The essential lubricant for a free society is tolerance. This, however, does not necessarily apply to all societies. There are obvious examples of states which are held together without the least regard for tolerance. It does apply, however, to all states where there is government by consent. Canada, where various groups live and work together within the boundaries of a national state, is a good example of this principle in operation. This country exists on the assumption that, as far as is humanly possible, the interests of no group—racial, geographic, economic, religious, or political—will prevail at the expense of any other group. We have committed ourselves to the principle that by compromise and adjustment we can work out some sort of balance of interests which will make it possible for the members of all groups to live side by side without any one of them arbitrarily imposing its will on any other. It is my belief that this is the only basis upon which Canada can possibly exist as a nation, and that any attempt to govern the country on any other basis would destroy it. In these circumstances, the basic quality of tolerance in our national character is of the first importance.

Of almost equal importance for our national welfare, and indeed arising out of the practice of tolerance, is the avoidance of extreme policies. This is often called walking in the middle of the road. This of course is not so easy as people usually think. It imposes both self-restraint and discipline, even when we assume that the traffic is all going in the one direction. Anyone who chooses to travel in the middle of the road must not deny the use of either side of it to persons who prefer to walk there. He condemns himself, therefore, to accept during the journey the constant jostling of companions on either side. This middle ground is, I think, becoming more and more difficult to maintain, and the temptation to abandon it is constantly increasing, especially in the face of the road blocks thrown up by unfriendly fellow travellers. I do not wish here to criticize those who choose other ground upon which to walk, or to question the basis of their choice. I wish only to make a strong plea for the preservation of this middle position in our national life. Paradoxically, it is only in this way that the existence of many of those on each side can also be preserved.
If the middle group is eliminated, less tolerant elements fall under the irresistible temptation to try to capture the whole roadway. When the middle of the road is no longer occupied firmly by stable and progressive groups in the community, it is turned into a parade ground for those extremist forces who would substitute goose-stepping for walking. All others are driven to hide, disconsolate and powerless, in the hedges, ditches, and culverts.

How can the meaning of the middle way in our free society be described in a few words? What principle does it stand for? Where does it lead in practice? Is it merely the political line of least resistance along which drift those without the courage of their convictions, or simply without convictions? It is, or should be, far more than that. The central quality of this approach is the stress which it always lays on human values, the integrity and worth of the individual in society. It stands for the emancipation of the mind as well as for personal freedom and well-being. It is irrevocably opposed to the shackling limitations of rigid political dogma, to political oppression of, and to economic exploitation by, any part of the community. It detests the abuse of power either by the state or by private individuals and groups. It respects first of all a person for what he is, not who he is. It stands for his right to manage his own affairs, when they are his own; to hold his own convictions and speak his own mind. It aims at equality of opportunity. It maintains that effort and reward should not be separated and it values highly initiative and originality. It does not believe in lopping off the tallest ears of corn in the interests of comfortable conformity.

The middle way presents no panacea for the easy attainment of general welfare, but it accepts the responsibility of government to assist in protecting and raising the living standards of all, and, if necessary, to take bold and well-planned action to help maintain economic activity for that purpose.

The middle way, unlike extremism in political doctrine, has positive faith in the good will and common sense of most people in most circumstances. It relies on their intelligence, their will to co-operate, and their sense of justice. From its practitioners, it requires determination and patience, tolerance and restraint, the discipline of the mind rather than the jackboot, and the underlying belief that human problems, vast and complicated though they may be, are capable of solution.
Lester Bowles Pearson (1897–1972) was, successively, a teacher of history at the University of Toronto, a brilliant civil servant in Canada’s Department of External Affairs, and Liberal prime minister of Canada from 1963 to 1968. He was also twice president of the United Nations Assembly, the only Canadian ever to hold this prestigious position. Because of his role in bringing about a resolution to the Suez Crisis in 1956, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

lubricant: a substance used to reduce friction between moving parts; used here metaphorically. (para. 1)

tolerance: a fair and objective attitude towards views and opinions which differ from one’s own. (para. 1)

arbitrary: random. (para. 1)

jostling: roughly bumping and pushing up against someone else. (para. 2)

paradoxically: in a way that seems contradictory, but which is true or real. (para. 2)

goose-stepping: a military march step that has come to be associated in popular culture with repressive military regimes, particularly with Germany and Italy during World War II. Allied propaganda during the war used goose-stepping as the symbol of blind obedience. (para. 2)

disconsolate: beyond consolation; desolate. (para. 2)

emancipation: the struggle for rights and equalities, particularly of less powerful groups. (para. 3)

irrevocably: impossible to take back. (para. 3)

political dogma: a political ideology laid out as unquestionable truth. (para. 3)

panacea: cure-all; a remedy for all ills. (para. 4)

jackboot: aggressive, often arbitrary and cruel tactics. (para. 5)
In his essay, Pearson offers a summary of his political philosophy. He uses description and metaphor to persuade his reader of the importance for Canada of the values of tolerance and cooperation. He goes on to show how adopting these values will make Canada a better country.

The central metaphor Pearson uses is that of the road. He characterizes tolerance as “walking in the middle of the road.” The entire piece is an extended use of the metaphor.

Pearson’s argument is structured by cause and effect. Abandoning the middle of the road leaves it open to those on the edges who would take the whole road for themselves.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Who is Pearson’s audience? Why?
2. How does Pearson’s argument in this essay relate to the Canadian image of a multicultural mosaic?
3. How does Pearson’s use of diction distinguish desirable from undesirable Canadian traits?
4. What does “free society” mean to you?
5. What words would you use to describe your approach to tolerance?
6. Write a cause-and-effect essay explaining how the practice of tolerance, in Pearson’s view, will create a particularly Canadian society.
7. Is “walking in the middle of the road,” as Pearson describes tolerance, always admirable and desirable? Does the “middle way” preclude a passionate existence? Is the “middle way” that Pearson advocates a path that you would follow? Discuss your response in an essay that integrates subjective and objective elements.
8. If “the basic quality of tolerance” constitutes the Canadian character, as Pearson argues, what is the basic quality that defines the American character? Write a cause-and-effect essay comparing Canadian and American approaches to tolerance.