

# MR. MACKENZIE KING AND THE BLUNT PENCIL

SOME MARGINALIA OF CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY

By JAMES A. GIBSON

FOR nearly the whole period during which he was Prime Minister, Mr. Mackenzie King was also Secretary of State for External Affairs. An astute student of the subject has remarked that much of Canadian foreign policy, especially during the Second World War, was written in marginal notes with a blunt pencil. For over seven years, between May of 1940 and July 9, 1947, I was an almost daily witness to this blunt pencil at work, and I have tried to recall some of the occasions upon which it was used with most significant effect.

The pencil was blunt because it was short. It was the survivor of an earlier useful life as a self-respecting full-length pencil. It was ending its days in a pocket of the Prime Ministerial vest. As such, it was not quite anonymous; but the *blunt* characteristic had a certain symbolism. A blunt pencil is not the ordinary instrument of sustained thought or extended writing; it is the agency of the moment and of on-the-spot decision. The blunt pencil, in the end, belied any notion that its wielder was temperamentally averse to prompt decisions. What neither voice, nor typewriter, nor stub pen could accomplish, the blunt pencil finally did, and what it wrote, most usually in the margin, is now enshrined in Departmental files and archives.

The most obvious case I can remember of the blunt pencil approach resulted in the raising the status of the Canadian Legation in Washington to become the first Embassy of Canada. It was already apparent that, alone among the missions in Washington of the Western Hemisphere states, Canada was still represented by a Minister. It was perhaps a little invidious, in 1943, that Canada alone should have a legation when twenty other American states had embassies.

On the other side of the world an increasing amount of attention was being given by Soviet speakers and commentators to the structure and organization of the British Commonwealth of Nations. One day the Canadian Minister at Kuibyshev sent a despatch to Ottawa mentioning that it would be much easier for him to represent the constitutional relationship existing

within the British Commonwealth, and particularly of the autonomous political communities concerned if at some time Canada could be represented in the U.S.S.R. by an embassy (as was the United Kingdom) instead of by a Legation. A note came down from the Department to ask whether at some stage it would be appropriate, as a start, to consider raising the Canadian mission at Washington to an Embassy. The reply written by the blunt pencil was short and characteristic: "Yes. At once. The sooner the better." The intention was subsequently discharged by an exchange of letters between the Prime Minister and the President, in which Mr. King took the initiative. He proposed November 11, 1943, as the effective date, and this proposal brought a prompt and cordial concurrence.

The gradual extension of the elevating principle brought some minor complications on the United Kingdom side. The Canadian mission to Mexico was the first to be established as an Embassy without any preliminary steps. The United Kingdom Government, not unreasonably, perhaps, was unwilling to be represented through a legation when Canada was opening an embassy, and the then incumbent, together with other colleagues in the Caribbean area, found himself promoted ambassador. Within a few months after the Washington elevation, the Canadian Legations to Brazil, Argentina, the U.S.S.R. and China were all raised to Embassies, and within seven years there were 17 embassies among the 33 Canadian missions abroad. In Ottawa, there was full diplomatic reciprocity by the nation concerned.

On one occasion the logic of events did not wait upon the blunt pencil. One day in January, 1945, during a draft session on the Speech from the Throne, Mr. King remarked on the day that allied victory in Europe should be announced he intended that the Canadian red ensign should fly from the Peace Tower. When VE Day arrived, we were at the United Nations Conference on International Organization at San Francisco. I remember walking in, on the morning before VE Day, to remind Mr. King of what he had said the previous January. His instinctive reaction was to reach for the telephone and order the appropriate officials in Ottawa to have this done. The red ensign was not yet the flag of Canada, at least, it was not for domestic purposes (though it had had a statutory warrant for being flown abroad since 1924). Between this ceremonial wearing in May and an Order-in-Council of the following September, Mr. King had broached the flag question in

election speech in Winnipeg on May 24. He remarked immediately afterward that there seemed to be a good deal more obvious enthusiasm for the Union Jack than for any distinctively Canadian flag. In the event, the later Order-in-Council, without making the usage *final*, did say that it was appropriate to fly the red ensign whenever it was desired to mark the Canadian significance of an occasion, and this has been the practice ever since.

There were other occasions when the telephone, rather than the blunt pencil, was again the instrument of diplomacy. When the first allied landings were made in Sicily in August, 1943, the agreed communiqué to be issued after the operation had been launched contained no reference to Canadian troops being in the van of the landings. I was working with Mr. King in his library when this was drawn to his attention.

"Do you know the White House number?" he asked, over his glasses on the tip of his nose.

"I think it's National 1414", I said, never having had occasion to call it.

"Get me Harry Hopkins", he said into the telephone. In a moment it had been agreed that Mr. L. B. Pearson (then Minister-Counsellor in Washington) should call at the White House and speak personally to the President. After a while word came back that the President had directed the change to be made: and when the formal communiqué was released, towards midnight, the Canadian forces, literally and journalistically, were again "in the van."

The blunt pencil sometimes was used to give an especially Canadian slant to some formal proceeding. In June, 1945, it was proposed by the Department that the full powers to enable Mr. Mackenzie King and Mr. St. Laurent to sign the Charter of the United Nations on behalf of Canada should issue under the Great Seal of Canada and not (as in the case of all previous full powers involving Canadians) under the Great Seal of the Realm. There were two objects to be served: one to "upgrade" the Great Seal of Canada, and the other to give a distinctively Canadian complexion to an important milestone in Canadian external policy. "Let them make it as Canadian as they like," wrote the blunt pencil, and so more history was made. It was only because the blunt pencil did not write quite quickly enough that the Commission of Appointment of Viscount Alexander of Tunis as Governor-General of Canada was not similarly sealed with the Great Seal of Canada, as had



been intended; and that, being drawn up in England because of pressure of time, this Commission issued under the Great Seal of the Realm.

There were other occasions when the blunt pencil, whether plodding or mercurial, inspired or pedestrian, could never hope to equal the spontaneous, unrehearsed expression that came from the heart. On many domestic occasions even the bluntest pencil tended to get lost in a maze of circumlocution—though the final version “on the record” was likely to read far better than it sounded at the time. But there were occasions abroad when one felt that an authentic voice of Canada was speaking without pretence or affectation of any kind. Such an occasion was a speech which Mr. King made in the *Cimetière des Vertus* at Dieppe in August, 1946. For two whole days he had visited every point of importance connected with the reconnaissance in force against Dieppe four years earlier by a force of which the majority of units were drawn from the Second Canadian Division. Standing in front of the Cross of Sacrifice, overlooking more than 2,000 Canadian graves, each one bright with summer flowers, Mr. King spoke of the prospects for the Paris Conference on Peace Treaties, and how the eyes of the whole peace-loving world were focussed on the deliberations at the Luxembourg Palace. I think it was the most moving speech I ever heard him make. A correspondent of the *New York Times*, at my elbow, whispered “Why do you chaps ever trouble to write anything down when you can get this?”, and we could only reply, “Why indeed?”

Another occasion was when Mr. King was paying a visit to Hull House in Chicago nearly fifty years after his first association with it as a Resident in his university days. As he was coming down the main stairway a group of high school student from South Bend, Indiana, came in, and he was asked to say a few words to them. From a strategic point behind a pillar I took down what he said—about the changes which 50 years had brought in the status of women, and how the example of woman such as Jane Addams had wrought a profound difference in the approach to many social and humanitarian problems. Sometime later I showed him a transcript of these remarks, which had been friendly and unaffected and well put together. “Did I really say *that*?” he asked, with some wonderment.

The blunt pencil served another purpose, in recording dates and times and circumstances. I remember one Saturday afternoon in August, 1940, when in company with the th

United States Minister at Ottawa, Mr. King drove at high speed from Ottawa to Prescott, crossed over the St. Lawrence by a special trip of the Prescott-Ogdensburg ferry, and met President Roosevelt and Mr. Henry L. Stimson. Out of their discussions came the Ogdensburg Agreement, foreshadowing the appointment of the Canada-United States Permanent Joint Board on Defence. The first copy of the Agreement which I saw was the single paragraph, mimeographed on plain paper aboard the President's special train. Some days later when I asked for an official copy which might be placed in the Departmental Archives, I was told I already had it. So it was that a plain sheet, with Mr. King's notes in pencil, passed into foreign policy.

There was, by contrast, one area in which the blunt pencil gave way to pen-and-ink, and odd scraps of paper to full sheets of more permanent texture. This was in those meticulous communications, most frequently written in his own hand, which began, "Mr. Mackenzie King, presents his humble duty to His Majesty . . .," and my impression is that no part of his official responsibilities gave him quite the same sense of honour and satisfaction. Even where a draft might get into typescript, the corrections would customarily be made in ink and not in pencil, as if every phrase, comma, or other refinement were to be entered upon the record.

Neither typewriter nor ink were foolproof. I remember one submission to the King which had to be diverted and done over again, because by inadvertence, General the Hon. Sir Harold Alexander (as he then was) was given a different Christian name to which he had never laid claim. With visions of the much-disputed appointment of Sir Francis Bond Head in 1835 in mind, the correction was made in record time!

The blunt pencil was equally at home in correcting proof of material which had been set in type. Behind the pencil was the experienced eye and the practised hand which, fifty years after its earliest editing and publishing days, were as vigilant and as exacting as ever. I remember one draft in typescript acknowledging the honour of the freedom of the city of Missolonghi in Greece, and the re-naming of a street leading to the house in which Byron had once lived. It had come out of the typewriter as *loved* and before the blunt pencil corrected it, Mr. King remarked: "Perhaps he did, but we had better not say so."

In a retrospective sense, it may be argued that the use of

the blunt pencil was all in the day's work in matters of external policy. Apart from the knowledgability and advice of certain principal advisers in the public service, the decisions which were noted in the margins were based, most often, not upon profound personal study of issues, but upon the apparent needs of the moment. The blunt pencil might, one supposes, have been poised in mid-air if it had been reminded that Canadian policy in external affairs, at least until 1939, was frequently the policy of the best available alternative. After 1939 there were fewer hesitations and a good deal more urgency.

In the end, the blunt pencil was the instrument of many moods. It was the operative agency of a curious blending of the rational and the intuitive, of the reflective and the ruthless. Sometimes it spoke of aspiration and achievement; sometimes of disappointment and frustration. Occasionally it revelled in the excitement of certain proceedings: there was a certain instinctive delight in writing out the message which greeted the Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia when he was able to return to his capital at Addis Ababa—the fulfilment of a ceremonial promise Mr. King had made in Geneva in 1936. More than once the blunt pencil poked fun at the somewhat stilted but well-recognized usages of protocol; and sometimes it demanded strict accountability for this or that undertaking. Sometimes indeed it put off decision: "Bring up later", or "Speak to me of this," it said, and the occasion for doing so might be many days into the future.

The blunt pencil was, finally, quite a human embodiment of a person who had as many prejudices, foibles and genuine human failings as the next person, but who also had, in the words of one of his retainers, "a rare streak of human goodness if you can only find it". It was the essence of a way of transacting an important part of the public business in circumstances and in an atmosphere which have now very nearly disappeared. If it conferred few benefits, equally, it asked no favours. It was at the end, as blunt and unpretentious as when it started out.