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LIVRES ET REVUES

The Canadian Historical Review, XXX, 1, March 1949: 22–46.
CORNELL, PAUL GRANT, « The Alignment of Political Groups in the United Province of Canada, 1854-1864 ».

« This study endeavours to analyse the forces operating in the Legislative Assembly ». The author, writing at the University of Toronto, provides a series of maps representing the Upper Canadian political scene at the close of the four general elections which occurred within his period, those of 1854, 1857-8, 1861 and 1863. He does not do the same for Lower Canada. But, in footnotes, he lists the names of all members elected in each of those years, and classifies them on the basis of their votes in the Assembly. The reader with a special interest in French Canada, therefore, can discover from this article the political tendencies of any electoral district between 1854 and 1864, provided he has a list of the constituencies represented by the various members. [1]

The situation in Parliament at the beginning of the election year 1854 in some ways resembled that in Parliament at the beginning of the election year 1949. A Liberal (or « Reform ») government, led by Hincks and Morin, was in office, while the Conservatives formed the official opposition. « The two strongest groups in the House were the Lower Canadian Reformers and the Upper Canadian Tories ». (In early 1949, the two strongest groups are the Quebec Liberals and the Ontario Progressive Conservatives, while Mr. Mackenzie King and Mr. Saint-Laurent have been occupying the place of Hincks and Morin). Before the election of 1854, « the Ministry commanded a majority of the representatives from Lower Canada », including Cartier, Chauveau, and Morin. Mr. Cornell divides the opposition members into two groups. He includes L.-J. Papineau, Sicotte, and

1. For example, Joseph Desjardins, *Guide Parlementaire Historique de la Province de Québec, 1792 à 1902*, Québec, 1902.

the members for Trois-Rivières and Montréal (comté) among those which he marks as « Rouge ? »; while the members for Québec (cité) are placed among those in a second group, which he does not attempt to describe. (Of the two members for Montreal (cité), one is among the « Rouges ? », and one is in the other opposition group, but both are English-speaking). Before the election of 1949, also, the Ministry commands a majority of the representatives from Quebec Province; while the French-speaking opposition members cannot all be placed in one group, varying as they do from Réal Caouette, of the Union des Electeurs, to Georges Héon, of the Progressive Conservatives.

The general election of the summer of 1854, like that of 1949, was conducted on a basis of a new enlarged representation. « The Lower-Canadian Ministerial Reformers returned a clear majority of the members from that section », but no single party obtained a majority in Parliament as a whole. In the spring of 1949, it seems quite possible that, for the Ministerial Liberals, the results of this year's elections may be quite similar to those of 1854. Should this prove to be the case, the manner in which new political alignments were worked out between 1854 and 1864 to overcome the party deadlock, the topic dealt with in Mr. Cornell's article, may throw some light on what we should expect, or perhaps should try to avoid, in Canadian politics during the next few years.

The Liberal or « Reform » government, in the elections of 1854, made some notable gains, including all three members for Québec (cité). Montréal (comté) was for the first time divided into Jacques-Cartier and Hochelaga, and the Ministry won the latter. But the opposition Radical Reformers, on the other hand, held Jacques-Cartier, and elected all three members for Montreal (cité), one of whom this time was a French Canadian, A.A. Dorion. Trois-Rivières still had the same member as before, Antoine Polette, but after the general election of 1854 he is classified by Mr. Cornell simply as an opposition « Independent ».

A.-N. Morin, and his associates in the government, now had to decide whether they would look for a majority among the new radical groups on the left, or in the official Conservative opposition on the right. At first the Assembly seemed to be looking to the left. When the government nominee for speaker was rejected, « L. V. Sicotte from the Lower-Canadian section of the Opposition was chosen ».

And J.-B.-E. Dorion, the new opposition Radical member for Drummond and Arthabaska, « seized the initiative in ordering the business of the House ». But A.-N. Morin swung to the right, and entered a ministry « based upon the support of the two most numerous groups in the House: thirty-five Bleus and twenty-six Tory-Conservatives ». In other words, the Bleus ceased to be Liberals and became « Liberal-Conservatives », which meant that, although they were the largest party in 1854, they were gradually thereafter absorbed by the Conservatives who, under MacNab and John A. Macdonald, really continued to be the party of British nationalism in Canada. The result was that, by 1897, the once all-powerful Bleus had been reduced to a helpless position in the Province of Quebec.

The new Liberal-Conservative Government of 1854 secured the adhesion of the member for Trois-Rivières and of the other French-speaking « Independents » (did they have the equivalent of Union National leanings?), leaving the Radicals to form the opposition. « This combination of a French-Canadian bloc from Canada East and later Quebec, with Conservative forces from other portions of Canada was normally the basis of government strength down to 1896 », says Mr. Cornell, although his use of the word « bloc » suggests a unanimity which really never existed; and after the hanging of Riel in 1885, the Macdonald government was actually never again able to win even a majority of the French-speaking districts.

The Liberal-Conservative government survived its first general election, that of 1857-8, due to the distinct victory registered in Canada East by the Bleu party, now controlled by Cartier. The Hon. L.-V. Sicotte (Saint-Hyacinthe), was now one of their number. He had become a member of the ministry in 1857, as had Hon. Charles Alleyn from Quebec (cité), and Hon.John Rose, who captured one of the Montreal seat from the Radicals. Jacques-Cartier was among the other government gains, and a new recruit for the Bleus turned up in Hector-Louis Langevin, who was elected in the ministerialist county of Dorchester. The defeated Rouges, on the other hand, produced a new Irish member in Montreal in the person of Thomas D'Arcy McGee.

An interesting incident occurred on July 28, 1858, when the Liberal-Conservative administration failed to get a majority for its proposal regarding the permanent capital of Canada. « The direct

cause of the Government's defeat on this occasion was the large-scale desertion of the Government policy favouring Ottawa by twenty-two members from the Bleu party ». The Liberal-Conservatives went out of office, and A.-A. Dorion actually joined with George Brown in forming a government. It lasted only three days, however, for « none of the twenty-two Bleu members who had left their party over the Ottawa question gave their confidence to the Brown-Dorion Government ». The Liberal-Conservatives came back, with Georges-Etienne Cartier (Verchères) as Prime Minister, on August 6, 1858. « The Ottawa question was raised again... on February 10, 1859, but... nine Bleu members of the twenty-two who had opposed Ottawa on July 28, 1858 now voted in its favour ». John A. Macdonald and Cartier got their way, — Ottawa became the capital.

« An examination of the history of the Legislative Assembly from August, 1858 to June, 1864, » says Mr. Cornell, « is a study of the anatomy of 'deadlock'». Elections came in due course in 1861, and again the Liberal-Conservative government was victorious. But this time Cartier's Bleus « formed a bare majority of the sixty-five members from Canada East, and numbered thirty-three ». One of them, Hon. Joseph-Edouard Turcotte, an old-time Conservative now elected for Trois-Rivières, was the government's nominee for Speaker. The Assembly accepted him on March 20, 1862, by a margin of thirteen. But the Rouge party had increased in numbers to twenty-two. A.-A. Dorion was missing, Montréal-Est having been captured by Cartier in person. But the Rouges had retaliated by capturing Verchères and a number of other seats, including Hochelaga (which was opened for A.-A. Dorion in 1862), and Québec-Est (which was destined to be opened first for Wilfrid Laurier in 1877, and then for Louis Saint-Laurent in 1942). Among the new Rouge members elected in 1861 was Henri-Gustave Joly de Lotbiniere. L.-V. Sicotte, who had dropped out of Cartier's cabinet at the end of 1858, was re-elected as an independent Liberal.

On May 20, 1862, the difficulty of holding French Canadians in the same party with British Conservatives was demonstrated on another question than that of the capital. « This defeat of the Liberal-Conservative Executive Council was caused primarily by the defection of eleven Bleu members over the militia issue ». « J.S. Macdonald and Sicotte formed a new ministry on May 24, 1862, apparently

seeking to capture the support of Lower Canadian Liberal Independents and some of the eleven late supporters of the Bleu party, as well as the expected adherence of Rouges and Reformers ». But the « eleven recalcitrant Bleus returned to the support of their parent party ». On May 6, 1863, a defeat in the Assembly caused the Reform Ministry to advise a new general election. Sicotte was dropped from the cabinet, and J.S. Macdonald « appealed now to the Rouge party in Canada East », with A.-A. Dorion leading the French wing of the government.

But in the elections of 1863, Cartier's Bleus were again victorious in Canada East, winning thirty-eight seats. They included not only Sicotte, but also McGee, who likewise had gone over to the opposition after J.S. Macdonald and Dorion had replaced him by Isidore Thibaudeau as President of the Executive Council before the elections. The three Montreal seats, which had all been Radical in 1854, were now all Conservative, John Rose having replaced Luther Holton in 1857, Cartier having replaced Dorion for Montreal-Est in 1861, and D'Arcy McGee of Montreal-West having changed sides in 1863. On the other hand, the new Rouge ministers were all elected in 1863: A.-A. Dorion (Hochelaga), Holton (Chateauguay), Huntingdon (Shefford), Laframboise (Bagot), and Thibaudeau (Québec-Centre). It was this same Isidore Thibaudeau who resigned as member for Québec-Est in 1874 to provide a seat for Laurier. His election in 1863 gave the Rouges, for the first time, two out of the three seats in Quebec City.

In Canada West, the Conservatives were in a minority. The total result was that in July, 1863, no party had a majority in Parliament. The balance of power was held by six Independents. Four of these were from Lower Canada: Abbott (Argenteuil) had been dropped, like Sicotte and McGee, from the Reform cabinet before the elections in 1863, but was later to become a Conservative Prime Minister (1891-2); Sylvain (Rimouski) also was an associate of Sicotte; Dunkin (Brome) was « an Independent English Tory », and O'Halloran (Missisquoi) « appears to have been a radical independent ». « It was the action of these six Independents which contrived to render it impossible for either the Rouge-Reformers, or the Liberal-Conservatives to secure a working majority ». The J.S. Macdonald — A.-A. Dorion government resigned in March, 1864, but the Liberal-

Conservative ministry which succeeded it was in turn defeated, in June, 1864, by two votes.

The Liberal-Conservative coalition had at first seemed invincible. A Drew-Saint-Laurent government would be the 1949 equivalent of the MacNab-Morin alliance of 1854. Yet within a decade it could not obtain a majority. In 1864 a new coalition was necessary. A new government, formed on June 30, 1864, « was supported by all Conservatives, the large bulk of the Bleus, and four-fifths of the Reformers. The Rouge party and the dissenting segment of the Reform group furnished the basis for an opposition ».

Mr. Cornell remarks that the « one persistent feature in the changing scene was the French-Canadian Nationalist Bloc, controlled by Lafontaine [should be LaFontaine], Morin, and more recently, by Cartier ». « From 1854 to 1864 », he says, « the forces of the 'right' were predominant in Canada East ». From this he concludes that the « pivot of parliamentary manœuvring in Canada during this decade was surely the large, fairly resilient bloc of members from Canada East, who commanded a majority from that section throughout the period », and that the « Bleus were consistently the Lower Canadian majority, the continuing problem of instability was due to the changing complexion of the Upper Canadian majority ».

Thus Mr. Cornell tends to accept the usual English-Canadian view of French-Canadian politics in any period, as consisting of a stubborn and solid « bloc », refusing to listen to any new ideas. « United in defence of existing rights and privileges », he says, « the French Nationalist group could remain defiant, united, and immovable ». Mr. Cornell is obviously looking at his subject through Ontarian eyes.

In the first place, it is misleading to refer to the Bleus as though they were more « Nationalist » than the Rouges, the party which « advocated positive innovation ». The tradition of Papineau and the leadership of Dorion were actually more nationalist than were the tradition of LaFontaine and the leadership of Cartier. It was no accident that both Mercier and Bourassa were later produced by the Rouges, not the Bleus.

Secondly, although the Bleus under Morin and Cartier maintained a majority in Lower Canada throughout the decade 1854-1864, there was always a vigorous minority opposed to them. There was

really no solid French-Canadian « bloc ». Even the Bleus themselves sometimes were divided. In his conclusions the author ignores the fact which he himself had pointed out, that both in 1858 and 1862 it was not Upper-Canadian votes, but a revolt among the Bleus on important matters of policy, which upset the Liberal-Conservative governments under J.-A. Macdonald and Cartier.

Mr. Cornell's own figures show that, in times of crisis, it was actually the Upper Canadians to a greater extent than the Lower Canadians who tended to stand together as a bloc. Thus, when the MacNab-Morin government was formed in 1854, it at first had the support of 45 of the 65 members for Canada West, but of only 42 (some of whom were English-speaking) out of 64 from Canada East. When J.S. Macdonald replaced the Liberal-Conservatives from 1862 to 1864, his government, too, had more supporters from Upper than from Lower Canada. And finally, when the Taché — J.-A. Macdonald coalition government was formed in 1864, it had almost the solid support of the Upper Canadian members, leaving the Rouges as the only real opposition. Fundamentally, the British nationalists were at least as « united in defence of existing rights and privileges » as was « the French Nationalist group ».

The two major Canadian parties of today really originated in 1854; and in the decade under discussion French Canadians were divided between them. The chief stronghold of the Rouge party as it finally emerged in that year was in the counties of Saint-Jean and Napierville, which came into existence for the first time in the general election of 1854. They immediately voted Rouge, and began a tradition which remained unshaken until 1941, when they turned to the Union Nationale in a very significant by-election. On the other hand, in the decade beginning in 1854, Trois-Rivières was consistently Bleu, and there it was the Conservative tradition which became strongly established. Thus, while it may be quite true to say, as Mr. Cornell does in his interesting article, that the « Bleu were consistently the Lower Canadian majority », it is quite another thing, and much less accurate, for him to speak of « the French-Canadian bloc » and to say that « the French Nationalist group could remain defiant, united, and immovable ». Actually there was a very healthy division of opinion among the French Canadians, — so much so that it sometimes became a « lutte fratricide ». Gordon O. ROTHNEY.