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Presidential Address

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE LIBERAL TRADITION IN CANADA

Presidential Address by FRANK H. UNDERHILL
The University of Toronto

"THE reader is about to enter upon the most violent and certainly the most eventful moral struggle that has ever taken place in our North American colonies. . . . That I was sentenced to contend on the soil of America with Democracy, and that if I did not overpower it, it would overpower me, were solemn facts which for some weeks had been perfectly evident to my mind." So wrote Sir Francis Bond Head in his *Narrative*,¹ the famous apologia for the policy of his governorship of Upper Canada. The issue as he saw it, and as his contemporaries in Canada saw it, was not merely whether the British North American colonies were to set up a responsible form of government; it was the much deeper one of whether they were to follow the example of the United States and commit themselves to achieving a democratic form of society. And good Sir Francis appealed with confidence to all right-thinking property-owning Englishmen against what he termed "the insane theory of conciliating democracy" as put into practice by the Colonial Office under the guidance of that "rank republican," Mr. Under-Secretary Stephen. No doubt, if the phrase had been then in use he would have accused Stephen, and Lord Glenelg and Lord Durham, of appeasement. In rebuttal of Durham's criticisms of the Upper Canada Family Compact he wrote:

It appears from Lord Durham's own showing that this "Family Compact" which his Lordship deems it so advisable that the Queen should destroy, is nothing more nor less than that "social fabric" which characterizes every civilized community in the world. . . . "The bench," "the magistrates," "the clergy," "the law," "the landed proprietors," "the bankers," "the native-born inhabitants," and "the supporters of the Established Church" [these were the social groups which Durham had defined as composing the Family Compact] form just as much "*a family compact*" in England as they do in Upper Canada, and just as much in Germany as they do in England. . . . The "*family compact*" of Upper Canada is composed of those members of its society who, either by their abilities and character, have been honoured by the confidence of the executive government, or who by their industry and intelligence, have amassed wealth. The party, I own, is comparatively a small one; but to put the multitude at the top and the few at the bottom is a radical reversion of the pyramid of society which every reflecting man must foresee can end only by its downfall.²

Sir Francis's statement is as clear and as trenchant an enunciation of the anti-democratic conservative political philosophy of his day as could be quoted from the American conservatives who were fighting Jacksonian Democracy at this same time or from the English conservatives who were fighting the Reform Bill or Chartism. As we all know, this "moral struggle" over the

¹Sir Francis Bond Head, *A Narrative* (London, 1839), 64.

²*Ibid.*, 464.

fundamental principles on which society should be based, which Sir Francis correctly discerned as representing the real meaning of the Canadian party strife of the eighteen-thirties, was to be decided against him and his tory friends. The century since his *Narrative* was published has been, in the English-speaking world at least, a period of continuously developing liberal and democratic movements. Liberalism has merged into democracy. Today the people of Canada are recovering from the second world war within a generation in defence of democracy. Presumably, considering the sacrifices we have shown ourselves willing to make for the cause, we Canadians cherish passionately the liberal-democratic tradition which is our inheritance from the nineteenth century. Presumably, the growth of liberal-democratic institutions and ideas in our political, economic, and social life is one of the main themes in our Canadian history, just as it certainly is in the history of Great Britain and the United States, the two communities with which we have most intimately shared our experience.

Yet it is a remarkable fact that in the great debate of our generation, the debate which has been going on all over the Western World about the fundamental values of liberalism and democracy, we Canadians have taken very little part. We talk at length of the status which our nation has attained in the world. We have shown in two great wars that we can produce soldiers and airmen and sailors second to none. We have organized our productive resources so energetically as to make ourselves one of the main arsenals and granaries of democracy. We have achieved political autonomy and economic maturity. But to the discussion of those deep underlying intellectual, moral and spiritual issues which have made such chaos of the contemporary world we Canadians are making very little contribution.

Our Confederation was achieved at the very time in the nineteenth century when a reaction was beginning to set in against the liberal and democratic principles which, springing from eighteenth-century Enlightenment, had seemed up to that moment to be winning ever fresh victories. The liberal nationalism of the early part of the century was beginning to turn into something sinister, the passionate, exclusive, irrational, totalitarian nationalism that we know today. The optimistic belief in human equality and perfectibility was beginning to be undermined by new knowledge about man provided by the researches of biologists and psychologists. At the same time technological developments in mass production industries were building up a new social pyramid with a few owners and managers at the top and the mass of exploited workers at the bottom; and new techniques of mass propaganda still further emphasized this division of mankind into *élite* and masses. The freedom which our Victorian ancestors thought was slowly broadening down from precedent to precedent seemed to become more and more unreal under the concentrated pressure of capitalistic big business or of the massive bureaucratic state. In such surroundings, the liberal spirit does not flourish. And the more reflective minds of our day have been acutely aware that the mere winning of military victories under banners labelled "liberty" or "democracy" does not carry us very far in the solving of our deeper problems.

Canada is caught up in this modern crisis of liberalism as are all other national communities. But in this world-debate about the values of our civilization the Canadian voice is hardly heard. Who ever reads a Canadian book? What Canadian books are there on these problems? What have we had to say about them that has attracted the attention of our contemporaries

or has impressed itself upon their imagination? In the world of ideas we do not yet play a full part. We are still colonial. Our thinking is still derivative. Like other peoples Canadians have of late expended a good deal of misdirected energy in endeavours to export goods without importing other goods in return. But we continue to import ideas without trying to develop an export trade in this field. We are in fact, as I have said, colonial. For our intellectual capital we are still dependent upon a continuous flow of imports from London, New York, and Paris, not to mention Moscow and Rome. It is to be hoped that we will continue to raise our intellectual standards by continuing to import from these more mature centres, and that we will never try to go in for intellectual autarchy. But international commerce in ideas as well as in goods should be a two-way traffic at least, and preferably it should be multilateral.

Incidentally, it is worth remarking in passing that one sign of this colonialism in our intellectual world is to be seen in the present state of Canadian historiography. The guild of Canadian historians confine their activities very largely to the writing of studies in local national history. South of the border American historians have long been demonstrating their intellectual equality by pouring out books on English and European and world history as well as on local subjects. But how little of this kind of research and writing has been done in Canada! During the past year we have lost one of our most distinguished colleagues, in the person of Professor Charles Norris Cochrane; and his book on *Christianity and Classical Culture* is a notable example of the sort of thing I mean. But one cannot think of many cases like this, in which we have asserted our full partnership in the civilization of our day by Canadian writing upon the great subjects of permanent and universal interest.

* * *

Now it seems to me—and this is more or less the main theme of the present rambling discursive paper—that this intellectual weakness of Canada is a quality which shows itself through all our history. In particular it is to be discerned in that process of democratization which is the most important thing that has happened to us, as to other kindred peoples, during the last hundred years. When we compare ourselves with Britain and the United States there is one striking contrast. Those two countries, since the end of the eighteenth century, have abounded in prophets and philosophers who have made articulate the idea of a liberal and equalitarian society. Their political history displays also a succession of practical politicians who have not merely performed the functions of manipulating and manoeuvring masses of men and groups which every politician performs, but whose careers have struck the imagination of both contemporaries and descendants as symbolizing certain great inspiring ideas. We in Canada have produced few such figures. ✓ Where are the classics in our political literature which embody our Canadian version of liberalism and democracy? Our party struggles have never been raised to the higher intellectual plane at which they become of universal interest by the presence of a Canadian Jefferson and a Canadian Hamilton in opposing parties. We have had no Canadian Burke or Mill to perform the social function of the political philosopher in action. We have had no Canadian Carlyle or Ruskin or Arnold to ask searching questions about the ultimate

values embodied in our political or economic practice. We lack a Canadian Walt Whitman or Mark Twain to give literary expression to the democratic way of life. The student in search of illustrative material on the growth of Canadian political ideas during the great century of liberalism and democracy has to content himself mainly with a collection of extracts from more or less forgotten speeches and pamphlets and newspaper editorials. Whatever urge may have, at any time, possessed any Canadian to philosophize upon politics did not lead to much writing whose intrinsic worth helped to preserve it in our memory.

At least this is true of us English-speaking Canadians. Our French-speaking fellow citizens have shown a much greater fondness and capacity for ideas in politics than we have; but their writings, being in another language, have hardly penetrated into our English-Canadian consciousness.

We early repudiated the philosophy of the Manchester School; but in the long history of our Canadian "National Policy" it is difficult to find any Canadian exposition of the anti-Manchester ideas of a national economy, written by economist, business man, or politician, which has impressed itself upon us as worthy of preservation. Our history is full of agrarian protest movements, but the ordinary Canadian would be stumped if asked to name any representative Canadian philosopher of agrarianism. And the most notable illustration of this poverty of our politics at the intellectual level is to be found in the fact that while we were the pioneers in one of the great liberal achievements of the nineteenth century—the experiment of responsible government, which transformed the British Empire into the Commonwealth, and which has thrown fresh light in our own day on the possibility of reconciling nationalism with a wider international community—even in this field, in which our practical contribution was so great, there has arisen since the days of Joseph Howe no Canadian prophet of the idea of the Commonwealth whose writings seem inspiring or even readable to wider circles than those of professional historians.

This seeming incapacity for ideas, or rather this habit of carrying on our communal affairs at a level at which ideas never quite emerge into an articulate life of their own, has surely impoverished our Canadian politics. Every teacher of Canadian history has this fact brought home to him with each fresh batch of young students whom he meets. How reluctant they are to study the history of their own country! How eagerly they show their preference for English or European or (if they get the chance) for American history! For they instinctively feel that when they get outside of Canada they are studying the great creative seminal ideas that have determined the character of our modern world, whereas inside Canada there seem to be no ideas at issue of permanent or universal significance at all. I can myself still remember the thrill of appreciation with which as a university freshman I heard a famous professor of Greek³ remark that our Canadian history is as dull as ditchwater, and our politics is full of it. Of course there is a considerable amount of ditchwater in the politics of all countries; my professor was more conscious of it in Canada because he missed here those ideas which he found in the politics of classical Greece. And as far as I have been able to observe, young students of this present generation are still repelled by

³Maurice Hutton, Principal of University College in the University of Toronto.

Canadian history because they find in it little more than the story of a half-continent of material resources over which a population of some twelve million economic animals have spread themselves in a not too successful search for economic wealth.

* * *

It will of course be said in answer to these mournful reflections upon the low quality of intellectual activity in Canadian politics that they are exaggerated and extreme. So I should like to buttress my position by referring to observations made at different times by students from the outer world upon the nature and quality of Canadian party politics. The name of Goldwin Smith* comes to mind at once. He watched and studied Canadian politics continuously from the early eighteen-seventies to the early nineteen-hundreds, applying to them the standards of an English Manchester liberal; and his verdict was adverse. He felt that Canadians after 1867 had failed to rise to their intellectual opportunities, that they had failed to grasp in their imagination the potentialities of the new nationality, that their political parties operated only to debase and pervert the discussion of public issues, and that in the absence of great guiding inspiring ideas Canadian national statesmanship had degenerated into a sordid business of bargaining and manoeuvring among narrow selfish particularist interest groups. He took a certain sardonic pleasure in noting the skill with which Macdonald played this low game as contrasted with the clumsiness with which Mackenzie and Blake played it; but he could see in it nothing but a low game after all. The obvious reply to Goldwin Smith is that he was embittered by the disappointment of his own ambitions and that his testimony is therefore to be discounted. But no one who studies the politics of the period 1867 to 1914 can be convinced that this is a wholly satisfactory defence against his criticisms.

At the period of the turn of the century, we were studied by another overseas observer who has given us the most penetrating and illuminating analysis of our politics that has yet been written by anyone, native or foreign. In 1906 André Siegfried published his book, *The Race Question in Canada*, and set forth the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that, while (to quote his opening sentence) "Canadian politics are a tilting ground for impassioned rivalries," they operated so as to suppress the intellectual vitality which would be the natural result of such a situation.

Originally formed to subserve a political idea, these parties are often to be found quite detached from the principles which gave them birth, and with their own self-preservation as their chief care and aim. Even without a programme, they continue to live and thrive, tending to become mere associations for the securing of power; their doctrines serving merely as weapons, dulled or sharpened, grasped as occasion arises for use in the fight. . . . This fact deprives the periodical appeals to the voting public of the importance which they should have. . . . Whichever side succeeds, the country it is well known will be governed in just the same way; the only difference will be in the *personnel* of the Government. That is how things go save when some great wave of feeling sweeps over the Dominion, submerging all the pigmies of politics in its flood.

*See F. H. Underhill, "Goldwin Smith" (*University of Toronto Quarterly*, II, Apr., 1933).

In the intervals between these crises. . . it is not the party that subserves the idea, it is the idea that subserves the party. Canadian statesmen . . . undoubtedly take longer views. They seem, however, to stand in fear of great movements of public opinion, and to seek to lull them rather than to encourage them and bring them to fruition. Thus, deliberately and not from short-sightedness, they help to promote the state of things which I have described. The reason for this attitude is easy to comprehend. Canada, with its rival creeds and races, is a land of fears and jealousies and conflicts. . . . Let a question involving religion or nationality be once boldly raised. . . and the elections will be turned into real political fights, passionate and sincere. This is exactly what is dreaded by far-sighted and prudent politicians, whose duty it is to preserve the national equilibrium. . . . They exert themselves, therefore, to prevent the formation of homogeneous parties, divided according to creed or race or class. The purity of political life suffers from this, but perhaps the very existence of the Federation is the price. The existing parties are thus entirely harmless. The Liberals and Conservatives differ very little really in their opinions upon crucial questions, and their views as to administration are almost identical. . . . They have come to regard each other without alarm: they know each other too well and resemble each other too closely.⁵

Mr. J. A. Hobson, the well-known English economist, published a little book about Canada at almost the same moment as M. Siegfried—*Canada Today*, which appeared in 1906. It also gives a rather unfavourable impression of Canadian politics, although the author's main interest was in the economic question of protection and the British preference.

More recently another great student of politics from overseas has given us his observations upon Canada. James Bryce had played an active part in the politics of his own country, had made himself intimately acquainted with the American Commonwealth, and applied to Canada a mind that was deeply learned in comparative politics. In his book, *Modern Democracies*, published in 1921, he devoted some chapters to the working of Canadian democracy.

Since 1867 the questions which have had the most constant interest for the bulk of the nation are . . . those which belong to the sphere of commercial and industrial progress, the development of the material resources of the country . . . —matters scarcely falling within the lines by which party opinion is divided, for the policy of *laissez faire* has few adherents in a country which finds in governmental action or financial support to private enterprises the quickest means of carrying out every promising project. . . . The task of each party is to persuade the people that in this instance its plan promises quicker and larger results, and that it is fitter to be trusted with the work. Thus it happens that general political principles . . . count for little in politics, though ancient habit requires them to be invoked. Each party tries to adapt itself from time to time to whatever practical issue may arise. Opportunism is inevitable, and the charge of inconsistency, though incessantly bandied to and fro, is lightly regarded. . . . In Canada ideas are not needed to make parties,

⁵André Siegfried, *The Race Question in Canada* (English translation, London, 1907), 141-3.

for these can live by heredity. . . . The people show an abounding party spirit when an election day arrives. The constant party struggle keeps their interest alive. But party spirit, so far from being a measure of the volume of political thinking, may even be a substitute for thinking. . . . In every country a game played over material interests between ministers, constituencies and their representatives, railway companies and private speculators is not only demoralizing to all concerned but interferes with the consideration of the great issues of policy on a wise handling of which a nation's welfare depends. Fiscal questions, labour questions, the assumption by the State of such branches of industry as railroads or mines, and the principles it ought to follow in such works as it undertakes—questions like these need wide vision, clear insight, and a firmness that will resist political pressure and adhere to the principles once laid down. These qualities have been wanting, and the people have begun to perceive the want.⁶

* * *

This general failure of our Canadian politics to rise above a mere confused struggle of interest groups has been no doubt due to a variety of causes. In the middle of the twentieth century it is rather too late for us to keep harping on the pioneer frontier character of the Canadian community as the all sufficient answer to criticism. The young American republic which included a Jefferson and a Hamilton and a Franklin, not to mention many of their contemporaries of almost equal intellectual stature, was a smaller and more isolated frontier community than Canada has been for a long time; but it was already by the end of the eighteenth century the peer of Europe in the quality of its political thinking and was recognized as such. We still remain colonial in the middle of the twentieth century.

One reason for our backwardness, and the reason which interests me most at the moment, has been the weakness of the Radical and Reform parties of the Left in our Canadian history. A healthy society will consist of a great majority massed a little to the right and a little to the left of centre, with smaller groups of strong conservatives and strong radicals out on the wings. If these minority groups are not present in any significant force to provide a perpetual challenge to the majority, the conservatives and liberals of the centre are likely to be a pretty flabby lot, both intellectually and morally.

For this weakness of the Left in Canada, the ultimate explanation would seem to be that we never had an eighteenth century of our own. The intellectual life of our politics has not been periodically revived by fresh drafts from the invigorating fountain of eighteenth-century Enlightenment. In Catholic French Canada the doctrines of the rights of man and of Liberty Equality Fraternity were rejected from the start, and to this day they have never penetrated, save surreptitiously or spasmodically. The mental climate of English Canada in its early formative years was determined by men who were fleeing from the practical application of the doctrines that all men are born equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights among which are life liberty and the pursuit of happiness. All effective liberal and radical democratic movements in the nineteenth century have had their roots in this fertile eighteenth-century soil. But our ancestors made the great refusal

⁶James Bryce, *Modern Democracies* (New York, 1921), I, 471-505. Bryce's analysis was based mainly upon observations made before World War I.

in the eighteenth century. In Canada we have no revolutionary tradition; and our historians, political scientists, and philosophers have assiduously tried to educate us to be proud of this fact. How can such a people expect their democracy to be dynamic as the democracies of Britain and France and the United States have been?

Then also it has never been sufficiently emphasized that our first great democratic upheaval a hundred years ago was a failure. In the United States, Jacksonian Democracy swept away most of the old aristocratic survivals and made a strong attack upon the new plutocratic forces. The Federalists disappeared; and their successors, the Whigs, suffered a series of defeats at the hands of triumphant Democracy. But the Canadian version of Jacksonian Democracy represented by the movements of Papineau and Mackenzie was discredited by the events of their abortive rebellions. And Canada followed the example of Britain rather than of the United States. Responsible government was a British technique of government which took the place of American elective institutions. Our historians have been so dazzled by its success that they have failed to point out that the real radicals in Canada were pushed aside in the eighteen-forties by the respectable professional and property-owning classes, the "Moderates" as we call them; just as the working-class radicals in Britain, without whose mass-agitation the Reform Bill could not have been passed, were pushed aside after 1832 for a long generation of middle class Whig rule. The social pyramid in Canada about which Sir Francis Bond Head was so worried in 1839 was *not* upset; and after a decade of excitement it was clear that the Reform government was only a business men's government. When Baldwin and Lafontaine were succeeded by Hincks and Morin this was so clear that new radical movements emerged both in Upper and in Lower Canada, the Grits and les Rouges.

Now in North America the essence of all effective liberal movements—I assume in this paper that liberalism naturally leads towards democracy—must be that they are attacks upon the domination of the community by the business man. This was what the Democratic party of Jackson and Van Buren was. As Mr. Schlesinger has recently been pointing out in his brilliant book, *The Age of Jackson*,⁷ the effectiveness of the Jacksonians was due to the fact that their leading ideas about the relations of business and government came primarily not from the frontier farmers of the west but from the democratic labour movements in the big cities and their sympathizers among the urban intellectuals. Jefferson had been mainly interested in political democracy; Jackson tackled the problem of economic democracy in a society becoming increasingly industrialized. The social equality of the frontier has never given agrarian democrats a sufficient understanding of the problems of a society divided into the rich and the poor of an urban civilization. Here we seem to come upon an important explanation for the weakness of all Canadian radical movements from the eighteen-thirties to the end of the century. They were too purely agrarian. The only force that could ultimately overcome the Hamiltonians must, like them, have its base of operations in the cities.

Mr. Schlesinger has also pointed out that American conservatism was immensely strengthened when it transformed itself from Federalism to Whiggism. In the eighteen-thirties, as he puts it, it changed from broadcloth to homespun. "The metamorphosis revived it politically but ruined it intel-

⁷A. M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945).

lectually. The Federalists had thought about society in an intelligent and hard-boiled way. The Whigs, in scuttling Federalism, replaced it by a social philosophy founded, not on ideas, but on subterfuges and sentimentalities.⁸ But the Whigs learned the techniques of demagogy from the Jacksonians and set out to guide the turbulent new American democracy along lines that would suit the purposes of business. Surely we should remark that exactly the same metamorphosis took place just a little later in Canadian conservatism. The clear-cut anti-democratic philosophy of Sir Francis Bond Head and the Family Compact Tories was as obsolete and out-of-place in the bustling Canada of the eighteen-fifties as Federalism had been in the United States in the eighteen-twenties. The Macdonald-Cartier Liberal-Conservative party was American Whiggism with a British title. (And no doubt the British label on the outside added considerably to the potency of the American liquor inside the bottle.) The Liberal-Conservatives had made the necessary demagogic adjustments to the democratic spirit of the times; they had a policy of economic expansion to be carried out under the leadership of business with the assistance of government which was an almost exact parallel to Clay's Whig "American System." But there was no Jackson and no Jacksonian "kitchen cabinet" in Canada to counter this Liberal-Conservatism.

The Grits and les Rouges did not quite meet the needs of the situation. What Rougeism, with its body of ideas from the revolutionary Paris of 1848, might have accomplished we cannot say; for it soon withered under the onslaught of the Church. Grittism in Upper Canada was originally a movement inspired by American ideas, as its early fondness for elective institutions and its continuing insistence on "Rep by Pop" show. But Brown's accession tended to shift the inspiration in the British direction. Brown himself became more and more sentimentally British as he grew older. Moreover, as publisher of the *Globe*, he was a business man on the make, and Toronto was a growing business centre. As Toronto grew, and as the *Globe* grew, the original frontier agrarianism of the Grits was imperceptibly changed into something subtly different. As early as January 3, 1857 the *Globe* was declaring: "The schemes of those who have announced that Toronto must aspire no higher than to be 'the Capital of an agricultural District' must be vigorously met and overcome." Brown defeated the radicals from the Peninsula in the great Reform convention of 1859, and by 1867 Grit leaders were more and more becoming urban business and professional men. A party which contained William McMaster of the Bank of Commerce and John Macdonald, the big wholesale merchant, was not likely to be very radical. Oliver Mowat, a shrewd cautious lawyer, was about to take over the direction of its forces in Ontario provincial politics; and its rising hope in the federal sphere was Edward Blake, the leader of the Ontario equity bar. Moreover, as Brown's unhappy experiences with his printers in 1872 were to show, the Reform party under *Globe* inspiration found difficulty in adjusting itself to the new ideas which industrialism was encouraging in the minds of the working class. Blake and Mowat, who dominated Canadian Liberal thinking after Brown, were not American democrats or radicals so much as English Whigs in their temperament, their training, and their political philosophy. For political equality and liberty they were

⁸*Ibid.*, 279.

prepared to fight; economic equality did not move them very deeply. And the same might be said about Laurier who succeeded them.⁹

Another point worth noting is the effect of British influences in slowing down all movements throughout the nineteenth century in the direction of the democratization of politics and society. Inevitably, because of geographical proximity and the mutual interpenetration of the lives of the two North American communities, the urge towards greater democracy was likely to appear in Canada as an American influence; and since the survival of Canada as a separate entity depended on her not being submerged under an American flood, such influences were fought as dangerous to our Canadian ethos. Sir Francis Bond Head and the Tories of his time habitually used the words "democratic" and "republican" as interchangeable. Every Canadian movement of the Left in those days and since has had to meet accusations of Americanism, and in proving its sound British patriotism it has been apt to lose a good deal of its Leftism. Canadian Methodism, for example, widely influenced by its American connections, was on the Reform side of politics until the Ryerson arrangement in the eighteen-thirties with the British Wesleyans put it on the other side.

When we get down to the Confederation period no one can fail to see how markedly the British influence gives a conservative tone to the whole generation of the Fathers. Later Canadians have had to reflect frequently on the sad fact that the "new nationality" was very imperfectly based upon any deep popular feeling. It has occurred to many of them, with the wisdom of hindsight, that Confederation would have been a much stronger structure had the Quebec Resolutions received the ratification of the electorate in each colony in accordance with American precedents. But the British doctrine of legislative sovereignty operated to override all suggestions that the people should be consulted; and Canadian nationality has always been weak in its moral appeal because "We the People" had no formal part in bringing it into being.

Similarly British example was effective in delaying the arrival of manhood suffrage in Canada till toward the end of the century, though the Americans had adopted it in the early part of the century. The ballot did not become part of Canadian law until sanctioned by British precedent in the eighteen-seventies. The Chancery Court which had long been a favourite object of radical attack in Upper Canada remained intact until jurists of the Mother Country had amalgamated the equity and common law jurisdictions there. And that strange constitutional device, the Canadian Senate, with its life appointees, was slipped into our constitution with the plea that appointment by the Crown

⁹On the Liberal party see further F. H. Underhill's articles on:

- (1) "Some Aspects of Upper Canadian Political Opinion in the Decade before Confederation" (*Canadian Historical Association Report*, 1927).
- (2) "Canada's Relations with the Empire as seen by the *Toronto Globe*, 1857-67" (*Canadian Historical Review*, XX, June, 1929).
- (3) "The Development of National Political Parties in Canada" (*Canadian Historical Review*, XVI, Dec., 1935).
- (4) "Edward Blake, the Liberal Party and Unrestricted Reciprocity" (*Canadian Historical Association Report*, 1939).
- (5) "Edward Blake and Canadian Liberal Nationalism" (in R. Flenley, *Essays in Canadian History*, Toronto, 1939).
- (6) "Political Ideas of the Upper Canada Reformers, 1867-78" (*Canadian Historical Association Report*, 1942).
- (7) "The Canadian Party System in Transition" (*Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, IX, Aug., 1943).

was the British way of doing things. John A. Macdonald must have had his tongue in his cheek when he presented this Senate as a protector of provincial rights, its members being appointed by the head of the very federal government against which provincial rights were to be protected. In the privacy of the Quebec Conference, when they were constructing the second chamber, he had remarked to his fellow delegates: "The rights of the minority must be protected, and the rich are always fewer in number than the poor." One wonders what George Brown or Oliver Mowat, the Grit representatives, must have said at this point, or whether the secretary, who caught Macdonald's immortal sentence, failed to take down their comments. Generally speaking, the notable fact is that in all this era of constitution making, and of constitution testing in the decades just after 1867, the voice of democratic radicalism was so weak.

On the other hand, when Britain began to grow really democratic towards the end of the nineteenth century, her example seemed to have little effect upon Canadian liberalism. The two most significant features in internal British politics since the eighteen-eighties have been the rise of industrial labour to a share of power both in the economic and in the political field, and the growing tendency towards collectivism in social policy. We are only beginning to enter upon this stage of development in Canada today. Throughout it has been the conservative trends in English life that we have usually copied. And one of the few sources of innocent amusement left in the present tortured world is to watch the growing embarrassment of all those professional exponents in Canada of the English way of doing things, now that the English way threatens to become less conservative.

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Of course the great force, by far the most important force, weakening liberal and democratic tendencies in Canada after 1867 was the rush to exploit the resources of a rich half continent. This was the age in American history which Parrington has called "The Great Barbecue."

The spirit of the frontier was to flare up in a huge buccaneering orgy. . . . Congress had rich gifts to bestow—in lands, tariffs, subsidies, favors of all sorts; and when influential citizens had made their wishes known to the reigning statesmen, the sympathetic politicians were quick to turn the government into the fairy godmother the voters wanted it to be. A huge barbecue was spread to which all presumably were invited. Not quite all; to be sure; inconspicuous persons, those who were at home on the farm or at work in the mills and offices were overlooked. . . . But all the important people, leading bankers and promoters and business men, received invitations. . . . To a frontier people what was more democratic than a barbecue, and to a paternal age what was more fitting than that the state should provide the beeves for roasting? Let all come and help themselves. . . . But unfortunately what was intended to be jovially democratic was marred by displays of plebeian temper. Suspicious commoners with better eyes than manners discovered the favoritism of the waiters, and drew attention to their own meager helpings and the heaped-up plates of the more favored guests.¹⁰

¹⁰Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, Volume III, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America* (New York, 1930), 23.

Parrington's description fits the Canadian situation also, though our barbecue did not get going in full force till after 1896. In the first generation after Confederation, Canadian Liberals wandered mostly in the deserts of opposition because they could not produce any policy which could match in attractiveness the economic expansionism of the Conservatives. They criticized the extravagant pace of Conservative policy, they denounced the corruption of the Macdonald system, they pointed with true prophecy to the danger of building up great business corporations like the C.P.R. which might become more powerful than the national government itself. But the spirit of the Great Barbecue was too strong for them. And when finally they did come into office under Laurier they gave up the struggle. The effort to control this social force of the business-man-on-the-make was abandoned. Their moral abhorrence of the methods of Macdonald gave place with a striking rapidity to an ever deepening cynicism. "You say we should at once set to reform the tariff," Laurier wrote to his chief journalistic supporter after the victory of 1896, "This I consider impossible except after ample discussion with the business men." And until he made the fatal mistake of reciprocity in 1911, the Liberal government was conducted on the basis of ample discussion with the business men.

It is easy to say that this was inevitable in the circumstances of the time. And indeed the remarkable fact about the Canada of the turn of the century is the slowness of other social groups in acquiring political consciousness and organizing movements of revolt against government by business men. American populism was only faintly reflected amongst Canadian farmers until the nineteen-twenties. The Progressive movement which helped to bring Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson to the White House seemed to cause few repercussions north of the border. Everybody in Canada in those days was reading the popular American magazines as they carried on the spectacular campaigns of the muckraking era against the trusts. But this fierce attack next door to us against the domination of society by big business stirred few echoes in Canadian public life. Our Canadian millionaires continued to die in the odour of sanctity. Canadian liberalism in the Laurier era was equally little affected by the contemporary transformation of the British Liberal party into a great radical social-reform movement.

What seems especially to have struck visitors from across the ocean was the absence of any effective labour movement in Canadian politics. Both André Siegfried from France and J. A. Hobson from England remarked upon this phenomenon in the books which they published in 1906. "When the workers of Canada wake up," said Hobson, "they will find that Protection is only one among the several economic fangs fastened in their 'corpus vile' by the little group of railroad men, bankers, lumber men and manufacturing monopolists who own their country."¹¹

The Great Barbecue was still in full swing when these observers studied Canada. As I have said already, liberalism in North America, if it is to mean anything concrete, must mean an attack upon the domination of institutions and ideas by the business man. In this sense Canadian liberalism revived after 1918, to produce results with which we are all familiar. Among those results, however, we can hardly include any advance in the clarity or the realism of the liberal thinking of the so-called Liberal party, however

¹¹J. A. Hobson, *Canada Today* (London, 1906), 47.

much we may be compelled to admire its dexterity in the practical arts of maintaining itself in office. In the realm of political ideas its performance may be correctly described as that of going on and on and on, and up and up and up. But I am now touching upon present-day controversies. And, whatever latitude may be allowed to the political scientist, we all know that the historian cannot deal with current events without soiling the purity of his scientific objectivity.

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In the meantime Canadian historians must continue to study and to write the history of their country. I have devoted these rambling remarks to the subject of political ideas because I have a feeling that Canadian historiography has come to the end of an epoch. For the past twenty or thirty years, most of the best work in Canadian history has been in the economic field. How different groups of Canadians made their living, how a national economy was built up, how the Canadian economy was integrated into a world economy, these topics have been industriously investigated; and we have been given thereby a new and a deeper understanding of the basis of our national life. The climax in this school of activity was reached with the publication of the Carnegie series on Canadian-American relations and of the various volumes connected with the Rowell-Sirois Report.

The best work in the Carnegie collection is for the most part on the economic side. And the volume, published during the past year, which crowns the series—Professor Bartlet Brebner's *North American Triangle*—can hardly be praised too highly for the skill and insight with which the author brings out the pattern of the joint Canadian-American achievement in settling the continent and exploiting its economic resources, and with which he explains the practical working of our peculiar North American techniques and forms of organization. But it is significant that he has little to say about the intellectual history of the two peoples, about education, religion, and such subjects; and especially about the idea of democracy as understood in North America. Materials from research on the intellectual history of Canada were not, as a matter of fact, available to him in any quantity. Volume I of the Rowell-Sirois Report is likewise a brilliant and, within its field, a convincing exercise in the economic interpretation of Canadian history. But it is abstract history without names or real flesh-and-blood individuals, the history of puppets who dance on strings pulled by obscure world forces which they can neither understand nor control; it presents us with a ghostly ballet of bloodless economic categories.

The time seems about due for a new history-writing which will attempt to explain the ideas in the heads of Canadians that caused them to act as they did, their philosophy, why they thought in one way at one period and in a different way at another period. Perhaps when we settle down to this task we shall discover that our ancestors had more ideas in their heads than this paper has been willing to concede them. At any rate, we shall then be able to understand more clearly the place of the Canadian people in the civilization of the liberal-democratic century which lies behind us.