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The Red Scare

Canada searches for communists during the height of Cold War tensions

At the height of the Cold War, Canada joined its southern neighbour in an effort to unearth homegrown communists, real or imagined.



Minister of External Affairs Lester B. Pearson cautioned against succumbing "to the black madness of the witch hunt" when Canada began to track down homegrown communists in the early 1950s. (National Archives of Canada, PA-126393)

Communism was a dirty word in Canada and the western world after the Second World War. The common view was that communists were planning to overthrow democracy. Therefore anyone with communist leanings, or even progressive opinions should be under suspicion.

In 1955, the jet aircraft manufacturer Canadair published an ad revealing typical anti-

communist sentiments of the time:

"Everywhere are evidences of the continuous underground, cancerous movements of Communism ... Only eternal vigilance can protect us against Communism and its infiltration into our

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way of life."

In the United States, Senator Joseph McCarthy led the communist witch-hunts in the 1950s. He convinced many Americans that members of the Communist Party had infiltrated the United States government.

McCarthy's unfounded charge sparked a frantic search for "Reds" under every American bed. A parade of the nation's actors, writers, journalists and labour leaders appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee, to be interrogated about political affiliation and beliefs.

In Canada, Minister of External Affairs Lester B. Pearson cautioned against following in American footsteps.

"Let us by all means remove the traitors from positions of trust, but in doing so, I hope we may never succumb to the black madness of the witch hunt."

On the whole Canada proceeded forcefully but more discreetly than the Americans. Ottawa set up a sweeping system of security checks. In one year alone, 70,000 checks were done. The RCMP quietly investigated civil servants, scientists, university professors, and trade unionists, seeking out political or sexual nonconformity.

In Quebec, Premier Maurice Duplessis was a vociferous anti-communist crusader.

"The world is in a crisis more dangerous and evil than the most grave and destructive of diseases. Nowhere else but in Quebec is there a law protecting people against the vile cocaine of communism. "



Premier Maurice Duplessis introduced the Quebec Padlock Act in 1937 to give police the power to seal off any property where communist literature or activity was suspected. (National Archives of Canada, C-031052)

The Quebec Padlock law gave police the power to seal off any property where communist literature or activity was suspected.

Danielle Dionne was a Communist. She and her family became a target for Quebec's Red Squads.

"When I saw five strapping provincial police enter my home, I

experienced an instinctive moment of fear, but I quickly realized that there was nothing I could do but remain silent. They rummaged through drawers and bookcases, removing literature and books. We had to change apartments a few times, because of the raids. "

A Maclean's magazine columnist described the paranoid atmosphere of the time:

"If a housewife in Ottawa hears a knock on her door, it can be one of only two people. The milkman or the RCMP".

The anti-communist zeal extended beyond the government ranks.

Gordon Martin was a British Columbia man who served with the Royal Canadian Air Force for four years during the war. He received an honourable discharge and went to the University of British Columbia where he graduated with a degree in law in 1948.

In his application to the bar, the law society asked Martin about his politics. He had been a member of the Communist Party since 1938, but responded that queries about his political affiliation violated his freedom of thought and association.

The benchers rejected Martin's application for membership in the society, which made it impossible for him to practice law in B.C., citing his candidacy in the Labour Progressive Party.

Martin found work with a logging company driving a caterpillar, and later worked in a sawmill. Eventually he set up a television repair shop in Nanaimo. He died in 1974. Twenty-four years later the B.C. Law Society apologized to the Martin family.

Canada's hunt for communists began to lose momentum in the mid-1950s as the anti-Communist fervour died down throughout the West. Senator Joseph McCarthy was discredited in the United States after he directed his anti-communist attacks on the American army. In the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin died in 1952 and was replaced by the more moderate leader Nikita Khrushchev.

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