

Lester Bowles Pearson

Canada's Fourteenth prime minister

Quick Facts

Term(s) of Office:

- April 22, 1963–April 20, 1968

Born

- April 23, 1897, Newton Brook, Ontario

Died

- December 27, 1972, Ottawa, Ontario
- **Grave site:** Maclaren Cemetery, Wakefield, Quebec

Education

- University of Toronto, B.A. 1919
- Oxford University, B.A. Modern History 1923, M.A. 1925

Personal Life

- Married 1925, Maryon Moody (1902–1991)
- One daughter, one son

Occupations

- 1914–1918 Lieutenant, Canadian Army Medical Corps and Flying Officer, Royal Flying Corps
- 1923–1928 History lecturer, University of Toronto
- 1928–1948 Department of External Affairs
- 1945–1946 Canadian Ambassador to the United States
- 1946 Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs
- 1951–1952 Chairman of the NATO Council
- 1952–1953 President of the United Nations General Assembly
- 1969–1972 Professor and Chancellor, Carleton University
- Author

Political Party

- Liberal
- 1958–1968 Party Leader

Constituencies

- 1948–1968 Algoma East, Ontario

Other Ministries

- 1948–1957 Secretary of State for External Affairs

Political Record

- Nobel Peace Prize 1957
- Leader of the Opposition 1958–1963
- Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism 1963
- Canada Pension Plan 1965

- Canada-United States Automotive Agreement (Auto Pact) 1965
- National flag 1965
- Universal medicare 1966
- Centennial celebrations 1967

Biography

I have done it by hard work and long hours, by making it evident that I was available for whatever was to be done; by welcoming every opportunity for new and more responsible duties; and by accumulating all the experience possible in all the varied aspects of my profession.—Lester Pearson, in his memoirs, 1972

Such a philosophy led our 14th prime minister from playing semi-pro baseball for the Guelph Maple Leafs, to the highest position in Canada and to the presidency of the United Nations. Yet he never lost the easygoing, friendly aspect of a rural Ontario boy; indeed, it was exactly this manner that won him the trust of so many nations and led him to win one of the world's highest honours.

Lester Bowles Pearson was born in Newton Brook, Ontario in 1897. His father was a Methodist minister who moved frequently, so Pearson and his brothers were schooled in Peterborough, Aurora, Hamilton and other small Ontario towns. In 1913, he went to the University of Toronto to study for a general B.A. Two years later, in the midst of his studies, he enlisted. Pearson served two years as a medical orderly in a military hospital in Salonika. In 1917, he requested a transfer to the Royal Air Force and went to air training school in Hendon, England. He survived an airplane crash during his first flight, only to be hit by a bus in London during a blackout! Pearson was invalided home in 1918.

He returned to the University of Toronto and graduated in 1919. After a year in Chicago at a meat packing plant and then a fertilizer company, he was offered a scholarship at Oxford University. There, Pearson distinguished himself on the Oxford hockey team. He returned to Canada in 1925 and taught history at the University of Toronto.

While doing research at the Public Archives in 1927, Pearson was invited to join the Department of External Affairs. He came first in the departmental exams and was appointed first secretary. During his 20-year career in External Affairs, Pearson proved himself a natural diplomat. He was hard-working, quick to comprehend complex issues and his congenial charm quickly disarmed potentially hostile negotiators. Recognizing that any successful compromise must spare all parties from humiliation was his secret to effective diplomacy.

The Liberals lost the election in 1958 and St. Laurent retired as prime minister. Pearson was elected Liberal leader and served in the Opposition during the Diefenbaker years. In 1963, the Liberals won

a minority government. An attempt to win a majority in 1965 was not successful and the Liberals continued with the support of the Social Credit and New Democratic parties.

Governing under such circumstances is never easy, and Pearson's party endured scandals, bungled budgets and the contentious flag debate. His conciliatory approach which had proved so successful in diplomacy did not always translate to politics. Pearson's efforts to accommodate all views were often interpreted as poor leadership and a lack of direction. Nevertheless, his five-year legacy is very impressive: a new flag, the Canada Pension Plan, universal medicare, a new Immigration Act, a fund for rural economic development, and the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism which led to the foundation of a bilingual civil service. The Centennial celebrations of 1967 awoke Canadians to their great heritage and reflected the optimism that signified the latter years of Pearson's government. One of his great talents was recognizing ability in his colleagues: three future prime ministers were all members of his 1965 Cabinet.

In 1968, at the age of 71, Pearson announced his retirement from politics. He returned to the academic world and lectured on Canadian foreign relations at Carleton University, while writing his memoirs. Pearson died in 1972, but his "Liberal dynasty" lived on in his former Cabinet ministers, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, John Turner and Jean Chrétien, Canada's 15th, 17th and 20th prime ministers.

International Relations

Lester Pearson served in Greece and England during the First World War after which he continued his academic studies. Under the King administration, he started a long career in the Department of External Affairs. He gained much experience in international relations in his various duties in the office of the High Commissioner for Canada in England, as ambassador to the United States, as chairman of the NATO council and as president of the United Nations General Assembly.

In 1956, Pearson was the Secretary of State for External Affairs in the Liberal government of Louis St. Laurent when Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the company that controlled the Suez Canal. There were concerns that Egypt would restrict which nations could use the canal. In October 1956, Israel, Britain and France invaded Egypt. The Canadian government opposed the use of force, as did the Americans. Pearson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for his proposal to establish a United Nations peacekeeping force to resolve the dispute. He is the only Canadian to have received this honour.

As prime minister, Pearson met with U.S. President Johnson in January 1965, to sign the Auto Pact, which eliminated the tariff on cars, trucks, parts, and accessories moving in either direction over the border. This reversed the auto trade imbalance, which had favoured the Americans, and in the long term, the Auto Pact was hugely beneficial to Canada. It has been described as a significant move towards North American economic integration.

In 1967, during Canada's centennial year, many notable foreign dignitaries visited Canada and in particular the site of the Universal and International Exhibition in Montréal or Expo 67. For the most part, these visits went smoothly. The notable exception was when Charles De Gaulle, the president of France, addressed a crowd in Montréal and said, "Vive le Québec libre!" (Long live free Quebec!). Pearson made a televised public statement, saying that this comment was unacceptable; Canadians were already free. This diplomatic incident cut short this famous general's state visit, who returned to France without going to Ottawa.

Also in 1967, the government adopted a screening process for immigration called the points system. The selection criteria gave preference to immigrants that knew English or French, who were able to work and who were well educated.

Anecdote

A sporting prime minister

Lester Pearson is known to most Canadians as the winner of the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize and our 14th prime minister. But in his youth he was an accomplished athlete. At the University of Toronto in 1914, he played baseball, basketball, lacrosse and hockey. While at officer training camp in Oxford, England, during the war, he set a record by throwing a cricket ball 114 yards, a feat which was reported in *The London Times*.

Back at the University of Toronto in 1917, Pearson earned money that summer playing "semi-pro" baseball with the Guelph Maple Leafs. He also played quarterback on the university rugby team and was so invincible that at every game, the cheerleaders on the opposite team chanted, "Will we get the Pearson boy?!" He returned to Oxford in 1921 to study. Here again he made his name in sports, playing fullback in rugby, defence in hockey and winning a half-blue in lacrosse. Pearson toured Europe with Oxford's hockey team in 1922 and was on Britain's Olympic hockey team the same year.

Pearson's participation in sports declined as he became more involved in politics, but his passion remained. He was never happier than when talking to hockey, baseball and football players, and he could recall all the details of their positions, scores and careers. While prime minister, Pearson had a television installed in his office during the World Series so he wouldn't miss a game!

Bibliography

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