

# Evaluating Prime Ministerial Leadership in Canada: The Results of an Expert Survey

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**Abstract.** This article reports the results of the largest survey of expert opinion on prime ministerial leadership in Canada, conducted in 2011. The top-rated prime ministers were, in order, Laurier, King, Macdonald, and Pearson, who were preferred because of their creative records of achievement and capacity to see the country as a whole, champion its unity, and make for positive change. Survey respondents valued transformational leadership that altered the country, but did so in a cautious way that did not threaten national cohesiveness. The article makes frequent reference to the international literature on leadership, allowing for comparisons across a range of countries.

**Keywords.** Canada; prime ministers; leadership.

In 2011, we conducted the largest ranking survey of expert opinion on prime ministerial leadership ever carried out in Canada. The number of respondents was higher than that in the most extensive survey in the United States, that of Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, taking into account the smaller Canadian population and the disparity in the size of the academic communities of the two countries. The sample size meant that our findings are more statistically robust than previous Canadian surveys. By asking more questions and polling more experts, we were able to probe deeper into perceptions of the prime ministers who have held the highest political office in Canada since 1867. Our survey advances an understanding of the performance and competence of Canadian leaders and of the assumptions that experts bring to their work, including how they make their judgements and why they favour certain prime ministers over others.

The polling of experts to determine rankings of political leaders dates to Arthur M. Schlesinger's 1948 survey for *Life* magazine, which assessed US presidents. Schlesinger surveyed 55 scholars, mostly historians, and asked them to use their own criteria to rate the presidents as great, near great, average, below average, or failures. Since then, American experts have been polled more than a dozen times for their views on their country's leaders. Over time, this process has become more sophisticated, with more questions being

**Résumé.** Cet article présente les résultats de la plus grande enquête d'opinion d'expert sur le leadership concernant les premiers ministres du Canada, une enquête conduite en 2011. Les premiers ministres les mieux notés sont, dans l'ordre, Laurier, King, Macdonald et Pearson, qui ont été préférés en raison de la popularité de leur résultats et de leur capacité à appréhender le pays comme un tout, du fait qu'ils ont été champions de son unité, et de leur marque de changement positif. Les répondants du questionnaire ont accordé beaucoup de valeur au leadership qui a permis de transformer le pays, mais d'une manière circonspecte qui n'a pas mis en péril la cohésion nationale. Cet article fait de fréquentes références à la littérature internationale sur le leadership, ce qui permet de comparer avec une gamme de pays.

**Mots clefs.** Canada; premiers ministres; leadership.

posed to a greater number of experts. In 1982, Murray and Blessing polled 846 historians. Although common in the United States, such exercises have been rare in Westminster democracies, where there has been little research on prime ministerial leadership until recently. In Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, prime ministerial biographies are common, but not comparative research. This is beginning to change (see Strangio, Hart, and Walter: 2013). Experts are increasingly polled for their views on the prime ministers of the larger Westminster democracies. The American and emerging Commonwealth literature allows us to make comparisons between the political leadership perceptions of experts from a range of different countries.

## Previous Canadian Surveys

Prior to our 2011 survey, Canadian experts had been polled four times for their views on Canadian prime ministers, beginning in 1964 with a seldom-mentioned exercise for the *Globe and Mail*. Patterned after Schlesinger's work in the US, the *Globe* editor asked 10 historians and political scientists to rate each prime minister as great, near great, adequate, or inadequate. No precise criteria were given, and no further questions were asked. The exercise generated little interest at the time and has been ignored since. More than

three decades passed before Norman Hillmer and J.L. Granatstein in 1997 asked 26 historians and political scientists to rate the prime ministers, also using the Schlesinger approach. The two reported their findings in a *Maclean's* article and a best-selling book (Granatstein and Hillmer, 1999).

In 2003, *Policy Options* looked at the prime ministers over the previous 50 years by contacting 30 experts. The rationale for the choice of panellists was far from clear. On the list were some individuals who were not specialists in Canadian political history, including a scholar of French religious history. Omitted were several productive and well-known Canadian political historians. Two of the *Policy Options* panellists later politely refused to take part in our 2011 survey on the grounds that they lacked the necessary expertise. "I am really not enough of an expert on Canada to be able to contribute usefully," one told us. The other explained that, although he had taken part in the *Policy Options* exercise, he would decline our 2011 invitation. "I was uneasy enough on the previous occasion, but this time round you are looking for a more 'in-depth' series of judgments, and I really feel under-qualified for the task."

Psychologist Elizabeth Ballard's 1982 master's thesis was the first Canadian study of prime ministers based on a survey of more than 30 scholars. Ballard polled 60 political scientists and 37 historians. She did not ask for an overall assessment, instead requesting that the experts rank each prime minister in 10 areas: difficulty of political issues, activeness, motivation, strength of role, effectiveness, prestige, innovativeness, flexibility, honesty, and accomplishments. Ballard's work suffered from her preoccupation with the prime ministers' integrative complexity, the inability to integrate many complex ideas, and the large gaps between her evidence and her conclusions. As with all surveys before ours, she made no systematic attempt to determine if gender, region, age, or political affiliation had any impact on an expert's judgement.

## The Methodology in 2011

We compiled our list of experts from a variety of sources. Because history is the discipline with the most experts knowledgeable about the full canvas of the Canadian prime ministerial experience, we began with the membership list of the Canadian Historical Association's Political History Group, removing those scholars who specialized in countries other than Canada. We then added the names of Canadian political historians listed in the American Historical Association's *Directory of History Departments, Historical Organizations, and Historians*, a publication that covers both the United States and Canada. Also included were the authors of survey textbooks on Canadian history and of recent scholarly monographs on Canadian political history. A search of the internet sites of Canadian universities turned up more experts in political history, whether in departments of history, political science, international relations, or economics. We also identified journalists with a speciality in political culture and history. We contacted 204 authorities on Canadian

politics; their numbers included women and men, and individuals from all regions of the country.

In all, 117 experts answered our electronic survey, 57.4 per cent of those we contacted. This rate compares favourably to similar surveys in Canada and other countries. Elizabeth Ballard (1982: 35, 38) had a 41.3 per cent return rate for her 1982 survey. In New Zealand, Simon Sheppard (1998: 76-77) had a 40.0 per cent return. Britain's Kevin Theakston and Mark Gill (2006: 197; 2011: 80) achieved 53.8 per cent in 2004 and 60.2 per cent in 2010. The largest such survey, that of Americans Murray and Blessing, had a 48.6 per cent response. Our return rate was highest among historians (61.2% completed the survey), with political scientists (46.4%) and journalists (23.1%) less likely to reply. Of those who gave a reason for not completing the survey, roughly half questioned the value of the endeavour, and most of the rest indicated that they did not believe themselves qualified to carry out the exercise.

The questionnaire (see Box 1) asked respondents to rate the overall success of the prime ministers on a 1-to-5 scale, with 1 representing "highly unsuccessful," and 5 signifying "highly successful." At this stage of the questioning, we did not provide criteria for judging the prime ministers, instead allowing the experts to use their own standards, based on their understanding of Canadian politics. Survey respondents evaluated the impact of longer-serving prime ministers (those in office for four years or more) in each of five key areas: national unity, the economy, domestic issues (including social policy), Canada's place in the world, and party leadership. We also asked our panellists to list the greatest success and greatest failure of each prime minister, and gave them the opportunity to explain their rankings. To provide context to our findings, we inquired about the experts' gender, age, province of residence, and voting intentions. We considered asking more questions, but feared that a more time-consuming survey would have resulted in a lower response rate. For the same reason, we did not insist that respondents explain their ratings.

### Box 1. The Questionnaire

Q1. Please rate the prime ministers according to how successful they were in office (5 being highly successful, and 1 being highly unsuccessful). Consider only their time as prime minister, ignoring activities before or after they assumed the prime ministership. If you have inadequate information to make a judgment, select "DK." [This was followed by a list of all 22 prime ministers.]

Q2 to Q14. The following questions ask for more detail on the prime ministers who served at least four years in office. Using a 1-to-5 scale, please rate the extent to which each prime minister had a positive or negative impact in the key areas indicated (1 being the most negative, 3 being neutral, and 5 being the most positive). If you do not have enough information to judge, select "DK." Later in the questionnaire, you will have the opportunity to add comments to explain your scores. [This was followed by a list of 13 prime ministers, with a place to rate each in these five areas: national unity, the economy, domestic issues (including social policy), Canada's place in the world, party leadership.]

Q15 to Q27. The following section is optional. Please indicate the greatest success and greatest failure of each of the long-serving prime

ministers. If you wish to explain your earlier ratings, please do so now. [This was followed by a list of the 13 prime ministers who had served at least four years in office.]

Q28. May we quote your comments on the last 13 questions (questions 15 to 27) and attribute them to you?

- Yes, you have my permission to quote my comments and attribute them to me.
- You may quote my comments, but may not mention me by name.
- No, do not quote my comments.

All your responses will be treated with the strictest of confidence and will not be published or passed on to anyone without your approval. We pose the following questions only to help us analyze the survey results.

Q29. Gender:

- Male
- Female

Q30. Age:

- 30 or under
- 31-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- over 65

Q31. For which party's candidate did you vote (or will you vote) in the federal general election of May 2011?

- Conservative
- Liberal
- New Democratic
- Bloc Québécois
- Green
- Other
- Did not vote

Q32. Where is your permanent residence?

- British Columbia
- Alberta
- Saskatchewan
- Manitoba
- Ontario
- Quebec
- New Brunswick
- Prince Edward Island
- Nova Scotia
- Newfoundland
- Yukon, Northwest Territories, or Nunavut
- outside Canada

Q33. Which is your primary discipline?

- history
- political science
- journalism
- international relations
- other (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_ )

Q34. Do you have any comments about this exercise?

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The survey was conducted in April 2011, during the federal election campaign, a time when political leadership was particularly on the minds of the country's political analysts. Through an online interface, we distributed the questionnaire on April 6, with an April 30 deadline for responses. The election campaign ran from the issuing of the writs on March 26 to election day on May 2. We deliberately ended our inquiry before the election was held so that its outcome would not have a disproportionate impact on the respondents, and so that differences would not arise between those who had filled out the questionnaire before the vote and those who had done so after May 2.

## The Survey Results

The top three places in the survey (see Table 1) went to the same prime ministers who had led the rankings in the past. As in the *Globe and Mail* survey of 1964 and the 1997 Hillmer/Granatstein study, Wilfrid Laurier, John A. Macdonald, and William Lyon Mackenzie King were in a category of their own in the first three spots, though they were not ranked in the same order that they had been earlier (see Tables 2 and 3). Laurier came first, Macdonald second, and King third, but the difference in their overall scores was negligible. Respondents emphasized these leaders' solid achievements in office, their electoral successes, their management of the Cabinet and their party, and their sense of the entire country, captured in a political vision that made Canada more than the sum of its parts.

Those prime ministers who pursued divisive policies dropped in the standings, while those who sought accommodation – particularly between French and English Canada – improved over previous surveys. The top four rankings in 2011 are occupied by political diplomats who were sensitive to the country's linguistic, cultural, and political diversity: Laurier, Macdonald, King, and Lester B. Pearson. Those who damaged national unity performed poorly. The confrontational Arthur Meighen, the architect of conscription as a minister in 1917 and a leader in the 1920s who had little understanding of Quebec, has dropped from 10<sup>th</sup> in 1964, to 14<sup>th</sup> in 1997, to 16<sup>th</sup> in 2011. Robert Borden, whose policies during the First World War strained national unity as never before, has gone from 4<sup>th</sup> place (and a rating of "near great") in 1964, to 7<sup>th</sup> in 1997, and to 8<sup>th</sup> in 2011. By contrast, Pearson has been improving to the point that a future survey may show him ranking with the greats: Laurier, Macdonald, and King.

A prime minister's strengths emerge most clearly in retrospect. The experts give low ratings to incumbents and those who recently left office, leading political scientist David Smith to comment on the phenomenon of reverse perspective: "characters growing larger the farther one is from them" (Hillmer and Granatstein, 1997: 35). Pearson placed sixth in 1997, but fourth in 2011. Still in office during the 1997 survey, Chrétien ranked ninth, but he now places sixth. The stock of Stephen Harper, ranked number 11 in 2011, may rise in future surveys.

**Table 1: Overall Ratings from the 2011 Survey**

Prime Minister	Party	Term	Score
1. Wilfrid Laurier	Liberal	1896-1911	4.59
2. John A. Macdonald	Conservative	1867-1873, 1878-1891	4.54
3. W.L. Mackenzie King	Liberal	1921-1926, 1926-1930, 1935-1948	4.52
4. Lester B. Pearson	Liberal	1963-1968	4.05
5. Pierre Elliott Trudeau	Liberal	1968-1979, 1980-1984	4.04
6. Jean Chrétien	Liberal	1993-2003	3.87
7. Louis St. Laurent	Liberal	1948-1957	3.72
8. Robert Borden	Conservative/Unionist	1911-1920	3.70
9. Brian Mulroney	Conservative	1984-1993	3.58
10. John Diefenbaker	Conservative	1957-1963	2.84
11. Stephen Harper	Conservative	2006-present	2.68
12. R.B. Bennett	Conservative	1930-1935	2.65
13. Alexander Mackenzie	Liberal	1873-1878	2.64
14. John Thompson	Conservative	1892-1894	2.14
15. Paul Martin	Liberal	2003-2006	2.09
16. Arthur Meighen	Conservative	1920-1921, 1926	2.05
17. Joe Clark	Conservative	1979-1980	1.77
18. Charles Tupper	Conservative	1896	1.71
19. John Abbott	Conservative	1891-1892	1.67
20. John Turner	Liberal	1984	1.45
21. Mackenzie Bowell	Conservative	1894-1896	1.38
22. Kim Campbell	Conservative	1993	1.29

**Table 2: Comparison of 1964, 1997, 2011 Rankings for pre-1963 Prime Ministers**

Prime Minister	Globe Magazine (1964)	Hillmer and Granatstein (1997)	Azzi and Hillmer (2011)
Macdonald	1	2	2
Laurier	2	3	1
King	3	1	3
Borden	4	5	5
Mackenzie	5	7	8
Bennett	6	8	7
St. Laurent	7	4	4
Diefenbaker	8	9	6
Thompson	9	6	9
Meighen	10	10	10
Abbott	11	12	12
Bowell	12	13	13
Tupper	13	11	11

**Table 3: Comparison of 1997 and 2011 Rankings of pre-2003 Prime Ministers**

Prime Minister	Hillmer and Granatstein (1997)	Azzi and Hillmer (2011)
King	1	3
Macdonald	2	2
Laurier	3	1
St. Laurent	4	7
Trudeau	5	5
Pearson	6	4
Borden	7	8
Mulroney	8	9
Chrétien	9	6
Thompson	10	13
Mackenzie	11	12
Bennett	12	11
Diefenbaker	13	10
Meighen	14	14
Clark	15	15
Tupper	16	16
Abbott	17	17
Turner	18	18
Bowell	19	19
Campbell	20	20

We calculated the average divergence between the prime ministers' overall score and their score in each specific category (see Boxes 2 to 6). The results of this analysis would suggest that, in evaluating prime ministerial leadership, experts place the highest premium on party leadership. Canada's place in the world, national unity, and the economy were less closely aligned to the overall score. Domestic policy (not including the economy or national unity) had the lowest correlation to overall score, suggesting that this, of the five categories evaluated, was the least important to the experts.

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**Box 2. National Unity (average divergence: 0.33)**


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1. King - 4.52
  2. Laurier - 4.49
  3. Macdonald - 4.08
  4. St. Laurent - 4.07
  5. Pearson - 4.04
  6. Chrétien - 3.52
  7. Trudeau - 3.50
  8. Mulroney - 2.90
  9. Mackenzie - 2.87
  10. Bennett - 2.83
  11. Diefenbaker - 2.82
  12. Harper - 2.71
  13. Borden - 2.30
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**Box 3. Economy (average divergence: 0.36)**

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1. Laurier - 4.17
  2. St. Laurent - 4.08
  3. Chrétien - 4.05
  4. King - 4.01
  5. Macdonald - 4.00
  6. Pearson - 3.75
  7. Mulroney - 3.47
  8. Borden - 3.37
  9. Harper - 3.07
  10. Trudeau - 2.92
  11. Diefenbaker - 2.79
  12. Mackenzie - 2.57
  13. Bennett - 2.34
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**Box 4. Domestic Issues (average divergence: 0.47)**

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1. Pearson - 4.41
  2. St. Laurent - 4.17
  3. King - 4.05
  4. Trudeau - 4.03
  5. Laurier - 3.75
  6. Chrétien - 3.63
  7. Diefenbaker - 3.37
  8. Macdonald - 3.22
  9. Borden - 3.13
  10. Mulroney - 3.11
  11. Mackenzie - 2.90
  12. Bennett - 2.68
  13. Harper - 2.15
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**Box 5. Canada's Place in the World (average divergence: 0.33)**

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1. Borden - 4.32
  2. Pearson - 4.28
  3. King - 4.19
  4. St. Laurent - 4.17
  5. Laurier - 4.11
  6. Trudeau - 3.83
  7. Mulroney - 3.64
  8. Chrétien - 3.58
  9. Macdonald - 3.40
  10. Bennett - 2.78
  11. Diefenbaker - 2.77
  12. Mackenzie - 2.56
  13. Harper - 2.29
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**Box 6. Party Leadership (average divergence: 0.21)**

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1. King - 4.65
  2. Macdonald - 4.55
  3. Laurier - 4.52
  4. Trudeau - 4.22
  5. St. Laurent - 3.74
  6. Pearson - 3.72
  7. Chrétien - 3.71
  8. Borden - 3.66
  9. Harper - 3.60
  10. Mulroney - 3.56
  11. Bennett - 2.87
  12. Mackenzie - 2.50
  13. Diefenbaker - 2.37
- 

When asked about the greatest successes of the prime ministers (see Table 4), respondents preferred what James MacGregor Burns (1978) called “transforming leadership” in his classic work, *Leadership*. Pearson’s social policies (e.g., the national health care program, Canada Pension Plan) were the most commonly cited. Other frequently-mentioned accomplishments were Macdonald’s role in the 1867 creation of Canada and his National Policy, King’s wartime leadership and his efforts in the founding of the Canadian welfare state, John Diefenbaker’s Bill of Rights, Pierre Trudeau’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the patriation of the constitution, and Brian Mulroney’s free trade agreement with the United States.

National unity has become ever more important to the experts. On the list of successes, King and Laurier were given high marks for keeping the country together, and the majority of the failures also related to national unity (see Table 5). The most cited mistake was Borden’s splitting of the country over conscription during the First World War. Also censured were Brian Mulroney for the collapse of the Meech Lake Accord, which led to the birth of the Quebec separatist party, the Bloc Québécois, and for the defeat of the Charlottetown Accord, which gave further impetus to the sovereignist movement in Quebec. Trudeau was criticized for alienating Western Canada, and Macdonald for the late nineteenth century breakdown in relations between anglophones and francophones. After national unity, economic policy was the most conspicuous area for misjudgement. Both Trudeau and R. B. Bennett were faulted for their inability to deal with the economic challenges of their time.

In general, respondents were apt to remember prime ministers’ successes rather than their failures, and were not at all likely to comment on scandals. Macdonald’s reputation did not suffer from the Pacific Scandal, which caused the government’s fall in 1873 when news broke that the Conservatives had accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars from promoters who won the contract to build the trans-Canada railway. Not a single respondent mentioned the Beauharnois scandal, in which Mackenzie King’s Liberal party received large donations from a company that had secured the government’s approval to build a power station on the St. Lawrence River. Few commented on Brian Mulroney’s questionable relationship with corrupt German-Canadian businessman Karlheinz Schreiber.

**Table 4: Greatest Successes – Most Commonly Mentioned**

Number of Respondents	Prime Minister	Area of Success
33	Pearson	social policy
31	Trudeau	constitution, charter of rights
28	Mulroney	free trade with the United States
26	Chrétien	economy, balancing the budget
25	King	national unity
24	Macdonald	consolidation of confederation
24	Borden	advancing Canada's international status
23	Diefenbaker	Bill of Rights
20	Laurier	national unity
19	King	foundation of welfare state
19	Macdonald	National Policy
18	King	wartime leadership
17	King	longevity
15	Laurier	settling the west

**Table 5: Greatest Failures – Most Commonly Mentioned**

Number of Respondents	Prime Minister	Area of Failure
35	Borden	splitting country over conscription in 1917
26	Mulroney	Meech Lake, birth of Bloc Québécois, Charlottetown
18	Trudeau	economic policy
17	Trudeau	western alienation
17	Macdonald	breakdown in relations between English and French
17	Bennett	inability to deal with Great Depression
15	Harper	contempt for parliament

The survey results illuminate some major differences between the unspoken assumptions of Canadian and American experts. Political scientist Ivan Eland (2009: 4), a critic of presidential rankings, notes the “charisma bias” among American scholars, the tendency to give higher grades to more appealing presidents. A lackluster personality hampered the ratings for William McKinley and Calvin Coolidge, even though both had successful records as president. There is little evidence to suggest such a predilection exists among Canadian experts. Mackenzie King, whose public persona was insipid, always places in the top three, while the magnetic John Diefenbaker is inevitably among the lowest-ranked of the long-serving prime ministers. Pierre Trudeau is highly ranked, but not for his charisma, which united Canadians only briefly and divided them thereafter.

Eland (2009: 6-7) also identifies an inclination to favour presidents who governed in difficult times, especially during a war. This “service during a crisis bias” is largely absent from the Canadian rankings. King placed first in 1997 and third in 2011, in part because of his leadership during the Second World War, but Borden, prime minister during the

First World War, finished in seventh and eighth place respectively. Trudeau’s performance during the October Crisis of 1970, when he invoked the War Measures Act to combat terrorists in Quebec, received uneven reviews from experts. Some praised him for confronting a serious threat, while others saw his actions as an overreaction and an unreasonable attack on civil liberties. His reputation has also been damaged by his battles with the provinces in the 1980s. He is nevertheless regarded, particularly in English Canada, as a strong prime minister because he achieved a new constitution, a success that eluded other prime ministers, and saved the country from a serious separatist threat in Quebec.

If there is a Canadian bias, it is against leaders who have not fundamentally transformed the country. There may be a certain unfairness about this. When the preliminary results of our survey were published in *Maclean’s*, retired politician Paul Hellyer (2011) wrote a letter to the editor to complain about the low ranking of Louis St. Laurent, who placed seventh. For Hellyer, who had served in the Cabinets of St. Laurent, Pearson, and Trudeau, and who had the opportunity to observe Diefenbaker from across the aisle of the House of Commons, St. Laurent “stood in the shade of no man, living or dead.” Other Ottawa insiders from that era agree. Long-time Liberal Cabinet minister Lionel Chevrier remembered St. Laurent as “the greatest prime minister the country ever had” (Good, 1987: 154). For Chevrier’s colleague Jack Pickersgill (1975: 328), St. Laurent “was the greatest Canadian of our time.” St. Laurent came to power in an era that demanded managerial expertise from a prime minister. He presided with supreme competence over the rapid growth of the Canadian economy and over Canada’s participation in the Korean War, doing so with an apparent ease that made the job of prime minister look effortless. But his was “trans-accidental leadership,” to use Burns’s (1978) phrase. Not seen as having fundamentally transformed the country, St. Laurent is condemned by our experts to a place in the middle of the rankings.

Although the experts were only asked to rate a prime minister’s performance while in office, they could not always ignore how leaders behave in retirement (see Azzi, 2011). With the exception of Macdonald, who died in office, the top four prime ministers conducted themselves with dignity in their post-prime ministerial years. Pearson’s standing further benefitted from his charming, graceful, and self-deprecating memoirs. In contrast, those who placed lower in the rankings often damaged their reputations through their actions out of office. Diefenbaker became increasingly paranoid and out of touch with modern Canada. He raged against the governing Liberals and against his successors as Conservative party leader. He was gleeful when his own party lost the 1968 election because so many of his Conservative enemies had lost their seats. Petty, bitter, and egotistical, Diefenbaker’s memoirs did little to endear him to later scholars. Mulroney initially tried to play the role of elder statesman and wrote a lengthy memoir, slowly rebuilding his reputation after he left office as one of the most unpopular prime ministers in Canadian history. Then his public relations campaign ran aground when the 2010 Oliphant Commission censured him both for breaching federal ethics

guidelines by accepting between \$225,000 and \$300,000 from Karlheinz Schreiber and for giving deceitful testimony in a 1996 deposition on the affair.

Notable biographies of Canadian prime ministers can have an effect on expert opinion. Older works, such as Peter C. Newman's *Renegade in Power: The Diefenbaker Years* (1963), no doubt matter, but it is difficult to measure the impact of books that appeared before scholars began rating the prime ministers. Yet we can see that more recent biographies likely alter the rankings. André Pratte's short book on Wilfrid Laurier was on the best-seller list during one of the weeks when we were conducting the 2011 survey, in which he placed 1<sup>st</sup>. Alexander Mackenzie placed 5<sup>th</sup> in the 1964 ranking, four years after the publication of Dale Thomson's largely sympathetic biography. Since then, Mackenzie's stock has fallen – to 11<sup>th</sup> place in 1997 and 13<sup>th</sup> in 2011. Sir John Thompson, until recently the only short-term prime minister to be the subject of a favourable biography (P.B. Waite's *The Man from Halifax*), fares better than the other leaders who served two years or less in the top job. Diefenbaker dropped from eighth in 1964 to 13<sup>th</sup> in 1997, two years after Denis Smith published *Rogue Tory*, a critical portrait of an erratic chief. Since then, Diefenbaker's position has slightly improved: he placed 10<sup>th</sup> in 2011. Lawrence Martin's study of Jean Chrétien and John English's biographies of Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau were best sellers that lent prominence to their subjects' achievements. The ranking and reputation of Pearson, Trudeau, and Chrétien steadily improved after the publication of their biographies.

## Profiling the Experts

Ours is the only survey on Canadian prime ministers to have asked experts about their political allegiance, gender, region, age, and academic discipline. We found that women and men who study Canadian political history are not representative of the country as a whole. Our results show that they tend to be Liberal, male anglophones, who reside in Ontario. Fully 76 per cent of respondents answered the optional question about their voting intentions. Of those, the largest number, 47.1 per cent, indicated that they would vote Liberal. The New Democrats had the support of 27.6 per cent of respondents, while the Conservatives garnered the support of 9.2 per cent (the party received 39.6 per cent of the popular vote in the 2011 election), and the Greens won 8.0 per cent. A similar survey in Britain suggests that Conservatives are underrepresented among historians and political scientists (Theakston and Gill, 2011). As for region, a large majority of our respondents (67.7%) resided in Ontario, while a smaller proportion came from the Western provinces (17.7%), Quebec (6.3%), the Atlantic provinces (6.3%), or outside Canada (2.1%). Men made up 78.6 per cent of the respondents, and women 21.4 per cent. Historians were 79.5 per cent, political scientists were 11.1 per cent, and the rest were specialists in international relations, journalism, economics, or law. Our most striking finding was that political allegiance and demographic factors mattered little in the expert evaluations.

Elsewhere, expert rankings of political leaders are controversial because of a common perception that the judgments reflect more the political slant of the respondent than the performance of the politicians. In Britain, there were marked differences in the rankings from the supporters of the different parties (Theakston and Gill, 2006). A common complaint about ratings of US presidents is that they reflect a bias toward the Democratic party among US historians. Critics noted that Democrats far outnumbered Republicans among respondents to both Arthur Schlesinger's 1962 poll and the 1982 Murray/Blessing survey (Bailey, 1966: 25; Murray and Blessing, 1994: 72). Yet the disproportionate number of Democrats among the experts is relevant only if Democrats and Republicans rated the presidents differently. Not having asked their respondents about their political leanings – despite having distributed a 19-page, 180-question survey that took more than one hour to complete – Murray and Blessing were unable to respond to this charge.

In our survey, the political leanings of the experts had only a limited impact on the rankings. Conservatives gave the three top spots to King, Laurier, and Macdonald, in that order. For Liberals it was King, Macdonald, and Laurier; and for New Democrats, Laurier, Macdonald, and King. Regardless of the experts' political inclinations, the top three prime ministers scored very closely to each other, as they did in the overall rankings. Conservatives were no more likely than others to give a higher ranking to Brian Mulroney or John Diefenbaker, both Tory prime ministers who alienated many in their own party. Mulroney placed 9<sup>th</sup> overall in the survey and was 9<sup>th</sup> among Conservatives. Conservatives were more critical than others of Diefenbaker, who placed 10<sup>th</sup> overall but 12<sup>th</sup> among Conservatives. Party affiliation did make some difference with Trudeau, who was 5<sup>th</sup> overall, but 7<sup>th</sup> with Conservatives. The only substantial differences were with Harper and Borden. Placing 11<sup>th</sup> overall, Harper was 7<sup>th</sup> among Conservatives. Borden was 8<sup>th</sup> overall, but 4<sup>th</sup> among his party's supporters.

Region apparently had scant effect on the rankings. The differences between Western Canadians and Ontarians, as determined by province of current residence, were modest. Westerners and Ontarians placed Laurier, Macdonald, and King in the top three spots, though not in the same order. No long-serving prime minister was more than two spots higher or lower among Ontarians than among Westerners. Saskatchewan's John Diefenbaker placed 10<sup>th</sup> overall and 10<sup>th</sup> among Westerners. Westerners put British Columbia's Kim Campbell in last place, as did Ontarians. Only a small number of Quebecers or Atlantic Canadians responded to the survey, not enough to allow us to draw any sound conclusions.

Gender and age did not significantly affect the rankings. Again, both men and women, and both younger and more mature scholars accorded the top three spots to Laurier, Macdonald, and King, though again not in the same order. Kim Campbell placed last among both men and women. Of the long-serving prime ministers, only Bennett, who placed 10<sup>th</sup> with women and 13<sup>th</sup> with men, had a substantially different ranking based on the gender of the respondents.

Although Pearson appointed the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, he placed lower among women (6<sup>th</sup> place) than among men (4<sup>th</sup>). Turner did significantly better among women (17<sup>th</sup>) than men (21<sup>st</sup>), despite the negative publicity he received in 1984 when the media revealed his inappropriate habit of patting women on their behinds.

The discrepancy between male and female respondents was less in the order they ranked the prime ministers than in the harshness of their overall evaluations. In Britain, Theakston and Gill (2006: 201) noted that scores from female experts were generally higher than those given by their male counterparts. In the US, Murray and Blessing (1983: 545) found the opposite, that women's judgements had a harder edge than those of men. The Canadian case seems to conform more closely to the British. Canadian women gave an average score of 3.00 out of 5.00, while men gave an average score of 2.85.

Scholarly discipline mattered little. There were negligible differences between the rankings of historians and political scientists. Laurier placed first for both groups. King and Macdonald were second and third, though not in the same order. The next two spots went to Trudeau and Pearson, again not in the same order. The only substantive differences were with the short-term prime ministers. John Abbott was 15<sup>th</sup> among political scientists, but 18<sup>th</sup> among historians. Historians placed John Thompson in the 14<sup>th</sup> position, but political scientists had him six positions lower. In both cases, the discrepancies likely reflect a lack of specific knowledge about nineteenth-century politics, not a divergence in standards, values, and expectations among experts in different disciplines.

## Further to the International Literature

For the purposes of further comparative analysis, we turned to studies of the interface between political leadership and ranking exercises in the United States and the United Kingdom. This literature exposes factors that might influence prime ministerial performance, and thus, indirectly, expert ratings: education; physical appearance; age upon assuming office; previous ministerial experience; length of term in office; and leaders' mandates as demonstrated by the size of their election victory. To discuss these issues, we draw on the international literature, the Canadian political experience over time, and the commentaries from our roster of experts.

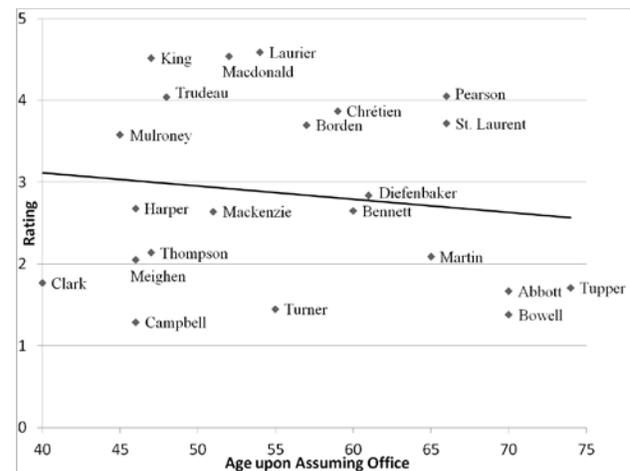
The five top-ranked Canadian prime ministers attended a wide range of institutions. Laurier had a law degree from McGill College (now McGill University); Macdonald had no university education, but did undertake the necessary apprenticeship to become a lawyer; King had three degrees from Toronto and two from Harvard, one of which was a doctorate; Pearson had a B.A. from Toronto and an M.A. from Oxford; and Trudeau had a B.A. from a classical college, a law degree from the Université de Montréal, an M.A. from Harvard, and a master's from the London School of Economics. McGill was the alma mater of both the top-ranked prime minister (Laurier) and the 19<sup>th</sup>-ranked (Abbott). The 4<sup>th</sup>-rated (Pearson) and the 20<sup>th</sup>-rated (Turner)

attended Oxford. The sample is too small to draw any conclusions from the fact that two of the top five (King and Pearson) attended the University of Toronto, and that two of the bottom five (Turner and Campbell) studied at the University of British Columbia. British and US surveys showed that the place, length, or variety of education had little impact on a leader's success; nothing that we encountered in our study suggested otherwise (Murray and Blessing, 1994: 25-36; Theakston and Gill, 2006: 202-205).

Physical appearance appears not to be relevant to expert opinion of prime ministerial success. Of the top-rated prime ministers, Laurier was often described by experts as elegant, but not Macdonald or King. Although usually well dressed, Macdonald could still look to contemporaries like a "seedy beggar," to quote one eyewitness (Waite, 1975: 163), and contemporaries habitually saw Mackenzie King as "a pale, colourless, little man," in the words of journalist and political organizer Dalton Camp (Hillmer, 1980: 2-3). John Turner, whom Senator Keith Davey (1986: 200) described as "Hollywood handsome," placed 20<sup>th</sup> in our survey. The largest US survey had a similar finding: physical appearance matters little to experts (Murray and Blessing, 1994: 25-26).

Age made no difference in the ranking of Canadian prime ministers, so long as they assumed office before turning 67 (see Chart 1). The top five leaders in our survey ranged widely in age from 47 to 66 when taking office, but the three prime ministers who were 70 or older all placed in the bottom five spots. British and US surveys demonstrated that age upon taking office had little effect on the expert rankings (Murray and Blessing, 1994: 25-36; Theakston and Gill, 2006, 202-205).

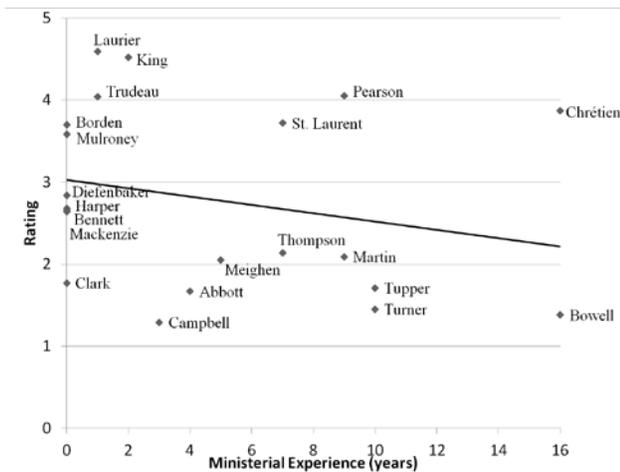
Chart 1: Prime Minister Rating and Age upon Assuming Office



Perhaps surprisingly, extensive ministerial experience seems a largely insignificant factor in the determining of a leader's performance as prime minister. Three of the top five prime ministers in our 2011 survey had limited experience in a Cabinet portfolio: Laurier had a bare one year in Mackenzie's Cabinet, King served two years under Laurier, and Trudeau spent one year under Pearson. Clearly, some previous experience is deemed an asset, but the trend line on Chart 2

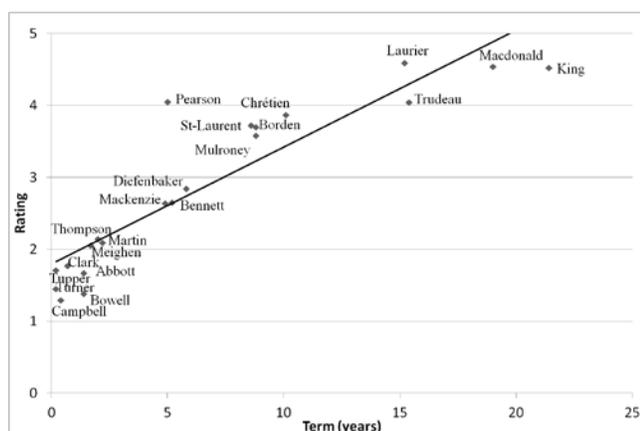
suggests that prime ministers with lengthy ministerial experience are slightly less likely to do well in the expert rankings than those with more limited experience. Of the bottom five prime ministers, all had at least three years of ministerial experience, and three (Bowell, Charles Tupper, and Turner) had more than 10 years. Mackenzie Bowell was a minister for 16 years before his brief tenure as prime minister. Again, this would seem to follow British and US surveys that showed that political experience had little effect on leadership success, at least as the experts perceive it (Murray and Blessing, 1994: 25-36; Theakston and Gill, 2006: 202-205).

**Chart 2: Comparison of Prime Ministerial Ratings and Previous Ministerial Experience**



The British politician Roy Jenkins once said that a prime minister in his country needed at least five years in office to have a major impact (Theakston and Gill, 2006: 205). Our survey suggests the same is true in Canada. Chart 3 shows that all long-serving prime ministers performed well in the survey; the short-termers all did poorly. This also holds true in surveys conducted in Britain (Theakston and Gill, 2006: 205) and in New Zealand (Sheppard, 1998:82).

**Chart 3: Comparison of Prime Ministerial Rating and Time in Office**



Theakston and Gill (2011) suggest that in Britain the size of an election victory matters: those prime ministers who won large mandates were more likely to place well in a scholarly ranking. Kenney and Rice (1998: 163-164) made the same argument for American presidents. But the pattern does not hold in Canada. In our survey, Pearson, who never had a parliamentary majority, outranks Mulroney and Diefenbaker, who had the two largest majorities, and who placed only in the middle of the pack.

**The Matter of Birth Order**

Scholars on political leadership have been drawing, with mixed results, on an extensive literature in psychology that links birth order to certain personality traits and levels of achievement. Studies of American, Australian, and Dutch politicians suggest that they are more likely to be the eldest children in their families (Andeweg and Van Den Berg, 2003; Newman and Taylor, 1994). Psychologist Louis H. Stewart (1977) has added some nuance, suggesting that Americans are apt to elect first-born sons in times of external crisis, only children when there is a domestic crisis, and younger sons in other eras. Others have rejected these findings, suggesting that the differences in birth order are not statistically significant for the selection or behavior of US presidents or British prime ministers (Theakston and Gill, 2006: 202; Somit et al., 1994, 1996).

In Canada, birth order might make some difference in who attains the top political office, with most prime ministers being first- or second-born in their families. Of the country's 22 prime ministers, one was an only child, nine were first-born, seven were second, three were third, one was seventh, and one was eighth-born.<sup>1</sup> Few conclusions can be drawn from this without comparisons to the birth order of the general population in each period in Canadian history, statistics that do not exist. Still, we do know that there will be as many first-borns as last-borns in society, because every family with children will include one of each. Among the Canadian prime ministers, eight were first-born, but only two were last-born, which corroborates the research suggesting that the last-born are seldom leaders, "except as champions of the oppressed in channels outside of mainstream politics," to quote political psychologist Valerie Hudson (1990: 589). The Canadian experience also confirms the frequent conclusion that an only child seldom assumes leadership positions, not having had the experience of leading siblings. At the same time, the Stewart thesis seems not to apply to Canada, as the first-born were no more likely to become prime minister in peaceful times than in more tumultuous periods.

Birth order may also play a role in a prime minister's performance. Research in psychology suggests that the second-born is often gifted at compromise, a trait essential for a successful Canadian prime minister. Of the top five prime ministers, four were second-born in their families.<sup>2</sup> Of the bottom eight prime ministers, five were first-born. Not a single first-born made it into the top six, though they take up 9 of the remaining 16 spots.<sup>3</sup> The first-born make up more

than half of the short-term prime ministers (five of nine), and their numbers include two prime ministers who often showed themselves unwilling or unable to find middle ground: R.B. Bennett and John Diefenbaker.

## Conclusion

The 2011 electronic survey of attitudes towards prime ministers was the largest of its kind carried out in Canada. The response rate, at 57.4 per cent, was in line with the best levels of return in similar surveys in other countries. The conclusions are largely consistent with previous Canadian surveys, although the ranking of the most recent prime ministers can be unpredictable in the first few years after they leave office. The first three places in the survey went to Wilfrid Laurier, John A. Macdonald, and Mackenzie King, all of them in office for 15 years or more, with solid records of achievement and reputations as superb political managers, and with the capacity to see the country as a whole, to maintain its unity, and to change it in positive ways. All of them governed a long time ago: their strengths are magnified, their accomplishments are firmly established, and their weaknesses are set in perspective. Laurier, Macdonald, and King were rated at the top by experts from all regions, academic disciplines, and political parties, by the young and by mature scholars, and by men and women.

In searching out specialists, we found that the constituency of experts in Canadian politics and history is limited. Some of those we approached, indeed, asked not to be included in the survey because they did not consider themselves sufficiently well versed in the subject. The respondents were heavily male, Liberal, anglophone, and from Ontario; women (who hold Canada's leaders to lower standards than men) and residents of Quebec and the Atlantic provinces were represented in much smaller numbers. Relatively few Conservatives participated in the exercise; in Canada, as in the US and Britain, those to the right of centre are fewer in numbers among scholars, and thus among those who complete surveys of this kind.

Designers of future surveys will wish to devise methods of broadening the audience of experts, perhaps by making special efforts to reach groups underrepresented among respondents in 2011, or by extending the exercise to other populations, such as political practitioners and elected officials. Survey leaders may also want specifically to inquire, as suggested by our discussion of the international literature, into perceptions of the impact of the following factors on the performance of prime ministers: education; physical appearance; age upon assuming office; previous ministerial experience; length of term in office; and the mandates given to leaders at election time. Future surveys might ask a different set of questions about the short-term and long-term prime ministers, inquire about the difficulty of the challenges each faced, and ask respondents to categorize prime ministers as either transformational or transactional. The influence of favourable books about leaders and of distinguished lives after a prime minister's retirement could also be tested. At the same time, future survey organizers will not want to pose

too many questions for fear of discouraging respondents and lowering the rate of return. An appropriate interval between ranking exercises would seem to be no more than seven years, the average period a Canadian prime minister serves in office.

Our survey reveals characteristics and patterns particular to Canadian politics, as well as ways into understanding the country's prime ministerial leadership and the manner in which specialists determine the ingredients of success and the reasons for failure. Unlike the case in Britain, the political allegiance of experts has only a small impact on their assessment of historical leaders. In contrast with American studies, charisma does not affect expert opinion of leaders, nor do they need a crisis to prove their mettle. What does matter is how effectively a prime minister functions within the Canadian political context. The good prime ministers understand the political system and operate effectively within it. The great ones shape their environment. Leaders who sin against a fragile national unity are condemned for endangering the country's survival. The paradox of Canadian political leadership is that the prime ministers who are valued most are those who transform a country in which drama and discord do not wear well.

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## Endnotes

- 1 In determining birth order, we omitted children who passed away at a young age. For instance, Laurier had an older sibling who died before he was born, so we considered Laurier an only child.
- 2 Macdonald, King, Pearson, and Trudeau.
- 3 St. Laurent, Diefenbaker, Harper, Bennett, Martin, Clark, Abbott, Turner, Bowell, and Campbell.