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THE STANFIELD ERA: A POLITICAL ANALYSIS

THROUGHOUT ITS ONE-HUNDRED-YEAR HISTORY, the provincial Conservative party in Nova Scotia has had to contend with many difficulties. Not the least of these is that of losing its leaders to the federal party. As Professor Murray Beck succinctly notes, "Paradoxically it was the continued success of the federal Conservatives which helped initially to establish the dominant position of the Liberal party."¹ Beginning with Charles Tupper in 1867, leading Bluenose Tories have had the habit of forsaking the provincial field for federal politics. On three occasions when they did manage to secure the services of able men—Thompson in the 1880s, Rhodes in the 1920s, and Stanfield in the 1940s—each has left to try his hand at Ottawa.² Robert L. Stanfield, however, is unique in that he has left only after firmly establishing the party over a twenty-year period as leader. He alone has led the provincial party to other than Pyrrhic victories.

For the greater part of the history of Nova Scotia, the Conservative party has been weak. Not only the Confederation issue, but also the manner in which Charles Tupper brought the province into the Union, resulted in producing a strong anti-Union and hence anti-Conservative bias. The initial swing to the Reform or Liberal party, combined with good Liberal leadership and the subsequent Conservative lack of such leadership, culminated in an almost one-party political system. From 1867 to 1956, the Liberal party controlled the province for all but a dozen years (1878-1882 and 1925-1933). Furthermore, the Conservative victories of 1878, 1925, and 1928 were all but won by default, each in a time of severe economic crisis, and after a short tenure of office the Conservative party went into long periods of opposition.

Throughout most of this period, the Conservative party managed to form some semblance of an opposition, but by 1945 it had hit rock bottom. Unable to elect any members in the election of that year, it was reduced to an extra-parliamentary organization. When the party leader, Leonard Fraser, resigned the following year, there ensued some serious soul searching among

the few party activists. An attempt to convene a leadership convention was forestalled in May of 1947 because the party had to contest a provincial by-election and, according to George Nowlan, then president of the provincial association, it was in no shape to perform both tasks.

By this time, however, young Robert Stanfield and a group of Young Conservatives concerned with re-activating the party had aroused sufficient enthusiasm for Nowlan to call a special meeting to delineate the role of the Stanfield group. While the question of leadership was postponed once again, Stanfield was chosen to head a committee on policy and organization. By November he had expended considerable time and energy in canvassing the province in an effort to create the framework of an organization and draft a policy programme. Having been selected at this time to lead the party association, Stanfield reiterated his earlier view on leadership. "A dynamic leader", he said, "would be a great help. A poor choice would, however, finish us. It is surely better to try to drive ahead without a leader until we see the man we want."³ Just a year later, after he had conducted a vigorous assault on the lethargic disposition of many provincial Conservatives and made a good start in re-organizing the party apparatus, a leadership convention was assembled on his own urging because of the expectation of an early election. Having solidified his position in the party through his activity on all fronts, he had little difficulty in defeating C. Fred Fraser, a former Halifax newspaperman, then residing in Ottawa. In two years Stanfield had moved to the leadership of the Conservative party, and, in retrospect, it would appear that his taking over of the party was as smoothly accomplished as his subsequent provincial success.

His task was hardly enviable. Yet in his first two electoral contests he managed to increase party membership in the Legislative Assembly, first to eight and then to twelve, while the popular vote for the Tories rose from 33.5 per cent to 39.2 per cent and then to 43.4 per cent. Although this was an improvement, his first two battles were hardly smashing successes. Several factors were pointing to a more promising future and, indeed, in October of 1956, Stanfield succeeded in leading his party to victory. An examination of the more salient factors that brought about the Stanfield era will demonstrate the two chief characteristics of this period, his political style or approach and his political image.

The first and perhaps the most crucial factor was the death of Angus L. Macdonald, a leader as successful and as popular as Stanfield would later become. This was one of the principal reasons why the Conservatives were

obliged to be constructive. The difficulties that would have beset the Conservative party had they alienated loyal Macdonald supporters might have forestalled the rise of Stanfield. Once he had gone, the problem of uniting the Liberal party following a religious split over the question of his successor could not but harm the provincial Liberals.

Secondly, the federal political scene was less detrimental to the provincial Conservatives than it had been in previous years. The point to be emphasized is that national politics were kept out of the provincial battle since provincial issues were dominant. If external influences are to be considered important at all, then perhaps the one significant aspect of Canadian life was the relative prosperity since World War II of various other parts of the country *vis-à-vis* Nova Scotia, a matter much publicized by the Conservative party to illustrate the backward position of the provincial economy.⁴

The fact that it had now been over twenty years since the last Conservative government held office was a third possible factor. During this period there had come of age a new generation of Nova Scotians who had not themselves experienced Tory rule. Obviously the possibility of such an administration would seem less fearful to them than to their elders. Thus the process of political socialization during a period of one-party domination can have the effect of eliminating part of the repellent image of a minority party since there is no first-hand exposure to its failings.

Nevertheless, while the Liberal party had not only grown old but had also permitted divisions to appear in its ranks on the crucial level of religion, the Conservatives had undergone an obvious change for the better. The competent job of Stanfield in the Legislative Assembly and his establishment of a formidable party organization with a re-established headquarters gave to loyal party supporters a sense of promise that had been dormant for quite some time. Moreover, the band-wagon effect of this new enthusiasm ensured a stable base of Conservative support among those traditionally disposed to the party, especially that portion that may have been inclined to stray because of Liberal supremacy.

In the field of practical politics the party's new leader demonstrated considerable ability. His party's campaign techniques gave evidence of its efficient organization, and his electoral strategy attested to his appreciation and understanding, not only of the Nova Scotia electorate but also of modern methods of exposure and persuasion. In the three electoral contests of 1949, 1953, and 1956, the Stanfield party continually reiterated its policy on specific "position" issues such as provincial finances, highways, and the lack of new

industry. But it refrained for the most part from focusing on issues of "style", such as leadership images (especially in 1949 and 1953 when Macdonald was their opponent), party histories or other tactics designed to reinforce party preferences.⁵ This, of course, is essential, for having already mustered a winning coalition, the incumbent party or candidate normally benefits from any attempts to resurrect past or latent biases.

Following his success in 1956, Stanfield undertook to fulfil his party proposals and thereby perpetuate the "position" issues that he felt to be important. While no doubt sincere in his conviction that this was the road to progress for Nova Scotia, the Premier was also developing an electoral appeal. His establishment of Industrial Estates Limited and voluntary economic planning and his provision of increased expenditures on highways and education not only coincided with his ideas on provincial growth but also maintained the support that he had acquired as a result of these "position" issues. In other words, a voter who switched his allegiance in 1956, or for that matter at any time since 1949, because of the Stanfield policy on industrial development, could still defend his decision to support the Conservatives on this policy regardless of whether he may have succumbed to the Stanfield image.

To facilitate matters for the Conservative party, the Liberals suffered yet another division in the early 1960s when an urban-rural rupture took place in the selection of Earl Urquhart to lead the party. Not that the party was in any sense ready to challenge the Stanfield government, for it was still reacting to the Premier in a bewildered fashion, unable to decide whether to oppose him or his policies or both. Yet the new disunity certainly militated against their constructing a more plausible strategy.

By 1967, the Liberals had a new leader in Gerald Regan and with at least some faint signs of enthusiasm the party set out to strengthen its position by evading the "style" issue of Stanfield himself, by presenting its policy on definite "position" issues, such as the removal of the property tax for education and the establishment of labour-intensive industry, and by nominating candidates, for example municipal councillors, who had previously exhibited some popular appeal. This strategy not only failed but even backfired as Stanfield pulled the rug from under the Liberals by converting their "position" proposals into "style" issues. With respect to their own platform the Conservatives, in the words of Professor Beck, "buried [it] . . . almost as soon as they unveiled it".⁶ On Stanfield's initiative, the debate became concerned with the question of the "responsible nature" of the Liberal platform, and any

headway that the opposition may have made was forestalled as the Stanfield party pressed its image of efficient and responsible government on an electorate faced with the dubious proposals of the Liberals as their only alternative.

The weaknesses of the Liberals were not, however, the sole reason for the rise of the Premier's popularity. Since 1956, he had managed to maintain party organization at a high level of efficiency while simultaneously promoting individual participation and retaining cohesion. Moreover, once he had succeeded in wresting the reins of power from the Liberals, he had attained the means of strengthening the position of his party through the spoils of government, something his Conservative predecessors had difficulty in doing. While in the mind of the public his government succeeded in fulfilling his electoral promises, the Premier also was afforded a good deal of favourable publicity for any progress in the province even if he had little direct connection with the particular development. Indeed the "New Nova Scotia" became synonymous with Premier Stanfield and each additional step increased his prestige. Everything about him permitted him to project an image of integrity and honesty devoid of any suspicion of mishandling the public trust. While not neglecting the interests of the Conservative party or its followers, he was able to escape criticism for abuse of patronage, a phenomenon that attests to his successful and seemingly fair allocation of public rewards.

His approach to politics, as exemplified in his early emphasis on "position" issues and his later use of "style" issues when the opportunity presented itself, explains the development and employment of his public image. It is difficult to say exactly when the "party of industrial expansion" became the "party of integrity and honesty", but the differences between the campaigns of 1960 and of 1963 are clear-cut. There should be no confusion, however, between the Stanfield *image* and Stanfield's *style* of politics. To a great extent they determined each other, but they were not one and the same. Stanfield and his political managers were more accountable for his style of politics inasmuch as it was not determined by situational factors. Yet, so long as Stanfield had to confront Macdonald, the possibility of raising "style" issues was greatly limited. The political strategists were much less responsible for his public image. In this respect the *projection* of him was, needless to say, of considerable concern, but the actual *perception* of the Conservative leader belonged to the electorate. A good example of the distinction between these two variables, and yet their reciprocal influence, could be found in the 1967 provincial contest in which the Conservative campaign centred almost exclusively on the Premier. Based on the obvious assumption that the electorate's

perception of the Stanfield image was extremely favourable, those responsible for the strategy of the party paraded the "Stanfield government" incessantly before the public. While this style of "one-man" politics was certainly designed to take advantage of the Premier's popularity, it also reinforced the leader's image as well as further projecting it to those not counted among the faithful. Thus to play "style" politics successfully presents one with the opportunity to take even further advantage of the increased perception of an image, whether it be of a party or of a personality.

Hence throughout his era in provincial politics, Stanfield not only managed to stay in power with ever-increasing popularity by developing an image found attractive by many Nova Scotians, but he also employed various styles of politics designed to complement and extend this very image. Having combined his personality with political, administrative, and organizational ability he not only performed well but emerged the winner. But the all-important question concerns the nature of his success. Was it merely personal or was he able to bring about a definite re-alignment of political forces for his party?

The long reign of the Liberal party in Nova Scotia, maintained for reasons of history, good leadership, and good fortune, enabled the party to retain a majority coalition of partisan attachments. Except for the deviating periods of 1878 to 1882 and 1925 to 1933, the provincial Liberals could count on a great deal of support from the Catholic minority, the lower socio-economic groups in general, together with a sizable contingent of upper-class and better-educated Protestants. Political affiliation has been an important aspect of life among Nova Scotians and, while little in the way of systematic research has been done, the significance of these traditional biases has been well appreciated by provincial politicians. Insofar as the sociological environment reinforces the continuation of these prejudices, the very nature of the provincial society with its relatively low social mobility has favoured the historically preferred Liberal party.

Moreover, the historical factors which were responsible for the supremacy of the Liberal party, besides producing these political cleavages in the provincial electorate, were supplemented by psychological forces that seemed to produce an eternal *status quo* in provincial politics. "The electorate was persuaded by sheer repetition", as Professor Beck has written, "that Conservative leadership was inherently deficient and that Conservative governments could do little but harm. Liberal governments nothing but good."⁷

It has already been pointed out that the two pre-Stanfield interludes

since Confederation were deviations from the norm. A group of American psephologists, in an attempt at classifying electoral contests, define a 'deviating' election as one in which

the basic division of partisan loyalties is not seriously disturbed, but the attitude forces on the vote are such as to bring about the defeat of the majority party. After the personalities or events that deflected these forces from what we would expect on the basis of party have disappeared from the scene, the political balance returns to a level that more closely reflects the underlying division of partisan attachments. A deviating election is thus a temporary reversal that occurs during a period when one or the other party holds a clear advantage in the long-term preferences of the electorate.⁸

In 1878 and in 1925 the severe economic conditions coupled with other minor factors culminated in Liberal downfalls, but the nature of these forces was not sufficiently long-range nor intense enough to bring about more than a temporary shift in partisan commitments. With a return to normality the Liberal coalition was restored and maintained.

One could not say that there was anything approaching a political crisis in 1956 unless the religious cleavage was more serious than it appeared to be. Hence the change that took place must be viewed as a deviation, caused by a combination of forces at a time when the intensity of traditional preferences was at a low ebb. The total vote was lower than in 1953 when Macdonald ran his last election, and the passing of the popular Premier undoubtedly affected the degree of party attachment for a number of Liberals. Not only was there the loss of his personal appeal, but the Liberals were split on religious lines. Furthermore, the new leader, Henry Hicks, had not yet acquired many of the "father image" characteristics of his predecessor. The Liberal party, being the governing party, could not place too great a stress on novel "position" issues, for this would appear to be a slight on the record of Macdonald. And, where it did try to create the impression of having definite plans for the province, these were considered less than novel from a party that had been in power for twenty-three years. An opposition party usually encounters a certain amount of difficulty in projecting its proposals as contingent only on its gaining power, but often a governing party is confronted with an even more formidable task in endeavouring to overcome what recent jargon would describe as a "credibility gap". Saddled with these two limitations arising from the political situation, the leader of the Liberal party could not

place too great stress on "position" issues without appearing to be dissatisfied with the situation that his government and party had created, and he could not hopefully indulge to any great extent in issues of "style" when the creator of the "style" had passed away.

Under Stanfield, the Conservatives succeeded in a manner not unlike that of the Liberals under Fielding, Murray, and Macdonald. Party organization remained efficient, effective, and enthusiastic. The government progressed, in the minds of the electorate, and there existed a strong consensus behind the "New Nova Scotia" of Premier Stanfield. In 1960, the approach of the Conservatives, while perhaps more confident, was similar to their appeal in 1956. By 1963 a change was noticeable, and in 1967 their political style was reminiscent of Liberal party appeals under Macdonald. From all indications, Stanfield would seem to have brought about a definite re-alignment of political preferences. Roman Catholics and lower-income groups supported him; his policies and general handling of questions of government brought no significant dissent from the younger members of the electorate nor from the supposedly more sophisticated section. He was not without opposition, but there appeared to be no major crystallization of group discontent. This was attested to by the failure of the opposition parties to come up with even adequate "position" issues designed to solidify a sizable portion of the electorate.

The position, moreover, of the Halifax *Chronicle-Herald*, especially in its extremely favourable coverage of the Premier in all his undertakings, political and governmental, both in the province and outside, could not but help to project the Stanfield image. Provincial critics may have argued that the paper was still politically the old Tory mouthpiece, but without meaningful opposition its influence, especially in ordinary news reporting, was both persuasive and subtle. That the Halifax paper eschewed party politics in the late 1940s and early 1950s probably helped Stanfield, since each of his predecessors had often found it a millstone around his neck.⁹ By the early 1960s, however, its attitude was undoubtedly beneficial to the Conservatives.

It might be argued, nevertheless, that the former political alignments were in abeyance because of the dominant personal appeal of Stanfield and that they will reappear once he has left the provincial scene. That the local government was more inclined to present itself as the "Stanfield Government" rather than as the "Conservative Government" lends some credence to this line of argument.¹⁰ While the Liberal party in the past had more than its share of one-man domination, the party bias in its favour was clearly present. Nevertheless the Nova Scotian political society would seem to evince certain

traits of a "subject" culture, in that there exists a high frequency of deference towards government authority (or just the opposite). The result is either a passive affection or a passive dislike in terms of participation.¹¹ The "father" image that has been attributed to the four most successful Nova Scotian premiers would seem to be evidence of a "subject" culture. The lethargy exhibited by provincial opposition parties and their supporters, especially during the long periods of a Conservative minority and today in the Liberal party, coupled with the almost moral legitimacy surrounding the established governing party and its leader, both give evidence of such a state of affairs. With Robert Stanfield removed one step from the provincial scene, this deference may continue, at least temporarily, if his successor bears the imprint of his blessing. Needless to say, it will require more than this touch of "mystic" to make it permanent, but in itself it would be a definite advantage. It is difficult to speculate on events of the past, but the treatment accorded to the alleged Angus L. Macdonald favourite, Harold Connolly, may have erased this very advantage for the Liberal party in 1954.

Yet the process of political socialization, whereby environmental forces shape one's perception and biases, is difficult to determine without sophisticated investigation. Almost a dozen years of Tory success may have altered many of the former political alignments. Hence, rather than holding them in abeyance while waiting for a return of more traditional preferences, it may have rearranged them, albeit in a somewhat different form, along the lines of a Conservative attachment. This question is more than academic, since an understanding of the electorate, even if intuitive, is a prerequisite to any Liberal return to power. Aside from its obvious disadvantages, the Liberal party in Nova Scotia for the past two elections has evinced a good deal of political naïveté, something once supposedly the sole possession of the student of politics. Yet predictions belong to the pundit, and the analyst should be content to say that the provincial career of Robert Stanfield in a province of strong traditional biases, the majority of which did not point in his direction, shows a good deal of political awareness and understanding.

NOTES

1. J. M. Beck, *The Government of Nova Scotia*, Toronto, 1957, p. 158.
2. Thompson did go to the provincial bench for a short period before returning to political life.
3. *Nova Scotia Progressive Conservative Association Minutes*, Party Headquarters, Halifax, Vol. I, p. 309.

4. For Stanfield's comments on the increased prosperity of New Brunswick and Newfoundland in contrast to Nova Scotia's lack of development, see *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, Oct. 13, 1956.
5. For an examination of "position" issues versus "style" issues, see Lewis Froman's interesting and clever article, "A Realistic Approach to Campaign Strategies and Tactics", in M. Jennings and L. Zeigler (eds.), *The Electoral Process*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966.
6. From his analysis of the campaign for "Viewpoint", C.B.C., May 26, 1967.
7. Beck, *Government of Nova Scotia*, p. 164.
8. A. Campbell, P. Converse, W. Miller, D. Stokes, *The American Voter*, New York, 1960, pp. 532-533.
9. For a discussion of the role of the Halifax Tory newspaper, *The Herald*, which later became the *Chronicle-Herald* when the Liberal organ died, see my "The Conservative Leader in Nova Scotia: Selection and Position in a Minority Party", unpublished thesis, Dalhousie University, 1966, especially pp. 144-146.
10. While the 1967 campaign gave ample evidence of this phenomenon, there were considerable traces of it in 1963. A good example was a major television address by Richard Donahoe, the Attorney General, who mentioned the Stanfield party or team thirteen times, the Conservative party only once. See his address dated September 27, 1963, in *Files*, Conservative Party Headquarters, Halifax.
11. For a general introduction to the fascinating study of political culture, see G. Almond and S. Verba, *The Civic Culture*, Boston, 1965, Ch. I, pp. 1-45.