

“The Key Log in the Jam”: Mackenzie King, the North Atlantic Triangle and the Anglo-American Rapprochement of 1935–39

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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 that time. It argues that there was an Anglo-American rapprochement between 1935 and 1939 and that the Canadian Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, played an important part in this development. In particular, it stresses his role in facilitating (1) the Anglo-American trade agreement of 1938, (2) Roosevelt’s support for Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement during the Munich crisis in the same year and (3) the Royal Visit to the USA in 1939. Henry Stimson, the former American Secretary of State, had predicted that Canada could be “the key log in the jam” in improving Anglo-American relations and there is much to be said for his opinion. In view of Canada’s important role in influencing Anglo-American relations at this time the term “North Atlantic Triangle” appears to be an entirely valid one when applied to the international diplomacy of 1935–1939.

Sixty years after John Brebner’s book *North Atlantic Triangle* was first published historians are still debating the usefulness of the central concept of his work, especially in terms of Canada’s diplomatic relationship with Britain and the United States in the twentieth century.¹ In particular, the view has been put forward on a number of occasions that, if a triangular relationship ever really existed, Canada was very much a junior partner and that, historically, the Canadian Government has had little real influence on Anglo-American relations.² Indeed, even Brebner himself admitted that he had enlarged the role of Canada within the so-called North Atlantic Triangle.³

However, there can be little doubt that something akin to a North Atlantic Triangle has existed in the minds of various Canadian Prime Ministers and, above all, in the mind of the longest-serving holder of that office—William Lyon

Mackenzie King, who occupied the post for all but six years between 1921 and 1948. As a leading historian of the Mackenzie King era has put it: “He was a fervent believer, like Sir Robert Borden and so many other Canadians, in the “lynch-pin” theory—the destined role of Canada as the interpreter between the United States and Britain”.⁴ 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”.⁵

Certainly Anglo-American relations were far from easy when Mackenzie King first became Prime Minister and nor did they improve greatly during the remainder of the 1920s. The American rejection of the League of Nations and issues arising out of war debts, prohibition and naval relations all hampered relations between London and Washington. The London Naval agreement of 1930 improved relations significantly but this was soon followed by differences over the Manchurian crisis of 1931 and policy towards Japan. With the onset of the depression in the 1930s relations were also affected by various economic disputes.⁶

However, the late 1930s witnessed the development of what might be termed an Anglo-American rapprochement. This rapprochement consisted largely of a settling of outstanding economic issues between Britain and the United States, such as currency stabilisation, trade relations and war debts. Perhaps its most important feature was the negotiation of an Anglo-American trade agreement in 1938. But it also involved better political relations between London and Washington and especially between Franklin Roosevelt and Neville Chamberlain, despite the latter’s policy of appeasement and the controversy surrounding the Munich agreement in September 1938. The rapprochement was also aided by a very significant Royal Visit to the USA in 1939 and led to the partial repeal of the American neutrality laws in November 1939, shortly after the outbreak of war.⁷

The purpose of this paper is therefore to evaluate the role played by Canada in these developments and the extent to which Mackenzie King was able to fulfil his aim of acting as an interpreter between Britain and the United States. An examination of the diplomacy between Ottawa, London and Washington in the years from 1935, when Mackenzie King was re-elected as Prime Minister, to the outbreak of war in 1939, provides ample evidence of how far a meaningful North Atlantic Triangle actually existed in this vital period. However, it is first necessary to provide some background to the economic problems of the

early 1930s and to the Ottawa agreements of 1932 that were negotiated while Mackenzie King was out of office.

Following the onset of the Great Depression, Britain and the United States—and, indeed, Canada—had each taken steps to defend their ailing economies. The Republican Administration of Herbert Hoover resorted to a highly restrictive trade policy that culminated in the notorious Smoot-Hawley tariff act of 1930, which set US tariffs at record high levels. The British Government, led by Ramsey MacDonald, was forced off the gold standard in August 1931—a humiliation that was very largely blamed on American economic policy. In August 1932, partly in retaliation against American policy, MacDonald's Government negotiated the Ottawa trade agreements with Canada—led by Richard Bennett—and the other Dominions based on the principle of Imperial Preference.⁸

The advent of Franklin Roosevelt as President in March 1933 was welcomed in London as a great improvement on Hoover. But Roosevelt's preoccupation with the New Deal and differences over currency stabilisation, war debts and trade policies undermined the World Economic Conference held in London in July 1933 and Roosevelt's infamous "Bombshell message" to the conference seemed to suggest that he would be as difficult to work with as his Republican predecessor. This was certainly the view of leading members of the British Government, including Neville Chamberlain who was Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1931 to 1937. The British Government's jaundiced view of Roosevelt was confirmed by his apparent collusion over the Johnson War Debt Act of June 1934 which debarred Britain—as well as defaulters such as France—from future American loans. This was despite the President's earlier acceptance of "token payments" made by Britain since 1932.⁹

Partly as a result the British Government, and particularly Neville Chamberlain, seriously contemplated coming to terms with Japan over naval limits in the Far East, despite American opposition. Chamberlain put these views forward in Cabinet in October 1934 arguing that Britain must avoid a simultaneous war in Europe and Far East at all costs. "I recognised that certain aspects of these proposals might not be acceptable to the U.S.A.", he wrote in his Diary, "but I contended that in fact they would do her no harm and in any case I urged that we must not sacrifice our own vital interests to the hope, probably very meagre, of conciliating American opinion".¹⁰

Chamberlain's hopes for better relations with Japan came to nought but they show that at this time he was very far from being a supporter of closer Anglo-

American cooperation. There is little doubt that economic issues between Britain and the United States played a major part in contributing to Chamberlain's disdain for American policy, although this feeling was not limited to the Chancellor. As Norman Davis, a Presidential emissary, wrote to Roosevelt: "This hostility is one of soreness, which began during the Economic Conference and which has reached its full expression as a result of the Johnson Resolution, which they look on as a deliberate slap by the Administration to Great Britain, which was at least paying something, as a worse defaulter than France, which had paid nothing on the debt"¹¹

This situation was naturally of great concern to Sir Ronald Lindsay, the British Ambassador in Washington. On 15 October 1934 he dined alone with William Phillips, the American Under Secretary of State who, incidentally, had been the first American Minister to Ottawa from 1927 to 1930. Both officials agreed that their two Governments were far apart on almost everything. Phillips recorded: "The Ambassador mentioned that the situations in London and Washington were exactly reversed from what they were 15 or 20 years ago when London was most anxious to play ball with Washington. Now, he admitted, the British Government was not in the least interested in playing ball with us, partly because the European situation absorbed them and partly because they had made up their minds that the United States Government was a hopeless proposition to play ball with".¹²

At the end of October 1934, when Anglo-American relations were at their lowest ebb, Roosevelt met with Henry Stimson, the former Secretary of State under Hoover. Roosevelt had kept in touch with Stimson since the early days of his Presidency and was later, in 1940, to appoint him Secretary of War. Roosevelt complained to Stimson that the British Government had been very uncooperative, especially over the Far East. Stimson said that in his opinion Canada was "the key log in the jam". If relations could be improved with Canada this would put a great deal of pressure on London, both generally and in its attitude to Japan. One way to do this, he suggested, would be to negotiate a trade agreement with the Canadian Government. This would be possible under the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of June 1934 and Bennett, the Canadian Prime Minister, seemed anxious for such an agreement.¹³

Roosevelt also said that he had just sent Phillips to Ottawa partly for that reason. This was something of an exaggeration as Phillips did not have trade talks as part of his instructions, as Stimson later discovered.¹⁴ However, Phillips himself was all in favour of an early trade agreement with Canada, not least because the American press was criticising the new trade agreements pro-

gramme for its lack of steam. So far only one agreement—with Cuba—had been signed although negotiations with most of the South American states were in progress. More rapid action was also encouraged by the overwhelming victory of the Democrats in the mid-term elections.¹⁵

Roosevelt's Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, saw trade liberalisation as a key part of American foreign policy. The Trade Agreements Act of 1934 was, for Hull, the essential weapon in achieving what he called "economic disarmament" and even, on occasions, "economic appeasement". Trade agreements, in his view, would promote economic cooperation and expansion and would thereby remove the economic causes of political movements such as nazism and fascism.¹⁶

Trade negotiations were accordingly opened with Canada in December 1934 but they dragged on throughout 1935 as neither side was satisfied with the level of concessions offered by the other.¹⁷ Any agreement was likely to be controversial as it would raise questions about the Ottawa agreements for which Bennett, the Canadian Prime Minister from 1930 to 1935, had been largely responsible. In addition, trade relations with the USA were historically a difficult issue in Canadian politics and more than one Government had fallen as a result of negotiating an agreement with Washington, the defeat of Sir Wilfred Laurier's Government in 1911 being the most recent example of this tendency.¹⁸ No agreement had been reached, therefore, by the time of the Canadian general election in October 1935, which resulted in victory for Mackenzie King and the Liberals.

One of the first things that the new Prime Minister did was to pay a visit to Roosevelt and Hull. He arrived in Washington on 7 November 1935 and was very soon on good terms with the Secretary. Like Hull, Mackenzie King was a firm believer in the economic and political benefits of freer trade. This was less true of Roosevelt, who had something of the horse trader about him, but Mackenzie King helped to persuade the President to agree to further agricultural concessions in return for larger Canadian ones. As a result a US-Canadian trade agreement was rapidly concluded and signed on 15 November.¹⁹ Lindsay reported to London that the Canadian Prime Minister had told him that the agreement had proved possible because Roosevelt had "put his back into it" for the first time.²⁰

There can be little doubt that one reason for Roosevelt's conversion to Hull's trade agreements policy was the support it had received from Mackenzie King and the opportunity it presented for his personal diplomacy. Indeed, as well

as helping to conclude the Canadian-American trade agreement, Mackenzie King's visit was of great significance in establishing a rapport between him and the President. According to Mackenzie King's own account, the President 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. Roosevelt referred to the view that he had "torpedoed" the London Economic Conference in 1933 and said that the British Government had resented his refusal to stabilise the dollar. The two men also discussed the European situation at some length and Roosevelt said he favoured a blockade of Germany by the League of Nations if she became "troublesome" again.²¹

In July 1936 Roosevelt paid a return visit to the Canadian Prime Minister in Quebec and also met Lord Tweedsmuir, the Governor General. According to Mackenzie King's Diary, the three men discussed the worsening international situation in some detail, especially the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and Tweedsmuir suggested that Roosevelt should call a world peace conference. Roosevelt said that a similar idea had already been put to him and that he had thought about a conference of the leading heads of state, including Hitler and Mussolini, but that he could do nothing before the presidential election in November.²²

Mackenzie King's potential significance as a link between the Roosevelt Administration and the British Government can also 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."²³

Mackenzie King also told MacDonald that at the meeting between Tweedsmuir, himself and Roosevelt, the latter had "thrown out the idea of calling a conference of heads of States, including King Edward, Herr Hitler, the President of the French Republic, and others. It seems that President Roosevelt suggested he might call such a conference if he were successful in the American election." Mackenzie King said that he had pointed out the difficulty of calling a conference of heads of state and had asked to be kept informed of any further ideas the President had on the subject.²⁴

Further evidence of Roosevelt's growing interest in the international situation, especially its economic dimension, came during the American Presidential election campaign in 1936. Early in the campaign Roosevelt made an important speech on foreign policy at Chautauqua, New York, in which he underlined the role of the Administration's trade agreements policy. "We do not maintain that a more liberal international trade will stop war but we fear that without a more liberal international trade war is inevitable", he declared.²⁵ Also, in September 1936, the American, British and French Treasuries produced the Tripartite Currency Agreement which agreed on arrangements for the stabilisation of the exchange rates for the dollar, sterling and franc—something that London and Paris had wanted ever since 1933.²⁶ This agreement was obviously an electoral asset, as the British Embassy pointed out, as it helped Roosevelt to counter the claim that he had handicapped international recovery by torpedoing the World Economic Conference in July 1933.²⁷

Roosevelt's landslide re-election in November 1936 was welcomed in London as well as Ottawa. The Foreign Office felt that there was mounting evidence that Roosevelt was again taking a more active interest in international affairs that would help to counter the isolationism of Congress which had resulted in the Neutrality laws of 1935 and 1936.²⁸ One example of this was Roosevelt's idea of an international conference. Apart from the information supplied by Mackenzie King similar news came from Sir Eric Phipps, the British Ambassador in Berlin. On 6 November he cabled London that his American colleague, William Dodd, had told him of a message from Hull in which the Secretary had attributed the President's overwhelming victory partly to the latter's foreign policy which consisted in giving no kind of encouragement to the fascist states and concluding no new commercial agreements with them so long as they continued their present 'gangster-like' methods. He also told Phipps that the President had in mind the summoning of a world peace conference in the following spring. If the gangster powers declined to attend or to give satisfactory undertakings at the conference then the "peace-loving" states should come into close agreement amongst themselves.²⁹

There were mixed views in the Foreign Office about the prospect of an international conference called by Roosevelt. The chief reservation was that it might end up as an embarrassing failure, like the London Economic Conference in 1933. However, the main point was that the President was prepared to become more involved in international affairs, especially in terms of economic issues.³⁰ Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office and previously a leading critic of the President, wrote after the election: "There are signs that something might be made out of Mr Franklin Roosevelt

II who may not be the same man as Mr F. Roosevelt I".³¹ Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, and a strong supporter of closer relations with the United States, was of the same opinion. "It is of the utmost importance that we should lose no opportunity of cooperating with Roosevelt II in every sphere", he wrote.³²

The Foreign Office recognised that the obvious avenue of diplomatic cooperation with the United States was Hull's trade agreements programme. This fact had been underlined in a series of despatches from the British Ambassador in Washington, Sir Ronald Lindsay. He pointed out that the trade agreements policy had been attacked by the Republicans during the 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".³³

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 of the duties on hog products, barley, rice, fresh fruit, dried fruits, canned fruits, tobacco, softwood lumber and leather.³⁴ 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 the 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.³⁵

To make matters worse an announcement was made in Ottawa on 14 January 1937 that a further Anglo-Canadian trade agreement 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."³⁶ 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".³⁷

Hull was, indeed, upset at the idea that the Ottawa agreements were being strengthened just at the time when he was trying to open up American trade with Britain. He spoke to Lindsay on 17 January and complained to the British Ambassador that, according to press reports, Britain and Canada seemed to be moving against the liberalisation of trade in their negotiations for a new agreement by limiting concessions to third parties. He was not only concerned that this would threaten the negotiation of an Anglo-American trade agreement. "That was indeed a matter of importance in his eyes, but it almost faded into insignificance in comparison with the far wider matter of Anglo-American cooperation in all fields where there was work for appeasement to be done and in which efforts of neither Government alone could have their full effect."³⁸

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 1937.³⁹ Runciman had intended to visit Lord Tweedsmuir in Ottawa before going on to Washington but the delicate nature of the Anglo-Canadian trade talks at the start of the year had dissuaded him from doing this.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

On 29 January Lindsay sent London a summary of the position of the Anglo-American trade talks following the Runciman 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 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 the Dominions

with the gravity of the consequences of withholding consent, ie the prevention of economic cooperation and further trade agreements.”⁴²

The Foreign Office was naturally concerned that an Anglo-American trade agreement might be blocked because of the position of the Dominions, especially Canada. In the words of Craigie, the Head of the American Department, “the undiluted Ottawa policy ... is going to cost us the loss of a commercial agreement with the USA, with all that that means in the political field, unless both HMG and the Dominions are prepared to adapt Ottawa to the changed conditions of the present day”. He felt that the future of the Ottawa system and the need for an Anglo-American trade agreement should be given serious consideration at the forthcoming Imperial Conference in London and this was supported by Vansittart and Eden.⁴³

The Imperial Conference due to take place in May 1937 would obviously be an opportunity to gauge Dominion—and Canadian—opinion. Lindsay was of the opinion that the US Government would probably wait to see the outcome of the Conference before making its next move. “Much will depend on the Canadian attitude to allowing a lessening of their preferential margins with the United Kingdom,” he wrote. (47) 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.⁴⁴

The need for progress in the Anglo-American trade negotiations was no doubt one 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 preferences. 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 1935.⁴⁵

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 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.⁴⁶ 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, Runciman's replacement as President of the Board of Trade.⁴⁷

A more positive outcome of the Conference was the impression made upon Mackenzie King by Neville Chamberlain who became Prime Minister in place of Stanley Baldwin while it was taking place. Before the conference the Canadian Prime Minister had been very doubtful about Chamberlain's outlook on world affairs, especially his attitude towards the United States. But while in London he found a very high opinion of the new Prime Minister. On the evening of 15 June Chamberlain, Eden and Malcolm MacDonald, the Colonial Secretary, discussed the European situation with the Dominion partners. 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".⁴⁸

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 Von Neurath, the German Foreign Minister, 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".⁴⁹ 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 admirer of Chamberlain.

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.⁵⁰ In fact, this meeting took place soon after Roosevelt's "Quarantine speech" in Chicago which created something of a sensation in the USA as it suggested that the President was moving away from isolationism.⁵¹ 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. Thus the US government was now 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.⁵²

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 Morrison, the Minister of Agriculture, who was worried about the effect on home agriculture and the political consequences that might follow.⁵³ 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 he accepted the British offers as a basis for formal negotiations for the trade agreement.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

Thus progress was at last being made towards an Anglo-American trade agreement but events in Europe were moving much faster than the trade agreement programme would allow. In March 1938, the *Anschluss* between Germany and Austria altered the balance of power in Europe and proved a direct threat to Czechoslovakia, with its Sudeten German minority. As 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.⁵⁶ Certainly Mackenzie King was alarmed by the German move but 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".⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸ Runciman, of course, was well known to Roosevelt because of his visit to see the 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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰

While Runciman was in Prague suffering from the heat and 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. While 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.⁶¹ 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 he might be able to visit Washington when the trade agreements between Britain, the United States and Canada were eventually signed.⁶²

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, essentially endorsed Chamberlain's policy, not least by sending him a telegram with the words "Good man" at the height of the crisis. Roosevelt was therefore much more sympathetic towards Chamberlain's policy of appeasement than American public opinion in general, or the State Department, and Mackenzie King's support for Chamberlain may well have been an important factor in this.⁶³

Needless to say, the Canadian Prime Minister 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".⁶⁴ He disagreed with Chamberlain's critics in Britain, the United States and the Dominions and was sure he had done the right thing in supporting him.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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".⁶⁷ When the Munich agreement was announced he immediately sent congratulatory telegrams to Chamberlain and Roosevelt.⁶⁸

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 Pierrepoint Moffat, the Head of the European Division of the State Department.⁶⁹ 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".⁷⁰

While in Washington for the signing of the Canadian-American trade agreement, Mackenzie King was able to have yet another exchange of views with Roosevelt and Hull. First of all, after the signing ceremony and speeches, there was a general conversation in the White House Library, including Lindsay and, for a time, Sumner Welles, the Under Secretary of State. Most of the conversation was about the European situation and Roosevelt said that Germany was seeking to gain a strong foothold in South America. The United States must be prepared to defend herself, he continued, because with the advent of air power she was no longer beyond reach.⁷¹

Roosevelt developed this point later with Mackenzie King and went into detail about his new defence programme, announced to Congress in October. He complained that Britain and France had been "appallingly blind" over air defence and had let Germany get too far ahead. He said that 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.⁷²

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".⁷³ In similar vein, Francis Sayre, the Assistant Secretary of State in charge of the trade agreements programme, described the agreement with Britain as "the effective reply to the defeatism which appeared in some quarters after the Munich settlement".⁷⁴ But, as Roosevelt remarked, the trade agreements programme was "just too goddammed slow. The world is marching too fast".⁷⁵

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 envelope 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 her resources on self-defence. He warned against the illusion of neutrality by legislation and said that 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".⁷⁶

The *New York Times* felt that the President's message to Congress marked a turning point in the Administration's foreign policy.⁷⁷ Victor Mallet, Lindsay's deputy in Washington, pointed out that Roosevelt's main aim was to "educate" American public opinion away from isolationism.⁷⁸ 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".⁷⁹ And Mackenzie King also wrote enthusiastically about the President's address in his Diary.⁸⁰

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.⁸¹ These guarantees were a reversal of British policy since the Great War. Mackenzie King referred to Chamberlain's action as "a curious sudden shift".⁸² But Roosevelt favoured the stronger line now being taken in London. He told Sir Arthur Willert, a British friend, that he expected the Neutrality laws to be amended in the interests of the democracies. "The President brushed aside the Johnson Act as not mattering owing to the way in which money seeps through barriers".⁸³

The emerging rapprochement between Britain and the United States was further strengthened by the Royal Visit to Canada and the United States in June 1939, which owed much to Mackenzie King's good relationship with Roosevelt and his unselfish agreement to the original Royal Visit to Canada being extended to take in the USA.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ The visit took place in June 1939 and Mackenzie King accompanied the Royal Family to Hyde Park, Roosevelt's family home. During the visit Roosevelt, George VI and Mackenzie King took the opportunity of exchanging 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".⁸⁶

Despite the Royal Visit, which was well-received by American public opinion, Congress refused to repeal the arms embargo section of the Neutrality laws in favour of Britain and France.⁸⁷ The final blow came on 12 July when the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted by 12 to 11 to defer consideration of any revision of the Neutrality laws until the following session.⁸⁸ However, 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.⁸⁹ And, in June 1939, a cotton-rubber barter deal 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.⁹⁰

Along the same lines, steps were being taken to facilitate British purchases in the USA 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 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 USA without delay to capitalise on American goodwill.⁹¹ This was agreed by the British Cabinet on 28 August.⁹²

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, rather 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".⁹³

The repeal of the arms embargo was, in many ways, the culmination of the Anglo-American rapprochement that had developed since 1935. This rapprochement had included the tripartite currency agreement of September 1936, the gradual decline of war debts as a contentious issue and the trade agreement of November 1938. It had also included Roosevelt's tacit support for Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, especially during the Munich crisis, and the Royal Visit of June 1939. Finally, it had involved preparations for war such as the cotton-rubber barter deal of June 1939 and the establishment of a British purchasing mission in Washington (as well as Ottawa) by the time war broke out.

What was Mackenzie King's contribution to this Anglo-American rapprochement? Was the role of mediator a figment of his imagination or was Canada, as Stimson put it in October 1934, "the key log in the jam"? Clearly the return of Mackenzie King to power in November 1935 proved to be an important factor in relations between London and the Washington from that time onwards. Concerned about the deteriorating international situation and having little faith in the League of Nations he 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 regular contact and meetings with Roosevelt and Hull meant that he had ample opportunity to put across his support of appeasement. He also met Chamberlain—notably at the Imperial Conference in May 1937—and other British ministers and officials and was able to convey to them Roosevelt's support for the democracies. Thus he was 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 Tory, had a somewhat distant and strained relationship.

In specific terms, Mackenzie King's most obvious contribution to better relations between London and Washington in this period was his role in facilitating an Anglo-American trade agreement between 1935 and 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 to this end. But, following the Canadian-American agreement of 1935 he was prepared to see Ottawa make further tariff concessions, as part of wider package, in order that an Anglo-American trade agreement could be achieved. The importance of such an agreement from Washington's point of view can hardly be exaggerated and had it not been finalised it would have been much 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 that the United States would "not stand idly by" if Canada was threatened by a hostile power and Mackenzie King's attitude therefore had to be taken into account. Similarly, Mackenzie King 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 quite unpopular with the State Department and American public opinion and it could have led to a damaging split between London and Washington if Roosevelt had opposed it.

Thirdly, Mackenzie King played a very significant part in the Royal Visit to the USA in June 1939. It was he who alerted Roosevelt to the planned visit when they met at Queen's University in August 1938 and this prompted Roosevelt to invite George VI to the USA as well and, specifically, to 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 far as the North Atlantic Triangle is concerned, the evidence from the period 1935 to 1939 suggests that there was a recognisable triangular diplomatic relationship between Mackenzie King, Roosevelt and Chamberlain that played an important part in the foreign policies of the three nations in the lead up to the Second World War. Clearly Canada was the junior partner in this triangle but for a number of reasons her Prime Minister was a very significant figure. Firstly, trade was a major issue in Anglo-American relations, especially after the Ottawa agreements, and Canada was central to any modification of Imperial Preference. Secondly, the deteriorating international situation and the growing prospect of another world war meant that both London and Washington were keen to woo the Canadian leader. Thirdly, the issue of appeasement and the opportunity provided by the Royal Visit enabled Mackenzie King to play the role of interpreter very effectively.

If the North Atlantic Triangle has ever existed as a medium of diplomacy it was in the years 1935–1939 and, in this period, it helped to lay the foundations not only of an Anglo-American rapprochement but also of the so-called “special relationship” that still exists today. Ironically, of course, the development of this relationship during and since the Second World War has been one of the main reasons for the decline of the North Atlantic Triangle. Closer relations between London and Washington have rendered Canadian “mediation” increasingly unnecessary and irrelevant. In September 1939 Roosevelt began his now famous wartime correspondence with Churchill. The direct link that was thus established reduced Mackenzie King’s role as an “interpreter” between the American President and the British Prime Minister and, since the War, such a role has gradually disappeared. However, there were few signs of this transformation in October 1934 when Anglo-American relations had deteriorated alarmingly and, in Stimson’s words, Canada was “the key log in the jam”.

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