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Tony McCulloch

Abstract

This article looks at relations between Britain, the United States and Canada in the years leading up to the Second World War in order to ascertain the extent to which a North Atlantic Triangle can be said to have existed at the outbreak of war in September 1939. Drawing upon the author's contention that an Anglo-American 'tacit alliance' was formed against Germany, Italy and Japan during President Franklin Roosevelt's second term, it argues that the Canadian Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, played an important part in this development by virtue of Canada's position as the northern neighbour of the United States and the senior Dominion of the British Empire and that this 'tacit alliance' went hand in hand with a 'North Atlantic Triangle' between these three governments. The article first analyses the evolution of Mackenzie King's relationships with Franklin Roosevelt and Neville Chamberlain in the 1930s. It then examines three key elements in the triangular relationship between Canada, the United States and Britain in 1938–9: the conclusion of an Anglo-American trade agreement in 1938; British appeasement policy and Roosevelt's role during the Munich crisis of 1938; and the British Royal Visit to the United States in June 1939.

Keywords North Atlantic Triangle; Franklin Roosevelt; William Lyon Mackenzie King; Neville Chamberlain; appeasement; Nazi Germany.

Introduction

On 1 February 1938, William Borah, the veteran isolationist from Idaho, stood up in the Senate and accused the Roosevelt administration of 'risking war by letting the world believe that the United States was in a "tacit alliance" with Great Britain'. Borah was referring to a statement by Anthony Eden in the Commons on 21 December in which, according to the Senator, he implied 'a secret understanding between Great Britain and the United States'. Borah's outburst came in the wake of the fierce debate in the United States and abroad that ensued when President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) said in his Chicago speech on 5 October 1937 that the peace-loving countries of the world should 'quarantine the aggressors'. FDR's announcement on 28 January 1938 that the United States required a much larger defence budget, together with reports of a meeting between US and British naval officials in London, confirmed the suspicions of isolationists such as Borah that Roosevelt's 'Quarantine' speech was the harbinger of a more interventionist policy. Senator Hiram Johnson, another well-known isolationist, demanded a public statement confirming that the President had not abandoned the traditional American policy of avoiding entangling alliances with the nations of Europe.[1]

Both Borah and Johnson had been among the so-called Irreconcilables opposed to US entry to the League of Nations in 1919–20, and they had been suspicious of any sign of American political cooperation with European powers, especially Britain, ever since. Other signs of a close Anglo-American relationship that suggested an 'informal alliance' were felt to include the visit to Washington of Walter Runciman, the British Trade Secretary, in January 1937. A trade agreement had been concluded between the United States and Canada in November 1935 and there were suspicions that one with Britain would have more than economic significance. The increasingly friendly relations between the Roosevelt administration and Canada, which was the senior Dominion in the British Empire, and the continuing efforts of the US President to gain more discretion in interpreting the American Neutrality laws passed by Congress between 1935 and 1937, had also raised suspicions among the isolationists. So too, at a later date, did the President's Queen's University speech in August 1938 during the growing crisis over German policy towards Czechoslovakia, as well as the Anglo-American trade agreement of 1938, and the Royal Visit to Canada and the United States in 1939.[2]

There is little doubt that William Lyon Mackenzie King felt he had a special role to play in bringing Britain and the United States closer

together in the late 1930s, although he hoped that this would help to preserve international peace rather than to disturb it. The longest-serving prime minister in Canadian history, he had occupied that post for most of the 1920s until being defeated by Richard Bennett and the Conservatives in the general election of July 1930. Mackenzie King and the Liberals gained their revenge in the general election of October 1935 when they achieved a large majority, and they were re-elected in 1940 and 1945. Mackenzie King remained in office until his retirement in November 1948. Unlike his predecessor, he was, in the words of C. P. Stacey, 'a fervent believer … in the "lynch-pin" theory – the destined role of Canada as the interpreter between the United States and Britain'. In March 1925, for example, Mackenzie King confided to his diary that, while Conservatives desired a 'common foreign policy' with Britain against the United States, he believed that Canada could 'render the British Empire greater service by being an interpreter of each to the other'.[3]

Stacey also referred to 'the peculiar relationship of Franklin D Roosevelt to Canada'. Pointing out that 'Mr Roosevelt is perhaps the first American President of whom it could be said that he was genuinely popular in Canada', he raised the question of how Roosevelt's evident special interest in Canada might be explained. 'He was certainly not obsessed with the country,' wrote Stacey, 'but he seems to have had a more genuine interest in relations with Canada than any other President has ever had' – especially in the case of defence. Stacey had no real answer to this question himself, beyond saying that the enigmatic FDR was often difficult to fathom and stating that too much influence on US foreign policy should not be attributed to Mackenzie King himself.[4]

In fact, FDR's attitude towards Canada needs to be seen within the context of the 'North Atlantic Triangle', the term coined by the historian John Bartlet Brebner in 1945 to describe the triangular relationship that had emerged between the United States, Britain and Canada – politically and economically – during the late nineteenth century. This development was underlined by Canada's strong contribution to victory during the First World War, its status at the Paris Peace Conference and its membership in the League of Nations. The uneasy relations of the 1920s between the United States, Britain and Canada were followed by 'the perplexing triangular interplay during the prelude to war', but cooperation was much closer between 1939 and 1945, including a 'triangular economic integration for war'. Indeed, Brebner regarded the Second World War as the heyday of the North Atlantic Triangle.[5]

The broad concept of a North Atlantic Triangle sketched by Brebner has been filled in by several later historians and political scientists, some

of whom have doubted the existence of such a triangle while others have argued that it was a significant factor in Canadian foreign policy. For example, while Gordon Stewart has launched a wide-ranging assault on Brebner's North Atlantic Triangle thesis, another Canadian scholar, David Haglund, has put forward an equally robust defence, arguing that the triangle concept was still of value, even in the twenty-first century, as an explanation of Canada's strategic culture. A similar difference of opinion exists concerning Mackenzie King's diplomacy, as can be seen in recent works by Roy MacFarlane, who regards appeasement and Canadian unity as the total of Mackenzie King's foreign policy, and Neville Thompson, who views him as the indispensable 'Third Man' in a triangular relationship with Roosevelt and Churchill during the Second World War.[6]

The main purpose of the current article is to examine the notion of a 'North Atlantic Triangle' in the years leading up to the Second World War and to assess Mackenzie King's role in acting as an 'interpreter' between the United States and Britain, and more specifically between Franklin Roosevelt and Neville Chamberlain in the 'era of Munich' – 1938–9. This will be done by examining the role of Canada under Mackenzie King's leadership in three main areas: (1) Mackenzie King's role in facilitating the Anglo-American trade agreement of 1938; (2) his support for Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy during the crisis over Czechoslovakia and the influence this had on Roosevelt's attitude towards the Munich agreement; and (3) Mackenzie King's part in the British Royal Visit to the United States in June 1939. But before addressing these three examples of the 'North Atlantic Triangle' in practice, it is necessary to examine Mackenzie King's relationship with Neville Chamberlain and Franklin Roosevelt before 1938.[7]

Mackenzie King and Neville Chamberlain

As the leader of the Liberal opposition, Mackenzie King met Chamberlain and other members of the British trade delegation in the summer of 1932 when they travelled to Canada for the Imperial Conference to negotiate what became known as the Ottawa agreements orchestrated by his arch-rival, Richard Bennett, the Conservative Party leader and Canadian Prime Minister from August 1930 to October 1935. A convinced free trader, Mackenzie King was suspicious of Chamberlain as the son and political heir of Joseph Chamberlain, who had campaigned against free trade and for Imperial Preference at the start of the twentieth century. As a fellow Liberal he had more in common with Walter Runciman, the

President of the Board of Trade, who was also a member of the British delegation to Ottawa, along with Stanley Baldwin, who was the leader of the Conservatives in Ramsay MacDonald's National Government.[8]

Mackenzie King was also critical of Chamberlain's outspoken views, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, on the issue of the British war debts owed to the United States as a result of the Great War as liable to inflame American opinion, especially in Congress. For example, a speech by Chamberlain to American press correspondents in London in February 1933 was met with strong criticism in the United States and among Liberals in Canada. 'Everyone seemed to agree that Chamberlain has made a real mistake in his speech,' he noted in his diary. When asked by the Earl of Bessborough, the Governor General, for his view, Mackenzie King said the speech was 'a great mistake'. Bessborough regarded the speech as 'frightful' and, according to Mackenzie King, he 'put both hands to the side of his head saying it was too bad Neville should say such things' as better relations between Britain and the United States were essential in the lead-up to the London Economic Conference scheduled to take place in 1933.[9]

The 'Roosevelt Bombshell' message to the conference in July 1933 and continued tensions over war debts contributed to a difficult period in Anglo-American relations from 1933 to 1935, but relations improved when Baldwin became Prime Minister for the third time in June 1935. This improvement led to a degree of cooperation between the two governments when the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935 severely tested the effectiveness of the League of Nations in implementing 'collective security' for all its members, including the African kingdom that was under attack by Mussolini's Italy. While not wanting to alienate Mussolini for fear of driving Italy into the arms of Hitler's Germany, the Baldwin government reluctantly decided to support whatever sanctions France and the other League members could agree upon. Meanwhile, the Roosevelt administration, while constrained by the US Neutrality laws, introduced a 'moral embargo' against Italy in support of the League sanctions. However, in November the British Cabinet became increasingly alarmed at the prospect of economic sanctions leading to war with Italy, and it was against this background that Sir Samuel Hoare, the British Foreign Secretary, met with his French counterpart, Pierre Laval, in Paris in December 1935 and agreed that Ethiopia should be asked to make large territorial concessions to Italy in return for peace.[10]

When the Hoare–Laval pact became public, there was an outcry against it in Britain and Hoare was forced to resign. Sanctions were implemented, although not on oil, but they did not prevent Italian forces from defeating the Ethiopians and the proclamation of an Italian victory

in May 1936. Hoare received the sympathy of Mackenzie King, who was a regular critic of the League and especially of the notion of 'collective security', which he felt had the potential to involve Canada in a European war. 'He has allowed himself to be sacrificed not only to save a ministry … but a European war and a great conflagration,' he noted in his diary.

> If no war comes he will be the hero, because of his willingness to sacrifice the League to avert both the destruction of the League and of Europe … My own feeling is increasingly against Canada's being involved in these European situations, and against the continuance of the League of Nations as a body having to do with any matters involving more than police action.

He was therefore delighted with Chamberlain's speech on 10 June 1936, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister-in-waiting said that the continuance of sanctions was 'the very midsummer of madness'. He was also pleased when, following Roosevelt's re-election in November 1936, Chamberlain indicated that he regarded a trade agreement with the United States as an early objective.[11]

Mackenzie King and Franklin Roosevelt

Mackenzie King welcomed Roosevelt's victory over Herbert Hoover in November 1932 and his first speech as president in March 1933, following the long interregnum period. 'It is an admirable inaugural address and Roosevelt has got off to a good start,' he wrote in his diary. However, while he supported some of the early measures taken by Roosevelt as part of his New Deal programme, by 1934 he had become concerned about what he regarded as the growing economic nationalism of the New Deal. 'I fear government in the US has become very much of a dictatorship – though not backed and controlled by coercion and force, beyond that of propaganda and publicity,' reads one diary entry. 'I confess I feel alarmed about some parts of Roosevelt's policies,' he continued the next day. 'The policy of encouraging scarcity, or substituting scarcity for plenty as a part of government policy seems to me not only folly but blasphemy' and 'was leading the US into state socialism'. More to his liking was the prospect of a trade agreement with the United States, which was initiated by his predecessor Richard Bennett, desperate for economic measures that might help him to gain an unlikely victory in the Canadian general election of October 1935.[12]

In fact, it was Mackenzie King and the Liberals who emerged as the victors in the election, and one of King's first acts as Prime Minister was to pay a visit to Roosevelt and his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, to push for the conclusion of Canadian-American trade negotiations that had stalled under Bennett. He arrived in Washington on 7 November 1935 and was very soon on good terms with the President. According to Mackenzie King's own account, Roosevelt told him that he thought Canada could help him in his relations with Britain by acting as an 'interpreter' on some of the issues between the two nations. In particular, Roosevelt referred to the view that he had 'torpedoed' the London Economic Conference in July 1933 by sending his 'Bombshell message' criticising attempts at currency stabilisation at that time – an event that had particularly incensed Chancellor Neville Chamberlain, who became the British Prime Minister in May 1937.[13]

Besides helping to establish a rapport between Mackenzie King and Roosevelt, the visit was significant in other ways as well. The two leaders discussed the European situation at some length, and Roosevelt revealed his viewpoint by saying he favoured a blockade of Germany by the League of Nations if it became 'troublesome' again under Adolf Hitler. This was not a view that the new Canadian Prime Minister shared, but on the issue of a Canadian-American trade agreement the two leaders made rapid progress. Like Hull, Mackenzie King was a firm believer in the economic and political benefits of freer trade. This was less true of Roosevelt, but Mackenzie King helped to persuade the US President to agree to further agricultural concessions in return for larger Canadian ones. As a result, a Canadian-American trade agreement was signed on 15 November. Lindsay reported to London that Mackenzie King had told him the agreement had proved possible because Roosevelt had 'put his back into it' for the first time.[14]

In July 1936, Roosevelt paid a return visit to the Canadian Prime Minister in Quebec and also met John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir, who had become Governor General in November 1935. Mackenzie King's potential significance as a link between the Roosevelt administration and the British government can be seen in a report made by Malcolm MacDonald, the Dominions Secretary, based on a long conversation with Mackenzie King in Geneva on 20 September:

> Throughout the talk he showed every sign of a genuine anxiety to help us, and a readiness to be influenced by our opinions. At the same time it was clear that he is powerfully affected by the strength of Canadian opinion in favour of keeping clear of

European entanglements, and from the way in which he spoke about President Roosevelt I feel that he pays considerable heed to the President's views on foreign policy.[15]

Anglo-American trade agreement, 1938

The Foreign Office recognised that the obvious avenue of diplomatic cooperation with the United States was the negotiation of a trade agreement. This fact had been underlined in a series of despatches from Sir Ronald Lindsay, the British Ambassador in Washington. He pointed out that the trade agreements policy had been attacked by the Republicans during the 1936 presidential election, especially the agreement with Canada, and vigorously defended by Hull. As a result of the election, Hull had emerged as a much stronger figure in the administration, and he was now determined to add an agreement with Britain to his earlier agreements. The moral for Lindsay was clear. 'This must be of interest to His Majesty's Government in the immediate future when United States proposals for economic cooperation are renewed and negotiations for mutual tariff concessions are undertaken.'[16]

After the presidential election, on 16 November 1936, the State Department put forward an 'essentials list' of tariff requests to the British government, including reductions in the duties on hog products, barley, rice, fresh fruit, dried fruits, canned fruits, tobacco, softwood lumber and leather. The list was, in fact, made up almost entirely of items covered by the Ottawa agreements and therefore subject to Imperial Preference. Concessions on them could therefore be made only with the consent of Canada and the other Dominions, and this brought to the fore the issue of the Ottawa agreements negotiated in August 1932 and their central principle of Imperial Preference. The 'essentials' list was therefore greeted with dismay in the Foreign Office, where it was felt that it would be impossible to meet the American demands. American friendship was important, but it could hardly be obtained at the expense of the Dominions, it was felt.[17]

A further complication arose with the announcement in Ottawa on 14 January 1937 that a revised version of the Anglo-Canadian trade agreement signed in 1932 was imminent. Mackenzie King took much of the credit for this new agreement. 'I know that … except for the continuous and determined attention I have compelled the Cabinet to give to this matter, there would be no Agreement at this time, nor indeed would its provisions have been so favourable as they now are.' However, when

some of the details of the agreement appeared in the press in London, Hull telephoned Ottawa for clarification. 'Personally I have no doubt that the British are playing the old game and stating to the States that they cannot lower duties because of the opposition of Canada. I was anxious to make clear that we meant what we said about our liberal policy.' Hull's focus on the obstacles presented by the Ottawa agreements in concluding a trade agreement with Britain meant that Mackenzie King was bound to be a key player in Anglo-American relations in the late 1930s.[18]

However, the difficulty of reaching an Anglo-American trade agreement was highlighted during the visit of Walter Runciman, the President of the Board of Trade, to Washington in January 1937. Runciman had intended to visit Lord Tweedsmuir in Ottawa before going to Washington but the delicate nature of the Anglo-Canadian trade talks at the start of the year had dissuaded him from doing this. While in Washington, from 23 to 27 January, Runciman faced a barrage of information and arguments from Hull about the American trade agreements programme and he later complained that Hull was so proud of his own 13 agreements that he scarcely listened to the fact that Runciman had been responsible for 23. But the British minister also noted that Roosevelt was much less concerned about the details of trade policy and much more interested in the international situation. 'If the trade agreement were out of the way the course would be clear for more complete collaboration,' Runciman stated.[19]

On 29 January, Lindsay sent London a summary of the position of the Anglo-American trade talks following Runciman's visit. He stressed that the view in Washington was that 'for both countries the political reasons for agreement outweigh the commercial considerations'. The US government recognised that the maintenance of Imperial Preference was a political necessity for Britain but, at the same time, tariff reductions on agricultural items were a political necessity for them. The US government was disappointed with London's view that concessions could only be made with the consent of the Dominions. It was unable to give compensation for this consent. It was up to Britain to impress on the Dominions the gravity of the consequences of withholding consent, that is, 'the prevention of economic cooperation and further trade agreements'.[20]

The Imperial Conference due to take place in May 1937 would obviously be an opportunity to gauge Dominion – and Canadian – opinion. Revision of the Ottawa agreements was not officially on the agenda of the conference but the British plan, as agreed by the Cabinet Trade and Agricultural Committee, was to sound out Canada and the other Dominions unofficially while the conference was taking place. It was

hoped that they would be prepared to accept the need to modify the Ottawa agreements in the light of the 'essentials list', bearing in mind the desirability of obtaining the political sympathy of the United States.[21]

The imminence of the Imperial Conference, and the desire to make progress towards opening trade negotiations with Britain, was no doubt the main reason why Roosevelt invited Mackenzie King to Washington again in March 1937. Both Hull and Roosevelt dwelt on the worsening international situation in their discussions with the Canadian Prime Minister, although no specific requests were put to him for Canada to make concessions on its Imperial Preference. But he suspected, quite rightly, that Canada was being pressured to make economic sacrifices to facilitate an Anglo-American trade agreement, something he was determined to resist unless there were separate negotiations for a new Canadian-American agreement, to replace the one concluded in 1935.[22]

In the event, the Imperial Conference was not a great success in advancing the Anglo-American trade agreement as each Dominion insisted on compensation for any concessions on margins of preference. South Africa and New Zealand presented the fewest problems, but the Australians, led by Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, would not commit themselves before their general election, due in the autumn, for fear that any concessions would be exploited by the Labour opposition. As for Mackenzie King, he also steadfastly refused to countenance any Canadian concessions except as part of a wider package. 'We would be thought simpletons if we returned home after doing anything of the kind,' he told Oliver Stanley, who had replaced Runciman as President of the Board of Trade. Thus Mackenzie King was happy to act as an interpreter between Britain and the United States, but he was not prepared to sacrifice Canadian economic interests in the process. The United States would have to renegotiate the 1935 trade agreement if it wanted concessions from Canada regarding the Ottawa agreements.[23]

In October 1937, Mackenzie King received a visit in Ottawa from Cordell Hull, who was by now very anxious to make some progress on a trade agreement with Britain. Hull stressed the urgency of the international situation both in Europe, where the Spanish Civil War was raging, and in the Far East, where Japan had recently attacked China. In fact, this meeting took place soon after Roosevelt's 'Quarantine speech' in Chicago, which created something of a sensation in the United States as it suggested that the US President was moving away from isolationism. While Hull and Mackenzie King discussed international events in Ottawa, their officials met in Washington to discuss trade details. As a result, the Canadians were ready to recommend specific concessions

and the American side agreed to renegotiate the 1935 agreement with Canada. This meant that the US government was prepared to hold simultaneous negotiations with Canada and Britain – a course they had previously resisted for fear of paying twice for an Anglo-American trade agreement.[24]

It was now up to the British government to finalise its own concessions on the 'essentials' list, and this issue was discussed by the Cabinet on 27 October. The main opposition to concessions came from William Morrison, the minister of agriculture, who was worried about the effect on home agriculture and the political consequences that might follow. As a result, the final British list of possible concessions was some way from the requests made by the State Department. However, Hull, though disappointed, would brook no more delay and on 17 November accepted the British offers as a basis for formal negotiations for the trade agreement. Mackenzie King was delighted and claimed credit in his diary for resisting one-sided Canadian discussions and forcing Britain and the United States to take the Dominion into proper account. 'I know that this would never have been done but for my insistence upon every step that has led up to it both with the British Government and with the US Government,' he wrote.[25]

The Anglo-American trade agreement was finally signed in the East Room of the White House on 17 November 1938. The main participants were Roosevelt, Hull, Mackenzie King and Lindsay, the British Ambassador. But the man of the hour was Cordell Hull. 'Today was the big day in Mr Hull's career,' noted Pierrepont Moffat, the Head of the European Division of the State Department. Mackenzie King also recorded Hull's sense of achievement. 'Mr Hull was greatly delighted with the conclusion of the trade agreements and could not be too friendly. If I had been a long lost brother, I could not have received a warmer welcome,' he noted. 'He spoke almost immediately of how pleasant the negotiations had been between Canada and the United States, and indicated there had been a good deal of difficulty in the other negotiations.'[26]

Mackenzie King, appeasement and Munich, 1938

Although the Imperial Conference had not greatly advanced the conclusion of an Anglo-American trade agreement, it had reassured Mackenzie King that Neville Chamberlain was the right man to succeed Stanley Baldwin when the latter stepped down as Prime Minister. Before the conference he had been doubtful about Chamberlain's outlook on

world affairs, especially his attitude towards the United States, but while in London he developed a very high opinion of the new prime minister. On the evening of 15 June, Chamberlain, Eden and Malcolm MacDonald, the Dominions Secretary, discussed the European situation with the Dominion leaders. Mackenzie King said he was glad to note that Chamberlain recognised the value of 'economic appeasement' and was not opposed to German expansion in the East, as long as it was peaceful, or to colonial compensation to Germany. He wrote in his diary that 'the British ministers are earnestly and wholeheartedly working for the peace of Europe, and are likely to be wise and sane in their attitude'. He added for good measure: 'I have come to have the greatest confidence in Chamberlain.'[27]

Henceforth, Mackenzie King was to be a firm supporter of Chamberlain and his brand of appeasement, and although as reluctant as ever to commit Canada to any future action, he spoke warmly of Chamberlain to both Roosevelt and Hull. His support for appeasement was strengthened yet further as a result of a visit he made to Berlin after the Imperial Conference at the end of June 1937, during which he met German Foreign Minister Konstantin Von Neurath, Hermann Goering and Hitler himself. Mackenzie King told Hitler that he felt Chamberlain had a good understanding of foreign affairs and a broad outlook. The Canadian Prime Minister was very impressed by Hitler: 'My sizing up of the man as I sat and talked with him, was that he is really one who truly loves his fellow man and his country and would make any sacrifice for their good.' While this comment in Mackenzie King's diary does not inspire much confidence in his judgement of men, it does underline that he had become a strong advocate of appeasement and a great supporter of Chamberlain's foreign policy.[28]

Thus Mackenzie King approved of British neutrality during the Spanish Civil War, which had broken out in July 1936, despite events such as the bombing of Guernica by German and Italian planes in April 1937. He was also keen for Britain and the United States not to be dragged into the war between China and Japan that began in July 1937 or to confront Hitler after the enforced Anschluss between Germany and Austria in March 1938. This event altered the balance of power in Europe and proved a direct threat to Czechoslovakia, with its Sudeten German minority. As German pressure grew on the Czech government to make concessions, there was a real danger of France becoming involved in a war with Germany because of its alliance with the Czechs, and this in turn would mean Britain – and probably the Dominions – being dragged in. Certainly Mackenzie King was alarmed by the German move, but he was

confident that war could be avoided. 'I believe the British Government will be wise enough not to take a stand which will bring England into war and, with her, France and Russia and Italy and some other countries, as would be inevitable, but will bide her time to meet the European situation in some more effective way a little later on.'[29]

The strategy of Chamberlain and the British government was, indeed, to play for time and to try to defuse the potential crisis between Germany and Czechoslovakia. To this end the British government put forward a 'conciliator' – in the person of Walter Runciman, the former President of the Board of Trade – to travel to Prague in August 1938 to assess the situation and mediate if possible. Runciman, of course, was well known to Roosevelt because of his visit to see the US President in January 1937. He wrote to Roosevelt about his mission and the Foreign Office tried very hard to get a supportive statement out of Roosevelt in favour of the mission. Roosevelt was reluctant to do this, but Mackenzie King had no such hesitation, in private at least. 'I have found tremendous enjoyment and peace of mind in the appointment of Runciman as mediator to Czechoslovakia,' he wrote at the end of July.[30]

While Runciman was in Prague suffering from the heat and from insomnia, Roosevelt paid a significant visit to Canada in which he again met with Mackenzie King on the occasion of receiving an honorary degree from Queen's University, Kingston. At Queen's Roosevelt made a much-quoted speech in which he said, 'I give to you assurance that the people of the United States will not stand idly by if domination of Canadian soil is threatened by any other Empire.' This was clearly a warning to Germany and Japan not to disregard the significance of American power. Roosevelt also took the opportunity to discuss the international situation with Mackenzie King, who by now had come to regard Hitler as the chief danger to European peace. The two leaders also discussed Chamberlain's policy, which Mackenzie King fully supported, and hoped that Chamberlain might be able to visit Washington when the trade agreements between Britain, the United States and Canada were eventually signed.[31]

The Runciman mission failed to solve the Sudetenland problem, but it did pave the way for the eventual Munich settlement of September 1938 as a result of which the German-speaking Sudetenland was incorporated into Germany. Roosevelt, despite his own misgivings, which he had shared with his Cabinet, appeared to endorse Chamberlain's policy in public, not least by sending him a telegram with the words 'Good man' at the height of the crisis. Aware of British and French weakness in the air at this time, and mindful of Mackenzie King's strong support of

Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, Roosevelt was more sympathetic towards the efforts of the British Prime Minister than was American public opinion in general.[32]

Needless to say, Mackenzie King was full of admiration for Chamberlain's policy. 'It is well for Chamberlain that he was born into this world and for the world that he was born into it,' he enthused in his diary. 'His name will go down in history as one of the greatest men who ever lived—a great conciliator.' He disagreed with Winston Churchill and Chamberlain's other critics in Britain, the United States and the Dominions and was sure he had done the right thing in supporting him. He was particularly pleased with the appeals made by Chamberlain and Roosevelt to Hitler to seek a peaceful solution to the Czech crisis at Munich. The calling of a conference at Munich was, for him, 'a relief indescribable', and he felt that his 'personal contacts' with Roosevelt and Chamberlain, and possibly even with Hitler, had helped to 'save the day'. When the Munich agreement was announced he immediately sent congratulatory telegrams to Chamberlain and Roosevelt.[33]

Royal Visit, 1939

While in Washington for the signing of the Canadian-American trade agreement in November 1938, Mackenzie King was able to have another exchange of views with Roosevelt and Hull. After the signing ceremony and speeches, there was a general conversation in the White House Library that included Lindsay and, for a time, Sumner Welles, the Under Secretary of State. Most of the conversation was about the European situation, and Roosevelt noted that Germany was seeking to gain a strong foothold in South America. The United States must be prepared to defend itself, he continued, because with the advent of air power the country was no longer beyond reach. Roosevelt developed this point later with Mackenzie King and went into detail about his new defence programme, announced to Congress in October 1938. He complained that Britain and France had been 'appallingly blind' over air defence and had let Germany get too far ahead. He said he had made his appeal to Hitler after he and the Cabinet had listened to Chamberlain's address on the radio on 27 September and been much moved by it. But he pointed out that Chamberlain was now unpopular in the United States because of the reaction against Munich. Mackenzie King had urged Chamberlain to attend the signing of the trade agreement, but he said he was exhausted after Munich.[34]

The Anglo-American trade agreement was generally well received in the United States and to some extent helped to counter the backlash there against the Munich agreement. As the influential radio commentator Raymond Gram Swing put it, 'the emotional distance between Britain and the United States was widening, and signing this agreement just at this time has suddenly wiped out most of that distance'. In a similar vein, Francis Sayre, the Assistant Secretary of State in charge of the trade agreements programme, was quoted in the *New York Times* as describing the agreement with Britain as 'the effective reply to the defeatism which appeared in some quarters after the Munich settlement'. But, as Roosevelt remarked, the trade agreements programme was 'just too goddamed [*sic*] slow. The world is marching too fast.'[35]

Roosevelt's overriding concern with events in Europe and the Far East was apparent in his annual address in January 1939, the first part of which dealt with the international situation. In an early reference to Munich, he said, 'a war which threatened to envelop the world in flames has been averted; but it has become increasingly clear that peace is not assured'. Rearmament, military and economic, was growing and there were new threats of aggression, he continued. No country was now safe from war and America must concentrate its resources on self-defence. He warned against the illusion of neutrality by legislation and said the United States could not be indifferent to aggression abroad. 'There are many methods short of war, but stronger and more effective than mere words, of bringing home to aggressor governments the aggregate sentiments of our people.'[36]

The *New York Times* felt that the President's message to Congress marked a turning point in the administration's foreign policy. Victor Mallet, Lindsay's deputy in Washington, pointed out that Roosevelt's main aim was to 'educate' American public opinion away from isolationism. Chamberlain himself made a short statement welcoming the speech 'as yet another indication of the vital role of the American democracy in world affairs and its devotion to the idea of ordered human progress', and Mackenzie King also wrote enthusiastically about the President's address in his diary. 'It was, I think, the finest thing I have heard anywhere at any time, in the way of a political utterance – fearless, comprehensive, constructive.'[37]

On 15 March 1939, German troops occupied the state of Czecho–Slovakia that had been left after the Munich settlement and it was subordinated to Hitler's Reich. Chamberlain tried to defuse the situation when he spoke in the Commons later that day, but opinion was in favour of a strong stand after the humiliation of Prague being virtually

annexed, in defiance of the Munich agreement. Fearing further German moves, and bowing to public opinion, the British and French governments gave guarantees of territorial integrity to a number of countries in eastern Europe, including Poland. These guarantees were a reversal of British policy since the Great War. Mackenzie King referred to Chamberlain's action as 'a curious sudden shift'. But Roosevelt favoured the stronger line now being taken in London. He told Sir Arthur Willert, a British friend and formerly the chief US correspondent of *The Times* of London, that he expected the Neutrality laws to be amended in the interests of the democracies, and he 'brushed aside' the Johnson Act of 1934 that banned loans to countries, such as Britain and France, in default of their war debts.[38]

The 'tacit alliance' between Britain and the United States was further strengthened by the Royal Visit to North America in June 1939, which owed much to Mackenzie King's good relationship with Roosevelt and his agreement to the original Royal Visit to Canada being extended to take in the United States. Mackenzie King told Roosevelt in August 1938, when they met at Queen's University, that the royal family planned to visit Canada in 1939. The President then wrote to George VI extending a personal invitation to stay with him at Hyde Park, his family home. The visit took place in June 1939, and Mackenzie King accompanied the royal family to Hyde Park. During the visit Roosevelt, George VI and Mackenzie King took the opportunity to exchange their views on the world situation. The President continued to stress the need for the democracies to increase their air power and referred to German designs on South America. The conversation also turned to Chamberlain's likely successor. 'The King indicated that he would never wish to appoint Churchill to any office unless it was absolutely necessary in time of war,' Mackenzie King recorded. 'I confess I was glad to have him say that because I think that Churchill is one of the most dangerous men I have ever known.'[39]

The Royal Visit was a great public relations success, but it failed to persuade Congress to repeal the arms embargo section of the Neutrality laws that prohibited the sale of 'arms, ammunition and the implements of war' during wartime. The final blow came on 12 July, when the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted 12 to 11 to defer consideration of any revision of the Neutrality laws until the following session. However, Anglo-American relations continued to improve in other ways. For example, the semi-annual exchange of notes over war debts between Washington and London was brought forward so as to avoid embarrassment during the Royal Visit. In addition, in June 1939, a cotton–rubber exchange agreement was arranged between the two governments under which Britain

was to take 600,000 bales of cotton in exchange for a substantial amount of rubber from the British Empire for American stocks.[40]

Along the same lines, steps were being taken to facilitate British purchases in the United States in the event of war. To this end Lord Riverdale, a businessman who made frequent trips to America, arrived in Washington for secret talks with members of the State and War departments. Most of these officials, reported Riverdale, believed that the Neutrality Act and Johnson Act would be repealed if war broke out in Europe. He was told by Louis Johnson, the Assistant Secretary of War, that the US President had expressed himself as '100 per cent in favour of what we are doing'. Riverdale had no doubt that a purchasing agency should be set up in the United States without delay to capitalise on American goodwill. This was agreed by the British Cabinet on 28 August.[41]

When war broke out in Europe, Roosevelt called a special session of Congress to secure revision of the Neutrality laws, which was accomplished in November 1939. Upon the repeal of the arms embargo Chamberlain was moved to write to Roosevelt to express his gratitude. 'I am convinced it will have a devastating effect on German morale,' he stated, too optimistically. 'We here have derived all the greater satisfaction from it because we realise to what an extent we owe it to your own personal efforts and goodwill.' The repeal of the arms embargo was, in many ways, the culmination of the Anglo-American 'tacit alliance' that had developed since the start of FDR's second term in January 1937.[42]

Conclusions

What was Canada's contribution to this Anglo-American 'tacit alliance'? Was the role of mediator a figment of Mackenzie King's imagination or was there, as Brebner claimed, a 'North Atlantic Triangle' in which Canada was an important player? Clearly the return of Mackenzie King to power in November 1935 proved to be an important factor in relations between London and Washington. Concerned about the deteriorating international situation, and having little faith in the League of Nations, Mackenzie King saw close cooperation between the British Empire and the United States as the best means of avoiding a war that was likely to involve Canada. His meetings and correspondence with Roosevelt and Hull on the one hand and Chamberlain and other British ministers and officials on the other meant that he was to some extent able to fulfil his aim of acting as an 'interpreter' between Britain and the United States at a time when Roosevelt, the liberal Democrat, and

Chamberlain, the staunch Tory, had a somewhat distant and strained relationship.

In more specific terms, Mackenzie King's most obvious contribution to better relations between London and Washington in this period was his role in facilitating the signing of the Anglo-American trade agreement in 1938. Like Hull, he was a firm believer in trade liberalisation as a way of improving economic and political relations. He was obviously determined not to sacrifice Canadian commercial interests and resented what he regarded as undue pressure from Britain and the United States. However, following the Canadian-American agreement of 1935, he was prepared to see Ottawa make further tariff concessions, as part of a wider package, in order that an Anglo-American trade agreement could be achieved. The political importance of such an agreement increased as the situation in Europe and the Far East deteriorated, and had an agreement not been finalised it might have been more difficult to secure the revision of the Neutrality laws in November 1939.

A second important contribution by Mackenzie King to Anglo-American relations in this period was the way in which he supported Chamberlain's policy of appeasement and helped to gain Roosevelt's acceptance of it, especially during the Munich crisis. Canada's position was of great importance to Roosevelt, as he made clear when he said in August 1938 that the United States would 'not stand idly by' if Canada was threatened by a hostile power. Mackenzie King's personal attitude therefore had to be taken into account. Similarly, the Canadian Prime Minister encouraged Chamberlain and Roosevelt to support a peaceful solution to the Sudetenland crisis in September 1938 through his telegrams to them both. Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, especially at Munich, was unpopular within the State Department and across American public opinion and it would have led to a damaging split between London and Washington if Roosevelt had openly opposed it.

Third, Mackenzie King played an important part in the Royal Visit to the United States in June 1939. It was he who alerted Roosevelt to the planned visit to Canada when they met at Queen's University in August 1938, and this prompted Roosevelt to invite George VI to the United States and specifically to Washington, DC and his home at Hyde Park in upstate New York, not far from the border with Canada. This visit was of great psychological significance at the time and may perhaps be likened to the visit by Edward VII to France in 1904 that helped to cement the 'Entente Cordiale' before the First World War.

As the Prime Minister of Canada in the late 1930s, Mackenzie King's role was largely confined to being a concerned spectator to the

events unfolding in Europe and the Far East. But his part in strengthening Anglo-American relations during this critical period and thereby contributing to the 'tacit alliance' between Washington and London at the outset of the Second World War is certainly worthy of note. If nothing else, it helps to balance Mackenzie King's naivete in trusting in Hitler's good intentions and thereby presents a fuller picture of his significant role in Anglo-American relations during the era of Munich.

Note on contributor

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The author is the Editor-in-Chief of the *London Journal of Canadian Studies* this article is included in. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Notes

1 *New York Times*, 2 February 1938; FO/371/21491, A965/1/45, Sir Ronald Lindsay (British Ambassador in Washington) to Anthony Eden (British Foreign Secretary), 2 February 1938. See also McCulloch, *Tacit Alliance*, 3–4.
2 For US isolationism see McCulloch, *Tacit Alliance*, 5–9; Adler, *Isolationist Impulse*; Cole, *Roosevelt and Isolationists*; Jonas, *Isolationism in America*; Wapshott, *The Sphinx*; Maddox, *William E Borah*; McKenna, *Borah*; Lower, *Bloc of One*.
3 Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict*, 31; Mackenzie King Diary, 7 March 1925.
4 Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict*, 230–1; see also Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada*; Perras, *Franklin Roosevelt*.
5 Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle*, xx, 304, 325; see also Brebner, 'A changing North Atlantic Triangle'; Brebner, 'Canada in North American history'.
6 See Kottman, *Reciprocity*; McKercher and Aronson, *North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World*; Stewart, 'What North Atlantic Triangle?'; Haglund, 'Brebner's North Atlantic Triangle at sixty'; McCulloch, 'North Atlantic Triangle'; MacLaren, *Mackenzie King*; Thompson, *The Third Man*.
7 For an earlier examination of this topic by the author see McCulloch, '"The key log in the jam"'.
8 Mackenzie King Diary, 23, 25–28 and 30 July 1932 for Mackenzie King's conversations with Runciman and other members of the British delegation.
9 Mackenzie King Diary, 3 and 4 February 1933. See also *New York Times*, 2 February 1933, for details of the speech and the US reaction.
10 McCulloch, *Tacit Alliance*, 22–30.
11 Mackenzie King Diary, 19 December 1935; 11 June 1936; 12 November 1936.
12 Mackenzie King Diary, 6 March 1933; 17 January 1934; 18 January 1934; 8 February 1934.
13 Mackenzie King Diary, 8 November 1935.
14 Mackenzie King Diary, 7–15 October 1935; FO/371/18756, A9726/321/45: Sir Ronald Lindsay to Sir Samuel Hoare (Foreign Secretary), 17 November 1935.
15 Mackenzie King Diary, 31 July 1936; FO/371/20476, W11944/79/98: Note by Malcolm MacDonald of conversation with Mackenzie King, 20 September 1936.
16 FO/371/19829, A8703/170/45: Lindsay to Eden, 5 November 1936.
17 SD/611.4131/205: memo of essential American requests, 16 November 1936. See also Kottman, *Reciprocity*, 117–48 for background; FO/371/19834, A9627/890/45: memo by John Troutbeck, 24 November 1936.
18 Mackenzie King Diary, 12 and 18 January 1936.
19 McCulloch, *Tacit Alliance*, 40–7; McCulloch, 'Runciman visit', 211–40; Harrison, 'Runciman visit', 217–39; Hull, *Memoirs*, Vol. 1, 524–6; Kottman, *Reciprocity*, 159–60.
20 FO/371/20658, A805/228/45, Lindsay to Eden, 29 January 1937.
21 FO/371/20659, A2964/228/45, including Minutes of Cabinet Committee on Trade and Agriculture, 12 April 1937.
22 Mackenzie King Diary, 5 March 1937. See also Hull, *Memoirs*, Vol. 1, 526–9.
23 FO/371/20660, A4104/228/45: memo by Frank Ashton-Gwatkin, 4 June 1937; Mackenzie King Diary, 7 June 1937.
24 Mackenzie King Diary, 21 October 1937; FO 371, 20663, A7663/228/45: Victor Mallet (British embassy) to Eden, 26 October 1937. For 'Quarantine speech' see McCulloch, *Tacit Alliance*, 83–106; Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 148–51.
25 CAB 23, 39 (1937), item 7, 27 October 1937; FO/371/20664, A8249/228/45: Lindsay to Eden, 16 November 1937; Mackenzie King Diary, 17 November 1937.

See also Kottman, *Reciprocity*, 183–215, for background and press reaction to the announcement of negotiations.

26 Moffat Journal, Vol. 41, 17 November 1938; Mackenzie King Diary, 17 November 1938. See also Kottman, *Reciprocity*, 183–215; Witham, 'Seeing the wood for the Trees', 29–51.

27 Mackenzie King Diary, 15 June 1937.

28 Mackenzie King Diary, 29 June 1937; see also Ovendale, 'Canada, Britain'; Teigrob, *Four Days in Hitler's Germany*.

29 Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, 124–55; Mackenzie King Diary, 11 March 1938.

30 Vysny, *Runciman Mission to Czechoslovakia*; McCulloch, 'Franklin Roosevelt'; Mackenzie King Diary, 28 July 1938.

31 FO/371/21527, A6744/64/45, including State Department press release on FDR's speech, 18 August 1938; Mackenzie King Diary, 18 August 1938.

32 McCulloch, *Tacit Alliance*, 160–2.

33 Mackenzie King Diary, 14, 21, 26, 28, 29 and 30 September 1938.

34 Mackenzie King Diary, 17 November 1938; McCulloch, *Tacit Alliance*, 178–81.

35 FO/371/21509, A8917/1/45: text of commentary by Raymond Gram Swing, 19 November 1938; *New York Times*, 13 December 1938; Blum, *From the Morgenthau Diaries*, Vol. 1, 524.

36 *Roosevelt Public Papers*, Vol. 8, address to Congress, 4 January 1939, 1–12.

37 *New York Times*, 5 January 1939; FO/371/22812, A660/98/45: Mallet to Halifax, 10 January 1939; *The Times*, 6 January 1939; Mackenzie King Diary, 4 January 1939.

38 Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, 200–15; Mackenzie King Diary, 31 March 1939; FO/371/22829, A2907/1292/45: memo of conversations between Willert and Roosevelt, 25 and 26 March 1939.

39 Roosevelt Letters, Vol. 3, Roosevelt to George VI, 25 August 1939, 239–40; Mackenzie King Diary, 10–12 June 1939. For Royal Visit see also McCulloch, *Tacit Alliance*, 211–28; Rhodes, 'British Royal Visit of 1939'; Reynolds, 'FDR's foreign policy'. For Chamberlain's attitude towards Churchill see Phillips, *Fighting Churchill*.

40 Divine, *Illusion of Neutrality*, 229–85; FO/371/22815, A4828/98/45: Lindsay to Halifax, 12 July 1939. For cotton–rubber agreement see Herbert Feis papers, Box 56, memo by Feis on cotton–rubber agreement, June 1939; CAB 23, 32 (1939), item 12, 14 June 1939. See also McCulloch, *Tacit Alliance*, 233–4.

41 FO/371/23905, W12351/9808/49: report of Lord Riverdale's mission, August 1939; CAB 23, 45 (1939), item 3, 28 August 1939.

42 McCulloch, *Tacit Alliance*, 266–80; PREM 1/367, Chamberlain to Roosevelt, 8 November 1939.

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