



## **JOHN DIEFENBAKER**

### **TRANSCRIPT**

**HOLLY DOAN, CPAC Host:** He was a charismatic crusader whose spell gripped a nation.

**PETER NEWMAN, Journalist:** I can only describe it as being biblical. He was like an old testament prophet.

**HOLLY DOAN:** But his style made enemies who forced him from power. John Diefenbaker. Welcome. I'm Holly Doan. He was the longest long shot who ever became prime minister. For years he could not get elected, let alone elected leader. He was an outsider considered brash and egocentric, even unstable; a loner who saw himself as a folk hero. Yet he was the most electrifying campaigner the country had ever seen. And he championed issues no prime minister had championed before. We present, John Diefenbaker.

**NARRATOR:** John Diefenbaker campaigned all his life. He was a crusader against special interests, he said. Diefenbaker told supporters: "Everybody is against me but the people."

**PETER NEWMAN:** I remember being in a mall in Vancouver and it started to rain. Somebody held an umbrella over Diefenbaker's head and he pushed them away. So the rain started to fall on Diefenbaker while he was speaking, while he was waving his arms and shouting. People in the audience had umbrellas and as soon as he refused an umbrella, they closed their umbrellas. They wanted to share the rain with him! It was that kind of power that he had.

**NARRATOR:** A newspaperman said Diefenbaker saw himself as an almost mythical figure – the defender of the common people. In one campaign photographers noticed his followers just wanted to touch him.

**DICK SPENCER, Campaign Organizer:** John Diefenbaker from the beginning of the career to the end of it was an actor. You didn't know what was real. You couldn't be sure what was real. He played for effect. With the hair askew and unraveling and the piercing eyes and the angry look! And the ferocity of the attack on his enemies! He feigned outrage all of the time, distemper. He was the best show in town! He loved people, the ordinary people, the average Canadian people. He loved the prairies. He loved the West. He loved the underdog, the farmers. He loved the workers on the railway. He loved the fishermen in Atlantic Canada. This was part of his being. It can't be contrived! This is John Diefenbaker. It is elemental; this is the essence of the man!

**NARRATOR:** “They criticize me sometimes for being too much concerned with the average Canadian,” Diefenbaker said. “I can’t help that; I’m just one of them.”

**NARRATOR:** He was raised in a homestead on the Saskatchewan prairie. The land and sky seemed endless. Pioneers who settled the territory were nearly overwhelmed by its emptiness. Diefenbaker recalled it was “hard living”.

**TED BYFIELD, Journalist:** That loneliness. That sense of isolation. It’s part of the Prairie psyche and it’s still there today. It’s this sense that ‘If we don’t make it on our own, we’ll die!’”

**NARRATOR:** His father was a poor farmer descended from German immigrants. From age 10 Diefenbaker worked to help the family.

**DENIS SMITH, Biographer:** The Diefenbakers lived in what really amounted to a shack which they built themselves. John actually bunked with his uncle in a shed and his brother lived, slept in the kitchen I think. It was a two room shack with a little garden patch.

**DICK SPENCER:** Those hardships that his family and all of the communities at that time faced affected John Diefenbaker for a lifetime, a political lifetime, because he was one of them. And he knew that somehow or other that he wanted himself and his family to move from the margins into the centre and upwards if possible and he would like to see his neighbours come along, too. They needed a defender, an advocate. And he was that advocate.

**NARRATOR:** Westerners’ resentment was not only borne of poverty. The Prairies were settled by immigrants who faced another hardship.

**PETER NEWMAN:** You know there was a lot of prejudice against immigrants. That didn’t disappear until after the Second World War. I mean they were the “Ukes, they were the, well, they were looked down as a kind of a working class subterranean group of people who you didn’t really mix with. And he rose out of that.

**DENIS SMITH:** His own party in Ontario referred to ‘garlic eaters’ out West, meaning East Europeans. This was the Conservative Party, Dief’s own party, saying this about Westerners. That struck him very strongly and he from that time on from the moment he came into the Conservative Party almost, he had a strong feeling that the Conservative party was deeply prejudiced against the people and the interests of Western Canada.

**NARRATOR:** Fresh out of law school in 1919 John Diefenbaker sought acclaim as a friend of the powerless. It earned him a reputation that would satisfy his ultimate ambition – to succeed in politics.

**TED BYFIELD:** Diefenbaker was the guy who got my brother-in-law off when he was caught drunk driving. Diefenbaker was the guy who took my sister’s case before the

Supreme Court of Saskatchewan because her husband had deserted her and she was left with nothing and he brought about justice. Diefenbaker was the guy who would get on the train in Saskatoon and take it to Winnipeg and he knew all the porters, ALL the porters because he traveled by train everywhere. And they thought he was just wonderful! He was unlike any previous candidate for prime minister. He was ours.

**NARRATOR:** Elected a Conservative Member of Parliament on his third try, Diefenbaker championed civil rights. He opposed restrictions on the freedoms of Japanese-Canadians and Jehovah's Witnesses persecuted because of race and religion.

**DICK SPENCER:** I don't believe that John Diefenbaker discovered civil rights when he was first elected to parliament in 1940. He discovered civil rights when he didn't have them, when he felt marginalized; when he knew that he was part of a minority in the Territories in the homestead days, when he saw those differences. And later on when he was running for parliament, when Canada was at war with Germany, his German name was thrown up to him and mispronounced, it became Diefen-bawker, and people talked about 'the Bosch'. The humiliation of that he carried with him to parliament, and his ambition was always to do something about that!

**NARRATOR:** Ambition would lead him to the pinnacle of power. He could not have known the cost. When we return – John Diefenbaker, the nation's crusader.

**NARRATOR, Continued:** John Diefenbaker built a career as a Prairie crusader. He was determined to succeed on the national stage. Twice he tried and failed to become leader of the Conservative party. He succeeded on his third try, in 1956. Even in power, he remained an outsider.

**PETER NEWMAN:** I used to refer to him as being well-balanced; he had a chip on each shoulder. And he did, he had lots of chips. It's not a surprise, I mean here's a man who grew up totally outside what was then civilized Canada, what was then where all the power resided; Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa. To break into that circle you had to kowtow to their values. There was no point bringing your own values in because they despised them, they made fun of them. But he didn't do that. He came with his values. He defended his people and he represented the West.

**ROBERT BOTHWELL, Historian:** Oh, the Liberals were overjoyed when Diefenbaker became Tory leader. They thought this guy was a Saskatchewan, not hayseed exactly, but a has-been. I mean here's this guy who's out of the Stone Age! And the Tories make him their leader? Well, that's just wonderful! They could have somebody modern and they've chosen somebody who's got curly-cues on him!

**NARRATOR:** The country had never seen a campaigner like John Diefenbaker.

**PETER NEWMAN:** Well, I can only describe it as being biblical. He was like an Old Testament prophet. He had that kind of presence, that kind of cadence in his speech. Unfortunately he had crazy eyes! If you looked at him closely, they were going in all

directions. Especially when he got mad and when he got excited about something, his eyes would almost twirl like tassels!

**ROBERT BOTHWELL:** He had a face that in repose, or in still photographs, looks ugly. It looks, you know, like an English bulldog who's had a bad day. But right at the center of that face were these two bright, bright blue eyes. And again, right to the end of his life, if you were in Diefenbaker's presence and you saw those bright blue eyes.

**JOHN DIEFENBAKER (*newsreel speech*):** "I say this to you with the deepest of feeling..."

**ROBERT BOTHWELL:** And they were staring at you, it was surprising. The first reaction you have to Diefenbaker is how imposing! How commanding! How formidable! And maybe, how fearsome.

**JOHN DIEFENBAKER:** "...My country and yours."

**NARRATOR:** In 1958 Diefenbaker won the biggest parliamentary majority in Canadian history. "Sometimes," he said, "I even amaze myself." He remained just plain John. Diefenbaker told a reporter his favourite food was potatoes. His great passion was fishing. "It's the only time you...forget everything," he said. As prime minister, Diefenbaker went home on weekends to unwind by watching TV wrestling and football. In the Commons Diefenbaker remained a defender of the underdog. He raised farm subsidies and widows' pensions. He gave aboriginals the vote and introduced a Bill of Rights. In 1962 the Diefenbaker government became the first to abolish discrimination in racial quotas on immigrants. "I know what discrimination is," he said.

**JOHN DIEFENBAKER (*televised speech*):** "We took action, not for any special interest, not for the privileged, we took action on behalf of the average Canadian..."

**NARRATOR:** Diefenbaker invited Canadians to contact him personally. "Write me your ideas," he said. The letters poured in. Diefenbaker answered his own mail – 300 letters a week.

**DICK SPENCER:** The problem with reading all those letters and believing them may have been that they could've become a kind of public poll for him. And when things are going badly and these Diefenbaker supporters are writing him and saying everything was good, he may have believed them when he should not have.

**NARRATOR:** A journalist said, he replayed "the only role he had ever mastered" – the small town crusader. His campaign slogan had been "Follow John". Soon followers would conspire against him. When we return – a Conservative coup d'état.

**NARRATOR, Continued:** John Diefenbaker loved to make an entrance. As prime minister he ordered that his entire cabinet wait for him at the airport every time he returned from a trip.

**DICK SPENCER:** He was very image-conscious. He liked the image of ‘The Chief’. He liked to be called ‘The Chief’. Chief meant the leader, the head honcho, the guy in charge, but there was something human about Chief, something collegial about Chief. He liked that.

**NARRATOR:** Diefenbaker thrived as the people’s champion, said a newspaperman, but he was “lost” once he had to run a government. He had little executive experience. For much of his life he had worked in a small law office. Now he was running the country. In 1959, when Diefenbaker cancelled the Avro Arrow jet project at a loss of 14-thousand jobs, he did not bother to consult his own caucus. His style began to irritate colleagues.

**ROBERT BOTHWELL:** And you read the Cabinet minutes and the first thing that strikes you is – they haven’t reached a conclusion! The issue on the table calls for a decision. Cabinet decides not to deal with it. Or cabinet decides to postpone it. Or cabinet decides to discuss it further. Why is that? Well it’s because they don’t know the public will on the issue and they don’t know how it’ll play. And even if they have an idea how it’ll play, they’re afraid of the opposition. This is amazing! So it’s really like, uh, like a very large rangy cat that is terrified of a tiny little mouse! And you have these guys sitting around the table going ‘Row! Row! Don’t know what to do! Row!’ They look at Diefenbaker and, ‘Row!’ He doesn’t know what to do either!

**NARRATOR:** The government began to unravel. Members of Diefenbaker’s own party organized against him. One Conservative said, “Everyone seemed to think they could do a better job.” Opponents called Diefenbaker incompetent. Eleven members of his own cabinet members demanded that he step aside.

**ROBERT BOTHWELL:** I think that he’s inadequate in his ability to deal with other people. He continues to treat members of his cabinet in a way that indicates that he seriously distrusts them. And it is not a way really to handle rivals. It’s fatal.

**PETER NEWMAN:** We have never had a coup d’état in Canadian history, except once. In 1962 and 1963 when the Diefenbaker cabinet unraveled. And I could see the lights burning every night, all night in the offices of the ministers who were on either side of the coup trying to get him out or trying to defend him. And I knew there was a lot of liquor consumed so I found the statistic on the amount of ice that was consumed during the plotting days, or plotting nights. And it went up 90 percent.

**JOHN DIEFENBAKER (*newsreel speech*):** “I read in the press that the old magic is gone!”

**DENIS SMITH:** He was explosive, unpredictable, constantly reversing himself, unable to make decisions, repeatedly saying he was about to resign and then six hours later deciding not to. He was very close to going off the rails.

**NARRATOR:** His party in turmoil, Diefenbaker waged his final campaign as prime minister in 1963. He lost. He would never again hold power he had long pursued. In defeat he was consoled by his wife Olive. She never forgave those Conservatives who turned on her husband. “Those men... will be forgotten,” she said. “It’s John who will be remembered.” Only days after the couple celebrated their 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary Olive died of heart disease. Diefenbaker was shattered. He sat, staring at her picture. “There’s nothing now,” he said.

**JOHN DIEFENBAKER (1967 speech):** “Whatever remains to me of life, be it long or short – Almighty God has been bountiful – I will give to the service of my country. I will continue to fight for those things that I have fought for throughout life.”

**NARRATOR:** John Diefenbaker remained in the House of Commons. Until his death at 83, he still received letters from ordinary Canadians who sought his help. When he died in 1979, Diefenbaker was carried by train across the Prairies. Along the tracks, the farmers and country people who had always stood by him, stood one last time.

**DICK SPENCER:** And they stood there and they waved goodbye until the train was gone. And around me there were tears, I heard sobs. And this was more than just Ottawa, more than Saskatoon the next day, more than grief and affection. It was love! And it was unforgettable. And it was beautiful.

**POSTSCRIPT:** John Diefenbaker left his Ottawa home to Government of Canada. He wanted it developed into a prairie pioneer museum. The government declined the offer.

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