
The Growth of Canadian Nationalism: Canada as a Multilingual Imagined Community and an International Peacemaker under the Lester B. Pearson Administration

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Abstract:

This paper examines how Lester B. Pearson's Administration created a Canadian identity that transcended linguistic differences to boost Canadian nationalism and strengthen Canada's position on the international stage. On the home front, the Pearson government implemented domestic strategies that balanced English-Canadian imperial sentiment and French-Canadian separatism. Simultaneously, through a foreign policy doctrine known as Pearsonian Internationalism, Pearson established an autonomous role for Canada outside the shadows of Britain and the United States. Through mediation in the Suez Crisis and opposition to the American bombing campaign in the Vietnam War, the administration cemented Canada's reputation as a neutral mediator, humanitarian peacemaker, and peaceable middle power.

Keywords: Canadian Nationalism, Lester B. Pearson, Imagined Communities

Introduction

This article will examine how Lester B. Pearson – the 14th Canadian prime minister – and his administration embodied a shift in international norms as it transitioned away from British influence and developed a unique identity as a bilingual humanitarian peacemaker. To curate this Canadian national identity, Pearson's government employed a policy of official nationalism. As Benedict Anderson explains in *Imagined Communities*, official nationalism arose to protect imperial dynasties by strengthening national identity and unity often through a single official language (2016, 159). However, Canada demonstrated that official nationalism was not restricted to empires and any government could employ it to strengthen national unity (135,159). Anderson further reveals that, in the 20th century, once multilingual broadcasting arose and nation-states became the norm, nations could be “imagined without linguistic commonality” (135). In line with these phenomena, Canada under Lester B. Pearson, despite being a bilingual nation-state, employed official nationalism to strengthen the Canadian identity and promote unity. Pearson's government relied on domestic and foreign policies to define a solid Canadian identity that superseded linguistic differences. Pearson implemented domestic strategies, such as a new national flag and the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (Bi and Bi Commission) to create a bilingual national identity that balanced English-Canadian imperial sentiment and French-Canadian separatist culture. Simultaneously, Pearson's government strengthened Canada's international identity through a foreign policy doctrine known as Pearsonian Internationalism, firmly placing Canada outside of Britain and America's shadows. Through his mediation in the Suez Crisis, opposition to bombing in the Vietnam War, and support for international assistance, Pearson fostered an international identity for Canada as a supporter of peace, humanitarianism, and decolonization. Through these policies, Pearson unified Canadians under a singular identity.

Transitioning Away from the Empire: From British Subjects to Bilingual Canadian Citizens

While Canada distanced itself from the British Empire and gained increased autonomy, it continued to rely on its British past to forge new relations with other former colonies. Canada's association with the British Empire yielded its membership in the British Commonwealth (Morton 1973, 83). However, Canada officially dropped the common usage of Dominion in its name, and the Commonwealth similarly dropped British from its name (127). The renaming of both entities embodied how Canada was impacted by the international system's transition away from imperial dynasties towards nation-states. While the Commonwealth may have been founded to expand British influence, as British international influence waned, the organization served as a tool for former Dominions to form relations with one another independently of Britain. In this vein, Canada demonstrated its independence through its diplomacy with other Commonwealth members, such as India, Pakistan, and Ceylon i.e. present-day Sri Lanka (55-56, 127). Through these diplomatic relations, Canada strengthened its autonomous foreign identity throughout the 1950s (55-56, 127).

Canada's shift away from association with empire abroad was accompanied by a similar shift on the homefront. Canada's monarchical roots played a vital role in the nation's multicultural identity. To illustrate, since the British and French monarchies were of a relaxed nature, there has not been a "process in becoming Canadian akin to conversion." Both monarchies operated on the belief that the "king's task was to uphold the law, not to make law." To uphold this belief, the monarch never imposed an identity on incoming Canadians; any "French, Irish, Ukrainian, or Eksimo," could be Canadian "without...changing or ceasing to be himself" (85). Lester B. Pearson continued this idea of the Canadian identity being inclusive and multicultural. Simultaneously, Pearson worked to define an identity that

overshadowed Canada's monarchical roots (85). He focused on an individual being 'Canadian', i.e. a citizen of the Canadian nation-state, rather than a subject of the British monarchy.

Fostering a Bilingual Identity Transcending English and French Canadians' Differences

Striking a balance between the influential and distinct Franco-Catholic and Anglo-American cultures was vital to shaping Canadian nationality (83). The English and French monarchies greatly influenced Canadian political structures, and most Canadian citizens were of English or French descent. Other cultures were welcomed in Canada, but none of them were nearly as "subsumed in the political nationality" as the English and French cultures (83). Canada in the 1960s was home to a variety of ethnic groups, but the two dominant cultures were those of French and British descendants (Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism 1969, 12-13). As of 1961, 43.8% of Canadians were of British origin while 30.4% were of French origin; therefore, the two groups constituted nearly 75% of the Canadian population (19). In contrast, Indigenous peoples accounted for 1.2% of the population and all other ethnic groups combined made up 24.6% (19). Pearson's administration thus focused on generating a bilingual identity in hopes of unifying French and English Canadians, while successive governments would expand Canada's identity to be more akin to the multiculturalism associated with it today. As the Francophones and Anglophones had gradually developed different identities following their respective settlements in Canada, Pearson's government used bilingualism and a new national flag to create an identity encompassing both cultures.

The Maple Leaf Flag as a Manifestation of the Canadian Identity

As a manifestation of the unique identity that Pearson was attempting to create for Canada, Pearson's administration replaced the flag portraying Canada as a British Dominion with a new flag which represented an independent Canadian nation-state. In 1965, Pearson proposed the Maple Leaf flag, and he argued that "the maple leaf is deeply embedded in Canadian history as a national symbol" and that the white background represents purity (Neville 1964, 1). Many Anglo-Canadians who had British ancestry and felt a sense of loyalty to the British Empire, opposed the flag because it did not contain the Red Ensign or Union Jack (2). In contrast, French-Canadian separatists viewed these elements as reflections of "Anglo-Saxon colonialism," and they desired an identity distinct from Britain (2). Thus, French-Canadians supported the exclusion of British symbols. Pearson mitigated this conflict by allowing the Union Jack and Red Ensign to be flown separately alongside the Canadian flag (2). While there was opposition to other aesthetic details of the flag, most Canadians supported the development of a national flag and anthem. A 1964 *Los Angeles Times* article revealed opinion poll results showing that more than 60% of Canadians supported the Maple Leaf flag (2). This support was reflected in the flag change being supported by a majority of the Canadian parliament's 265 members despite Pearson's minority government constituting less than half the seats (1). Consequently, the Maple Leaf flag became a "true reflection of the new Canada" (1). By relying on a symbol that was native to Canada and neither English nor French, it projected Canada as an independent nation on the world stage and also united Canada's differing groups under one identity (Holloway 2006, 146).

Becoming Officially Bilingual: The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism

Pearson further fostered a bilingual identity by founding the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, i.e. Bi and Bi Commission, in 1963 (145). The commission was created to address the rising French separatism during the 1960s reform movement known as the Quiet Revolution. The government's failure to "establish equality for the French and English languages within government institutions" was serving as fuel for French Canadian separatism, especially among young Québécois ("Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism," 2024). Consequently, Pearson established the Bi and Bi Commission to address this concern. The Commission found that "Canada recognizes two official languages and that it possesses two predominant cultures that have produced two societies—Francophone and Anglophone—which form two distinct communities within an overall Canadian context" (4). Accordingly, the Commission was vital to the passage of the 1969 *Official Languages Act* which cemented Canada's bilingual identity by declaring French and English as Canada's official languages (Miedema 2017). Through its analysis of the role of English, French, and other cultures, the Commission supported a bilingual official identity rooted in "equal partnership between the two founding races." ("Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism," 2024, 235).

The Bi and Bi Commission argued that "linguistic variety is unquestionably an advantage" (14). It held that "the presence in Canada of many people whose language and culture are distinctive...represents an inestimable enrichment that Canadians can not afford to lose" (14). The Commission considered people of all cultural groups equal, and its report expressed a desire "to see all Canadians associating in a climate of equality whether they belong to the Francophone or Anglophone society." The report also argued this equality should be extended to other cultural groups (14).

As Benedict Anderson – an Anglo-Irish political scientist and historian – discussed in *Imagined Communities*, official nationalism arose to protect imperial dynasties by strengthening national identity and unity often through a single official language (2016, 159). Anderson proceeded to argue that in the 20th century, we will no longer need to rely on a singular language to promote national unity, instead using multilingual broadcasting to their advantage (Anderson 2016, 135, 159). Anderson further expands the argument by stating that in the 20th century, once multilingual broadcasting arose and nation-states became the norm, nations could be “imagined without linguistic commonality” (135). In asserting that being home to multiple languages is an asset for Canada, the Bi and Bi Commission demonstrated Anderson’s argument that states in the 20th century no longer needed to rely on a singular language to promote national unity, instead using multilingual broadcasting to their advantage (Anderson 2016, 135, 159). By adopting biculturalism as an official policy, the federal government aspired to address Quebec’s French separatism while appealing to Canada’s English majority. Biculturalism appealed to French Canadians by increasing the role of French culture, and it provided English Canadians with a Canadian identity to pair with their British roots.

Alongside playing a vital role in strengthening Canada’s bilingual identity, the Bi and Bi Commission recognized that Canada is a country of heavy immigration. (“Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism,” 2024, 4). Additionally, the commission labelled Canada as “an officially bilingual but fundamentally multicultural” country (12). In doing so, it set the stage for the succeeding government of Pierre Elliot Trudeau to characterize Canada’s official identity as multicultural (Gazette 2019).

Pearsonian Internationalism: Forming a Unique Canadian Identity on the World Stage

With domestic policies shaping Canada's identity and fostering Canadian nationalism, Pearson also pursued foreign policies that set Canada apart from Britain and the United States on the world stage. Pearson's policies became known as Pearsonian Internationalism and were characterized by an "emphasis on multilateralism and peacekeeping" (Perras and McKercher 2017, x). Pearson began spotlighting Canada internationally as Secretary of State for External Affairs from 1948 to 1956 (Greenhill and Sharpe 2019, 20). He also represented Canada globally as President of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1952 (20). Furthermore, Pearson's role in the 1956 Suez Crisis created an international image for Canada as a peacemaker.

Canada as a Peacemaker in the Suez Crisis: Distancing from British Foreign Policy

Through his commitment to resolving the Suez crisis, Pearson exemplified the separation between Canada and Britain's foreign policies and thus established a unique position for Canada on the world stage. He expressed Canada's "bewilderment and dismay" to Britain's Prime Minister when contacted for support in the Anglo-French militaristic efforts to retake the nationalized Suez Canal (G. Pearson 1993, 146). Pearson frowned upon the fact that Britain did not consult with Canada or its other allies (146). Furthermore, at the United Nations (UN), Pearson proposed a plan through which international pressure was used to end the conflict, and Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts in 1957 (Greenhill and Sharpe 2019, 20). Despite connections being made between Canada and Britain, Pearson remained committed to ensuring Canada appeared to be a neutral peacemaker. When Egypt's second president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, was wary of Canadian

soldiers due to the similarity between Canadian and British uniforms, Pearson devised a last-minute solution in which Canada provided funding instead of military support (153). Pearson also successfully resisted opposition in Canada's House of Commons by emphasizing that he had not directly critiqued British foreign policy, despite disliking that Britain had not consulted Canada and its other allies before relying on force. He defended France and Britain internationally, arguing that they were willing to accept a UN force replacing theirs – something that the Soviet Union would not have accepted (G. Pearson 1993, 152). Pearson also asserted that his critiques of Britain and France's actions were equal to, if not less critical than, his critiques of American actions at the UN. He stated, "Canada had been as helpful to the UK and France as we possibly could be" (154). By carefully balancing Canada's alliances with colonial powers and decolonized countries, Pearson fostered a unique identity for Canada on the world stage as a peaceful power committed to fulfilling its global responsibilities.

Media coverage at the UN also furthered Canada's importance in global affairs. Canada had taken on unprecedented levels of responsibility and represented a shift from the Great Powers resolving crises. Reporters remarked on this progress, stating, "Canada is almost a magic word here" (Perras and McKercher 2017, 3). This international appreciation increased Canadian patriotism and contributed to Pearson's efforts to generate official nationalism.

Pearson's departure from supporting Britain and France's imperial policies was similar to his efforts to transition Canada's identity away from its monarchical roots. On the homefront, Canada kept English and French as its official languages, yet dropped the use of symbols such as the Union Jack from its national flag. The Suez crisis exemplifies that the Canadian identity acknowledged its monarchical past on the foreign stage as well while also defining itself internationally as a nation distinct from the monarchies it was formerly

controlled by. Namely, Pearson supported Canada's French and British allies by refraining from direct critiques of their policies, yet he forged a distinct identity for Canada as a neutral peacemaker. Pearson's efforts to characterize Canada as a "peaceable 'middle power'" continued during his tenure as Prime Minister, namely via his actions in the Vietnam War (3).

Separation from American Foreign Policy: Canadian Diplomacy in the Vietnam War

In an era of growing American influence, Pearson's government worked to portray Canada as independent from the United States on the world stage. A key element of Canadian nationhood in the 1960s was the need to "preserve a slowly evolved independence as the intimate neighbour of a great world power under the stress and novelty of the power politics of the nuclear age" (Morton 1973, 3). Pearson's position during the Vietnam War played a significant role in generating an autonomous Canadian foreign policy. Pearson began expressing his concerns surrounding US policy in the Vietnam War through quiet diplomacy (Holloway 2006, 146). However, when the American bombing of Vietnam persisted, he ultimately separated Canada from US foreign policy through a speech at Philadelphia's Temple University in April 1965 (146). To maintain the Canada-US alliance, Pearson acknowledged America's "honourable motives" in the war against communism, but he also furthered the Canadian foreign identity as a peacemaker by opposing the American strategy of heavily bombing North Vietnam (Global Affairs Canada 1965).

Pearson's approach to the Vietnam War was similar to that in Suez. In both cases, he supported the policy of Canada's allies yet also opposed the use of force. Specifically, Pearson agreed that communist rule in North Vietnam needed to be ended but also argued that "continued bombing action...may not bring about this result" (Morton 1973, 5).

Pearson's call for a bombing halt enraged US President Lyndon Johnson. However, despite heavy American opposition, Pearson continued to distinguish Canada's foreign policy from that of America by calling for bombing halts again in September 1967. While Pearson's lack of support for America caused a decline in US-Canada relations, it established "an autonomous position [for Canada] of a more neutral mediator rather than being merely a 'loyal ally'" (Holloway 2006, 147).

Pearson's strategic maneuvers during the Vietnam War were consistent with the ideals of Pearsonian internationalism, and they reinforced Canada's image as a peacemaker in global affairs. This image was further enhanced by Canada's membership in the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICC), an international body founded in 1954 to implement the Geneva Agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia following the French-Indochinese War (CBC 2010). As part of the ICC, Canada was an impartial observer in Vietnam, and thus it was a proponent of achieving peace. Canada made every "reasonable effort to facilitate serious negotiations between Hanoi and Washington" (Preston 2003, 76).

Pearson's efforts and Canada's ICC membership boosted unity on the homefront as Canadians felt radicalized by Vietnam. They opposed communism but saw American brutality in Vietnam as the greater evil (Azzi 1999, 136). Protestors in Canada called on the Canadian government to intervene instead of acquiescing to US policy on Vietnam (Bothwell 1998, 68). To illustrate, Toronto hosted a peaceful sidewalk protest involving 5000 demonstrators (CBC 2019). Canadians also welcomed American recruits who were fleeing enlistment (Churchill 2004, 1-26). These individuals would become known as draft dodgers, and they featured in many news stories as Canadians formed support groups including the Toronto Anti-Draft Program (6). Canadians' anti-war sentiment would rise further following Pearson's tenure, namely in 1981 when Canadians discovered that the

American army tested Agent Orange, a toxic defoliation agent infamously used during the Vietnam War, in Canada” (CBC 2015). Pearson’s foreign policy reflected Canadians’ anti-war sentiment, notably through his Temple University Speech and letters to American leadership stating Canada “would have great reservation to nuclear bombing” in Vietnam (CBC 2010).

Through his efforts during the Vietnam War, Pearson was able to further Canada’s international identity as a peacemaker, distinguish Canadian foreign policy from that of its American neighbour, and boost Canada’s national unity.

Canada as a Humanitarian: Supporting Development via International Assistance

Pearson prioritized international assistance, and he believed that it was vital to creating Canada’s international image (Greenhill and Sharpe 2019, 20). His travels through India, Pakistan, Burma, Singapore and Japan showed him the poverty of the developing world (22). Consequently, Pearson felt it was necessary for Canada to provide humanitarian assistance. As a result, Canadian international assistance rose by 280% during Pearson’s tenure from 1964 to 1967 (28). Pearson attributed this increase to humanitarian considerations, the vital role of international assistance in dictating foreign policy, and the expansion of the Canadian open economy (28). The foreign policy of Pearsonian internationalism encompassed a “parallel stress on caring, sharing, and compassion” (20). Pearson believed the world was increasingly “becoming...divided into rich and poor, developed and underdeveloped,” and he believed it was Canada’s responsibility to generate global peace by assisting in bridging these divides (21). Hence, Pearson laid the fundamental groundwork that allowed the succeeding government to found the Canadian International Development Agency which established Canada’s national identity as [a] ‘Just Society’ to the wider world” (29). In addition to wanting to assist the international world on moral grounds,

Pearson believed that international assistance was crucial to Canada's national interests as international development would promote domestic security through "global public goods such as environmental protection and public health" (21). Canada's foreign policy also entailed support for decolonization as Pearson believed it was vital to provide international assistance to countries vying for freedom. He argued, "As we believe in freedom and self-government and greater human welfare for ourselves, so we must believe in it for all men" (28). In doing so, he positioned Canada as a helper of newly decolonized and developing nations. Canada's history as a former colony itself and Pearson's efforts to distance Canada from its monarchical identity also assisted in creating this image. Through his appreciation of international development, Pearson created a vital role for Canada on the world stage and placed the nation in the center of humanitarian causes.

Conclusion

Through his policies, Pearson embodied the Canadian national identity. Many Canadians looked to Pearson as their hero; the ideal personification of what it meant to be Canadian (Perras and McKercher 2017, 4). Four decades after Pearson's tenure, "Liberal foreign minister, Lloyd Axworthy...[stated]...Pearson was the role model...Pearson represented to me the quintessential qualities of a Canadian" (4). Through his foreign policy, "Pearson personified a notion of Canada as an altruistic, outwardly focused honest broker" (4). Through his solutions to the Suez Crisis, his opposition to US bombardment in the Vietnam War, and abundant international assistance, Pearson generated an ideology that continued to be recognized as Pearsonian Internationalism long after his tenure elapsed. He successfully defined Canada on the world stage and separated Canadian foreign policy from those of the United States and the United Kingdom. Similarly, he used domestic policies to construct a Canadian identity that united the homefront. Pearson created a new national flag to unify French and English Canadians under an identity transcending linguistic differences.

The flag emphasized Canadian values such as purity and used the Maple Leaf symbol which belonged to the land of Canada and neither France nor Britain. The adoption of this new flag also redefined Canada on the world stage. Similarly, Pearson founded the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism to establish a bilingual identity for Canada that respected both English and French cultures on the national level.

Canada's identity officially centred greatly on English and French culture, yet Canadian society featured various nationalities. This inclusive nature was similarly reflected in Canada's foreign policy as it allied with both developing and developed nations. Pearson's efforts to create a distinctive Canadian identity were stepping stones to creating the Canadian identity known to the world today. The decades succeeding Pearson's tenure would witness the broadening of Canada's bilingual official identity to reflect the multiculturalism that now characterizes it. Namely, the Pierre Trudeau government would separate Canada from Britain legally by patriating the Constitution. At that time, Canada's Indigenous peoples whom Pearson's bilingual identity overlooked would also gain greater recognition after launching the global *Constitution Express* movement to protect their nationhood. Canada's official identity would grow to become more multicultural with the passage of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* which contains provisions to guarantee Aboriginal rights and Canadians' fundamental freedoms. This transition to multiculturalism had its hurdles, but it is worth noting that Pearson's creation of a bilingual identity and a unique foreign policy were the stepping stones to Canada's eventual multiculturalism.

On balance, Pearson effectively fostered Canadian nationalism to strengthen the Canadian state both domestically and internationally. Pearson's policies embodied how official nationalism as a policy had expanded beyond protecting imperial dynasties. Canada showcased that nation-states could also rely on the 150-year-old strategy of official

nationalism to strengthen national unity (Anderson 2016, 135). Canada embodied Anderson's argument that "once 'out there for all to see,' [official nationalism] was...copyable by all" (159). Lester B. Pearson's government successfully implemented official nationalism as Canadians began to see their nation as officially bilingual, characterized by multiculturalism. Simultaneously, on the international stage, Pearson's Canada adopted the role of a humanitarian peacemaker, allied with yet independent from the Great Powers.

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