

Jonathan Webb

Advice to a Governor-General 1935

Sir Alan “Tommy” Lascelles served British royalty or its representatives in a secretarial capacity for some thirty years. He was, at various levels, the Crown’s informed observer; a mediator among the great; trusted, witty, the epitome of tact. Sir Harold Nicolson, in his published diary, praised Sir Alan, with whom he conferred when writing his *King George V*, as one “so certain, so humourous and so friendly”.¹ An ubiquitous dinner-guest, a keen fisherman and companion, Lascelles was literate and intelligent, and he freely proffered advice.

The document that follows is demonstration of the latter propensity: a memorandum he entitled, rather coyly, “Apocrypha”, written for the edification of John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir, who would presently succeed Bessborough as Governor-General of Canada. At the time of writing, Lascelles had been in Canada for five years, heading Bessborough’s viceregal staff. He wrote from Ottawa, shortly after Buchan’s appointment was announced, in the spring of 1935. It is a revealing piece of work, a mixture of perspicuity and pleasing frankness. Yet one senses the isolation of the world of his experience: “Apocrypha” is very much a product of the precincts of Rideau Hall.

Buchan was the choice of both Bennett, the incumbent Prime Minister, and of King, whose election victory more-or-less coincided with Buchan’s arrival. He had some prior first-hand knowledge of both Canada and its politicians. With King, in particular, he was familiar; in Violet Markham they shared a common friend. Indeed, there had been a King-inspired intrigue to make Buchan Governor-General as early as 1926, in which Miss Markham had figured. The plan, if long in gestation, worked out well when realized. Buchan, as Governor-General, was exceedingly successful. It was a role that perfectly suited his

political abilities, if not, perhaps, his aspirations. Buchan served almost his full term, though in failing health, and died in Ottawa in January 1940.²

This memorandum is among the Buchan Papers, and is published with the permission of the Douglas Library Archives at Queen's University, Kingston.

Memorandum: Sir Alan Lascelles to John Buchan 27 May 1935

Confidential

The outward and visible function of a Governor-General of Canada is, of course, to represent the King in Canada.

But he has also an inward function, supremely important in these days – to represent the English to the Canadians.

It is unnecessary to dwell on the former; provided due attention is paid to the proper discharge of the formal ceremonies inherent in Viceroyalty, the exercise of it is comparatively plain sailing, save in times of constitutional crisis, when the works of recognized authorities on such matters – Anson, Dicey, Berriedale Keith, and so on – afford better guidance than I can pretend to offer. The most difficult thing about it is to know when it ends – to know when the Viceroy should become the Man.

The second function is more complex, and to perform it successfully is no easy matter. Any man of education and imagination who is used to public life can adequately play the King on ceremonial occasions, or in official relationships; to win the sympathy and affection of a very diverse, self-conscious, and politically restless people is more difficult.

Yet this second task is today the more important of the two; Canadians, as a whole, are so deeply loyal to the present King that their loyalty needs little stimulus – it is a hardy plant that requires only a minimum of tending. So, too, their affection for “The Old Country” is very strong: it has, moreover, recently had a strong practical tonic in their genuine admiration for the manner in which Great Britain has overcome her domestic difficulties, and recovered the financial and political leadership of the world.

What is not so strong, and needs constant reinforcement, is their affection for Englishmen, in general and in particular. The danger here

is obvious; if Canadians do not like Englishmen in the flesh, sooner or later the spiritual affiliation is bound to be weakened.

The G[overnor-] G[eneral], however successfully he may identify himself — as he should do — with Canada and the Canadians, is always the typical Englishman of the moment. As I said above, he, his lady, his family, and his Staff, “represent the English” to the Canadians. Consequently, the *personal* popularity of all of them is, in varying degrees of importance, a major determinant in the success or non-success of any G.G.’s regime, which is ultimately gauged by the single question “Has he weakened or strengthened the ties between Canada and the Mother-Country?” — for, when all is said and done, it is as the chief guardian of those ties that he is sent out to Canada.

(In parenthesis, it may be pointed out that the work of any Englishman who is interested in the preservation of those ties does not cease on his return to England. He can then usefully devote himself to the other side of the medal — namely, to making Englishmen appreciate Canadians; always provided that he has himself learnt to understand and like them.)

English people who come to live in Canada for the first time, or without having had the opportunity of seeing the country through the eyes of some friend who has real knowledge of it, often experience a series of shocks in the early stages of their stay that warps their whole outlook; they become bewildered, bored, or contemptuous, according to their individual temperaments.

Whatever the cause, the effect is to make them appear aloof; to the Canadian mind, obsessed as it is by the national “inferiority-complex”, aloofness is indistinguishable from a sense of superiority; the Englishman, or Englishwoman, is written off as one more “high-hatted Britisher”, and one more little rift is made in the imperial lute.

Such unfortunate impressions on either side can, of course, be lived down. Many Englishmen, having been completely miserable, and correspondingly unpopular for the first year or so of their Canadian life, find, when the time comes to go home, that they leave with real regret and are themselves regretted by a host of friends, whom they have made after becoming socially, and indeed physically, acclimatised.

Some, on the other hand, never overcome the first impressions they got and gave. In either case, it would clearly be better if the mutual first-impressions could be favourable, or, at any rate, neutral. There is

no reason why they should not be so, if only new-comers approach the country in the right frame of mind.

The first thing any such new arrival should do is to rid himself both of pre-conceptions of Canada (e.g., the "great open spaces" legend; more of one's life in Canada is spent in stuffy trains and houses than it is in England.) and of standards of comparison with his English past. He should get it into his head that he is going to live, not in an outpost of the British Isles, but in a totally different country, and, what is more, in a social environment and in a social period that are totally different from those to which he is accustomed. In a recent play, "Berkeley Square", the hero is magically transplanted into the days of the Regency. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that a denizen of the modern West End of London must look on his journey to Canada as a transplantation to a provincial community of mid-Victorian times.

This parallel is not, of course, meant to apply to material things — the standard of material comfort, heating, lighting, transport, etc., is probably higher in Ottawa today than in London; but it does apply not unfairly to the social and intellectual atmosphere — yes, and to the political atmosphere too. Canadian politics are in many respects still in the Eatanswill period.

The one fatal attitude of mind for the newcomer is "We order this matter better in England." Canadians, with that sense of inferiority I mentioned above — a normal symptom of adolescent nationalism — are always on the look-out for it; they are uncannily quick to perceive it, even when no spoken word has betrayed it; and so sensitive are they on this point, that they will sometimes plague one to the point of exasperation with such provocative questions as "You must find this very dull after London?", or with some self-depreciatory gambit such as "We Canadians are still only poor Colonials after all." — So, I suppose, the British-born Romans in the England of the third century A.D. were wont to plague the new arrivals from Rome.

I have always found that the best riposte to this form of attack is to say simply — and, in my case, quite truthfully — "It never enters my head to make comparisons of that kind. Of course, the two countries are bound to be different in many ways, but none the less I am very happy here." If the inmates of Govt. House can school themselves into never looking at their new surroundings through English spectacles, and into eschewing the habit of comparison, then they will automatically

lessen one of the greatest dangers to the success of a G[overnment] H[ouse] — namely *the temptation to poke fun at Canadians and things Canadian in the home-circle.*³ Such gibes are inevitably repeated outside, sooner or later, and nothing is more disastrous than that the idea should become current that the G.G., his family, or his staff, are critical of, or bored with, Canada.

They are ill-mannered, too, for whatever shortcomings Canadians may have, they are the most spontaneously friendly people in the world, and thoroughly sincere in wanting to do everything they can to make the life of all at G.H. as happy as possible.

It is interesting to try and see the G.G. through Canadian eyes — to get some idea of what the average Canadian wants his G.G. to be. But a difficulty arises at the outset, in that there is really no such thing as an “average” Canadian. The Quebecker [*sic.*] the Maritimer, the man from the Prairie Provinces, and the British Columbian, are very different creatures in many respects, each with a distinctive outlook and habit of mind.

Of the people of Quebec it may be said, broadly speaking, that all they want is a G.G. who shows respect for tradition, and a sympathetic interest in their French ancestry, the French tongue, and the Church of Rome. Any G.G. with a certain amount of personal charm, a conversational knowledge of French, and a store of patience, can win the province of Quebec without much trouble.

British Columbia is quite satisfied if it gets an English gentleman and sportsman, while the ideal of the Prairie Provinces is a “regular fellow with no frills” and some understanding of Agriculture.

Incidentally, in making contacts with this diverse population, a different technique is necessary according to the locality. In addressing a Quebec, or Nova Scotian, audience, for example, a speaker can make historical allusions that would have no appeal in Winnipeg or Regina; even in mere externals this holds good — top hats are normal enough in the East, but should be worn as sparingly as possible in the Prairies — in fact, only at formal functions in the large towns; so, too, though, [*sic.*] in Toronto, the G.G. regularly drives up the race-course in a four-horsed barouche with a mounted escort, this Ascot touch would astonish the natives considerably at, say, the Calgary Stampede, and would only bring ridicule on the occupants of the carriage. Such distinctions cannot be drawn with hard and fast exactitude; but, speaking quite roughly, a

G.G. on tour in the West, or in any of the remoter districts, should adapt himself to his environment in the same way that the Prince of Wales adapts himself to a tour of a mining district.

But, as the G.G. spends far the greater part of his time in Eastern Canada, and as over 60% of the whole English-speaking population of the Dominion is concentrated in the Maritimes and Ontario, it is the attitude of the inhabitants of these Provinces that really signifies.

In general, then, Canadians expect that the G.G. should play his part with due dignity, and with all the outward trappings of dignity on all public occasions — especially on those occasions that have a constitutional significance. The standard of “pomp and circumstance” at the Opening of Parliament, for example, or Their Excellencies’ Drawing-Room, is now very high, and it would be a great pity if it fell off. Both these ceremonies are really very fine shows, and, in their small way, compare not unfavourably with their original models in England. Though individual journalists occasionally sneer at them, I have no hesitation in saying that the majority of Canadians set great store by their maintenance. The great moment in the life of the Bandarlog was when they were able to say “Now we are like Bagheera”; it is a great moment in the life of Ottawa — and I use the comparison in no spirit of unkindness — when it can say “Now we are like London.”

Some little time ago, I had a lengthy correspondence (with Buck.[ingham] Pal[ace], the Dominions Office, etc.) extant in the Secretary’s Office — on the wrong-headedness of making the G.G. of Canada, should he pay an official visit to Washington, masquerade as a private citizen the moment he crosses the frontier, simply because the King, technically, has already got another Representative in the U.S.A. — a technicality that is quite incomprehensible to the average Canadian citizen. In that correspondence — which I am glad to say, had a happy ending — I emphasized that, to the Canadians, the G.G. is *their* G.G., the personal representative of *their* Sovereign, the embodiment of the Imperial tie, their First Citizen, the Bull of their Herd — just as his wife is the “First Lady of the Land”, a title habitually given her by Canadian journalists.⁴

It is this conception of the G.G.’s Office that makes them, on fitting occasions, delight in producing for him mounted escorts, guards of honour, or artillery salutes, and in handing him formal Addresses of an Elizabethan pomposity; in return, they expect him to receive such

incense gracefully, and his Staff to ensure that "a good show" is put on. They delight no less in hearing their G.G.'s voice.

They regard him, in fact, as a valued public institution, the incarnation of their loyalty to the Throne, and of their sturdy and eminently healthy Nationalism (which, incidentally, must never be confused with Separatism). In the last few years, so far as I am aware, there has never, in any part of Canada, been the slightest evidence of any tendency to diminish the outward forms of respect shown to the G.G., and the nearer you get to the American border, the more rigidly are those forms observed.

So much for the Canadian conception of the G.G. as an Officer of the Crown; what is even more important, as I have already suggested, is their opinion of him as a man.

It seems to me that the two main things in a G.G. that appeal to individual Canadians are, first, that he should be able to doff his Viceroyalty, so to speak, as he doffs his top hat — that off parade they should find him approachable, human, and sympathetic — the three adjectives they continually apply to popular G.G.'s in the past, such as Grey or Byng; and, second, that he should show himself interested in Canada, and happy to be in Canada.

There is no need to elaborate these two points at length, but here is a random example of the working of the first: take an ordinary Govt. House dinner-party of about 30 people; at certain moments, set formalities have to be observed — the announcing of Their Exc[ellenc]ies, the presentation of their guests, the drinking of the King's health, the curtseys of the ladies as they leave the dining-room, the "bringing-up" of different guests by the A.D.C.'s after dinner — all this is the regular routine of G.H., and must be carried out formally: but outside of this routine, no item in which takes more than a few minutes, the general atmosphere of the evening ought to be that of an ordinary dinner-party in London.

Without in any way diminishing the outward respect due to the King's representative, G.H. ought never to be "stiff". The great success of the Devonshire regime was largely due to the pleasant "family" atmosphere they created in Rideau Hall. Achieving it, of course, depends largely on the personalities of the individual occupants of the place — not only of Their Excies., but also of their Staff; but it can be encouraged artificially in various ways — for example, by going in

regularly for a certain amount of minor informal entertaining — eg., making a habit of getting a few people up to play lawn-tennis in the summer, or to skate or play covered tennis in the winter; by the G.G., if he is a golfer, playing golf with various members of the golf-clubs he may frequent; by his occasionally lunching informally at the Rideau Club in Ottawa. Lord Byng used to make a point of fraternising with the younger men of Ottawa — getting them to small “stag” dinners (at which he would always wear a dinner jacket and black tie), taking them for walks, and so on. In their middle age, they still talk with reverence and affection of the impression his friendship made on them. Lord Bessborough, via his interest in Community Drama, has not only got in touch with many Canadians who would otherwise never have seen the inside of Rideau Hall or even the outside of their G.G., but, as a result of the Dominion Drama Festival he instituted in Ottawa, has annually brought together people from all parts of the Dominion who hitherto had hardly exchanged greetings with any fellow-Canadians outside their own Provinces.

Such forcible mixing of the disparate elements in Canada is a function that practically nobody but the G.G. can perform; it is extremely valuable, and is capable of indefinite expansion. Week-end parties at G.H., for example, offer great opportunities in this direction. They should not consist only of the monied magnates of Montreal or Toronto — charming people, in the main, but all resembling each other like a pack of beagles, and all representing one rigid point of view; a leaven of University dons, musicians, newspaper-proprietors, writers, clergy, social workers, and so on should be introduced.

It is remarkable what iron barriers there are between the different social tribes in Canada, and they badly need breaching. But, it must be confessed, it is sadly uphill work trying to make such breaches in the dividing wall between French- and English-speaking Canada. The educated class in the province of Quebec is limited; and, within that class, the number of those willing, or able, to “mix” is lamentably small, though there are a few shining exceptions.

Yet, whether the “mixing” process be fruitful or not, anybody with any experience of G.H. will agree that it must be pursued at all costs; it is fatal if G.H. gets the reputation of seeking its guests only in one social, or professional, stratum. Its doors must be opened to all sorts and conditions of men; to a certain extent, preference must be given to

the diplomatic and official world of Ottawa; with that reservation, there ought to be no other preference in entertaining.

So far, I have been trying to give some idea of how G.H. should appear to Canadians; what would be no less instructive, if I could do it adequately, would be an indication of how Canada actually appears to a newly-arrived [Governor-General]. Fore-warned is for-armoured; and, for English people to step into Canadian life with any degree of contentment, they ought to be fore-warned, that they may be armour-plated against the shocks that undoubtedly await them.

I must preface any such attempt by saying that, personally, I am now very fond of Canadians, and that any candour I may show in criticising them is the candour of a friend, and of one who has made many friends among them; also, that in speaking of "Canadians", I exclude the travelled, cultured minority whom one habitually meets in London, and refer to the great mass of "echt-Canadians", who have probably never crossed the Atlantic.

The national faults of Canadians, common to all parts of the country, are, I should say, a naive parochialism: lack of general education: paucity of imagination, with its correlative, a rudimentary sense of humour: unbusinesslikeness: and — if this be a fault — the inferiority-complex alluded to above, which makes them sometimes tediously, sometimes disarmingly, conscious of their failings. A few years ago, a certain smug complacency might have been added to the list; but the successive shocks of the Depression have largely corrected this. Their outstanding virtues are their cheerfulness, and their friendliness. They are stout-hearted, and a warm-hearted people; and, in criticising them it must not be forgotten that they are essentially a young people, with little national and practically no family background. They have indeed the defects and the qualities of Youth.

These qualities are obvious, and soon discovered; I will try to analyse some of the failings I have ascribed to them.

Their parochialism is abysmal. One is continually amazed at the lack of knowledge one Province has of the others, or the lack of interest shown by individuals, not only in the affairs of the outer world, but even in Canadian matters removed from their own parish-pump. This is specially noticeable in the average member of Parliament; it is indeed hardly an exaggeration to say that in the present Cabinet only two men — Bennett and Perley — could fairly be described as Pan-Canadians.⁵

So, too, in the Press. There is no national newspaper, and will not be one for many years. But it is deplorable how little extra-provincial news appears even in the soi-disant great newspapers of Canada; if one has not time to skim six or seven provincial newspapers, it is a frequent experience to find in the ten days old London "Times" some quite important piece of Canadian news that has not been mentioned in, say, the Ottawa "Citizen", the Montreal "Gazette", or the Toronto "Globe".

Similarly, if the G.G. makes an important speech in Toronto, it is most improbable that the Montreal newspapers will give it more than a few lines, while the Western journals will not even record that he has been there. The foreign news-service in all Canadian newspapers, with the possible exception of the Winnipeg "Free Press" and the Montreal "Star" is puerile.

This parochialism colours the politics and the entire national life of the country. It also has a very narrowing effect on the conversational range of the individual. It cannot be gainsaid that, until one has learnt to take an interest in parochial matters, the conversation of his neighbours at luncheon or dinner is apt to be boring or even die a lingering death. That is what I meant by saying that English — or at any rate London — standards must be discarded; one has got to learn to talk about simple everyday things — as a general rule, be it understood, for there are many Canadians of both sexes who would be admirable company anywhere, though they take some finding. But the average level of table-talk is certainly far lower than in England, particularly the talk of the ladies of Canada; the latter is essentially of the Cranford type, and often has the flavour, though rarely the charm, of the innocent prattling of Miss Matty or Miss Pole. The question put to Lady Glenmire, on her first appearance in Cranford, "Has your ladyship been to Court lately?" might be an echo of many Canadian tea-fights; at the latter, however, it would be put not once but many times, for Canadian tea-fights are of Gargantuan dimensions, and the new arrival must reconcile himself, or herself, to being asked the same conundrum by everybody in the room in turn.

The wife of the new G.G. will be asked "How do you like our Canadian winter?", followed instantly by the second barrel, "How does His Ex [cellenc] y like our Canadian winter?" not less than five thousand times in the first few months of her residence. There is

nothing to be done about it: it is a conventional conversational opening as unavoidable as the flowery platitudes of a polite Chinaman.

What is more depressing than these social trivialities is the second in my list of short-comings — the almost universally low standard of education. There are few men in Canada, and hardly any women, to whom one can talk the ordinary language of “cultured” England. They are essentially a literal-minded and an un-literary-minded race. The most obvious figure of speech is apt to be taken *au pied de la lettre*, the most commonplace literary allusion is often not understood. People who are well-read, in the accepted English sense of the term, are so few and far between that a chance association with them stands out like a landmark. To a man, it comes as a shock to find that even legal luminaries can only rarely understand a simple Latin quotation, while to the ordinary citizen the Classics are esoteric mysteries.

One is often astonished, too, by evidence of complete ignorance of modern public affairs shown by men of undoubted mental ability; but such astonishment ceases to be felt by anybody who has sent his son to a Canadian school, and thus had practical experience of the childishly low standard of teaching throughout the country.

Yet even here, beware of casting the first stone; the writer, after long and expensive education, arrived in Canada for the first time, eleven years ago, firmly convinced that Newfoundland was part of the Dominion; and it is on record that Alfred Lyttelton, when Colonial Secretary, travelled down the Red Sea expecting to get his first glimpse of Aden on the Starboard, or African, bow.

To accuse the Canadians of being unbusinesslike might at first sight seem paradoxical; they are popularly supposed to have acquired that high standard of business acumen traditionally imputed to their Southern neighbours. My own belief is that this trans-Atlantic businesslikeness is a complete myth. I regard both Americans and Canadians as poor organisers, feckless planners, and slovenly correspondents; their reputation for being such super men of business is due far more to the bounty of Nature than to the wit of American man. The cold blasts of Depression have shown this reputation to be a very tender plant — witness the general state of affairs in U.S.A., and the appalling mess into which the Canadians have got their two great railways.

The haphazard manner in which Governmental and Parliamentary

business is often conducted is startling to those educated in Whitehall or Westminster; there is a tendency to leave everything to the last moment, and then to attempt to evolve belated order out of chronic chaos by telephone or telegram. It is only fair to add, however, that in the past few years this tendency has been increased by the Prime Minister's inveterate habit of making himself the bottle-neck through which alone action can issue; in a less highly concentrated administration, both the Civil Service and the governmental machine generally would have a far better chance of running smoothly and efficiently. Moreover it may well be that the very rapidity of the country's expansion during the past few generations, and the ease with which national and individual prosperity was achieved, are responsible for this happy-go-lucky neglect of mere details.

Canada has only recently been obliged to bother about ways and means; now that adversity has compelled her to study them more closely, a different habit of mind will very likely be acquired by the people at large before long. They certainly can organise, if they try — the Royal Military College, the Mounted Police, the Winter Fair at Toronto, — each of these widely diverse national institutions is a model of efficient planning and administration.

Footnotes

1. Harold Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters III 1945-1962*, (London: Collins, 1968), p.203. See also Earl of Bessborough, *Return to the Forest*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962), and John Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI His Life and Reign*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958).
2. Violet Markham to John Buchan, 21 March 1926, 31 March 1926, 9 April 1926; and Susan Buchan to Violet Markham nd. June 1926; Buchan Papers, Douglas Library Archives, Kingston. See also Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1965).
3. It is not clear whether this phrase was given its pencilled emphasis by Buchan or Lascelles.
4. The relative precedence of the King's representative in Washington and the Governor-General of Canada elicited some further discussion at the time of Buchan's sojourn to the American capital in 1937. See John A. Munro, ed., *Documents on Canadian External Relations Vol. 6*, (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1972), pp.39-40.
5. R.B. Bennett, Conservative Prime Minister from 1930 to 1935; Sir George Perley, Minister without Portfolio throughout the same period.