

Remembering Allan J MacEachen: 'Builder'



Colin Robertson

A Builder

There are politicians who ride events, and those who shape them. Allan J. MacEachen belonged to the latter category: a builder of modern Canada whose legacy is so embedded in daily life that it is often taken for granted.

He made Canada a better country—deliberately, patiently, and with conviction. He believed in the redemptive power of government, not as an abstraction, but as a practical instrument to improve lives. His lodestar was simple and unpretentious: politics should help people “put bread on the table.”

That phrase, repeated often in his later years, was not rhetoric. It was a test.

Cape Breton First, Always

MacEachen’s politics began at home, in the coal towns and fishing villages of Cape Breton. Not a day passed, even at the height of his power in Ottawa, without attention to his riding. He had learned early how fragile political fortunes could be. In the 1958 Canadian federal election, he lost his seat by a handful of votes in the sweep that brought John Diefenbaker to power.

It would not happen again.

From that point forward, constituency work was not a chore, it was a discipline. Harbours were dredged, wharves rebuilt, coal miners supported, and infrastructure delivered. If you represented Cape Breton, you delivered for Cape Breton.

His worldview was shaped by the Antigonish movement and the teachings of Father Moses Coady, who preached adult education, cooperatives, and self-help for the poor. It instilled in MacEachen a lifelong belief: that public policy, done right, could empower people without patronizing them.



The Moral Economy of Government

MacEachen's legislative legacy is woven into the fabric of modern Canada.

As Minister of Labour and later Minister of National Health and Welfare, he helped build the architecture of the Canadian social safety net—labour standards, unemployment insurance, and, most notably, universal health care. These were not ideological trophies; they were instruments of dignity.

At MacEachen's retirement celebration in 1996, journalist Hugh Winsor famously called his era “the golden age of government.” It was an age when policy ambition matched political will.

MacEachen himself offered a more grounded measure. In *In Pursuit of the Public Good*, a reflection on his career, he recalled a Cape Breton farmworker who told him: “You certainly kept bread on the table here in the north all those years.”

“As a compliment,” MacEachen said, “it was enormous.”

That was enough.

The Celtic Sphinx

He was not an easy man to read.

Reserved, deliberate, often silent, MacEachen earned the nickname “the Celtic Sphinx.” He preferred substance to chatter, argument to anecdote. Gaelic-speaking and steeped in his Scottish heritage, he carried himself with a quiet intensity that could unsettle colleagues and staff alike.

I saw it firsthand.

As his junior departmental assistant when he was Minister of External Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister under Pierre Trudeau,



I quickly learned that silence was not indifference—it was assessment.

For three months, he said almost nothing to me.

Each day, fifteen minutes before Question Period, I would brief him in his office. He would listen, nod, and then walk slowly across to the House of Commons. No feedback. No encouragement. No correction.

Finally, after I offered a particularly convoluted answer on a Middle East file, he broke his silence.

“Would you really say that?” he asked, in a deep, rumbling baritone. “Would you really say that in the House of Commons?”

Caught between loyalty to the department and duty to the minister, I answered honestly: “No, Minister.”

A pause.

“What would you say?”

That was the lesson. Not what the briefing book said. Not what officials preferred. What would you say—standing in the Commons, accountable.

He went into the chamber and delivered an answer that was erudite, evasive, and devastatingly effective. The opposition had nothing left to pursue.

MacEachen understood Parliament as both theatre and battlefield.

Master of the Commons

Few parliamentarians have matched his tactical skill. Serving three times as Government House Leader, he guided legislation through minority governments with a combination of



patience, cunning, and an almost preternatural sense of timing. Tom Axworthy once remarked that MacEachen could “sniff the atmosphere” of the House like a bloodhound.

Pierre Trudeau relied on him instinctively. “He had a very good strategic sense,” Trudeau later wrote, “and he lived and breathed politics.”

During the fragile minority government of 1972–74, MacEachen’s management of the Commons remains a case study in parliamentary control. And in 1979, his speeches to Liberal caucus helped bring down the government of Joe Clark, clearing the way for Trudeau’s return.

He was not flashy. He was effective.

Managing the Mandarins

MacEachen’s approach to the public service was equally disciplined. At meetings, he carried a simple piece of paper, divided into two columns: departmental priorities on the right, his priorities on the left. Officials would press their cases. He would listen, nod, and occasionally initial the page—“AJM”—to acknowledge their points.

Then, calmly, he would turn the discussion back to his list.

The message was unmistakable: government is not run by officials. It is directed by elected ministers, accountable to Parliament and the public.

He expected rigour from his deputies and clarity from his staff. He read everything—cables, memos, dispatches—annotating them in his careful hand. And when necessary, he bypassed hierarchy, calling junior desk officers directly to get unfiltered advice.

MacEachen understood that insight often resides at the working level, not the top.



A Pearson Liberal

MacEachen's political identity was shaped in the orbit of Lester B. Pearson.

After the Liberal defeat in 1958, he worked closely with Pearson in opposition. The relationship was often described as paternal. When I asked him whether he was a Trudeauite or a Pearsonian, MacEachen was unequivocal: he was a "Pearson Liberal."

That meant internationalism grounded in realism. It meant multilateralism backed by capability. And it meant an understanding that Canada's influence depended on balancing ideals with interests.

He carried that approach into his tenure as Secretary of State for External Affairs, where he managed relations with the United States with characteristic clarity. As he often reminded us, the Americans focused on security; Canadians focused on trade. The art of diplomacy lay in reconciling the two.

Having lived through the BOMARC controversy when it came to cruise missile testing in Canada to support continental and collective security, he was forceful in reminding his cabinet and caucus colleagues of the earlier debates.

Like Pearson, he understood something that is too often forgotten: soft power requires hard power behind it.

Global Player, Domestic Builder

MacEachen's career spanned the domestic and international spheres with equal authority.

He chaired major international forums, including the Group of Ten and GATT ministerials. He co-chaired the Conference on International Economic Cooperation. He engaged deeply on North–South relations, trade policy, and monetary reform.



Yet he never lost sight of the domestic purpose behind international engagement: prosperity at home to sustain social programs.

He supported freer trade, but with conditions. He backed sectoral agreements, modeled on the Auto Pact, rather than sweeping concessions, particularly on energy. Economic sovereignty mattered.

The Senate Warrior

Appointed to the Senate in 1984, MacEachen became Government Leader and, later, Leader of the Opposition in the upper chamber during the Mulroney years.

There, his mastery of parliamentary rules reached its zenith.

His resistance to the GST legislation became the stuff of legend. For months, he used procedure to delay its passage, forcing Brian Mulroney to take the extraordinary step of appointing additional senators to break the impasse.

It was a demonstration of institutional knowledge deployed to maximum effect.

The Man Behind the Public Figure

For all his public achievements, MacEachen remained intensely private.

He preferred conversation to performance, analysis to anecdote. Yet in quieter moments, he revealed a dry wit.

After being asked what advice he would give to someone considering a political career, he replied: “Think about it again.”

Pressed further: “Think twice.”



It was not cynicism. It was realism.

Politics, as he practiced it, was demanding—intellectually, emotionally, and morally. It required stamina, discipline, and a willingness to make hard choices. And politics could be cruel, as he learned when Finance Minister.

Lessons for Today

What does Allan J. MacEachen offer to a very different Canada?

First, that ideas matter. He believed that public policy could shape society for the better, and he proved it.

Second, that politics is not merely performative. It is a craft. It requires mastery of institutions, respect for process, and the ability to build coalitions.

Third, that good policy and good politics are not opposites. “Good policy makes for good politics,” he would say. And the reverse, when done properly, is also true.

Finally, that government has a role—not to dominate, but to enable. To ensure that prosperity is shared. To ensure that dignity is preserved.

A Country He Helped Build

When MacEachen died on September 12, 2017, tributes came from across the political spectrum.

Justin Trudeau observed: “Canadians are living in a country that Allan J. built.”

Bob Rae captured the man behind the legend: “He loved politics... the battles, the jokes, the stories... and what it brought to his life.”

That love was evident to those who worked with him.



He followed politics to the end—domestic and international—with undiminished interest and sharp judgment. Our conversations always began with the same question: what’s happening?

For MacEachen, politics was never abstract. It was immediate. It was consequential.

Bread on the Table

In the end, his legacy can be measured not only in legislation or institutions, but in outcomes.

Seniors living with dignity. Workers protected by law. Families able to access health care regardless of income. Regions like Atlantic Canada given a fair chance at development.

These are not small things.

They are the difference between rhetoric and reality.

MacEachen understood that. He insisted on it. And he delivered it. “Our job,” he told us, “is to help those who need our help to put bread on their table.”

In an era of noise and novelty, that clarity of purpose feels almost radical.

It is also enduring.

Allan J. MacEachen did not just practice politics.

He practiced nation-building.



About the Author

Colin Robertson served as departmental and legislative assistant to Hon. Allan J. MacEachen, Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for External Affairs from 1982-4. Later, when Mr. MacEachen was in the Senate, Colin recorded 18 hours of oral history with him for the MacEachen memoirs. In the years until Mr. MacEachen died, they would have tea and talk of many things. This memoir is based on their friendship.

Robertson is a Canadian Global Affairs Institute Fellow, hosting their Global Exchange podcast, and a contributing writer to Policy Magazine. He is an Honorary Captain (Royal Canadian Navy), a member of the Alphen Group of strategists, the Expert Group on Canada-US Relations, an Executive Fellow at the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy, and a Distinguished Senior Fellow at Carleton's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs.

A career foreign service officer, he served as first Head of the Advocacy Secretariat and Minister at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, Consul General in Los Angeles, Consul and Counsellor in Hong Kong, and in New York at the UN and Consulate General.

MacEachen

INDEPENDENT. INFORMED.