WLMK deserves more respect than he gets

William Lyon Mackenzie King was much underestimated in his lifetime and has been largely forgotten in his posterity, but he was a great prime minister

by Conrad Black

William Lyon Mackenzie King campaigns in 1926.

TVO's Steve Paikin and I may be an absolute quorum of people who took note of the 70th anniversary on Wednesday of the death of Canada's longest-serving prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King. He was much underestimated in his lifetime and has been largely forgotten in his posterity, but after a great deal of research for books I have written about Canadian history, I believe that he was a great prime minister. He was not heroic, and in fact was an anti-hero, which made his political success even more astonishing: he led the Liberal

party in seven federal elections, won five, lost one and drew one. He was prime minister for the first sovereign agreement Canada made, about halibut fisheries with the United States in 1923, and was still there when Canada was a co-founding member of the United Nations and the Western alliance almost a generation later.

He was a bachelor, an obscurantist and he believed that he communicated with the dead, including people he never knew, such as British statesman William Ewart Gladstone. He so venerated his mother and father that it verged on ancestor worship. He attributed supernatural significance to mundane events such as his own bowel movements, and believed that his Irish terrier Pat was a divine spiritual messenger in his life. He was indecisive, uninspiring, was defeated four times as a parliamentary candidate and was not particularly popular with his cabinet, which he constantly renewed over more than 25 years. All of this makes him appear a placeman, and even, in Cromwellian terms, a "decayed servitor."

When he died, the social reformer and McGill law school dean Frank Scott wrote his best poem: "How shall we speak of Canada, Mackenzie King dead? The mother's boy in the lonely room with his dog, his medium, and his ruins? We had no shape because he never took sides and no sides because he never allowed them to take shape. He never let his on the one hand know what his on the other hand was doing. The height of his ambition was to pile a parliamentary committee on a royal commission, to have 'conscription if necessary, but not necessarily conscription,' to let Parliament decide, later. Truly he will be remembered wherever men honour ingenuity, ambiguity, inactivity and political longevity. Let us raise up a temple to the cult of mediocrity, do nothing by halves which can be done by quarters." There was some truth in this, but it was far from the whole story.

Canada was a terribly ambiguous country politically, as it still to some extent remains. As King and all great Canadian

statesmen starting with Guy Carleton have recognized, the key to Canada's success is to ensure a double majority, the English and the French in support of any decisive initiatives; if the English majority merely imposed its will upon the French, separation by Quebec would just be a matter of time. From the Seven Years War to the First World War Canada had to winkle its sovereignty out of the British without so irritating Great Britain that it handed Canada to the United States in exchange for other considerations. And since it was assembled as an autonomous jurisdiction in 1867, Canada has had the considerable challenge of keeping pace with the completely unprecedented growth of the United States, which after the conclusion of its Civil War was an unbound Prometheus before an unlimited horizon. It nearly tripled its population in the next 50 years, and Canada has kept up with it ever since then. Canada has never had the panache or confidence of the United States, but has not had the violence or garishness of it either.

The most recent published reflection on King, "Mackenzie King in the Age of the Dictators," by former Liberal federal politician and External Affairs official Roy MacLaren, confirms the traditional view summarized in senior civil servant and diplomat Norman Robertson's alleged comment when King died: "I never saw a bit of greatness in him." Civil servants rarely do; Robertson was what distinguished (half-Canadian) U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson called a "Canadian arm-flapping moralist." And MacLaren is a sloppy researcher and a rather pretentious and misanthropic careerist and courtier who didn't evince much greatness himself and is not a plausible source for such Solomonic reflections. King was impressed by Mussolini and by Hitler when he met them, but they could be impressive. Even Winston Churchill included Hitler somewhat hopefully in his 1935 book "Great Contemporaries." King came well after Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt in recognizing the evil of Hitler, but he did recognize it abruptly on Jan. 19, 1939, and announced that if

war came Canada would stand with Great Britain. King broke ranks presciently with the Anglo-French appeasers.

He then arranged with his chief Quebec colleagues, Ernest Lapointe, Arthur Cardin and C.G. Power, to intervene in the Quebec election of October 1939 and trade a guarantee of no conscription in exchange for Quebec's pledge to support the war effort; and inflicted on Maurice Duplessis the only serious defeat he sustained in 28 years and seven elections as a party leader. King arranged a huge landslide for himself in a general election only two weeks before the Second World War began in earnest in April 1940. All had been arranged for Canada to have the extremely successful and brave war that it did, emerging with the world's third-largest navy and fourth-largest air force. For a year he knew Churchill and Roosevelt much better than they knew each other, and King deserves considerable credit for helping to interpret each to the other. He directly contributed to the contents of one of Churchill's most famous Demosthenean orations in the famous passage ending "until in God's good time the new world comes to the rescue and the liberation of the old." He was the ultimate architect of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, which trained up 125,000 allied aviators and aircrew.

And in his way, King fired the opening gun in the Cold War, travelling personally to Washington and London to advise President Harry Truman and Prime Minister Clement Attlee of the full gravity of the Gouzenko affair in which a clerk in the Soviet embassy in Ottawa defected and revealed the extent of Soviet espionage activities in the West. When King retired voluntarily in 1948, Canada was a distinguished victorious ally in the triumph over Nazism and in the containment of the Soviet Union and, as it remains, one of the 10 or so most important countries in the world.

In the 92 years from 1856 to 1948, John A. Macdonald, Wilfrid Laurier and King were the co-leaders of the so-called United Province of Canada (Quebec and Ontario), or prime minister of

the Dominion of Canada, for 65 years, and leader of the opposition for the other 27. It was a record of continuity and achievement of three serial leaders with no parallel in the history of the democratic world. They founded and built the country. During the Second World War, when Canadians wished inspiration they listened to Churchill and Roosevelt, not to King, and because he wished Canadians to see him as a person who had some influence with his illustrious allies, he was much more compliant to their wishes than Charles de Gaulle or even the prime ministers of Australia. But though he could not rival them even in the esteem of his own countrymen, nor was he overpowered by them.

King’s apparent diffidence was a mask that enabled him to endure with agility and direct the government of the country with prudence. The country didn’t tire of him because he didn’t distract them very much and always confounded the nine Conservative leaders he faced (counting Arthur Meighen twice). When Roosevelt died and Churchill was defeated by Attlee and Charles de Gaulle resigned to wait for the Fourth Republic to flounder to an end, King wrote in his diary: “Stalin is the only allied leader who has served longer than I, and of course I have led my party longer than he has his.” He deserves to be remembered, and with some respect.

Firsr published in the