

NATIONALISM AND UNITY IN CANADA

J. L. McDOUGALL

MR. G. K. Chesterton has somewhere remarked that it was quite as sensible to say Canada was growing a beard, as to say she was a "young" country or Great Britain an "old" country. Such a statement may give a healthy check to the drawing of too rash conclusions from similarities between the growth of the human body and that of the body politic. But growth and change are as true of the one as of the other. Even the superficial reading of the history of cultural and political groups does leave an indelible impression of first beginnings, of growth, of maturity, and of ultimate decay. In the history of the great nations one sees the intense efforts required to subdue one area to a common rule, the constant care necessary to prevent blind sectionalism from destroying the common cause. Unity is achieved when the sentiments of loyalty which formerly gathered around the component parts are transferred to the larger unit, and a sense of social solidarity leads to the willing suppression of private interests to the common good. But when the new body fails to bind the component parts to it by links of mutual interest and affection, when it fails to create that sense of solidarity by giving full expression to their genius, it can exist only by force,—and by force it is finally dissolved. The Canadian who wishes to understand his own country would do well to approach her history by the comparative method. Canada is culturally a part of Western Europe, and her national success will be measured by her capacity to develop a significant variant upon the dominant theme of European civilization. One must ask whether Canada is in fact working toward a real unity of purpose. If not, then one must enquire into the retarding forces. Geographic diversity may raise certain difficulties, but the real question is whether there are radically different conceptions of the ends toward which this country ought to work. If such differences exist and are not reconciled by mutual concessions, if any group feels that its deepest interests cannot find expression in the national purpose, then Canada is failing, to that extent, to justify her existence. It is humbly submitted here that Canada's most urgent problems do not arise from her division into sharply defined geographic areas,

except in so far as that prevents mutual understanding. The greatest source of division lies in misunderstanding among the different groups, and this arises out of conflicting ideals of Canadian development. Of these misunderstandings the greatest is that which exists between the English and the French-speaking peoples of Ontario and Quebec. It is the purpose of the present paper to examine the past relations between these two, to show that the present friction between them is the result of historic causes which no longer operate, and to suggest a synthesis satisfactory to both races, one which may also appeal to that new major force in Canadian politics, the force which now holds the balance of power between the other two, namely, the Prairie West.

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The distinguishing marks of the earliest British settlers in Canada were their bland assumption of superiority over the French-Canadians, their conviction that these ought to be assimilated to the English type, and their desire to get into their own hands all the political power which England did not reserve for her own nominees. As Mr. W. S. Wallace has very ably summarized their demands:

The handful of English-speaking merchants who had come into the province in the wake of the army . . . strove vigorously to obtain the continuance of the policy outlined in the Proclamation of 1763. They demanded the whole of the English laws, the exclusion of Roman Catholics from public office, and the calling of a House of Assembly in which, of course, they would have had control.¹

Great Britain won and has held the respect and affection of French Canada because she repressed these arrogant folk, and has ever since exercised a restraining hand over their spiritual descendants. The attitude of these "four hundred and fifty contemptible sutlers and traders", as Murray described them, is the genesis of the race problem in Canada. So soon as any race is threatened with assimilation, it invariably organizes to defend its rights and its culture. Not only have Anglo-Canadians been constantly guilty either of extravagant assertion or of bland assumption of their own superiority, but they have also attempted to treat the British connection as a racial privilege, and not as a right in which all Canadians, whatever their origin, might share. Political power was to be their special preserve because of their British origin. The founding of Upper Canada in 1791 as an

1. W. S. Wallace (ed.). *The Maseres Letter 1766-68*. Introduction, pp. 7-9.

English-speaking Protestant preserve was intended to minimize the friction between these two races; but in point of fact it made little difference, for Upper Canada was quite as strongly imbued with the feeling of superiority as were the English-speaking residents of Lower Canada. The result of the friction caused by this attitude was that co-operation of the two races for the reform of government was quite impossible; and when certain French-Canadians, despairing of reform by constitutional means, began to urge extreme measures, the ultra-loyal party were in effect their chief supporters, because they drove the French-Canadian moderates into the arms of the extremists by their vilification of the whole race. In the words of the Governor-General of the time, "The violent and unjustifiable attacks which have been made by the ultra-Tory party upon the French-Canadians generally have caused an animosity which Mr. Papineau does not fail to turn to account, and I attribute much of his influence over so many members in the Assembly to this cause."² When the troubles, which were so largely of their own creation, broke, the "Constitutionalists" of Montreal were, in the opinion of Lt. Col. Wetherall the military head of the district, much better organized and prepared than were those who did resort to arms.³ By one who may be counted as of this number they were described as follows: "The English party are less violent, but prepared to act in the most determined manner whenever their opponents give them an opportunity."⁴ As Lt. Col. Wetherall thought them "quite as violent as the opposite party",³ one may doubt if they did much more than allow the other side to commit the first over act. Indeed, after the beginning of the serious troubles, one of Lord Gosford's chief difficulties was to restrain the ardour of the "Constitutionalists." "If the ultra-Tory party would be liberal and give us a little of what they have very little of, moderation, I should look forward with some confidence to our soon seeing order and peace restored."⁵ A great deal has been written upon the part played by racialism in determining the attitude of French-Canadians in this period. Perhaps enough has been said there to show that that spirit was in large part a defence reflex caused by the narrowly racial spirit of the Anglo-Canadians.

All people are ready to be smitten with a sense of superiority when suddenly brought into contact with a group whose way of

2. Gosford to Glenelg. 2 Sept. 1837. Private and Confidential. *Arch. Can. Q.* 238-1 p. 71.

3. Lt. Col. G. A. Wetherall to Gosford. 6 Nov. 1837. *Arch. Can. Q.* 239-1, pp. 67-71.

4. Robert Gillespie to Glenelg. Oct. 1837. *Arch. Can. Q.* 241-1. pp. 92-95.

5. Gosford to Glenelg. 21 Dec. 1837. *Arch. Can. Q.* 239-2. pp 240-41.

life varies widely from their own. What needs explaining in this case is why Anglo-Canadians have taken so long to settle down to an acceptance of the right of French-Canadians to continue in the full enjoyment of their own customs. That explanation lies in the relation of this country to the United States. Some have suggested that the experiences of the United Empire Loyalists have been the major determinant of the attitude of Anglo-Canadians toward that country. Their sufferings and their sacrifices in clinging to their British allegiance gave this country, it is said, its anti-American bias. That is probably an imperfect reading of the facts. Certainly efforts were made to attract other settlers from the United States long after all the Loyalists had come in, a fact hardly to be reconciled with this theory. In point of fact, the war of 1812 and the motives behind it were of far greater importance. The caustic-tongued John Randolph of Roanoke, observing those causes from within the American Congress, gives the best characterization of them: "Agrarian cupidity, not maritime rights, urges the war. Ever since the report of the Committee on Foreign Relations came into the House, we have heard but one word—like the whippoorwill, but one eternal monotonous tone—Canada, Canada, Canada."⁶ The war proved Canada's vulnerability and her complete dependence upon Great Britain for her defence. Nor was the memory of that lesson allowed to grow dim. In 1837 Canadians had to march out to the defence of their frontiers against too enthusiastic American attempts to free them from "monarchical domination"; in 1866 and again in 1870 they had to defend themselves against anti-British forces operating from the United States. Each generation was baptised afresh in the old spirit, and was forced again to the conclusion that only the force of British arms made a separate existence possible.

One other factor must be dealt with, before the whole Anglo-Canadian position can be understood. The local aristocracy who led the ultra-loyal party were not acting solely from the purest of motives. Self-interest played its part as well. "Loyalty" was also, for many of them, good business. The governors sent out from England were men without any great political experience who could be, and were, managed by the local bureaucracy. Any reform of government would naturally curtail these special privileges. Jesse Ketchum, the philanthropist whose name is so well remembered in Toronto, gave a very able description of the system in a letter to Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Colborne, telling him why he

6. Quoted by H. E. Barnes. "The Second American War for Independence". *The American Mercury*, April, 1925.

had joined with W. L. MacKenzie in asking for an interview. His letter, dated 30th December 1853, is the more significant because of his well-known moderation and of his heavy property holdings in the province. He did not hesitate to draw the parallel between the condition of Upper Canada and that of the United States before the Revolution. "A few individuals", he said, "have taken possession of everything, and hold all for their relatives and their friends, and seem equally to set at defiance the wishes of the British nation as well as those of the inhabitants of this province." Those who would not join with this group found the whole power of Government turned against them. He felt that Great Britain was well disposed toward the province; but should the Colonial Secretary try to conciliate the people and send out a new governor, this, he said, would raise their hopes and their expectations. "The greater the expectation, the greater the disappointment, for they see every governor from the time of Governor Hunter (1799-1805) joining with the few families to make their power greater, their government more secure and their family monopoly more complete and to appearance perpetual or at least coeval with their colonial condition. . . . These I believe to be the feelings of a majority of the freeholders in the province "7

Unfortunately his protest was without effect. Colborne continued to shield the members of the "Family Compact" and to block the conciliatory policy of the British Government until recalled for his insubordination.⁸ His successor in office, Sir F. B. Head, threw off any pretence of impartiality, and campaigned actively for the "loyalists" in the election of 1837. When the policy of the British Government was at last honestly carried out by Mr. Poulett Thomson,⁹ later Lord Sydenham, the party of "loyalty" became the party of opposition. In a despatch to the Home Government he said: "There prevails among the ultra-Tory party in this province a desire to keep alive agitation as a means of maintaining their own power, and I feel that it is absolutely necessary to check it in order to give a chance of obtaining that tranquillity which is essential to the general interests." It is not necessary to go farther into this question. Enough has been said

7. *Arch. Can. U. C.* Sundries 30 Dec. 1833.

8. Upon this point the evidence is overwhelming. To refer to official sources only, see
 Goderich to Colborne, 6 April, 1832. *Arch. Can. Q.* 376 A. pp. 64-5.
 " " " 8 Nov. 1832 " " *ibid.* pp. 142-95.
 " " " 30 Dec. 1832 " " *ibid.* pp. 202-3.
 " " " 6 March 1833 " " *Q.* 380 A. pp. 52-67.
 Glenelg " " 1 July, 1835 " " *Q.* 388 B. pp. 1-10.
 " " " 28 Oct., 1835 " " *ibid.* pp. 114-48.

9. C. Poulett Thomson to Lord John Russell. Toronto, 13 Jan., 1840. *Arch. Can. Q.* 270-1, pp. 3-9

to show that the early loyalism had its very unpleasant aspects, and that love of England was not its only motive.

It would be unfair and unwise to exaggerate the selfish motives. They could, after all, affect only a very slight number directly. It must never be forgotten that the great force binding Anglo-Canadians to Great Britain, despite the alloys of fear of American aggression and of ordinary selfishness, was a real love for her. If they thought to unify Canada by implanting a common loyalty to England, it was because that motive appealed so deeply to themselves that the full consequences of that policy never quite came home to them. That policy was in fact, if not in name, a policy of assimilation. There was no room in the picture for the French-Canadians as such. They were already Canadian in spirit. The French Revolution extinguished the last spark of sentimental attachment to France. After that event, only one land could claim their instinctive love, the land of their birth. True, they were bound to England by every tie of interest and gratitude. In the British connection they saw the best guarantee of developing according to their own genius. Nevertheless, they were French and Catholic. They could not feel that complete identity with England which moved Anglo-Canadians, for whom England's triumphs were their triumphs, England's greatness was part of their heritage. If the French-Canadians could not feel so, then they must be assimilated. That feeling was to be the basis of Canadian unity. Those who could not share it must change. Unity must be achieved, though the price be uniformity.

It was inevitable that French-Canadians should resent and resist that threat to their culture. That resistance is the index to their spiritual vitality. The result, however, has been to turn French Canada into a highly organized defensive bloc under the leadership of the Catholic Church. Every historian of the period admits that without the organizing genius of the Church they could not have survived as a group. Those who are of French-Canadian birth are proud to acknowledge this debt of their race. Anglo-Canadians have looked to the other side of the medal. The Church, by organizing the resistance to assimilation, has been the greatest obstacle to national unity as they conceived it. The more extreme of them have been ready for that reason to limit the privileges wherever possible.¹⁰ What they have failed to see was that religion has always been the nucleus about which to organize against assimilation. It has been so in Poland, in

10. It is hardly necessary to mention the Orange Order in this connection. That body still carries on the old "loyalist", pre-responsible government tradition.

Czecho-Slovakia, and in Ireland in the past. In Japan the Buddhists, fearful of a too sudden spread of Western ideas, have organized a Young Men's Buddhist Association, and are now pushing their religion with all the methods of the Y. M. C. A.¹¹ The compactness of the French-Canadian groups and leadership by the Church are not facts to be explained on the grounds of perversity. They are the inevitable outcome of the dominant Anglo-Canadian attitude toward Great Britain.

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The great attention given above to the analysis of the formative years of Canadian history is justified only by the fact that it illumines modes of thought which are now so much a part of the mental equipment of most Canadians that they are rarely questioned, and still more rarely understood. Most French-Canadians still feel, and with a certain justice, that Anglo-Canadians do not fully sympathize with their desire to retain their own language and their separate culture. Most Anglo-Canadians are still unable to reconcile the growth of nationalism with the Imperial connection. Canada is now a free and equal member of the British Commonwealth of Nations; but when the Balfour Committee of the recent Imperial Conference made its report, Mr. Guthrie looked upon it with a jaundiced eye as threatening Imperial solidarity, and Mr. Maurice Cody in the recent Hart House debate described it as the work of "disgruntled Dutchmen and rebellious Irishmen." They both stand in the direct line of a long tradition. Criticisms identical in spirit and in language were made by the ultra-Tory Legislature of Upper Canada when Lord Durham made his recommendation of self-government for Canada.¹² It is not unfair to say that ever since that date an important body of Anglo-Canadians has steadily fought a determined rear-guard action against the inevitable consequences of growth. The haunting fear that political development was incompatible with the British connection still hangs with a paralyzing effect over Anglo-Canadian thought. That fear is regrettable, because it has no real basis. It is the more regrettable because it has hindered the growth of British influence over Canada by linking it with the idea of colonial subservience. British influence over Canadian development does not depend upon the exercise of political control over this country. There is no necessary conflict between a virile Canadian nationalism and vital connection with Great

11. It is interesting to note that M. Henri Bourassa is in substantial agreement with this view. See his editorial in *Le Devoir*, Montreal, 29 Jan., 1925.

12. See the reports of the select committees of the House of Assembly and of the Legislative Council of Upper Canada, summarized in Adam Shortt's *Lord Sydenham*, pp. 97-103.

Britain. The idea that such exists flows from a disregard of the one really vital element in our inheritance from Great Britain, the only one which can endure; British traditions. Once these are set up as the goal, the whole problem stands in a new light. The British connection ceases to be the property of one race. Britain and Canada are no longer rivals for the loyalty of Canadians. Rather do they become twin sources of inspiration, and the British connection becomes the heritage of all Canadians of whatever origin. There is so much to be learned from England, the quiet beauty of her social life, the high place of her public men, the inspiring tolerance of differing creeds and opinions and actions. They cannot be transplanted bodily. The form must be altered that the spirit may live and take vigorous root in the new environment. But these British principles must be the guiding lights to the solution of Canada's greatest problem, the creation of a land which will give free expression to the genius of each separate part of it. Only so may we create a land worthy of our loyalty. Only so may we create that unspoken sense of social solidarity which lies at the root of British public spirit. Only so may we gain our own self-respect, which must come from the mastery of Canadian problems. We shall become most truly British by being most truly Canadian.

Canada's spiritual portrait? How can it be painted before there is spiritual unity? The task of the present generation is not the contemplation of the finished work, but the clearing of the lions from the path—and some of them are all the more terrifying because of their unreality—that Canada, when she does achieve unity, may be worthy to carry on the great traditions of the two great races from whose loins she sprang.