

Pearson Peace Medal presentation, May 20, 2021

Good afternoon to all! Bonjour à toutes et à tous!

On behalf of the Pearson family, of whom I am now the senior member, and of the United Nations Association of Canada, let me welcome you to this virtual space to share in this presentation of the 2021 Pearson Peace Medal to a truly worthy candidate, the Rt. Hon. Beverley McLachlin.

Normally we would be gathering at Rideau Hall for this special event but, of course, the pandemic, along with certain other factors, has made this impossible. But the upside is that many individuals from all over the country, including, I am hopeful, a number of Lester B. Pearson's descendants, can attend!

But before I present the medal to our distinguished laureate, I would like to say a few words about the person for whom this medal has been named, as well as about the United Nations itself, and about the United Nations Association in Canada. As the organization designated to promote the UN to the people of Canada, in 1979 UNAC decided to make the awarding of the Pearson Peace Medal one of its signature activities.

When Lester B. Pearson died in 1972, tributes poured in from around the world in honour of his stature as an international statesman. Of course they all cited the Nobel Peace Prize that he was awarded in 1957 in recognition of the diplomatic skills that in November 1956 enabled him to defuse from his seat at the UN the Suez crisis that might have plunged us into another world war. Many tributes also recognized the part he played in preparing the ground for the conference in San Francisco that established the United Nations as well his role a couple of years later in the creation of NATO. And all this happened before he became Prime Minister! Nor was "Partners in Development", the report he authored for the World Bank after his retirement in 1968 that set .07 of GDP as the marker for the support of rich countries to the Global South forgotten

Unquestionably, he deserved the accolades that appeared in the world press, but for all Lester B. Pearson's international reputation, I have always thought of my father-in-law as a quintessential Canadian. Born to a Methodist minister of modest means who loved playing baseball with his three sons, he grew up in small towns around Ontario where he attended local schools doing well in his studies and even better at hockey. Like his older brother, Marmaduke before him, and his younger brother, Vaughan after him, Lester joined the Canadian Armed Forces on April 23, 1915, the day he turned 18, and then set off to fight in the First World War. It was the brothers' collective experience of war reinforced by LBP's presence in London in 1939 and in 1940 during the Blitz that led him to be so unshakeably committed to the cause of peace.

Lester Pearson left England in 1941 and went on to Washington after a brief spell in Canada and even before he was promoted to become the Ambassador of Canada to the United States on January 1, 1945 he was taking part in various serious efforts to ensure a lasting peace after the end of the war, an end that was finally coming into sight. He was even asked to become the director of the FAO at its founding meeting in Quebec City in October 1945 because of his

involvement in its formation. But he was more interested in being present later the same month on October 24 at the creation of the United Nations in San Francisco on October 24 so that at long last there could be peace in the “family of man.” Once back in Ottawa, LBP supported the adoption by the UN on December 10, 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and was proud that a Canadian, John Humphrey, was involved in drafting it under Eleanor Roosevelt, whom he much admired.

Throughout his career, LBP always worked to support the UN. As a pragmatist, he recognized the fault lines in the organization particularly in the structure of the Security Council where the tensions between the national interests of its most powerful permanent members and demands for collective action continue to play out. But, overall he never lost faith in the need for an assembly of nations to work together to resolve the great issues confronting humankind, and would have been pleased, I think, by the proliferation of covenants and conventions that have expanded the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into the impressive body of humanitarian law that exists today.

When I think of LBP as a quintessential Canadian, I am thinking as much of who he was as of what he accomplished. He was a man without side: what you saw was what you got. He was likeable rather than charismatic, not an intellectual but a man who thought a lot and who had great personal integrity and a strong moral compass. My mother once described him as having an “epic” sense of humour. I think she was referring to his remarkable resilience. I just liked his quick wit and his jokes! He was not as shrewd about individuals as my mother-in-law, Maryon was, too willing, perhaps, to give people the benefit of the doubt. But what was particularly striking in him was the degree to which he loved Canada, both its land and its people and how deeply committed he was to national unity.

Mon beau-père avait beaucoup d'admiration pour la culture de Québec. Même s'il parlait mal français il avait compris la place qu'occupait le Québec dans l'histoire du Canada, la qualité unique que sa présence dans la fédération avait donnée à notre politique et à nos valeurs communes. Je m'en souviens du plaisir qu'il avait eu lors des célébrations de notre Centenaire, en 1967, et à Terres des Hommes, l'Exposition universelle, qui avait attiré des gens de partout et leur donnait tant à découvrir. Ce n'est pas par hasard qu'il a choisi d'être enterré dans les collines de la Gatineau sous le drapeau qui nous unit.

That LBP did not fully understand the rights of the Indigenous populations that first occupied the land that we now call Canada is, to some extent, a function of his times. Yet he was greatly respected by the First Nations who live in the riding of Algoma East that he represented in Parliament, and I am sure he would have welcomed the changes in awareness that are now occurring.

Now let me turn to the medal that bears his name. As most of you who are witnessing this ceremony probably know, my husband, Geoffrey was involved with UN issues and with arms control and disarmament for much of his diplomatic career and after when he became the founding director of the Canadian Institute for Peace and Security. He also served as president of UNAC and was very much involved in the 50th anniversary celebrations. So, when members of UNAC approached him to establish an annual Pearson Peace Medal, he thought that it was an excellent idea. A bronze medal was struck by Dora de Pedery Hunt, a gifted Canadian sculptor, and criteria were set for the selection of laureates.

Let me reiterate these criteria again for everyone who is listening:

“The Pearson Peace Medal is awarded to a Canadian who has personally contributed through their working lives and voluntary commitments to those causes to which Lester B. Pearson devoted his distinguished career: aid to the developing world, mediation between those confronting one another with arms, succour to refugees and others in need, equal rights, and justice for all humanity and peaceful change through world law and world organization.”

And so it has. The roster of the 31 previous laureates is notable, comprising remarkable Canadians from every sector of society: peacekeepers, diplomats, politicians, scientists and educators, lawyers and judges, religious leaders, a doctor, a labor leader and civil society activists dedicated to “succour to refugees”, international development and the prevention of nuclear war. Some are men, some women, some francophone, some Anglophone. They come from all over the country, east to west, and with the addition of Grand Chief Willie Littlechild last year an Indigenous laureate who, like LBP, loved playing hockey. For anyone who would like to know about these people, there is an illustrated book entitled “Profiles in Humanitarian Courage,” that was written two years ago by Lester Pearson’s granddaughter (and my daughter) Patricia Pearson, and is available from UNAC.

So, Beverley McLachlin, today you join a company of honourable Canadians, each of whom has fulfilled most if not all of the criteria listed above, and all of whom have shown great courage in doing so. And courage is necessary in our challenging world where one is often tempted to despair because as the laureate for 1997, Hanna Newcombe, who came to Canada at the age of 16 as a refugee from the Nazis, forcibly said: “Between optimism and pessimism there is something called courage.” Without courage the future can look bleak and we all need models like the recipients of the Pearson Peace Medal to encourage us to move forward.

In his Nobel lecture delivered over 60 years ago at the height of the Cold War and under the threat of nuclear war Lester B. Pearson described the “Four Faces of Peace” which he listed as follows; peace and prosperity, peace and power, peace and policy, and peace and people, concluding that “In the end, the whole problem always returns to people and to one person and their own individual responses to the challenges that confront them.” These are the Canadians the medal celebrates, all individuals who have been prepared to confront the great issues that continue to plague us and to show us what can be done. You, Beverley McLachlin, are one of them.

There is neither time here nor need to recite your full CV, although for those who would like to know you better, I highly recommend your autobiography, “Truth Be Told,” which I thoroughly enjoyed. Instead I will share a few quotes from your sponsors, distinguished Canadians all, who know of whom they are writing.

David Johnston commended your “measured boldness” in pursuing the goal of “equal rights and justice for all humanity” and further clarified what he meant by writing: “Peace is founded on the rule of law within the context of the unified search for justice and fairness. Law with justice makes us free and creates the democratic institutions that ensure engaged citizens and equal opportunity for them all.”

Huguette Labelle added: "Beverley McLachlin has also contributed to strengthening the judiciary in a number of countries around the world. Highly respected internationally, she has been called to engage in judicial training and summoned to attend special meetings in countries as diverse as Russia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Turkey, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, India" and others. In doing so, she suggests, you drew on your unique experience in developing new roadmaps between different legal traditions as happened during your time in the Supreme Court of Canada.

And Sheena Khan, who was your primary sponsor, recited even more of your accomplishments, and then wrote, "In summary, the Rt. Hon. Beverley McLachlin embodies the Pearsonian ideals of peaceful change... through world law and world organization."

There is no doubt in my mind that Lester Pearson would have considered himself honoured that you would accept this medal that bears his name. I also know he would have liked you a lot and would probably have been able to make you laugh. I once had lunch with him and Barbara Ward, the distinguished British economist who, like you, had a very sharp mind and a passion for justice, and I can attest to his capacity to be both serious and charming at the same time! As for the charm, no one much writes about it, but his grandchildren felt it and would follow him, like the Pied Piper he was at heart, in a merry dance around Harrington Lake!

So Beverley McLachlin, having, I hope, conjured Lester Pearson up for you and anyone else in this virtual space, I am delighted in his name and on behalf of UNAC to present you with the 2021 Pearson Medal.

Hon. Landon Pearson OC

And I have to add now a quotation from LBP that I discovered only the other day in my journal. I am not sure which of his many speeches it comes from but it is such a strong statement of his understanding of political leadership that I couldn't resist sharing it with you!

"Politics and diplomacy are no play of will and skill where results are independent of the character of those engaging in the game. Results are determined not by superficiality but by the consistency of the actors in their efforts and by the validity of their ideals. Contrary to what seems to be popular belief there is no intellectual activity which more ruthlessly tests the solidity of a man than politics. Apparently easy successes with the public are possible for a juggler but lasting results are achieved only by the patient builder."

L.B.Pearson

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