

The Myth of the "Gagged Clam":  
William Lyon Mackenzie King's Press Relations

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***Abstract:***

William Lyon Mackenzie King was the longest-serving Prime Minister of any Westminster-style democracy. He was also the only Canadian Prime Minister to work as a reporter for a daily newspaper. A solid understanding of media manipulation techniques was part of his mechanism for gaining and holding power. King attempted to ingratiate himself with Canada's most influential journalists and publishers and maintained strong relationships with those who showed discretion in their dealings with the Prime Minister. King had no press or public relations advisor and did not hold press conferences, but he maintained strong personal relationships with key members of the then-tiny Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery and with their employers. While most historians and journalists who devoted any effort to analyzing King's media strategies concluded he was wary and secretive, a more careful examination of the record shows King, in fact, carefully used his control over information to quietly forge links to many elite journalists in Canada. He honed these techniques while working in the United States as a labour negotiator and media consultant for the Rockefeller family and during his years as journalist.

***Keywords:*** Canada; Mackenzie King; Media History; Political Reporting; Press Relations

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**Résumé:**

William Lyon Mackenzie King a été le Premier ministre en poste le plus longtemps de toutes les démocraties de type Westminster. Il a également été le seul Premier ministre canadien à travailler comme journaliste pour un quotidien. Sa bonne compréhension des techniques de manipulation des médias faisait partie de ses mécanismes pour obtenir et maintenir le pouvoir. King s'efforçait d'attirer les bonnes grâces des journalistes et éditeurs les plus influents du Canada et entretenait des relations étroites avec ceux qui se montraient discrets dans leurs rapports avec le Premier ministre. King n'avait pas de conseiller de presse ou de relations publiques et ne tenait pas de conférences de presse. Il maintenait par contre des relations étroites avec les membres clés de l'alors modeste Tribune de la presse canadienne et avec leurs employeurs. Bien que la plupart des historiens et des journalistes qui ont consacré leurs efforts à analyser les stratégies médias de King aient conclu qu'il était prudent et discret, un examen plus attentif montre, en effet, qu'il a soigneusement utilisé le contrôle de l'information afin de tisser des liens avec de nombreux journalistes d'élite au Canada. Il a perfectionné ces techniques alors qu'il travaillait comme négociateur de travail et consultant en médias aux États-Unis pour la famille Rockefeller, et pendant ses années comme journaliste.

**Mots-clés:** Canada; Histoire des Médias; Journalisme Politique; Mackenzie King; Relations de Presse

That the journalist today is without considerable influence in political life in Canada, it would be futile to assert; but it is obvious that this influence is less than it was in the days when public men were "made" and "unmade" by the editor of the *Toronto Globe*. The reasons for this decline in the influence of the journalist in Canadian politics may well be left to the historian of the future to determine.

(Wallace, 1941: 26)

The role of politicians' interactions with Canada's English-language<sup>1</sup> press is poorly understood by Canadian historians. In most writing, the press is seen as a distinct class, corporate body, and even interest group, but journalists are cast as spectators, rather than actors. Research on the role of the press is hampered by the lack of primary source material: just a very small percentage of the dozens of reporters who have served in the Parliamentary Press Gallery, the press galleries of the provincial legislatures, and in senior reporting and executive positions on major newspapers gave their personal and business papers to public archives, and many of Canada's major newspapers have lost important records.<sup>2</sup> Most front-line reporters did not keep papers at all (a notable exception being Grant Dexter of the Winnipeg Free Press, whose files and memoranda are held at Queen's University).<sup>3</sup> These papers hint at what has been lost: the Dexter memoranda are, next to the Mackenzie King Diaries, arguably the best snapshot of Ottawa in the mid-20th

century. In the case of the King papers, a voluminous record spanning 50 years, there is very little correspondence between the Prime Minister and journalists. The surviving letters often make reference to personal interactions, such as telephone calls and visits, for which there are no surviving records.

Journalists are often defensive about their personal relationships with politicians: exposure of symbiotic relationships between press and politicians undermines the public image, fostered by reporters, of the press being a probing, objective “fourth estate”. Fortunately, however, there was a brief interest in the 1960s in the memoirs of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Canadian journalists. Canadian publishers, especially Macmillan, published several well-crafted volumes. Because of the lack of primary source material on the workings of journalists during the King years, these memoirs make up the bulk of the surviving record. They are not peer-reviewed, nor are they comprehensive, but they are, in themselves, artefacts that show the opinions of these journalists and recount events that they saw as important in their lives. It is reasonable to assume they were written to withstand criticism from their colleagues, who were also their competitors.

Politicians know information has value. It can be given as a reward to reporters who toe the line and withheld from those who do not.<sup>4</sup> As well, the sharing of secrets tends to bind people together. William Lyon Mackenzie King entered politics after a short, successful career in journalism. Following his stint in the last Laurier ministry, he refined his public relations skills by working for John D. Rockefeller Jr. between 1914 and 1919. King used his formidable diplomatic and negotiation skills to find common ground with potential adversaries and develop personal relationships. After the 1914 “Ludlow Massacre” of Colorado coal miners by Rockefeller company police, King salvaged the reputation of the Rockefellers.<sup>5</sup> Soon after completing this work he won the leadership of the Liberal Party and became Prime Minister of Canada.

King took office just as major Canadian newspapers shed their party affiliations and financing. Still, King was able, over a span of thirty years, to manipulate most of the members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery to report favourably on him and his party. He often attempted to create a feeling among individual journalists that they were among the close group of insiders who could influence government policy.

### **Ink-Stained Wretches; Loner and Introvert: The Press and King in the Historiography**

Wallace made his 1941 statement on the decline of power of the Canadian media at a time when Toronto *Star* publisher Joseph Atkinson, *Globe and Mail* publisher George McCullagh, and many other journalists were, or believed they were, *ad hoc* advisors to the Prime Minister of Canada. Still, King’s biographers spent little time analyzing his press relations strategy. Many modern writers have mined King’s diaries for anecdotes of his bizarre private spirituality. There is, remarkably, no authoritative political biography of Canada’s longest-serving prime minister written in the past three decades. King’s official biographers, F.A. McGregor and H. Blair Neatby, engaged by King’s literary executors, ably explored King’s public and private lives but did not analyze his media relations’ work. H. S. Ferns and Bernard Ostry, writing soon after his death, also ignored the topic. Michael Bliss, J. L. Granatstein, and Brian Nolan have examined the wartime politics of the King government, concentrating on his interactions with the elites of the public service and military, but gave little obvious thought to the way King handled the press. Charles Stacey, whose hostile writing on King created the popular image of King as an emotionally-crippled, neurotic introvert also saw no reason to look at King’s interactions with

journalists. Even Bruce Hutchison, who was brought into King's circle of journalist confidantes and dispatched by King to the U.S., ostensibly as a correspondent covering Wendell Willkie's 1940 presidential campaign tour, but in fact on a mission to win over journalists to the British cause in the Second World War, did not analyze King's media strategies in his 1952 biography of the prime minister.

H. R. Hardy, writing just after King's retirement, was the only King biographer who devoted a section of his book to King's media dealings. Hardy realized King usually refused to speak to reporters in groups and in public, but courted journalists, even those with Conservative leanings and from newspapers that were hostile to him, in private meetings in his office. Hardy, though, was conflicted. He noted King "seldom took the press into his confidence" (Hardy, 1949: 290) but notes his close relationship with Conservative columnist Charles Bishop of the *Ottawa Citizen* (who King appointed to the Senate) and recounts a meeting in King's office in which King leaked the agenda of the 1926 Imperial Conference to Fred Mears, the parliamentary reporter of the Tory *Montreal Gazette*.

John Porter explained the many connections between Canadian elites and anecdotally noted King's cultivation of McCullagh and Atkinson, but did not discuss the effort King expended on Ottawa reporters (Porter, 1965: 535).

Patrick Brennan argued persuasively that a Liberal press establishment emerged in Canada during the latter part of the King regime. He examined the connections—personal, political, and ideological—between senior journalists and the elite of the public administration, the so-called "Ottawa men", but failed to explore the importance King himself placed on public relations or the effort the Prime Minister put into it. He noted Grant Dexter believed he had a unique personal relationship with King, but did not realize how many other journalists thought they also had one (Brennan, 1994: 55).<sup>6</sup>

Allan Levine, author of a comprehensive account of federal political reporting, said this "complex, curious and cautious man, who ruled Canada for nearly twenty-two years, was extremely secretive. Fearful to the point of paranoia of being misunderstood, undermined or embarrassed, King rarely made impromptu public comments—especially not to the press" (Levine, 1993: 120). While Levine's observation is true, King had other ways of communicating with the media.

### **King's Experience in Newspapers and Public Relations**

As an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, King wrote for the student newspaper *The Varsity* from the fall of 1893 to the summer of 1895 (Henderson, 1998: 35-37). At the *Toronto Evening News* in the early fall of 1895, he quickly plunged into sensational topics, covering a coroner's inquest on a case of infanticide and the sad state of Ontario's provincial reformatories. By early November, he was writing for the *Toronto Globe*, motivated by a higher salary (\$7 a week, compared to the *News'* \$5) and still covering lurid crime stories, fires, conferences, religious lectures, concerts, plays, political and medical stories (Dawson, 1958: 50). At that time, King sketched out a plan to create a "newspaper for the poor".<sup>7</sup> In 1897, he was a staff reporter for the *Mail and Empire* while completing his Master's degree. His thesis topic was "The International Typographical Union", which was the rival to the Toronto Typographical Union founded in the days of his grandfather, William Lyon Mackenzie. King's most-remembered journalism was on the sweatshops that made postal uniforms, a series of articles that brought him

to the attention of Postmaster General Sir William Mulock and resulted in his recruitment to government service.<sup>8</sup>

By 1898, he was working on his second Master's degree and was a regular contributor to the *Labour Gazette*. He edited the partisan *Canadian Liberal Monthly* from September 1913 until August 1914, a time when his party was out of power. This type of activism journalism appealed to his friend Toronto *Star* publisher Joseph Atkinson, with whom King had worked at the *Globe*. King began submitting articles to Atkinson's newspaper in 1900, while continuing his prolific writings for the *Labour Gazette* and submitting articles to the *Victoria Times*, the Berlin (Ontario) *Telegraph*, *Maclean's* magazine, *Liberty* magazine, the *Canadian Jewish Eagle*, and the *Monetary Times* (Henderson, 1998: 87-89).

King set out to meet the Liberal newspaper proprietors of the country and came to understand the relationship between the press and the party.<sup>9</sup> King, after a short stint as Labour minister, lost his House of Commons seat in the 1911 general election, which also saw his party lose power. In 1914, he accepted the Rockefeller family's offer of a short-term job as a labour advisor. King rebuilt John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s reputation, learning and pioneered some of the new arts of public relations. Kirk Hallahan explored King's career with the Rockefellers and argued King was a brilliant public relations strategist, far ahead of his colleague on the Rockefellers' staff, the famous media relations pioneer Ivy Lee. The Rockefellers needed to overcome the stigma caused to the family and its interests by the public backlash to the "Ludlow Massacre". Eight coal miners were shot and thirteen women and children were smothered when Rockefeller company police fired into a crowd of protesters and burned their camp during the Colorado coal strike of 1913-14 (Hallahan, 2003: 401-414).

Lee tried to manage press reaction to the Ludlow Massacre by providing the U.S. print media with pre-packaged features and publicity opportunities that were designed to rehabilitate John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s public image. King's strategy was far subtler and mirrors the approach he would bring to Canadian politics when he returned to Parliament in 1919. King employed bold personal diplomacy to ingratiate Rockefeller with the most unlikely potential allies. In King's six months with Rockefeller, he organized successful meetings with Colorado labour icon Mother Jones, leaders of the coal miners' union, and political leaders of all factions in Colorado. King met these activists and political leaders in advance, sized up his adversaries and determined the strategies Rockefeller employed in his own meetings with them (Hallahan, 2003: 405). King took control of Rockefeller's campaign-style tour of the mining regions. Hallahan notes King stayed in the background, carefully but very quietly steering events and publicity. Just before King returned to Parliament, he organized a pivotal meeting between Rockefeller and Samuel Gompers. King had prepared the groundwork so well that Rockefeller and Gompers, who had been bitter enemies in public, had a solid piece of common ground. Gompers and Rockefeller both feared Bolshevism, and Gompers asked Rockefeller for money for his American Alliance for Labour and Democracy. With King's help, Rockefeller re-made his image from an exploitive employer to a contrite and caring a man who, while not worldly and somewhat distant, had real concern for the well-being of workers. The press attitude shifted from suspicion and hostility to camaraderie, a change that was reflected in the articles that flowed from the tour (Gitelman, 1988: 184-86). Rockefeller gave King full credit for organizing the tour of the Colorado mine camps: "I could never have made the trip without him. He knew exactly what to do. I learned more from him than anyone" (Hallahan, 2003: 407).

Hallahan said personal diplomacy was the basis of King's success:

King appreciated the importance of direct contact between parties—and was an early advocate of the notion that public relations is ideally practiced as a two-way communication. In contrast to Ivy Lee’s approach, which depended on the power of mediated communications, King’s brand of public relations emphasised person-to-person interfaces with publicity. . . . Few prominent world leaders from the 20<sup>th</sup> century have played such a direct role in the evolution of modern public relations as Mackenzie King—at least outside of their role as political figures.

(Hallahan, 2003: 410)

This person-to-person diplomacy would be the basis of King’s media relations strategy when he returned to Canadian politics in 1919. It fit perfectly with the media culture of Ottawa in the years that King was in power.

### **King and the Parliamentary Press Gallery: The Ottawa Environment**

Mackenzie King did not have a press secretary and never held a press conference (Neatby, 1979: 262-263). He accepted campaign advice from professional party strategists but press advice flowed from King to the campaign (Neatby, 1963: 330).

King quickly grasped the culture of the Parliamentary Press Gallery. The Press Gallery, with an average membership of thirty journalists, along with the handful of top publishers and editors who controlled the nation’s print media, had an inordinate amount of access to King. This was not because King particularly enjoyed the company of journalists. King understood his political survival depended partly on good relations with the press. He set out to ensure that any journalist who was open to King’s overtures had what the journalist believed was a unique personal relationship with the Prime Minister of Canada.

Outsiders, primarily partisan Conservative journalists, did not understand that King confided in selected reporters and editors. Arthur Ford, long-time editor of the *London Free Press*, which was, in its day, one of the most important newspapers in Ontario, said King “was not a good source of news” (Ford, 1950: 173). According to a 1948 editorial in the Tory *Montreal Gazette*, King was as “informative as a gagged clam” (Ford, 1950: 124). Parliamentary reporters sometimes chanted: “William Lyon Mackenzie King—he never says a gosh-darned thing!”. Yet King even tried to reach out to the Bassett family, owners of the paper, when the young son of John Bassett Sr. died during King’s first term in office. King was one of the boy’s honorary pallbearers.

King’s sophisticated media manipulation went on at a time when some of the prime minister’s provincial colleagues still used a simple, time-tested and effective means of press control: bribery. David Taras notes the Duplessis regime doled out cash to most members of the Quebec legislative press gallery. W.A.C. Bennett’s Social Credit government in British Columbia also paid reporters who reported favourably on its policies (Taras, 1990: 47-48).

Each one of King’s relationships was a stand-alone affair. Because most press gallery reporters were members of one or two-man bureaus in friendly competition with the journalists representing other publications, each could be compartmentalized and dealt with as a separate entity by King, cabinet ministers and government officials. Competition and the desire to cultivate and protect official sources dampened down discussions between reporters, who, if they had compared notes, might have discovered King’s public relations strategies.

At first blush, newspaper proprietors would appear to have been the losers of this game, since reporters often held back publishing the very best information. The owners and publishers (who, during this period, usually held both positions on a newspaper) were often, however, involved with King in a game of their own. The losers were, in fact, readers and voters who were not given information that dealt with the conduct and capabilities of their elected representatives and on workings and policies of the federal government.

The capital had just 100,000 people and two major employers: the federal government and sawmills along the Ottawa River. The press gallery was, literally, exclusive, keeping out magazine writers until 1942 and radio reporters until the late 1950s (Seymour-Ure, 1962: 25). Journalists were expected to follow a code of conduct, laid down by the press gallery and given to new reporters, which prevented King and his ministers from being embarrassed by the reporting of loose talk:

The leaders in public life have come to feel free to talk with the utmost frankness to the members of the Press Gallery, it being understood that only those portions of the interview so indicated are to be quoted, or attributed to the speaker, or even used as background, as the case may be.

(cited in Seymour-Ure, 1962: 138)

Press Gallery reporter Wilfrid Eggleston, who, through most of World War II headed the English section of the Press Censorship Branch and later founded Carleton University's journalism school, found it onerous to carry around so many secrets: "It frequently disturbed me to be invited to share secrets of the most indiscreet and embarrassing nature, embarrassing, that is, to the cabinet minister or government official if ever divulged" (cited in Seymour-Ure, 1962: 138).

For senior politicians, deputy ministers and journalists, political Ottawa was centred on the restaurant of the Chateau Laurier Hotel and the Rideau Club, which stood directly across from the Parliament building at the southwest corner of Wellington and Metcalfe streets. The U.S. ambassador to Ottawa noted he could, during World War II, find anyone he needed to talk to at either the Rideau Club or the Chateau Laurier, tracking down, at one lunch sitting, Jack Pickersgill (private secretary to King), Jim Coyne (assistant director of the Office of Price Control and later governor of the Bank of Canada), and Saul Rae and Escott Reid of the Department of External Affairs. The tiny social scene, especially for journalists like Grant Dexter and Bruce Hutchison, members of the Rideau Club, gave journalists easy access to people in the highest levels of the government. Trusted reporters were invited to parties, and to join the small, private fishing clubs established in the Gatineau Hills (Seymour-Ure, 1962: 133).

Not all reporters, of course, had this access. It was a reward for acting skilfully as an information broker, and it could be withdrawn from anyone who failed to conform to the norms of this clique. The likelihood of acceptance by the capital's elite was governed by the partisan position of his newspaper or magazine, its circulation, and its location, but journalists' social skills, personal wealth, family and school connections, hospitality and intelligence counted among the members of this elite, as did discretion and personal habits (Taras, 1990: 46). King, for instance, could not abide the company of smokers and heavy drinkers (Lynch, 1983: 129).

The Prime Minister preferred to meet in private with individual reporters. King believed an uncontrolled press conference was one of the most dangerous settings for any politician. When he did sit down with a large group of press gallery reporters, these meetings were often "off the record". King used one such meeting in the fall of 1939 to isolate Director of Censorship

Walter Thompson. By the end of November, after the furor raised by the Union Nationale over the censorship of Quebec radio stations and newspapers during the recent provincial election campaign and embarrassing fights between journalists and censors over coverage rules concerning the deployment of the 1st Canadian Division from Canada to Britain, Mackenzie King expressed displeasure with the press censorship system. He admitted to reporters summoned to his office that many mistakes had been made and that public discourse had been harmfully restricted. According to Grant Dexter, the Prime Minister said he would deal with censorship as soon as he could get around to it (Gibson & Robertson, 1994: 19). Thompson got wind of King's criticism and resigned soon afterwards.

Untested Parliamentary correspondents had to earn King's trust: they were told to submit questions to King's staff in advance. Sometimes these were answered with a list of King's speeches, which were offered as the definitive policy statements of the government, as happened to Charles Lynch (Levine, 1993: 126). As long as there was a chance a journalist could be brought into the tent, King tried to seduce him. Although the Ottawa *Citizen* was a Conservative paper, King cultivated its editor, Charles Bowman. On a trip back to Ottawa from Washington in 1922, King invited Bowman to dinner in his private railway car. King wanted to talk about Bowman's editorial that attacked King for his handling of the Chanak crisis. King appeared to have been hurt by the *Citizen's* article. He complained to Bowman of the pressure applied to the Canadian government by the British. Then the talk shifted to the Cabinet, which Bowman had criticized for being mainly narrow-minded holdovers from the Laurier administration. King told Bowman he needed the older politicians to season his cabinet, reminding the *Citizen* editor that King had very little experience in government (Bowman, 1966: 62). "As our train backed into (Ottawa's) Union Station, we parted with a good understanding. Before launching out with editorial criticism, I should avail myself of an open door to the prime minister's office. I seldom did; but I enjoyed many other, less formal, opportunities to exchange views with Canada's new man at the helm", Bowman wrote in his memoirs (1966: 63). He does not seem to have understood that his relationship with the Prime Minister was far from unique.

In fact, King's diaries show he approached many more junior members of the press during his travels. On the road, King combined his stinginess with his political needs, often showing up alone and uninvited at the homes of journalists like Toronto *Star* publisher Joseph Atkinson for overnight visits. In Ottawa, reporters were invited into King's East Block office, to his home, Laurier House, and Kingsmere, his country property in the Gatineau Hills. Reporters who lived in Ottawa usually returned home the same day, but out-of-town media figures stayed as overnight and week-long guests of the Prime Minister. King was also a dedicated correspondent and an enthusiastic user of the telephone. In fact, his diaries show that King spent most of his waking hours communicating: in person, in print, or on the telephone. In fact, he kept the telephone number for the Canadian Press Ottawa bureau on a card beside his bed.<sup>10</sup> He worked very hard to ensure that no contact or friend became estranged.

King knew J.W. Dafoe, one of the country's most powerful journalists, throughout his political career. Dafoe edited the Winnipeg *Free Press* from 1903 until his death in 1944. The *Free Press* was the most powerful newspaper in western Canada, and its owner, Clifford Sifton, was a former Laurier minister and a powerbroker in his own right (Sotiron, 1997: 48). On King's invitation, Dafoe became a de facto member of the Canadian delegation to the Imperial Conference of 1923, receiving daily briefings on Canada's strategies and freely offering advice to King and his assistant, Oscar Skelton (Levine, 1993: 141).<sup>11</sup> King offered Dafoe a House of Commons seat in 1926 (Dafoe turned him down, believing his position at the *Free Press* was



preferable to politics). He did accept an appointment to the Rowell-Sirois commission on federal-provincial powers in 1938 (Levine, 1993: 141). Still, Dafoe was often sceptical of King's policies and abilities<sup>12</sup> and King appears to have felt a strong need to prove himself to the powerful western editor.

Because Dafoe, while leaning toward the Liberals, assessed each policy carefully before offering editorial support, King believed he had to send a steady stream of information to the Winnipeg editor and to the Sifton family, which owned the newspaper. He did this through the *Free Press*' Ottawa correspondent, Dexter, with whom King seems to have developed what he believed was a very strong and genuine friendship (Levine, 1993: 141-42). Like King, Dexter was a Miltonian liberal in economics and a strict moralist (Gray, 1978: 134). Dexter joined the *Free Press* as a reporter in 1912 and was Parliamentary reporter from 1924 to 1946.

Dexter had access to the very heart of government policy-making. Sometimes, he was able to use that access to gain exclusive stories, such as the first North American report of Neville Chamberlain's 1938 flight to Munich to meet with Hitler to resolve the Czech crisis (a story given to Dexter by Lester B. Pearson, then a senior official of the Department of External Affairs) (Gibson & Robertson, 1994: xix). Very often, they show Dexter sat on very important "scoops" to maintain his good relations with King. For instance, on November 7, 1941, King told Dexter the Japanese would attack U.S. military installations within the next month. Dexter did not write a story for his newspaper but did send the tip to Dafoe in a memorandum. Dexter also kept the secret of the allied occupation of Greenland in 1940 (Ibid: 71). King and his ministers also gave him information on the low morale within the British government, the progress of U.K.-Canadian-American negotiations regarding the possible transfer of the Royal Navy to U.S. control if Britain fell, the real extent of the U-boat problem in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and of the Conscription Crisis of 1944. King often called Dexter to give his candid, and often very negative, views on members of his own cabinet, and on divisive issues like conscription (Ibid: 378).

Dexter believed his published work contained enough information to adequately inform the public and provide the required amount of education in matters of public policy for voters to be able to make wise decisions. He decried the cynicism of some members of the press:

The people who are responsible for our laws deserve respectful attention, and a spirit of levity and disrespect will not improve our government. Once the public thinks all people in public life are crooked, hypocritical, and entirely lacking in any spirit of public service, a good man would not risk his character by becoming a member of parliament. The problem of democracy is a problem of education and will never awaken an interest in politics in a person when he has been led to believe that only grafters sit in legislatures and only warped laws are passed.

(Gibson & Robertson, 1994: xv)

Dexter's deference to power and respect for Parliament appear to have been views that were typical among Ottawa's media elite, and they could easily be exploited by someone who, like King, created the illusion of drawing them into the decision-making process. Near the end of his career, King was made an honorary life member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, and an autographed picture of Mackenzie King, with a profuse dedication to the event in the Prime Minister's hand, still hangs in the lounge of the press gallery.<sup>13</sup>

King deliberately closed the gap between himself and his chosen reporters, used them as conduits to their newspapers' managers and owners, who set editorial policies, and froze out those he did not trust. At the same time, journalists did not pry into King's somewhat bizarre private life, and details of the spiritualism that dominates his modern reputation did not appear in print in his lifetime. He had, indeed, an almost flawless run.

### **King and Newspaper Publishers**

King respected the Toronto *Globe and Mail* as the most politically important newspaper in Canada. The *Globe's* owner from 1914 was William Gladstone Jaffray. Participants in the debate over the validity of the political economy model of history should examine the careers of Jaffray, the Toronto *Star's* Atkinson, and other 20<sup>th</sup> century Canadian publishers who expounded their personal Puritanism and tenets of the Social Gospel even when doing so cost them money. Jaffray opposed divorce, gambling, and most other vices, large and small. The *Globe* lost a very substantial 10,000 subscribers in 1920 when Jaffray imposed a ban on reporting anything to do with horse racing, this at a time when bookmaking in Toronto was ubiquitous and people relied on the morning newspapers' race results to settle their bets (Levine, 1993: 143). Jaffray did not like King. He believed the Liberal leader was not vocal enough in his Christianity and that King's faith, in light of his obvious personal ambition and his willingness to compromise, was doubtful. Jaffray inherited the paper from his father who, with Liberal senator George Cox, had promised the 1880s that the *Globe* was to be held "in perpetual trust for the Liberal party to act as its mouthpiece" but, by 1923, the junior Jaffray reneged on the deal (Ibid: 146). King reacted to this betrayal by planting spies in the newspaper in 1924. Two senior editors, John Lewis and Hector Mackinnon, fed King information from inside the *Globe*. A short truce with Jaffray in 1925 ended when King could not get a bill through Parliament to outlaw the publication of horse race results (it was killed in the Senate). King had rewarded Lewis' loyalty in 1926 by appointing him to the Senate and, by then, King and other senior Liberals were looking for ways to buy Jaffray out. This move was rebuffed, so King tried using his diplomatic skills on Jaffray. The *Globe's* owner could not be charmed, Liberals in the senior editorial ranks were forced out, and King blamed the shift in the *Globe's* position (and the lukewarm support of Dafoe and the Winnipeg *Free Press*) for his near-defeat in 1925. "No party was ever so handicapped in its press", King confided to his diary a few weeks before the vote. "Both the *Free Press* and the *Globe* . . . are betraying the cause hourly".

King continued to court Jaffray through the rest of the decade. Jaffray ended up supporting King on some issues (in return for a clampdown on liquor smuggling and a renewed effort by King to outlaw the publishing of horse race results). The election of a Conservative government in 1930 softened Jaffray's opposition to King and convinced him to be open to amends from the then-Opposition leader. He came around to the Liberal cause after more stroking from King, including visits to King's estate at Kingsmere in the Gatineau Hills: the *Globe* supported King in the election of 1935.

Jaffray died soon after the election, and control of the *Globe* soon fell to a young man who was, in his own way, as unstable as Jaffray and as ambitious as King. George McCullagh, who had impressed mining magnates on Bay Street by making his own fortune shrewdly buying and selling gold stocks, used multi-millionaire Bill Wright's money to buy the *Globe* and the *Mail and Empire* in 1936 and cobble them together as *The Globe and Mail*. Wright was a bachelor who lived as a recluse on an estate near Barrie, Ontario and had shown no interest in

politics. McCullagh, a socially adept, brilliant, handsome man in his early thirties, served as Wright's link to the world and as his financial advisor.

The McCullagh-King relationship was remarkable for the speed at which it developed and collapsed. It was also one of the few relationships that is well-chronicled in the Mackenzie King Papers. In January 1937, McCullagh, who had never met King, travelled to Ottawa to brief the prime minister on the most intimate details of his negotiations with Jaffray.<sup>14</sup> In their long conversation, McCullagh and King gossiped about Ontario premier Mitchell Hepburn's alcoholism, discussed Christian virtues, and planned the editorial policies of the *The Globe and Mail*. McCullagh went back to the Prime Minister's office the following day for another long meeting, and, two days later, dined with the federal cabinet at Laurier House.<sup>15</sup>

Through that winter, the two men exchanged warm, detailed correspondence.<sup>16</sup> In March 1937, King visited McCullagh at *The Globe and Mail's* Toronto offices, arriving by the back door. At this meeting, King updated McCullagh on several federal initiatives and read to him a portion of a private letter sent to King by President Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>17</sup> In March 1938, when a rift had already begun to form, King reached out to McCullagh, sending him a letter praising a *Globe and Mail* editorial. By 1939, there was an open break between the two men. King refused to crush the 1938 Oshawa General Motors strike, which McCullagh believed was fomented by Communists, and *The Globe and Mail's* outspoken criticism of King's handling of the war effort. Still, King tried to win McCullagh back. During the 1939 Christmas season, King sent McCullagh a two-page letter filled with flattery. "One is pleased to have the esteem of those with whom great responsibilities are shared", King wrote. "What perhaps is even more satisfying is to have one's faith in others confirmed and strengthened", the Prime Minister wrote.<sup>18</sup>

King appears to have been attracted to McCullagh by the publisher's charm, his wealth, and his pledge of support to the federal Liberals. McCullagh's personality, King said, strongly resembled that of John D. Rockefeller Jr., and he noted in his diary the coincidence that McCullagh arrived in his office just as King was dictating a letter to Rockefeller.<sup>19</sup>

Still, politically, the newspaper was McCullagh's personal instrument. King tried through the late 1930s to remain on McCullagh's good side, but the publisher was one of Ontario premier Mitchell Hepburn's best friends and supporters. By 1939, he had fallen out completely with both King and Hepburn and backed George Drew's provincial and federal ambitions.

Professionally, Jaffray and McCullagh competed with *Star* publisher "Holy Joe" Atkinson, a fierce prohibitionist who was willing to support any party that opposed the liquor trade. Atkinson did not go so far as throwing away readership by refusing to print results from the horse tracks, but he did weave his desire to purge Toronto of vice very tightly with his desire to make the *Star* the dominant newspaper in the city.

Atkinson was King's closest media confidante. He and his wife, who was also a journalist, were among William Lyon Mackenzie King's best friends and had known his parents as well. King and Atkinson shared a desk when both of them were cub reporters at the *Globe* in 1896 (Harkness, 1963: 46). King's diaries show Atkinson and King were frequent visitors to each other's homes. The friendship lasted some fifty years. After King's defeat in the September, 1908 general election, the *Star* publisher offered to use his influence to secure King the leadership of the provincial Liberal party in Ontario. King declined, and continued the hunt for a seat in the House of Commons (McGregor, 1962: 72). In 1911, Atkinson advised King and senior Ontario liberals on strategy for the federal election<sup>20</sup> and King, the Labour minister in the Laurier government, went to Atkinson's office at the Toronto *Star* on election night to watch the results arrive by telegraph.<sup>21</sup> Three years later, Atkinson gave King personal advice about King's

plan to run in a by-election in North York<sup>22</sup> and offered King a job at the *Toronto Star* when he was defeated.<sup>23</sup> Between 1915 and 1935, the two men spoke often on the telephone and continued traveling to each other's homes. In 1927, King offered Atkinson a Senate seat:

In the course of my public life you have been at all times a true and loyal friend and I feel I owe very much to your helpful co-operation. The *Star's* advocacy of Liberal principles and policies and its support of myself and my colleagues have been of the utmost service to the party and to the government, as was also the case with the [London] *Advertiser* under your direction. But quite apart from this, your own high character, your deep personal interest in and knowledge of political problems as well as the years of public service you have given to our country, have more than merited this recognition on the part of the administration. The years of public usefulness which I pray may be still before you would make your presence in the Senate a valuable addition to the Parliament of Canada.

(cited in Harkness, 1963: 151)

While membership in the Senate did not preclude maintaining control of his corporate holdings, Atkinson turned King down. At the time, the *Toronto Star* editorial policy advocated abolition of the Senate (Cranston, 1963: 151-152). Still, King's offer and his praise of Atkinson could do little but strengthen the bond between the two men.

The day in 1935 when King was re-elected Prime Minister, Mrs. Atkinson placed a wreath on the grave of King's mother and father in Toronto's Mount Pleasant cemetery.<sup>24</sup> At this time, Atkinson dealing directly with King on the most serious matters of state. On October 18, 1935, King had a "long talk" with Atkinson by telephone about Cabinet choices and the policies of the new government, including King's plan for an unemployment insurance commission. King invited Atkinson to visit him in Ottawa the following Tuesday and stay at Laurier House. Atkinson arrived on October 23 and spent two nights alone with King.<sup>25</sup> In return, Atkinson put the pages of the *Toronto Star* at King's disposal. King noted in his diary:

He expressed himself greatly pleased with the little visit . . . I had not realized before that Mrs. Atkinson had felt toward me very much as though I were her own brother. Her friendship and Mr. Atkinson's with my father and mother was something I had always appreciated, though I had not recalled until they were gone that I had shared so fully the feeling which I knew she and Mr. Atkinson had felt toward them. As I walked from the door to the car with Mr. Atkinson, he said that if I ever wanted a paper wholly at my disposal I could count upon *The Star*.<sup>26</sup>

During election campaigns, Atkinson could be sure that the Liberal platform reflected his views, as he was chairman of the committee that drafted it. King wrote to Atkinson:

It was a particular pleasure to me in drafting the labour part of our policy to go over the work of the committee of which you were chairman and to embody in the platform the program of social reform which you have sought so eagerly to have adopted. I look forward with intense eagerness to continuing our efforts together to give expression in legislation to the principles and beliefs we have so much at heart.

(cited in Harkness, 1963: 119)

Atkinson, however, remained master of the *Star*. John Stevenson, a Toronto *Star* press gallery reporter who despised King, and was in turn hated by the Prime Minister, wrote to John Dafoe in 1919: "[King] is as full of noble sentiments as a new calved cow is full of milk, but he is short on concrete plans for our regeneration". Atkinson was later to apologize when anti-King sentiments crept into Stevenson's reports but did not fire the journalist, who was a link to the then up-and-coming Progressive Party, for another three years (Harkness, 1963: 129). (King was not rid of the irksome reporter. Stevenson later became Ottawa correspondent for the *Times* of London, which was then the most influential paper in the world).

When Atkinson died on May 8, 1948, King, to whom writing did not come easily, struggled all day to draft this tribute:

Our friendship began when he was a young reporter and came to Berlin (now Kitchener) to report the criminal assizes. I was then a student in the high school. He visited our home, 'Woodside', and the friendship he then formed with members of our family continued through the years. For a short time during the election of 1896, when I was a reporter on the staff of the Toronto Evening Globe, I shared Mr. Atkinson's desk. He was then on the staff of the morning paper. When he subsequently became publisher of the Toronto Star, and when I was pursuing studies abroad, he bought and paid for articles from me. During my public life, Mr. Atkinson was as unfailing in his support of me as leader of the Liberal party as he was constant in his personal friendship.<sup>27</sup>

King's involvement in the newspaper business went beyond befriending publishers and selected reporters. In 1922, Andrew Haydon, a lawyer who headed the National Liberal Council, King, and Joseph Atkinson purchased the London *Advertiser* to compete with the Conservative London *Free Press*. The paper was the first, and, until the late 1990s, last attempt by the *Star* to establish a chain (the paper failed in 1926), but it did give King valuable support in southwestern Ontario. The next year Haydon tried, with King's support, to use party money to start an Ottawa newspaper to compete with the *Journal* and the *Citizen*. The plan failed when Haydon could not get membership in the Canadian Press news co-operative. At the same time, Haydon arranged financing to keep afloat the St. John Publishing Company, which owned two newspapers in that city. In 1922, Haydon and King also established a syndicate to underwrite a \$250,000 loan to save the Liberal Regina *Leader* (Levine, 1993: 137).

### **King and Maclean's Magazine**

Magazine writers were barred from the Parliamentary Press Gallery, but editors bought political coverage from newspaper journalists. Although Liberal-leaning writers like Dexter, Blair Fraser and Bruce Hutchison often submitted articles to *Maclean's* (Mackenzie, 1993: 143) and Arthur Irwin, the magazine's assistant editor, was so loyal to the Liberal party's policies that he quit the *Globe* in 1925 to protest Jaffray's editorial policies (Mackenzie, 1993: 57), King was usually, in his later years in power, hostile to the magazine. He detested Col. J. B. Maclean, a man who, in many ways, was King's polar opposite. Maclean was a self-made millionaire, an extrovert who worked tirelessly to develop connections among the business community. He made his money publishing trade magazines that relied on the goodwill of business owners for circulation and advertising. Maclean was a Conservative who came to despise King, but he refused to become

openly politically active, having turned down a Senate seat offered by Sir Robert Borden in 1913 (Chalmers, 1969: 264). King's enmity may have been sharpened by the fact that Maclean had been friend with members of King's family, and the two men had started out on very good terms. Maclean had taken Bible study classes from King's father and the senior King was Maclean's advisor on libel matters. The future prime minister's brother, Max, had been Maclean's physician at the turn of the century (Ibid: 268). King stayed at Maclean's house in Toronto shortly after he won the Liberal leadership in 1919. Maclean maintained a steady correspondence with King for the first two years of King's premiership. Their falling-out was gradual. Maclean opposed King's choice of ministers (Ibid: 268-269). The publisher also disagreed with King's Canadian nationalism and was, despite an almost pathological hatred of Winston Churchill, a proponent of Imperial federation (Ibid: 121-122). Good relations between the two men lasted until King was returned to power in 1935. Maclean's advertising staff had created campaign pamphlets for the Liberals in the 1935 election, and it was a Maclean's advertising copywriter who coined the winning slogan "King or chaos".

Their falling-out came when King refused exempt Canadian magazines from duties on paper, ink and machinery, and from sales taxes. Maclean, as head of the Periodical Press Association, had lobbied King and the opposition Conservatives for these exemptions through the 1920s (Chalmers, 1969: 288). R.B. Bennett had imposed a duty on foreign magazines, but in 1935 King repealed them. The prime minister tried to soften the blow with a four-page letter that heaped flattery on Maclean. This failed to assuage the publisher's anger. Gradually, the government reduced the tariffs, but the damage to the relationship was done:

It was a slow process, and the Colonel's indignation stayed at the simmer. His files are bulky with bitter, almost vituperative letters to the Prime Minister; most of their final drafts, fortunately, were to be toned down into more reasonable, diplomatic language after discussions with Hunter and Tyrrell (senior executives of the publishing company) and deft editing by (Maclean's editor) Napier Moore.  
(Chalmers, 1969: 290)

Within two years, Maclean got almost everything he wanted from King, yet, once the friendship was over, it never revived. While King was in opposition, Maclean hired George Drew, a Conservative political comer who later became premier of Ontario. When King returned to power, Maclean let Drew loose to expose graft in Canada's munitions industry. In 1938, *Maclean's* published Drew's series of articles on corruption surrounding the manufacturing and sale of munitions. The first article was published under the rather anti-corporate headline of "Salesmen of Death" (Mackenzie, 1993: 108).

After the successful German military campaigns of 1940, *Maclean's* shifted its coverage to positive articles on the country's war effort, and, in the latter part of the war, on Canada's rosy post-war future. Blair Fraser, a King stalwart, was hired from the Montreal *Star* to report from Ottawa, and articles were purchased from Bruce Hutchison, Grant Dexter and other King supporters, but the personal rift between publisher and Prime Minister never healed.

## Conclusion

Mackenzie King served for a record twenty-two years as Canada's Prime Minister. He ranks among the most durable elected leaders in the democratic world. Today, he is remembered as a

neurotic, secretive, enigmatic man, but, in his day, he was an extremely successful political strategist. His understanding of the media—its workings, its leadership, and the ways in which it could be manipulated—was acquired at a young age and sharpened during his years with the Rockefeller interests. King used personal diplomacy to steer the mechanisms of publicity, reaching out to real and potential enemies in the press, drawing them into the most intimate corners of his life, and making them feel as though they had real political influence. He did this constantly, but on such a subtle, one-to-one basis that contemporaries and modern historians have been unable to piece together all of the connections. King’s public relations work, taking advantage of the media’s own idiosyncratic power structures and internal culture, effectively neutralized the potentially serious threat of an uncontrolled press. King was to use the same tactics to draw senior media into the propaganda and censorship systems created during World War II, and to give them a sense of responsibility and ownership of them. His media coercion mechanisms survived into the last years of his regime, and he manipulated the press until the very moment he announced his retirement. King’s media relations strategy of engaging individual reporters, editors and publishers is something of a relic in these days of pollsters and professional communications advisors, but the tactics used by King might well be employed by a modern leader as part of a stratagem for cultivating positive media coverage. This aspect of Canadian political and media history could benefit from more research to determine how much of King’s media legacy survives in official Ottawa.

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## Notes

- 1 During the period covered by this paper, very few French-language publications had full-time members in the Parliamentary Press Gallery. King did not speak French and appears to have had few strong contacts among the press gallery’s Francophone journalists.
- 2 Personal correspondence with the *Toronto Star*, *Globe and Mail*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Halifax Herald*.
- 3 Personal correspondence and conversation with York University historian John Saywell, who had access to these papers through the McCullagh family in the 1970s.
- 4 John Porter examines this relationship in some detail in *The Vertical Mosaic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965).
- 5 For an analysis of King’s work for the Rockefellers, see Kirk Hallahan (2003: 401-414).
- 6 Brennan skillfully examines the sociology of the journalistic-political elite in *Creating the Right Impression: How English-Canadian Journalists Interpreted the Immediate Post-1945 World*, a paper presented at the 2002 conference of the Organization for the History of Canada.
- 7 King diary June 17 and June 19, 1896.
- 8 The King and Mulock families had known each other for years, and one of King’s sisters was employed by the Mulocks as an assistant to the family. King had also known Mulock

- from his days on *The Varsity*, covering a student controversy that involved Mulock as a member of the university board. Mulock was also part-owner of the *Toronto Star*.
- 9 See Porter, 1965, especially Chapter XIII.
- 10 Personal observation during tour of Laurier House with Lorenzo Cotroneo, Laurier House National Historic Site of Canada staff, December 2009.
- 11 For a very detailed account of the dealings between King and Dafoe at this conference, see (Cook & Dafoe, 1960).
- 12 See Stevenson (1950: 400), Hardy (1949: 87-88), and Neatby (1963: 187).
- 13 Personal observation, January 2010.
- 14 Diary of W.L. Mackenzie King, January 6, 1937.
- 15 Diary of W.L. Mackenzie King, January 9, 1937.
- 16 McCullagh to King, February 2, 1937. W. L. Mackenzie King Papers, Vol. 237 (LAC MF C3726).
- 17 Diary of W.L. Mackenzie King, March 27, 1937.
- 18 King to McCullagh, December 30, 1939. W. L. Mackenzie King Papers, Vol. 271 (LAC MF C3745).
- 19 Diary of W.L. Mackenzie King, January 6, 1937.
- 20 Diary of W. L. Mackenzie King, November 27, 1911.
- 21 Diary of W. L. Mackenzie King, December 11, 1911.
- 22 Diary of W. L. Mackenzie King, November 11, 1914.
- 23 Diary of W. L. Mackenzie King, undated entry, early 1915.
- 24 Diary of W. L. Mackenzie King, October 23, 1935.
- 25 Diary of W. L. Mackenzie King, October 23 and 24, 1935.
- 26 Diary of W. L. Mackenzie King, October 24, 1936.
- 27 Diary of W.L. Mackenzie King, May 8, 1948. The tribute was printed in the *Toronto Star*, May 9, 1948.
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### ***Citing this paper:***

Bourrie, Mark. (2010). The myth of the "Gagged Clam": William Lyon Mackenzie King's press relations. *Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition*, 3(2). 13-30.