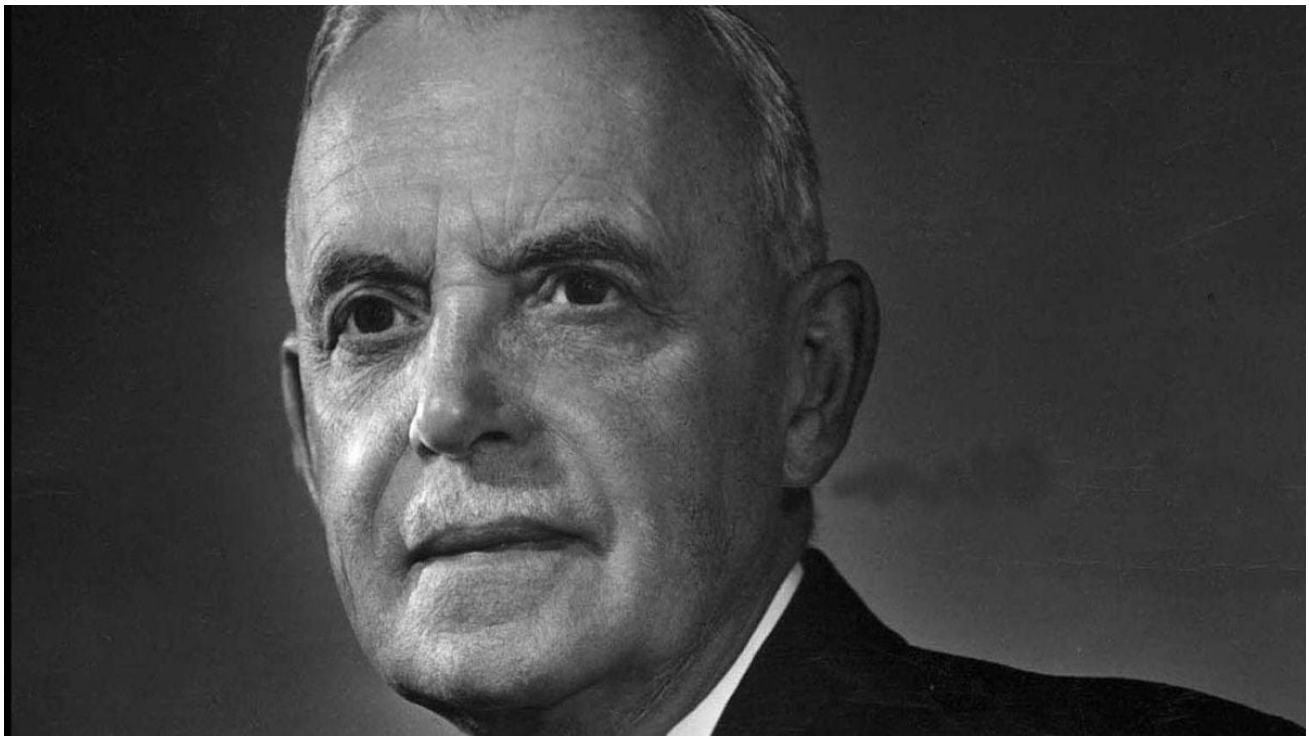
Louis St. Laurent – one of the most distinguished and successful leaders in Canadian history

by Conrad Black



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UBC Press has just released "The Unexpected Louis St. Laurent," a study of the former prime minister (1948-1957), whose title implies that he has been underestimated. He was the first Canadian prime minister that I remember in office and the first whom I met, in his later years, including an interview he graciously gave me for my book about Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis (1936-1939, 1944-1959). St. Laurent is the only such prominent figure I have known of whom I have

never heard a negative, or even slightly disrespectful, comment, including from his opponents, Progressive Conservative leaders George Drew and John Diefenbaker (who had nothing but praise for him).

If he is not often mentioned now, it must be because he was such a competent prime minister and so universally respected that he was relatively uncontroversial. Though the first few years of St. Laurent's time in office were the early days of the Cold War and the Korean War and were quite complicated, the mid-1950s were a time of comparative serenity, though in a tensely bipolarized world. This book is the product of 23 different contributors focusing on separate aspects of the subject's career. It isn't a biography, as it's organized thematically, and the context of his entry into public life and his six years as minister of justice and external affairs are passed over lightly. I believe that his greatest service to this country was as the de facto co-prime minister for Quebec during the Second World War (just as Wilfrid Laurier's greatest service, outstanding prime minister though he was, was as Opposition leader in preventing the outright defection of Quebec over conscription in 1917).

Louis St. Laurent had never considered entering public life until almost his 60th birthday. He was sitting at home having his dinner with his wife in November 1941 when a telephone call arrived from Prime Minister W.L. McKenzie King. King had recently received what he considered the grimmest news of the war: his senior and principal political ally, Ernest Lapointe, was terminally ill. Lapointe, the justice minister, had succeeded Laurier as the federal Liberal leader in Quebec following Laurier's death in 1919, and had been instrumental in securing King the succession to Laurier as party leader and in delivering overwhelming majorities from Quebec for King in six of the seven succeeding elections (1930 was a little closer because of the Great Depression and the Beauharnois and customs scandals). On Lapointe's advice, King had asked the

Liberal premier of Quebec, Adelard Godbout, to replace him, but Godbout declined. When Duplessis had called an election in the autumn of 1939, seeking authority to assure that French-Canadians did not have conscription inflicted upon them again as they had in 1917, Lapointe led the Quebecois federal ministers in promising that there would be no conscription for overseas service, but that if Duplessis were re-elected, they would all resign and leave Quebec defenceless against just such a fate. Godbout won. (All Quebecers were prepared to defend Canada, but most French Quebecers, having no filial attachment to France or Britain, felt that what happened in Europe was not particularly their concern.)

King had a number of profoundly emotional visits with Lapointe in the hospital during his final days: “There was never a deeper love between brothers than has existed between us,” he said to Lapointe. The retention of Quebec support for the government was essential to preserve it. The Conservatives and many English-speaking Liberals would happily have imposed conscription as in 1917 and possibly broken up the country. After Godbout, Lapointe and Quebec’s formidable Cardinal J.M.R. Villeneuve and others recommended St. Laurent, who was unenthused. St. Laurent called upon King at his home, Laurier House, in Ottawa, on Dec. 5, 1941, nine days after Lapointe’s death, and said he would only consider it as a matter of wartime duty, and when Japan attacked the United States and Britain two days later, St. Laurent accepted and became minister of justice and de facto associate prime minister. On Jan. 22, 1942, King announced a referendum seeking to liberate the government from its promise to avoid conscription, uttering the immortal Kingsian evasion: “Conscription if necessary, but not necessarily conscription.” St. Laurent was elected in February to succeed Lapointe and Laurier before him as member of Parliament for the prosperous upper town of Quebec, where he lived. (Laurier, Lapointe and St. Laurent between them held that constituency through 27 general and special elections, uninterruptedly from 1877 to 1958.)

On April 27, Canada voted on King's plebiscite; English-Canadians voted 80 per cent in favour of permitting conscription and French-Canadians voted 90 per cent against. King had outsmarted himself and the country could not have been more starkly divided. The senior surviving Quebec minister, Arthur Cardin, resigned and gave an eloquent parliamentary address that profoundly shook the government. St. Laurent made the greatest single contribution of his life to Canada when he, in what was virtually a parliamentary debut, delivered a splendidly fluent, untheatrical and convincing response in favour of the government's policy, while showing reasonable deference to Cardin. He emphasized Quebec's viewpoint but expressed his confidence that Quebec too would support whatever "might ultimately prove necessary to Canada's contribution to victory over the universal enemies of civilization as all Canadians construe and cherish it." This and various reiterations, emanating from a man of such prestige and integrity (and King's endless ingenuity at parliamentary manoeuvring and political legerdemain) kept the country in one piece for the balance of the war. In producing within a few weeks a French-Canadian leader of comparable stature to Laurier and Lapointe, King performed an inestimable service to Canada.

As the book notes, St. Laurent brought forward some outstanding future political figures, including Lester Pearson, Jean Lesage, Jack Pickersgill and Robert Winters, and in many other ways, was a forward-looking leader. The authors rightly give St. Laurent credit for devising equalization payments and accepting the British North America Act's concurrent provincial right to impose income taxes. But they gloss over St. Laurent's adherence to King's outrageous idea that the provinces reduce themselves effectively to the status of municipalities by surrendering their rights over direct taxes in exchange for grants from Ottawa, and that Ottawa only gave way when Duplessis imposed a Quebec income tax and said that if the federal government did not concede its

deductibility against federal tax, he would invite the voters of Quebec to judge which jurisdiction they supported. St. Laurent produced equalization payments as a consolation prize. He and the Liberals of the time often represented Duplessis as almost a separatist, but if they had made a tax and power-sharing agreement with him, we would not have had the grave threat of separation that came a decade later and has never entirely subsided. What the defender of federalism, St. Laurent, withheld from the trouble-maker Duplessis, the Liberal modernizer of Quebec, Jean Lesage, would rightly seize and the Liberal saviour of Canada, Lester Pearson, would concede gladly, in the higher interests of Canada (and the Liberal party).

Some subjects slip between the thematic divisions, but this is a very worthwhile book about one of the most distinguished and successful leaders in Canadian history.

First published in the