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The essence of politics and the goal of the politician is power. Probably no man in Canadian history set his feet on the path of politics more confidently or with greater expectations than did Arthur Meighen. None was more amply endowed with some of the qualities which, theoretically at least, ought to lead to political success in a parliamentary democracy. Yet, his career, which opened so promisingly and brought him within a dozen years to the office of Prime Minister, led on to disaster and disillusionment. What might have been the Age of Meighen became instead the Age of Mackenzie King, a rival whom Meighen regarded as unworthy and despicable. Was Meighen himself mainly to blame for his own downfall, as has generally been thought, or did the fates conspire maliciously against him? It will be the purpose of the following pages to suggest an answer to this question.

His active political career commenced in the Dominion general election of 1908, when at the age of thirty-four he recaptured the riding of Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, for the Conservative party. He had come west from Ontario ten years earlier, after a brief stint of high school teaching following graduation from the University of Toronto and the Ontario College of Pedagogy. Having served an apprenticeship in various Winnipeg law firms and been admitted to the Manitoba bar, he had devoted himself to building up his own practice in Portage, had married and begun to settle into the day-to-day routine of his profession. He was not, however, the kind of man whom the small combats and minor triumphs of a provincial courtroom could fully or forever satisfy. Indoctrinated as a child on a western Ontario farm with the view of life as a conscious, constant striving for self-improvement and self-advancement, confident in the possession of ample intellectual endowments, aspiring to make a name and a place for himself in a larger world than that of a small western town, he eagerly grasped the opportunity to enter the House of Commons. Opportunities, he believed, presented themselves but once and must be seized. He was seldom troubled by doubt or indecision concerning the course he ought to take.

The House of Commons was made for men like Arthur Meighen. Parliament is, or ought to be, a place of intelligent controversy and he was a controversialist to the manner born. He liked nothing better than a vigorous dispute and before going to Ottawa had acquired a local reputation in Manitoba for the forensic power he showed as a barrister. The work and atmosphere of the House were ideally suited to his talent and inclination and his career there, measured by the yardstick of sheer argumentative brilliance, has not been surpassed and seldom if ever equalled in Canadian politics. Even those who most strenuously objected to his ideas and his measures, or who believed he had serious limitations as a politician and party leader, recognized his superiority as a debater. When it came to constructing a case or refuting an argument or taking on all comers in the cut and thrust
of verbal swordplay, he had no peer in his own time. He waged that kind of warfare with high artistry and supreme, almost arrogant, self-assurance; he waged it with his whole mind and heart, as he did everything, and the pages of *Hansard* bear testimony to his pre-eminence. One of his opponents once applied to him Kipling’s characterization of the Sudanese “Fuzzy-Wuzzy”: “You’re a pore benighted ‘eathen but a first-class fightin’ man...”

The attributes that made Meighen a distinguished figure in the Commons, aside from this fondness for controversy, are not far to seek. First, he possessed a great capacity and a genuine liking for hard work, without which his natural gifts would have been wasted. Happiness in this world, he was firmly convinced, came from the conscientious performance of one’s duty, the accomplishment of worthwhile tasks. This required the mastery of whatever subject occupied one’s attention and that demanded single-minded concentration, the avoidance of time-wasting frivolity and distracting recreation. Work and lots of it was not only the inescapable fate of anyone who wanted to amount to anything, but also the means of attaining the only real satisfaction this life offered. Secondly, on the work he undertook Meighen brought to bear an unusually quick, orderly and analytical mind and the ability in uncommon measure to reason logically on the basis of the known facts of any given situation. More clearly than almost anyone else in the House he could define an issue, marshal the pertinent evidence and build up a cogent argument which, if one accepted his basic premises, was invariably most difficult to answer. In addition he had a phenomenal memory, of immense help to him in encompassing a subject and in presenting his views, and a facility of tongue equalled by few. Nurtured in the classics of the English language, he regarded that language with reverence and used it with clean precision, expressing his thoughts succinctly and making his meaning clear beyond all doubt. The use of the spoken word was an art in which he strove always to be as nearly perfect as possible and the fluid grace of his speech matched the clarity of his mind. Even his extemporaneous remarks were delivered with more ease than some men display in reading a manuscript and were marked by the same order, the same felicitous diction, as were the speeches for which he prepared in advance. Friends and opponents alike, whether agreeing with him or not, resentful as some of them were of his seemingly indestructible self-confidence, his acidly sardonic wit and his austere, uncompromising demeanour, were willing to concede that, intellectually, Meighen was a superior man.

Along with this distinctive mental equipment he had another characteristic that helped him to climb to the top of the political tree — and also accounted, in part, for his later fall from that eminence. He was never afraid to say or do unpopular things he thought were in the public interest, and to refuse to say or do popular things which were not. What was popular, easy or non-controversial was not necessarily right. The truth was sometimes unpalatable but it had to be swallowed and digested; he delighted in facing up to those who refused
to recognize the truth for what it was. "I am always happier," he once wrote, "facing an audience that has to be convinced." The more clamorous, the more violent the opposition to his views, the more icily brilliant and unyielding he became. And so, as Eugene Forsey has phrased it, "he strode up the great bare staircase of his duty, as he saw it, uncheered and undismayed."

All these attributes, these fruits of training and heredity, Meighen brought with him to Parliament and they ripened in that congenial atmosphere. He entered the House of Commons at the outset of a period of unusually bitter controversy, which reached its culmination during the first world war; and his courage, industry and superb prowess in debate found a larger outlet then than they would have found at almost any other time. Starting out as an unknown back-bencher, he soon became recognized as a young man with a future and, especially after his party came to power in 1911 under R. L. Borden, he moved quickly to the front and centre of the parliamentary stage.

The first of the major contentious measures with which Meighen was closely connected was the incorporation of closure into the rules of the House in 1913. at a time when the government’s policy of appropriating money for the construction of three battleships for the British navy was facing determined and resourceful obstruction by the Liberal opposition. Meighen framed the new closure rule, devised the strategy by which it was introduced in the midst of the naval debate and conducted almost single-handed on behalf of the Conservatives the long-drawn-out, exceptionally intricate and highly impassioned debate over closure itself. It was a dazzling performance, especially for a private member, and it so impressed Borden that he decided to take Meighen into the ministry as Solicitor-General, a position he held until in 1917 he was promoted to be Secretary of State.

From 1913 on he lacked neither the hard work on which he thrived nor the spirited controversy in which he revelled. With every one of the most bitterly disputed enactments of wartime he had much to do. with some of them more than anyone else. He framed and piloted through the House the Military Service Act, providing for the selective conscription of military manpower. He was the author and chief parliamentary exponent of the Wartime Elections Act, which by enfranchising for the first time in a Dominion election one class of citizens (the near female relatives of men in Canada’s overseas forces) and by disfranchising another (those of enemy alien birth or language naturalized since 1902) set the stage for the victory of the newly-formed Union Government in the election of 1917. Meighen was active in the prolonged negotiations leading to the establishment of that government — a coalition of English-speaking conscriptionist Liberals and Conservatives. The Department of the Interior, to which he was now transferred, was not of great significance as far as the prosecution of the war was concerned but he was recognized on all sides as one of the three or four most powerful men in the administration.
The policies and developments just alluded to — closure, conscription, the drastic revision of the franchise and the formation of the Union Government — aroused keen opposition and resentment in many parts of Canada but nowhere so markedly as in the province of Quebec. Closure, after all, had been introduced to enable the Conservatives to push through the Commons a naval policy which was the epitome of impérialisme, symbolizing to the French Canadians a commitment on Canada's part to support and participate in Britain's wars, wherever and whenever they might occur. For various reasons conscription, though widely unpopular, was especially repugnant to French Canada. The Wartime Elections Act was evidently intended to weight the electoral scales in favour of the conscriptionist forces and therefore against Quebec. And the Union Government, so widely demanded and supported by other Canadians, was looked upon by the French Canadians as a union of their enemies against them.

The alienation of the Conservative party from French Canada, which had begun thirty years earlier with the hanging of Louis Riel, was completed by these developments, although it was with less than justice that responsibility for them came to be laid entirely on that party. But this was not the only problem the party — and Meighen — had to contend with in Quebec. During the war the government reluctantly embarked upon a policy of railway nationalization which angered many of the powerful business elements in Montreal, notably those associated with the Canadian Pacific Railway, between whom and the party there had been traditionally in national politics a close and mutually beneficial relationship. An overabundant optimism in the early years of the twentieth century about the immediate future of Canada had led to the construction of two new transcontinental railroads, the Grand Trunk Pacific and the Canadian Northern. These enterprises fell on evil days during the war and became increasingly dependent on subventions from Ottawa to keep body and soul together. So large was this public assistance and so slight the prospect of the public treasury's being reimbursed that the government at length determined to acquire the near-bankrupt companies, as well as the Grand Trunk, which controlled its offspring, the Grand Trunk Pacific. The work of devising, expounding and defending the vastly complicated legislation through which these lines became public property was mainly done by Meighen. The doing of it demonstrated perhaps better than anything else his ability thoroughly to master a subject, his prodigious memory and his brilliance in debate. But it also earned him in certain ultra-conservative circles a reputation as a dangerous radical whose baneful influence over Borden was largely responsible for the inauguration of this lamentable experiment in state socialism. Suspicion of him on this score and intransigent antipathy to the railway policy he had done so much to carry out were most evident among the business class of Montreal. Thus to the alienation of French Canada was added the estrangement of much of the powerful English-speaking minority of Quebec. The outlook for the Conservative party
there was never bleaker than when Meighen succeeded Borden as Prime Minister in 1920.

His own and his party's unpopularity in Quebec affected Meighen's career and determined his political fate after 1920 to a greater extent than has generally been recognized. But for this the course of Canadian politics between the two world wars might have been very different. However, there were as well important elements elsewhere in the country among whom certain of his opinions and actions aroused bitter resentment and deep suspicion. One was the organized farmers of Canada — organized as never before for political action. Dissatisfied with the national policies of the old parties, policies they believed to be dictated by the powerful business interests of the central provinces to the detriment of the agricultural class, the farmers by the end of the first world war were proceeding to establish their own parties, both provincially and nationally. Their grievances were many, their demands diverse, but the most clear-cut issue on which they could unite was the tariff. Protection, they were convinced, would remain in effect under the existing two-party system. By forming a distinct farmers' party they hoped, if not to achieve power at Ottawa, at least to hold the balance of power. They saw no other means by which genuine tariff reform, with substantial reduction of duties, could be secured. The result of this conviction was the organization of the National Progressive party in 1920.

As the tariff once again became a leading issue in Canadian politics with the rise of this new agrarian movement, Meighen emerged as the most articulate defender in public life of the protective system. Although he represented a prairie riding and had lived for over fifteen years in the West where low-tariff sentiment was strongest, he believed the maintenance of the National Policy to be inextricably bound up with the preservation of the Canadian state. Unlike Mackenzie King, who was chosen leader of the Liberal party in 1919, Meighen made no effort to obscure the tariff question, nor did he try to persuade the farmers that there was no essential difference between their outlook on the matter and that of himself and his party. On the contrary he affirmed that there was a difference of paramount importance. This stand, he was certain, in addition to being a truthful one, would pay political dividends. But it meant, in effect, that the majority of western farmers, indeed of all prairie westerners, was not inclined to vote for Meighen or his candidates.

Of somewhat less immediate political significance was the fact that he also incurred the distrust, even enmity, of much of organized labour as a result of the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. The immediate post-war period, marked by a high cost of living and a high level of unemployment, witnessed widespread labour unrest in Canada. Excited by economic difficulties, many workingmen, in western Canada especially, became impatient with the traditionally cautious approach of Canadian trade union leaders to political action. Spurred on by the
inspiring example of the Russian Revolution — which, many then believed, had transformed an archaic despotism into a social and economic democracy — they were attracted to a more revolutionary type of unionism represented by the concept of One Big Union. Adherents to this radical school of thought believed that a single all-embracing labour organization could use the general strike as the unanswerable weapon with which to coerce the “bosses” and bring about a reconstruction of the industrial order. The strike in Winnipeg, precipitated by a dispute over collective bargaining, was ended after several weeks by the intervention of the Dominion government, which was convinced that action was necessitated by what it regarded as the inability of the municipal and the unwillingness of the provincial authorities to control an essentially revolutionary situation. The planning and execution of the measures devised to end the strike and to prevent a recurrence was largely the work of Meighen, who happened to be acting Minister of Justice at the time. Although neither the principle of the general strike nor its application in Winnipeg enjoyed the hesitating support of the Canadian labour movement as a whole, the severity of these measures did nothing to enhance the popularity among the labouring class of the government or of Meighen, who was in any case an outspoken critic of radical opinion.

While he bore only the same constitutional responsibility as his colleagues for all these hotly disputed policies of the Borden administration, he had been especially instrumental in the formulation and prominent in the defence of each of them. Thus he was constantly the focus of contention, a position in which he always felt at home. Not only did many of the policies for which he was the chief government spokesman arouse passionate indignation, but his manner in the House frequently enraged the opposition. His obvious ability earned their grudging respect but it also made them resent him. His imperturbable self-assurance, his mordant, taunting way of destroying their arguments and deflating their egos, maddened and exasperated them. He was a polarizing force, concerned always with clarifying issues, with exposing differences of opinion for all to see. He did not know how to win friends and influence people on the other side except by reasoned argument and logical analysis, methods less effective in politics than he believed. Politics, he thought, was a matter of intelligent, intelligible controversy. He was at length to be disabused on that score by Mackenzie King.

No doubt it was in large part the markedly controversial quality of the man that caused most of his colleagues in the Cabinet to oppose — unsuccessfully — his selection as Borden’s successor. They were convinced that Meighen had acquired too many political liabilities and that, in any case, he was not temperamentally suited to grapple with the tasks that would confront the new leader. The outcome of the first election in which he led the party, in December 1921, seemed to justify their misgivings. There were the usual wide disparities between the number of seats won by each party and the number of
votes cast for their candidates. The Conservatives polled about 200,000
more votes than the Progressives while capturing fifteen fewer seats,
a scant fifty. However, there could be no doubt about the decisiveness
of the voters’ verdict. More than two-thirds of them cast their ballots
for opposition candidates of one stripe or another. Six of the nine
provinces, including Manitoba where Meighen was defeated in Portage,
returned no Conservatives. The Liberals with one hundred seventeen
seats were just short of an absolute majority but the first round in the
battle between Meighen and Mackenzie King had clearly gone to
the latter.

At the same time the downfall of the Meighen Government had
been as predictable as it was complete. Borden’s mantle, which Meighen
had desired and of which he had striven to be accounted worthy, was
not an entirely enviable inheritance. In view of the strong disagree-
ments caused by their policies while in office, it is unlikely that the
Conservatives would have fared much better in 1921 under another
leader. At all events, surveying the situation as a whole on the morrow
of his defeat, Meighen was optimistic about the future. In spite of
the Liberal victory he still placed a low appraisal on King’s capabilities,
mainly because as compared with himself King was so inept in the
House of Commons, so windily platitudinous and equivocal in all his
public utterances. Also Meighen thought that the rise of the Progres-
sive movement and the revival of the tariff issue would yet prove
advantageous to his own party, enabling it above all to strengthen
itself in Quebec, where public opinion was known to be predominantly
protectionist and on the whole distrustful of the rather yeasty radicalism
of the West.

Meighen’s belief that the tariff was and ought to be acknowledged
as the central issue seemed to be shared by the Progressive leader,
Thomas Crerar, a former colleague in the Union Government. Crerar
desired to see the Liberal party, with which he had earlier been iden-
tified, liberalize itself by repudiating the protectionist forces within
its own ranks in the central provinces. It could then become a genuine
low-tariff party with which the Progressives might merge, a party which
farmers and other liberally-minded people could support. Such an
agrarianization of the Liberal party would have suited Meighen, who
hoped that political alignments would crystallize on the tariff question
and that his own party would be recognized as the only one committed
to the preservation of the National Policy.

Thus in opposition he continued the effort he had begun while in
office to convince all supporters of the protective system, Liberals and
Conservatives alike, that the system was in danger. Citing certain of
King’s speeches and the Liberal platform adopted in 1919, which
promised reduction or abolition of the tariff on a number of goods,
he tried to show that King planned to make a deal with the Progres-
sives, agreeing in return for their support to alter the country’s historic
trade policy. There was a certain inconsistency in Meighen’s argument
on this score, since he had often ridiculed King's pretensions as a tariff reformer and warned the Progressives not to expect much from him or from the Liberal party. As it happened many of those who shared his attachment to the National Policy also shared his scepticism about the sincerity of King's professed dislike of protection. This proved to be especially the case in Quebec. Meighen had gone to that province in the 1921 campaign hoping to be greeted as the upholder of protection but had been obliged, instead, to defend the record of the Borden administration and his own part in it. In particular, he was forced to defend himself, as the author of the Military Service Act, against the charge of being an enemy of French Canada, a charge dinned into the minds of the people by a barrage of calumnious misrepresentation that was exceptional even for Canadian politics. However, in spite of the débâcle in Quebec, where all sixty-five seats were won by Liberals, Meighen was not without hope. Surely time would cool passions and conscription no longer be in peacetime the overriding issue it had become during the war. Surely the distorted remembrance of things past would not indefinitely obscure an apprehension of things present. He was convinced that Quebec, like the rest of Canada, could be appealed to on the questions of the day, instead of being inflamed by the disputes of a bygone time.

The next four years witnessed a distinct shift of public opinion in favour of the Conservatives in the country at large. To be sure, the clear polarization of politics on the tariff question which Meighen hoped for did not occur; King was far too shrewd and supple a politician to permit this kind of simplification on an issue not of his own choosing. King's task was to re-unify the Liberal party, riven by the conscription crisis and the formation of the Union Government and further weakened by the burgeoning of the Progressive movement; part of his strategy was to absorb Progressivism but he could not try to do this with a clear-cut policy of tariff reform, which would alienate the protectionist wing of his party. He therefore had to, and did, steer an equivocal middle course with the result that the tariff never became the single decisive issue Meighen wanted it to be. Nevertheless, matters improved very greatly from the Conservative standpoint between 1921 and 1925. The Progressive party, weakened by disagreements within and eroded by King's blandishments from without, was disintegrating. At the same time the King Government was meeting heavy weather, including the cold, biting wind of Meighen's relentless criticism. The results of the election of October 1925 showed a dramatic change in political fortunes.

One hundred sixteen Conservatives were elected, as against one hundred one Liberals and twenty-four Progressives. Conservative nominees received over forty-six per cent of the popular vote, compared with thirty-one per cent in 1921. Only Saskatchewan failed to elect any Conservatives, but even there more than one-quarter of the ballots cast were marked for the party's candidates. The increase of Conservative strength in the Commons was the greatest recovery made by any party in Canadian history up to that time. It has been said
that, while Meighen won all the debates, King won all the elections; but this one was hardly a Liberal victory, with the party's strength reduced by sixteen seats and the Prime Minister and eight of his colleagues personally defeated. But it was not a complete victory for Meighen either, for the Conservatives were seven seats short of an absolute majority. That they were short was owing mainly to the fact that they won only four seats instead of the fifteen they had hoped for in Quebec, where the Liberals again campaigned chiefly on the conscription issue and, as well, on the likelihood of war with Turkey if Meighen became Prime Minister, presumably because of his celebrated "Ready, aye, ready!" pronouncement during the Chanak crisis of 1922.

After weighing the results of this indecisive election King decided to remain in office, hoping that his government would be supported by enough of the Progressives in the new Parliament to enable him to retain power. By improvising measures intended to satisfy Progressive and Labour demands the government withstood for five months of the 1926 session a sustained onslaught by the Conservatives, on occasion escaping defeat by the narrowest of margins. However, a parliamentary investigation of corruption in the Customs Department revealed serious irregularities and as the debate on this subject proceeded it became more and more certain that enough of the Progressives would desert King to cause his downfall.

King attempted to avoid this fate by advising that Parliament be dissolved before the vote on a motion censuring his government could be taken. The Governor General, Baron Byng of Vimy, refused to do so, precipitating the sensational and, to Meighen, profoundly disillusioning climax of his struggle with King. Space does not permit an examination here of the numerous constitutional questions raised by the crisis of 1926. Suffice it to say that the impropriety of the request for a dissolution and the propriety of Lord Byng's refusal have been irrefutably established by Eugene Forsey in The Royal Power of Dissolution of Parliament in the British Commonwealth, the definitive work on the subject. So has the legality of the government that Meighen formed after King had resigned, a legality which King erroneously but successfully denied; so, too, has the propriety of Byng's granting a dissolution to Meighen after the defeat of his government in the House. Indeed King's actions during the crisis rested on a misconception of constitutional practice; and his emotional oratory on the subject, both in the House and the ensuing election campaign, completely misrepresented the constitution. Meighen entered the campaign believing that, whether one considered the Customs scandal, the constitutional crisis or the general record of the King administration between 1922 and 1926, no party leader had ever had a stronger case against an opponent than he had. He was deeply shocked and his faith in democracy was shaken by the victory of the Liberals, which he attributed to the false claim that Byng's refusal of a dissolution undermined responsible government and endangered
Canada's autonomy with "Downing Street interference." Probably the constitutional crisis was a less decisive factor in the election than Meighen thought but, in view of the prominent place it occupied in King's campaign, he could be forgiven for thinking that no one had ever been defeated on so transparently false an issue.

Following his defeat Meighen retired from public life, going into business in Toronto. In 1932 he agreed to become the government leader in the Senate and Minister without Portfolio in the Cabinet of R. B. Bennett, and did much to increase the stature and usefulness of the Upper House. Late in 1941 he most reluctantly allowed himself to be drafted back into the leadership of the party, but his effort to return to the Commons in a by-election failed. His second and final retirement ensued and thereafter he devoted much of the time remaining to him, ending with his death in 1960, to thinking back over his eventful career and especially to the causes of his downfall at the hands of Mackenzie King. He was torn between his innermost conviction that it was wrong to blame others for one's misfortunes and the belief that he had lost out for reasons over which he had no control and for which he was not responsible.

How much the fortunes of a party leader and the party he leads are determined by his own qualities and actions is one of the most fascinating yet unanswerable questions raised by the politics of democracy. It has been fashionable to explain the outcome of the struggle between Meighen and King largely in personal terms. One would gather from the conventional wisdom that Meighen was hopelessly unsuited by temperament and outlook and King ideally suited for leadership in a country like Canada and that this accounts for the final triumph of the one over the other. In this view of things Meighen was a brilliant failure who fell inevitably because he lacked the superior perception that belonged to King, the deeper understanding of democracy, of the aspirations of the Canadian people and the nature of the Canadian state. He was, it has been argued, too rigid and uncompromising, too dogmatic and confident in the rightness of his own opinions, too obsessed with preserving his own consistency, too reluctant to accept any but the wrong advice from the wrong people. He took too much upon himself and failed to share either the work or the glory with others. His manner was overly austere, his language in controversy overly severe. He angered where he should have appeased, defied where he should have conceded, alienated where he should have conciliated, repelled where he should have attracted. This interpretation has all the beauty of simplicity but it does not accord entirely with the facts.

To begin with, judged by the acid test of ability to attract votes, Meighen was not a failure. Curiously, though his ultimate loss of the field to King has generally been ascribed to his own shortcomings, he has never received much credit for the revival of the Conservative party between 1922 and 1925. The credit was not all his, of course.
but if the personal factor of leadership was of any significance the
impressive gains made during that period must have been partly the
result of his efforts. The 1921 election was a defeat but in all proba-
bility had been lost before Meighen ever became Prime Minister. The
1925 election was a victory, but not a decisive one, in which the
Conservative popular vote exceeded the Liberal by over 200,000. Even
in 1926 the party outpolled the Liberals and came within a few
thousand votes of equaling the combined vote of the Liberals and
their Liberal-Progressive allies. Not for more than thirty years after-
wards, except in 1930, were the Conservatives to win as many seats
or as much of the popular vote as they did in two of the three general
elections they fought with Meighen as their leader. This does not
indicate that he was so inept politically, as much of a liability to the
party, as has sometimes been thought.

But was the failure of the party to do even better under his direc-
tion and gain a secure hold on power due to his alleged defects as a
public man? Meighen attempted to apply to public life the standards
of private and personal conduct in which he believed, among which
frankness, honesty and consistency ranked high. He tended to idealize
politics as an intellectual competition, a continuous great debate which
performed an educative function essential to the proper working of
democracy. The duty of the leader, indeed the purpose of the party
system itself, was to define and clarify issues in such a way that the
electorate, when the time came, could make an intelligent decision.
A party leader must announce his opinion or policy in such a way that
there could be no mistaking what it was and try to convince the voters,
either directly or through Parliament, that he was right. If Canada
were to be more than a congeries of disparate sections, peoples and
provinces, a national party must formulate a concept of the national
interest, along with measures calculated to serve it, and must be
prepared when the opportunity arrived to put those measures into
operation. It was incumbent on the leader of a party, Meighen believed,
to have the courage of consistency, to advance the same ideas in all
sections of the country, to say the same things no matter whom he
was addressing, whether they might prove popular or not. He knew
that there was room for honest difference of opinion about almost any
public question; that was why there were opposing parties, to cristallize
these differences and bring them sharply into focus. Only in this way
could politics have that clarity, that rational order without which
democracy made no sense.

This approach to politics was not entirely suited, perhaps, to the
realities of a far from perfect world. At any rate it was diametrically
opposed, and this for Meighen was enough of a recommendation, to
the theory and practice exemplified by King, which has been much
celebrated as the only practicable one if not, in fact, the very acme
of statesmanship. King's definition of the national interest seems to
have consisted largely of the conviction that it could only be promoted
by a Liberal government headed by himself. To him the essence of the
party leader's task was to listen to the many, varied voices of the people, taking from the infinitely complex and endlessly changing pattern of public opinion those thoughts, fears and desires which were politically important or exploitable. By being as many things as possible to as many people as possible, one must seek to attract the support of the majority. It was seldom clear just where King stood on any specific issue of the moment but he never left any doubt that he was on the side of the angels, where he invited all liberally-minded people to join him against the unregenerate and irredeemable Tories. Disliking to commit himself to a firm position on controversial public questions, he preferred to divert the attention of the people to the never-ending struggle between the wicked and the godly. Their support was invited in contending against usurpation, autocracy, militarism, the big interests and Downing Street interference, and in defending liberty, the rights of Parliament, peace and national unity. Meighen's attempt to gain support on the mundane issue of the tariff was pallid fare compared to the evangelical, moralistic fervour of his rival.

This was King's way of building a national party and, so it has been asserted, of restoring national unity. Its logical end product was the unity of a one party state, a state dominated by one massive, omnibus party which had something to offer to everybody and was bound to no fixed positions except an unrelenting war against evil in which all could join with a good conscience. To Meighen it was an outrageous debasement of politics. King's glossing over of real questions in favour of fictitious ones, the contradictions between what he said here and what he said there, and between what he said almost anywhere and what he actually did, his tortuous twistings and turnings to avoid making decisions and giving direct answers, his willingness to shift ground for the sake of popularity and to barter promises in exchange for votes — all this Meighen, one of the least "promising" of party leaders, found utterly repellent. It added up in his mind to nothing but the philosophy of power at any price.

Because it was King who emerged triumphant in 1926, because his method of leading and governing resembled to some extent that of the illustrious Macdonald and Laurier, and because he went on to govern for so long, it has sometimes been assumed that his was the only way in which so large and heterogeneous a country as Canada could be governed and a national party be successfully led. According to this theory King's conquest of Meighen was pre-ordained, inevitable. This conclusion not only exaggerates the similarity between King and his two most successful predecessors but discounts unduly the public intelligence. It also overlooks the fact that Meighen came within an ace of winning and King of being ousted from power and, it may be, from the leadership of the Liberal party as well. Assuming that Meighen was partly deserving of credit for the Conservative recovery revealed in the 1925 election, it may be said that his kind of leadership and his approach to politics had an appeal of their own, that forthrightness, consistency and reasoned argument proved more
attractive to many voters than King's shapeless verbosity, incessant moralizing and calculated obscurities.

Nor do the election results suggest that Meighen's manner on the hustings was a fatal handicap. That he faced the voters with anything but a sunny, outgoing disposition is true but he paid them the compliment of taking it for granted that they came to hear him discuss the public business as he saw it, not to soothe them with jokes or platitudes. There was something forbidding, even awesome, about him as he stood up on a platform to speak: the unsmiling, drawn, tired-looking countenance; the brooding, deep-set eyes; the fierce, pitiless punishment of King and all his works, meted out in carefully measured, faultless prose. However, it was in the Commons if anywhere, rather than on the hustings, that his sharply controversial quality did him serious harm. In part it was his ability, in part his manner that aroused the dislike of many of his opponents and in King's case an almost pathological fear and hatred. He was too clever, he knew too much, his memory was too dependable, he was too quick with the sharp riposte, the cutting sarcasm, too likely to be on hand with the final, devastating word, the clinching argument. By any standard of measurement he was, as the Manitoba Free Press put it, "the first swordsman of Parliament". But those who felt the point of the sword wanted nothing more than to retaliate and their opportunities came in the ridings of the country where he did not confront them face to face. There they attacked him with a special kind of fury, more vindictive and venomous, perhaps, than might have been directed against some other leader who was less irritatingly and arrogantly supreme in the House.

This was most noticeable and politically most decisive in Quebec. True, that province had been predominantly Liberal since the 1880's and during the fifteen years prior to their alliance with the Nationalists in 1911 the Conservatives had never taken more than sixteen of its sixty-five seats. It was also true that in the wartime election the Union Government had won only three. But the Laurier era and the war were both over now and Meighen believed that, using the tariff issue, the party could regain the ground it had lost in Quebec in recent years. Its failure to do so resulted from various factors. The fears of French Canada were too deep and too carefully nurtured by cynical propaganda to be allayed by Meighen's sincere but ineffective protestations of good will, or to permit the tariff to become the overriding question he tried to make it. Of course had no Liberal orator uttered the word "conscription," had no Liberal editor filled his columns with scurrilous attacks on Meighen as "the man of conscription," the Conservatives would still have suffered on account of it, at least for some time. But the fact that they remained as weak in Quebec as they did was presumably owing in some degree to the fantastic fabrications about Meighen's past deeds and future intentions with which the voters of the province were regaled in one campaign after another. It may be that he had to endure more of this kind of
thing than some other leader would have, partly because of his close connection with so much of the unpopular wartime legislation, partly because he had so often and so triumphantly tangled in the House of Commons with representatives of Quebec who thirsted for revenge. In this sense his past was catching up with him but what that past actually had been and what his enemies in Quebec pictured it as having been were worlds apart.

At any rate conscription, with all its symbolic associations, was an issue admirably suited to the immediate requirements of the Liberal party, however irrelevant it may have been in the post-war period. So were war with Turkey and Downing Street interference when in due course these were presented as issues. They were not, though, well suited to the restoration and strengthening of national unity. King's devotion to that particular purpose, so often affirmed, has usually been acknowledged as his best claim to the gratitude of his countrymen. But it was the cultivation of discord and disunity by his followers in Quebec, especially in 1925, that largely spelled the difference for him between a defeat that might have meant oblivion and survival by a narrow margin that permitted the rest of his extraordinary career to assume the shape it did. For had the Conservatives taken the fifteen seats in Quebec that they expected in 1925, King's day in power would have been over, for the time being anyway, and the crisis of 1926 would not have occurred. Thus there was no particular mystery or magic about King's success, no superhuman perception or political genius behind it. It rested simply on the hold which the Liberal party had on the province of Quebec, a hold maintained in part by a flood of mendacity seldom if ever matched, at a time when the balance of public favour almost everywhere else was swinging towards Meighen and the Conservatives.

Was Meighen responsible for his own downfall? In his later years, brooding over 1926 and all that had gone before, he could not bring himself to believe that, everything considered, he was really to blame. In this the weight of evidence is on his side.
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