

Canada and the Canadian Question 1954

by

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One of our most penetrating and provocative political historians examines "The Canadian Question" as it now is against the backdrop of Goldwin Smith's famous piece of pessimism published just before the QUARTERLY was founded. A reasoned — and modest — appraisal of the Canadian present and the Canadian future with a strong emphasis on our essential North Americanism.

WHEN QUEEN'S QUARTERLY began publication in 1893 the communal confidence of Canadians in their experiment of building up a new nation in the northern half of North America was at about the lowest point which it has ever reached. "We have come to a period in the history of this young country when premature dissolution seems to be at hand", wrote Wilfrid Laurier in a private letter to Edward Blake in December, 1891. "What will be the outcome? How long can the present fabric last? Can it last at all? All these are questions which surge in my mind and to which dismal answers suggest themselves." As one studies those dark days one gets the impression that there were many other Canadians besides Laurier who were tempted in private to lose faith in the future of their country. Few of them went as far as Goldwin Smith in his *Canada and the Canadian Question* published in 1891. But Smith's book was a distillation of defeatist tendencies that were strong at the time; and all modern discussions of the Canadian question still revolve around the points which he raised.

The long depression which had begun in 1873 had lifted for a short time in the early 1880's but had then settled down again upon the Canadian economy. Population was hardly growing at all, so great was the exodus of young people to the United States. The two great nation-building policies of the Conservative government of Macdonald, tariff protection and the building of the transcontinental railway, had not brought the promised expansion and prosperity. "The Conservative

policy", wrote Blake in his West Durham letter, "has left us with a small population, a scanty immigration, and a North-West empty still; with enormous additions to our public debt and yearly charge, an extravagant system of expenditure, and an unjust and oppressive tariff. Worse; far worse: It has left us with lowered standards of public virtue, and a death-like apathy in public opinion; with racial, religious and Provincial animosities rather inflamed than soothed; with a subservient parliament, an autocratic executive, debauched constituencies and corrupted and corrupting classes."

Superimposed upon the frustrations of economic depression was the bitterness between English and French Canadians produced by the North-West rebellion of 1885 and the execution of Riel. Thoughtful men were appalled by the outburst of passion over Riel. And the fires of racial and religious animosity were kept alive by Mercier's Jesuit Estates Act in Quebec. In Toronto the MAIL was editorializing about smashing Confederation into fragments. As the new QUEEN'S QUARTERLY began, all this excitement was being stirred up again by the Manitoba Schools question. Confederation, which had been adopted as a way of settling racial and religious conflicts, seemed only to have inaugurated a long imperialist struggle between Ontario and Quebec for the possession of the West.

It was in the midst of this period of economic, moral and spiritual depression that Goldwin Smith published his volume on Canada and the Canadian Question, the most completely pessimistic book that has ever been written about our country. Smith's thesis was: that the experiment of Confederation had by this time proved a failure; that Canada was only a geographical expression consisting of four northerly extensions of the American fertile belt, each of which was more closely connected with the corresponding part of the United States than with the other sections of Canada; that too much of the Canadian government structure represented a blind imitation of British forms without consideration of their unfitness for a different kind of society in North America, and that in particular Canadian political parties, however British their names, were mere factions without principles; that French Canada lay like a non-conductor between Ontario and the Maritimes, a permanent

obstacle to national consolidation; that its society, dominated by a reactionary Catholic clericalism, could never assimilate with the liberal democratic society of English Canada; that the building of the C.P.R. had been over-ambitious and imposed too heavy a burden on the young country; that the prairie North-West would be another disruptionist force and would revolt against the colonial status imposed upon it by the protectionist East; that enthusiastic visions of a great federated British Empire were an unsubstantial mirage; and that British North America, "rich by nature, poor by policy", could realize its promise only by a continental union, commercial and political, with the United States.

Each one of Smith's points was hard to answer if taken by itself. We have, in fact, been engaged ever since in working out answers to his indictment. No demonstration of the extent of our national success today, some sixty years later, could be more striking than a simple list of quotations from *Canada and the Canadian Question*. But this would also demonstrate the historian's favorite thesis that time never finally solves any of the deeper problems of a society; it merely carries them forward into a new phase. We are still debating our economic future, the nature of the union of French and English in a Canadian community, the essential meaning of our relations with Britain and the United States. The remainder of this article will consist of some rambling reflections upon these permanent problems.

"Modus Vivendi without Cordiality"

Goldwin Smith had little favourable to say about French Canada. Its clericalism, its archaism, its separatism repelled him. "Its character has been perpetuated by isolation like the form of an antediluvian animal preserved in Siberian ice" British statesmanship had made an irreparable mistake in the Quebec and Constitutional Acts when it provided facilities for the preservation of French nationality. Catholicism under the domination of an ultramontane clergy he regarded as a sinister force which denied every value of nineteenth century civilization and with which no compromise could be made. "Science and democracy do not go to Canossa." He wrote always as if Leo XIII had never succeeded Pius IX, and he assumed a

monolithic solidarity in Catholic thinking which did not exist.

As to the separatism of Quebec, he failed to pay sufficient attention to the economic processes by which transportation, manufacturing and finance were making one fabric of the economies of Quebec and the rest of Canada, processes which have been going on for sixty more years since he wrote. And the spread of French settlement southward into New Brunswick and westward into Ontario and the Prairies gave Quebec another tie with English Canada. She took over the function of the protector of exposed French minorities in the other provinces, and has been exercising it ever more vigorously. If Smith could have foreseen this he would have been more outraged than ever. But these two forces, economic and spiritual, have made our Canadian union indissoluble, even if frequently uncomfortable.

Smith was well aware of one factor in English-French relations which he denounced all his life, though we can now see that it has provided the chief means by which two racial groups have achieved in the political field such unity as does exist. This was the bi-racial composite political party, Macdonald's coalition of English and French in the Liberal-Conservative party seemed to him only an unholy alliance of political racketeers who held the country together by paying out bribes first to one section and then to another. Yet this bi-racial party has been our one creative Canadian invention in political science. It began with the Reform coalition of Baldwin and LaFontaine, and it has been carried on successfully now for a full century by Macdonald, Laurier and King. When Laurier's party broke up in the crisis over conscription, with the French Liberals all taking one side and most of the English Liberals taking the other, few persons could have foreseen that the party would have been so quickly and triumphantly reconstructed under Mackenzie King. Mr. King's superiority as a national leader over all his rivals during a long career was shown most conclusively by his sheer grasp of the principle that in a country like ours the only party capable of government is one that can draw substantial support from both French and English. The new parties that have sprung up since 1918 have all failed completely when put to this test. The Conservatives since Macdonald have never got the principle quite clearly into

their heads; and when Mr. Drew came along he showed his political illiteracy by wooing the extremists in Quebec rather than the moderates. So the existing Liberal regime seems likely to be prolonged indefinitely.

Intellectuals in Canada from Goldwin Smith to the present have never been fond of this Canadian version of the North American political party. They are disgusted, as he was, with the compromises which it involves, the sordid deals, the bargaining for power and place, the sinking of principle in expediency. Laurier was denounced by the French Canadian intellectual, Bourassa, for compromising about French rights ("When Sir Wilfrid Laurier reaches the gates of paradise the first thing he will do will be to propose a compromise between God and Satan"), and by the English Canadian intellectual, Willison, for yielding to the dictates of the French Catholic hierarchy. In our own day King has been sneered at by most of the intellectuals because of his long success in this balance-of-power politics. But as a technique for keeping French and English uneasily together it remains our great constructive Canadian invention. Apparently only one party at a time can rise to become genuinely national in this particular Canadian sense. But the system has now been working so long that we can say with confidence that it is a permanent device for maintaining national unity.

There is one other problem in the practice of democracy, however, in which French and English are far from any mutual understanding. Does democracy mean majority rule or does it mean minority rights? English Canadians have always assumed the first meaning. French Canadians have always thought of themselves as a special kind of minority, a people who are already in the deepest sense a nation, with a special way of life of their own, living within the wider artificial national structure of 1867, and therefore possessing special minority rights. There are certain questions, in their view, about which the majority has no moral right to impose its will on the dissentient minority; and these questions must be settled by concurrent majorities from each communal group. They have never produced a French Canadian Calhoun to define this doctrine of concurrent majorities, though Bourassa came very close to it; but we are all acutely conscious of the persistence

with which they have fought for the principle on the issue of conscription. English Canadians have never shown any sign of understanding what the French were talking about. Democracy, as the philosopher is bound to conclude, means both majority rule and minority rights, and it is the function of statesmanship to manage things so that these two principles do not come into conflict in questions that may stir up mass passions. But it is a sign of the intellectual weakness of our Canadian political life that there are no classic Canadian debates or books to be quoted on this ultimate insoluble question of the nature of democracy.

This failure to try to understand what is going on in the other group's mind is, of course, what explains why our French-English union has been so superficial beyond the field of politics. We have failed to do what every healthy vital nationality always does, to produce national symbols and myths. We have no national flag and no national anthem which all of us can sing. We have no great historical figures like Washington and Lincoln in the United States, about whom our national imagination has brooded so as to produce characteristic legends and symbolical myths. The French Canadians themselves have plenty of these symbols and myths of their own, but these are their private possession not shared by us English Canadians. And we have never attracted each other's sympathetic understanding.

Still it must be that daily contacts in parliament, the courts, business and labour, scholarship and science, and in all the activities of social life are steadily and unconsciously building up some solid structure, as coral insects build up a coral island from generation to generation. We did, after all, avoid a cleavage over conscription in World War II like that which split the nation in 1917. Mr. St. Laurent seems genuinely popular all across English Canada, as Laurier was before him. And one might accumulate evidence of this kind.

Yet it is also true that French Canadian nationalism is much more self-conscious, organized and articulate than it was in Goldwin Smith's day. An unregenerate English Canadian may feel that the Bourassa gospel of a special French Canadian mission to preserve some part of this continent from Anglo-Saxon materialism is as unreal as most such fanatical

nationalist gospels always are, and that English Canadians who see a higher spiritual quality in French Catholicism than in our Protestant Puritanism are letting their romantic tendencies run away with them. But still the phenomenon of intransigent French Canadian nationalism remains. Duplessis succeeds to Bourassa as well as St. Laurent to Laurier.

So one concludes on this matter of relations between the two main communal groups in Canada that we still haven't got much beyond André Siegfried's "Modus vivendi without cordiality".

Old Boys' Association

It was a Dutch professor a few years ago who compared the modern British Commonwealth to the alumni association of a school whose members meet together periodically on ceremonial occasions to engage in certain rituals, to listen to a speech from the headmaster and to enjoy themselves by free indulgence in nostalgic sentiments. Goldwin Smith would have been delighted with this twentieth-century simile; for an Old Boys' Association was pretty much what he maintained that the Empire had already become in the 1890's. The Canadian Question which he discussed was the issue whether Canada should (1) remain a dependent colony; or (2) achieve independence; or (3) join Britain in an Imperial Federation; or (4) unite economically and politically with the States. Choice No. 1, he correctly pointed out, was already impossible. Choice No. 2 was natural, but he himself had lost faith in the capacity of his fellow-Canadians to make a success of an independent nationality. Choice No. 3 he demolished by destructive analysis; and everything he said about the inacceptability of a close federal union between Britain and the Dominions has been justified by later experience. Choice No. 4 was, of course, his own preference; but he did not intend this to mean a complete break with Britain. For in the ultimate future he foresaw "a moral federation of the English-speaking peoples" He would not find our situation in the 1950's altogether displeasing.

It would be tedious to trace out here all the steps by which we reached our present position of independence without separation. Laurier defeated all attempts to set up any form

of centralized government or control in the Empire, and his achievements in preparing the way for the completely decentralized Commonwealth have been duly celebrated by his biographers. That this was the only kind of association that Dominion nationalism would find tolerable is now obvious. But Laurier's nationalism had a strong strain of North American pacifist isolationism in it, which most Canadian liberals and all French Canadians found congenial. There is no need today to pretend that this outlook on the world was sufficient. From our present point of view Borden's claim that "Canada cannot be a hermit nation" seems to show a much truer understanding of world politics. However, we did not accept as more than a temporary expedient the Borden-Smuts Commonwealth in which the British nations worked out a single common foreign policy by continuous consultation in the Imperial War Cabinet. There was no Imperial Peace Cabinet after 1919; and the Borden-Smuts Commonwealth was replaced by the King-Hertzog Commonwealth in which each British country pursued its own individual policy and refused to bind itself to future Commonwealth or League of Nations commitments. By the end of the 1950's Mr. King was forced to admit that this was not a completely satisfactory solution in a world of clashing ideologies and competing power politics. But it was the solution which divided us in Canada at least, and because he had avoided previous commitments Mr. King was able to carry a united country into war in 1939 when once the issue in Europe had been made clear.

The important point to grasp now is that Mr. King's delaying tactics have produced a result in the 1950's which he may have foreseen dimly in the 1930's but which most of his fellow-Canadians did not foresee at all. He had always understood clearly—and this is one of the proofs of his greatness as a Canadian statesman—that no form of Canadian-British association which excluded the United States would be finally satisfactory. And when the Canadian people were at last ready, after 1945, to undertake definite commitments, it was not in any exclusively Britannic alliance that we joined, but in the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Except for the Colombo Plan, our specific obligations to action are such as tie us to other countries as well as to our

fellow-British communities. The British Commonwealth is left in a position something like that of the smile on the face of the Cheshire Cat.

Canada takes part in repelling aggression in Korea along with a considerable list of other United Nation powers, and indubitably under American leadership and management. We keep up forces on the continent of Europe as partners in NATO, in which again the United States is the indispensable senior partner. We are united with the United States in a special exclusive regional North American defence alliance. Australia and New Zealand are joined with the United States in a Pacific security pact from which they have politely but firmly excluded Great Britain. Economically, Canada is part of the dollar area; and every British effort to make the sterling bloc successful only emphasises the point that we have distinct interests which are not identical with what British leaders conceive to be their interests.

The hard fact is that the secret of the long success of the British Empire was the economic and military power of Great Britain; and that this power has so declined in the middle of the twentieth century that Britain can no longer give the leadership which was hers in the nineteenth century. The British are now, in their connection with us, just poor relations. Gushing sentiment about the supposed experience and know-how of British diplomacy—which is not exactly a self-evident fact in Europe or Asia or Africa at this moment—cannot serve as an escape from the realities of power. The British Commonwealth, whatever the framework of cooperation, cannot provide by itself for its own security in the present world. It depends on the power of the United States. Since the Americans also depend on the power that we can supply in an association with them, we are all bound together or till death us do part. Our chief concern for the next generation will be not to escape from this new association but to accustom the Americans to the older Commonwealth methods of procedure, in which smaller powers argue freely with bigger ones and cannot be committed without their own consent.

Perhaps what we chiefly need in Canada just now is a Canadian Bagehot to educate us to see our external relations as a complicated structure with certain older more “dignified”

parts and certain newer more "efficient" parts. Our British associations are passing over to the dignified part of our external policy, and our American associations have become the efficient part.

The Revolution of 1940

The oldest and most tenacious tradition in our communal memory centres around our determination not to become Americans. This is also the one tradition in which English Canadians and French Canadians have been whole-heartedly united. Our forefathers made the great refusal in 1776 when they declined to join the revolting American colonies. They made it again in 1812 when they repelled American invasions. They made it again in 1837 when they rejected a revolution motivated by ideals of Jacksonian democracy, and opted for a staid moderate respectable British Whiggism which they called "Responsible Government" They made it once more in 1867 when the separate British colonies joined to set up a new nationality in order to preempt the northern half of the continent from American expansion. They built the Pacific railway and established the protective tariff as anti-American defences. In 1891 and 1911 they rejected Reciprocity. "A British subject I was born, a British subject I will die." "No truck nor trade with the Yankees." In fact it would be hard to overestimate the amount of energy we have devoted to this cause. One can never tell what will be the next occasion on which we'll gird up our loins and save ourselves once again from the United States. One can only predict with confidence that the occasion will come.

But in 1940, just ten years after the last of these exciting occasions (when Mr. Bennett led us to salvation by another high tariff), a revolution took place in world power politics. We are never going to live again in the same world in which we of the older generation grew up. For our world was a world in which the leading power, the power that dominated our imaginations, was Great Britain. But in 1940 Hitler overran western Europe and almost overran Britain. The immediate reaction here in Canada was our *permanent* defence alliance with the United States, a commitment of a sort such as we had never been willing to make with Britain. For a hundred

years, ever since Lord Durham's Report in 1839, we had gradually been growing independent of Britain; but we were like one of those pathetic ineffectual young men who never succeed in getting clear of their mother's apron-strings. Now we are going to have to spend the next hundred years in trying to maintain our independence from the United States. And its going to be a much tougher century. But our younger generation will gradually come to take for granted this central position of the United States in our destiny; while at the same time the Americans, growing up to their responsibilities of world leadership, will gradually come to recognize the necessity of not taking us for granted. And so the poison in our present Canadian-American relationship, which is due to the fact that Americans are "benevolently ignorant" about us whereas we and "malevolently informed" about them, will work itself out. [I owe the phraseology to an editorial in the SATURDAY REVIEW of June 7, 1952, by Merrill Denison. The title of his editorial is "4000 Miles of Irritation" See also on this subject of recent Canadian-American relations the article by F. H. Soward, entitled "The Changing Relations of Canada and the United States since the Second World War", PACIFIC HISTORICAL REVIEW, May, 1953.]

Once we become accustomed to this new world we may look forward to the day when our Department of External Affairs will occasionally discover some issue on which the United States is right and Britain is wrong. It will be as toughly Canadian as our Departments of Trade and Commerce and of Finance; i.e., it will be able to be tough with British statesmen as well as with American.

By that time, also, we shall all be looking at trade questions with fresh eyes. Most of us are still living in imagination in the nineteenth century when free-trade Britain was the world's great market, always stable and dependable. We have all suffered too much from the vagaries of American tariff-makers to be able to take long views about the American market. And so we are all worrying too much about the domination of our foreign trade by our American neighbour. But the fact is (and this also dates from 1940) that it is the British market today which is inherently unstable, because the British economy is in so precarious a condition. On the

other hand, the steadily rising standard of living in the United States is making her more and more dependent upon imports for future expansion. The Paley Report with its projections of American demand in 1975 for a long series of essential commodities, most of which are produced in Canada, should be more familiar in this country. This long-term trend may be slowed up temporarily by the aberrations of tariff-makers in Congress, but it cannot be fundamentally altered.

Another thing is happening which it would pay us to watch. Of course protectionism is far from dead in the United States, but it is now clearly on the defensive. The Paley Report is only one example of this fact. The coming Randall Report will probably be another. American big business is becoming more and more low-tariff in sentiment. It would not be too fantastic to picture the United States as standing today just about where Britain stood at the beginning of the 1840's when the free trade movement started to sweep over the country. Detroit, the centre of the most advanced technology, is evidently casting herself for the role of Manchester. Whether Detroit can produce a Cobden and a Bright remains to be seen. And it is admittedly difficult, considering his first year of weakness and futility, to see President Eisenhower as another Peel. But all the underlying conditions are ripening for a great change in American economic policy. "It appears to me that a moral and even a religious spirit may be infused into that topic", wrote Cobden to Bright in 1858 when they were starting on their campaign. The Americans are also good at religious crusades.

The other great cause of our worries in Canada, when we consider our relations with our great neighbour, is the invasion of American mass culture. American movies, American radio and television, American popular magazines and cheap books, American advertising, American slang and American chewing gum, American divorce and American juvenile delinquency, all threaten to overwhelm our Canadian way of life. At least that is how we put it. But we are not defining the problem in quite the correct way. We tend to see it as a problem of Americanization when it is really the problem of mass democracy. All these phenomena which we cite as examples of Americanization (which the French have nicknamed coca-

colonization) are just typical expressions of a society in which the masses have at last arrived and are demonstrating their lack of interest in the more severe intellectual and moral standards of an older aristocratic civilization. The United States has been going through this revolution of mass democracy ever since President Jackson arrived in the White House in 1828. But we all have to go through it in our turn; and turning our backs on the United States will not save us. We have no native inherent sense of higher standards which might preserve our Canadian purity if we could shut out the American invasion. Look at our native Canadian examples of mass culture, from professional hockey to the Social Credit movement—and let us not kid ourselves.

We are bound to do a great deal of cultural importing from our neighbours. And because the Americans have had a longer experience with the dangers of mass democracy than any other people, they are likely to find the desirable correctives sooner. So, instead of deploring the corrupting influences of our proximity to Hollywood and Times Square and Madison Avenue, we should be looking for other cultural imports besides the products of these centres. We should be inquiring about some of the good things we might import in addition to the bad things that we are certain to import (or to manufacture here in Canadian branch factories). We might, for example, investigate the good programs of music and talks which go out from F.M. stations in New York and Boston, and then ask why our F.M. facilities on the CBC continue to be wasted through long afternoons of soap opera and long arid Saturday nights of hockey. Our universities might investigate what the better American universities have been doing in "general education" and in institutes on foreign policy or American Civilization. Our libraries might make more display of the ever growing number of high-class American university quarterlies. How many Canadians know, for example, that the Number One football factory, Notre Dame, also publishes one of the best quarterlies in the country, the *REVIEW OF POLITICS*? Our newspapers might subscribe to more of the better American columnists. And our professional Christians would certainly profit by reading more of the good American religious journals. The thing which is most impressive to

anyone who really tries to make himself acquainted with American civilization is the extraordinary variety of American cultural expression, and the extraordinary variety of self-criticism within the American community.

Well, we have come a long way since the period of some sixty years ago when Goldwin Smith wrote his *Canada and the Canadian Question* and Queen's Quarterly issued its first number. Where are we going in the next sixty years? There was a time in the early 1900's when Canadians were announcing that the twentieth century belonged to Canada. This naive optimism is as impossible to us today as is the acute pessimism of the early 1890's. To that extent at least we have matured. But in the greater world society of which we became a responsible member when we plunged into the war of 1914 we have not played any part so far which was not determined by our triangular relationship with Great Britain and the United States. In the meantime the British century in which we grew up has come to an end. How we solve the Canadian question in the 1950's and thereafter depends on how we face up to the realities of the American century which lies before us.