

The Chief: A gift to Canada

**DOUGLAS
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1966 I had the temerity and poor judgment to use John Diefenbaker through a column that the Chief had come for him to quit the House of Commons. I argued that all of us should remember him at the height of his debating and argumentative powers, but lingering on as an embittered symbol of attitudes and events of the recent past would divide his own party and impede Robert Stanfield as party leader.

Two Sundays ago I listened as Diefenbaker fielded the calls from across the country on CBC radio's 630-AM Country Checkup program. He was superb — a blend of force of humor, sagacity, courtesy and plain talk with almost every caller. Further, he demonstrated a marvellous awareness of current events, even those which he converted rather brutally to the furtherance of his opinions and quirks.

Any of those who honor him on his 80th birthday (they are legion) could well do a retrospective assessment of the Chief as prime minister and wonder about several things.

Firstly, was he really as atrocious a prime minister as the Liberal and editorialist attacks of 1962 and 1963 claimed? Secondly, was the old-fashioned simplicity and directness of his populist performance as a national leader such an anachronism? Thirdly, were those hymns of praise to youth in political leadership which all of us indulged in from 1968 to 1972 worth much?

On this last point, I have the sneaky impression that Pierre Trudeau as prime minister seems a more subtle and less revelant or inspiring man than John Diefenbaker does at this point in time.

Remember that the two most generalized charges against Diefenbaker as prime minister were that he was a hay-wire, inexpert, unsure cabinet and governmental operation which had frazzled the corporate and financial community; and secondly,

that he was completely out of touch with French Canada and so was fostering alienation there, even separatism.

To make rude comparisons between now and then the federal juggernaut of spending and employees has more than doubled and few today seem much satisfied with the grip or expertise of the current government including Bay Street. As for French Canada, despite "co-operative federalism" as pushed by Pearson and the French presence as symbolized by the prime minister, the two other wise men, bilingualism, etc., the forces in Quebec for more autonomy (Bourassa) or for separatism (Levesque) are surely stronger than they were when the Chief was defeated in 1963.

This crude interpretation or recent political history in favor of Diefenbaker can be much argued against. A good reason for putting it is tied to what I see him as representing: That is, an antidote to the Liberal interpretation of our politics. You know the stuff: Lester Pearson as the warm, capable doer — the archetypal Canadian as bureaucrat and politician; or the Liberals as the only possible saviours of confederation because of their special understanding of Quebec, or the Liberals as peculiarly but fortunately the combination of expertise and experience who know much better than anyone else how to run both government and economy whereas almost all other politicians (especially John Diefenbaker) and parties haven't the brains, the rationality, and the great rapport with the splendid, capable mandarins of the Ottawa establishment.

By political longevity, a sustained involvement with people and issues, and a really stunning continuance of acuity and vigor, Diefenbaker is reshaping his own place in history. And with his persistence comes the revenge that he's getting on those in his own party who ousted him.

As one of my Liberal acquaintances in Toronto chortled yesterday: "The son of a gun is going to outlive and overshadow not only Pearson but Dalton Camp."

What I have always found most admirable in John Diefenbaker in politics is the time he gives to your people. I as an MP knew that I could bring one teenager or a score of them around and he'd find the minutes to talk with and encourage them in thinking about politics and Canada.

Last spring I had the chance to measure personally the impact he made on one high school through a morning visit. Literally, he interested and excited most of the kids. I could also see what a reservoir of encouragement and hope the kids were to the Chief. In this committal there's a gift to the country quite unlike anything offered by any other politician in our history with the possible exception of Laurier.