Louis Stephen St. Laurent
Canada's twelfth prime minister

Quick Facts

Term(s) of Office:
- November 15, 1948–June 21, 1957

Born
- February 1, 1882, Compton, Quebec

Died
- July 25, 1973, Québec, Quebec
- **Grave site:** Cemetery of St. Thomas Aquinas, Compton, Quebec

Education
- St. Charles Seminary, Sherbrooke, B.A. 1902
- Laval University, LL.L. 1905

Personal Life
- Married 1908, Jeanne Renault (1886–1966)
- Two sons, three daughters

Occupations
- Lawyer (called to the Quebec Bar in 1905)
- 1914 Professor of Law, Laval University
- 1929 Bâtonnier of the Quebec Bar
- 1930–1932 President of the Canadian Bar Association
- 1937–1940 Counsel to Rowell-Sirois Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations

Political Party
- Liberal
- 1948–1958 Party Leader

Constituencies
- 1942–1958 Quebec East, Quebec

Other Ministries
- 1941–1946, 1948 Justice and Attorney General of Canada
- 1946–1948 Secretary of State for External Affairs
- 1948–1957 President of the Privy Council

Political Record
- Trans-Canada Highway Act 1949
- Promoted Canada's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) 1949
- Welcomed Newfoundland into Confederation 1949
- Canadian participation in the Korean War 1950–1953
- Appointed Vincent Massey first Canadian-born governor general 1952
- Start of construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway 1954

- Equalization payments 1956
- Canada Council established 1957
- Leader of the Opposition 1957–1958

Biography

Our nation was planned as a political partnership of two great races. It was planned by men of vision, of tolerance, as a partnership in which both of the partners would retain their essential characteristics, their religion, their culture.—Louis St. Laurent, August 6, 1948

Like Sir Wilfrid Laurier, national unity was Louis St. Laurent's primary concern as prime minister. St. Laurent was descended from French and British ancestry, and like his predecessor, fluently bilingual, commanding the admiration and support of Canadians of both cultures.

Louis Stephen St. Laurent was born in Compton, Quebec in 1882. His father, a store owner, was Québécois and his mother was Irish. He grew up speaking French to his father and English to his mother, and was a teenager before he realized that this was not a customary practice in every family!

After completing six years of study at the Collège classique in Sherbrooke, St. Laurent attended Laval University where he earned his degree in law. Upon graduation in 1905, he was offered a Rhodes Scholarship, but turned it down in order to get started in the legal profession. He joined a Quebec law firm and began a legal career that lasted 25 years.

St. Laurent's bilingualism was an asset and he found himself representing Quebec clients in Ottawa, Great Britain and the United States. He excelled in both corporate and constitutional law. St. Laurent had been involved with the Liberal party since childhood. His father had run as a Liberal candidate in provincial elections and it was through him that young Louis met and shook hands with the campaigning Wilfrid Laurier in 1896. But although St. Laurent was supportive of the party and its candidates, many of whom were his friends, he had no interest in being a politician himself.

In 1941, St. Laurent was 59 years old; he had a distinguished and lucrative legal career and was at the age when he could contemplate retirement. Fate, however, had other things in mind for him. Ernest Lapointe, Minister of Justice and Prime Minister Mackenzie King's Quebec lieutenant, had just died and King was anxious to replace him with another advisor of equal calibre. For a variety of reasons, his choices within the caucus or the party were unable to take over the position, but all of them recommended Louis St. Laurent. Despite his initial protests of political inexperience, St. Laurent soon realized the importance of the role being offered him. He accepted on the grounds of patriotic duty and with the stipulation that he would retire as soon as the war was over. He won a by-election in 1942 for Quebec East and became a Cabinet minister.

St. Laurent's calm demeanour and rational logic, his knowledge of law and his dislike of political gamesmanship won him the respect of King, his Cabinet colleagues, even the Opposition. In the Conscription Crisis of 1944, St. Laurent's staunch support prevented the collapse of the government and the war effort. In the immediate aftermath of victory, he became involved in the establishment of the United Nations. Not only did he see a role for Canada independent of Britain and the Commonwealth, but also he felt that as a middle power, Canada should take an active role as an intermediary in international affairs.

By 1948, St. Laurent's political retirement was long overdue and he contemplated resigning. However, King and the Liberal party felt there was no one better qualified to succeed as prime minister. St. Laurent was persuaded to stand as a candidate at the leadership convention in August 1948, which he won.

In his first election as prime minister, the party was worried about his public image. While his quiet reserve and dignified manner enhanced the House of Commons, would they appeal to the average Canadian? But St. Laurent surprised everyone with his "common touch" and ability to connect with people. His rapport with children proved particularly appealing and he was dubbed "Uncle Louis."

As prime minister, St. Laurent oversaw the joining of Newfoundland in Confederation as Canada's tenth province in 1949. Despite considerable initial opposition, he managed to establish equalization payments to the provinces. The Liberals continued their program of social reform with improvements in pensions and health insurance. Canada played an important role in resolving the Suez Crisis in 1956, and contributed to the UN force in the Korean War. Under St. Laurent's ministry, wartime debts were paid off and Canada enjoyed economic prosperity.

The pipeline debate proved the Liberals' undoing. Their attempt to pass legislation to build a natural gas pipeline from Alberta to central Canada met with fierce disagreement in the House. The introduction of closure further infuriated the Opposition and the Liberals were discredited in the eyes of the public.

After almost 22 years in power, the Liberals lost the 1957 election. St. Laurent was content to finally retire from politics and resigned his leadership in 1958. His retirement was a quiet one, spent with his family, enjoying his many grandchildren. He died in 1973, at the age of 91.

International Relations

Before becoming prime minister in 1948, St. Laurent had served as Secretary of State for External Affairs. He went with Mackenzie King to the San Francisco conference to sign the United Nations Charter in 1945 and he led the Canadian delegation to the first UN General Assembly, in London, England, in January 1946.

In 1946 John Humphrey, a Canadian law professor, became director of the United Nations Division on Human Rights. Humphrey and Eleanor Roosevelt collaborated to produce the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which came into force in 1982, was based on this document.

As prime minister, St. Laurent played a major role in setting up the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a defensive military alliance linking Canada, the United States, Britain and western European nations. The treaty was signed in April 1949.

When North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950, the Americans wanted to intervene immediately to defend South Korea. St. Laurent and his Secretary of State for External Affairs, Lester Pearson, worked closely together in organizing the Canadian response. They urged the Americans not to take military action except with the authorization of the United Nations. Once this UN approval had been obtained, Canada participated in the UN force.

Anecdote
Uncle Louis

Political image-makers and spin doctors create a positive public image for prime ministers today. Before television brought politicians with their speeches, gestures and faces into the living rooms of the nation, the first prime minister to establish a "media image" was Louis St. Laurent. In his first election as leader in 1949, the Liberal party worried about what kind of image this elderly corporate lawyer would project. In person, St. Laurent was a shy, diffident man, with a quiet reserve that appeared almost courtly. Would such a personality appeal to post-war Canada?

Louis St. Laurent did appeal, for there was another side to his character. The father of five and grandfather of twelve, he adored children. On one of his first campaign stops in a small town in Manitoba, he immediately approached a group of youngsters on the railway platform. The children responded enthusiastically to his kind attentions. No matter what the adults thought, he was a hit! An astute reporter watched this rapport develop over the campaign tour and predicted "Uncle Louis will be hard to beat."

The Liberals maximized St. Laurent's instinctive "common touch" before and after the election. While usually well dressed, St. Laurent would appear on a campaign platform in his shirt sleeves to deliver a chatty speech. Travelling by train to the United States in 1950, he donned the engineer's cap and overalls, and drove the locomotive part of the way!

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