a review of immigration policy; in private, he understood that it would remain largely exclusionary, dictated by the country's ability to absorb newcomers into the economy and to find a policy that Canadians would accept.¹¹⁷ With 80 percent of Canadians being of either British or French descent, King feared, perhaps correctly, that many voters did "not wish, as a result of mass immigration, to have a fundamental alteration in the character of our population." As Irving Abella and Harold Troper point out, he was anxious to still rumours and fears about the wholesale admission of Asian immigrants, particularly to British Columbia. Yet, when Cabinet debated the *Report of the Committee for the Repeal of the Chinese Immigration Act*, he acknowledged that "a good deal of confusion [existed] in the minds of all of us as to where to draw the line and how to draw it in the matter of discrimination between races and peoples who wish to come to Canada." He added, "There should be no exclusion of any particular race," noting that it had been "wiped out against the Chinese." However, 3,964 Japanese Canadians – 66 percent of whom were Canadians by birth or naturalization – were deported to Japan between May and December 1946, and Japanese Canadians were not permitted to return to the west coast until 1949.¹¹⁸ In 1947, amid charges of discrimination in immigration policies, King had insisted in Parliament that "Canada is perfectly within her rights in selecting the persons whom we regard as desirable future citizens. It is not a fundamental human right of any alien to enter Canada. It is a privilege."¹¹⁹

King took tentative steps toward addressing some of the discriminatory features in the immigration policy even as he told Parliament in 1947 that Canadians had no wish to see mass immigration fundamentally alter the character of the population. This comment is frequently cited as proof that he continued to promote race-based exclusion.¹²⁰ What has not been acknowledged nearly as often, or as emphatically, is what he said next. Granted, he noted, "The Government has no intention of removing the existing regulations respecting Asiatic immigration unless and until alternative measures of effective control have been worked out." Yet, he added, "This does not mean that we should not seek to remove from our legislation what may appear to be objectionable discrimination." This remark, which is usually omitted in discussions of his speech, shows that, publicly, he wanted Canadians to acknowledge their prejudice (and perhaps his own) and come to terms with their racist immigration policy. He perceived the necessity of reform, and it is also significant that he, rather than



W.L. Mackenzie King's funeral, Parliament Hill, 26 July 1950 | Photo by Duncan Cameron, Library and Archives Canada

James Glen, the immigration minister, announced the new policy in Parliament. King took cautious but nevertheless important steps in diminishing the inequitable features of the legislation.¹²¹ Considered in its entirety, his speech does contain racist elements: as Abella and Troper remark, he “attempted to have it both ways.” He understood the necessity of liberalizing the policy and removing its bigoted aspects, in theory if not in practice, but he also understood voters and knew that change had to be accomplished incrementally.¹²² Of note, Asians soon won the vote in British Columbia, though Chinese immigration remained restricted until the 1960s.

The removal of some of the objectionable clauses in the immigration policy without fully opening the door to all who wished to come to Canada allowed King to praise Canada as consisting of “many races, of many creeds, with origins in many lands.”¹²³ Even if his rhetoric did not match his immigration policy, he remarked that in “a world which unhappily will long remain [a] seething cauldron of enmity and bitterness,” any person “who lends his voice or his pen to the stirring up of racial, religious or sectional strife should be regarded as a common enemy of mankind.”¹²⁴ In fact, in August 1946, speaking at Dieppe to

commemorate the failed 1942 Allied amphibious attack on the German-occupied port, King had praised Canada as a model: the descendants of Cartier and Champlain had joined with their British rivals to create Canada and give the world a “beacon of light.” An article titled “Monument Cornerstone Laid by Prime Minister on Visit to Dieppe,” in which the 19 and 20 August 1946 editions of the *Globe and Mail* reported on his doings there, included a lengthy quote in which he praised Canada’s diversity: “Never at any time have I been prouder of the fact that Canada is comprised of two races – French and English. It is an *example* to the world of two peoples united to form one nationality. The bond has been that of *freedom*. This is the *brotherhood* which united the peoples of the world.”¹²⁵ King’s rhetoric suggests that he wanted Canadians to recognize the importance of improving their human rights legislation even if they did so slowly and reluctantly.¹²⁶ This approach enabled them – then and since – to claim that they were a virtuous people because they acknowledged diversity, even if a number of racialized groups, including Indigenous peoples, remained marginalized. In 1948, King repealed the Dominion Elections Act, which had made it impossible to deny Chinese Canadians the right to vote on the basis of race. Subsequently, Chinese immigration greatly increased – from just seven people between 1926 and 1945 to nearly fifteen thousand between 1946 and 1955 – and, within a generation, newcomers from Asia would help to radically change the face of Canada.¹²⁷

ALL NATIONS CONSTRUCT national identities and narratives, and these are invariably ambiguous and contingent. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King advanced a new narrative of Canada as it came out of the Second World War that changed the identity of Canadians. Both his speeches and his policies were instruments of nation building, forging a new postwar consensus, and they challenged the existing view of the nation, especially in English-speaking Canada. Through an examination of his words, we can see how he articulated and gave meaning to new ideas of Canada and being Canadian. The nation was reimagined through words, both spoken and written, as well as through legislation. King led the country through these processes in the 1940s, and he did so in a sense of idealism and hope, not merely pragmatic political calculation. Of course, all politicians are by inclination if not by nature political calculators, always with an ear and eye attuned to the next election. In this, King was no exception, yet this does not mean that he functioned solely as political pragmatist.

When King died on 22 July 1950, the editors of the *Globe and Mail* praised him for symbolizing the nation. They were not wrong. As he lay in state in the foyer of the Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings for a day and a half, nearly

forty thousand Canadians of all ages and backgrounds came to pay their respects. As the *Globe* put it, “There was no distinction of age or rank or occupation” among those who filed past the open casket. “Parents brought their children, some of them in arms. Teenagers arrived in slacks. Labourers came from their jobs in their working clothes. Priests and clerics of all denominations mingled in that never-ending stream.”¹²⁸ Certainly, the curious came, but so too did those who “realized that Mr King had become a symbol of [Canadian] nationhood.”¹²⁹ Perhaps with his death, many Canadians appreciated that this prime minister had shepherded them through a tumultuous era and had helped to chart a new direction for them. He offered them a nation that they believed mattered in world affairs, one that cared for its citizens by universalizing the concept of social welfare and changing the notion of citizenship through the state provision of various social security measures. He also noted that new symbols had to be embodied in this reconstructed identity and that the immigration policy must confront its discriminatory aspects. By the time he died, King had seen the implementation of only a few of the changes he advocated, but he had instilled in Canadians the idea that their political and social cohesion depended upon forging a new national identity and a new narrative to build a renewed sense of purpose and to keep the country united. In the generations that followed, Canada’s identity would change significantly, but it was King who began that process.

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