

## Nationalism in Canada's First Century\*

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## NATIONALISM IN CANADA'S FIRST CENTURY\*

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The perils inherent in the acceptance of an assignment that seemed to require me to conduct a public investigation into the Canadian psyche at the end of a year of Centennial soul-searching were clear to me when I agreed to prepare this paper. Even then I marvelled at my own foolhardiness. Events of recent months have made the perils no less obvious and the assignment no less formidable. At the outset I must declare my awareness that my observations are more subjective than the usual historical exercise. Indeed, there may be some of my listeners who will feel that I have not even come close to exposing the Canadian psyche but have displayed only my own, and that I should borrow a sub-title for this paper from one of our Canadian creative writers, perhaps *Canada Made Me*, or *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. That is a risk I run, but I trust I need not apologize: I speak of my own country at a time when strong emotions are aroused and of events which are registered sharply in my consciousness.

At the end of this year's festivities most thoughtful Canadians find themselves envying the degree of confidence that the founders of "the uncertain nation"<sup>1</sup> of 1867 possessed. As long as Expo 67 lasted we kept up a bold front to the world, and enjoyed the show ourselves, trying to believe that what was done at Montreal had made us truly a nation at last. The party over, we know again that the Canadian future is more uncertain than ever before. Although *A Challenge of Confidence* now rests on our bookshelves beside *Lament for a Nation*, Eric Kierans' exuberant optimism does not altogether down the feeling that George Grant may be the truer prophet.<sup>2</sup>

I will not linger over an attempt to define nationalism. What the vast literature on the subject adds up to is that nationalism is where you find it, and that the combinations of factors that may enable groups of people to be a nation are many. It is also clear that nationalism may be highly creative or entirely destructive of

\* Paper presented at the joint meeting of the Canadian Historical Association and the American Historical Association held in Toronto, December, 1967.

<sup>1</sup> Ramsay Cook, *Canada: A Modern Study* (Toronto, 1963), p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> Eric W. Kierans, *Challenge of Confidence: Kierans on Canada* (Toronto, 1967); George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Toronto, 1965).

civilized life. I concern myself here with nationalism in the second half of our first century, and particularly with the development and present characteristics of what for want of a better term I must call English Canadian nationalism, i.e. the type of nationalism that has been most characteristic of the country outside of French Canada. I have chosen to do this because this English Canadian nationalism has received less attention than French Canadian nationalism, perhaps because it is harder to get hold of, and because it is of increasing importance that it be understood.

Most of the standard versions of Canadian history tell us that one of the most important consequences of the First World War was the growth of Canadian nationalism, and they often imply that this was an all-Canadian nationalism, and that it ended forever the local loyalties of pre-war years. Perhaps this exaggeration is a reflection of the nationalism of a generation of English-speaking historians who did much of their work in the two post-war decades and whose views have dominated our interpretation of Canadian history almost down to the present. But would it not be closer to the truth to emphasize that the war accentuated both the main streams of Canadian nationalism – French and English? During the conflict in Europe many individual Canadians doubtless gained an enlarged sense of the Canadian community, and an awareness of qualities that distinguished them from their British and French comrades in arms. But whatever the war-time experience may have meant to individual Canadians, the conscription issue and the bitter election campaign of 1917 in which English Canadians were so determined “to make the French do their duty” renewed in French Canadian society as a whole the awareness of its own distinctiveness.

In English Canada the post-war decades brought a rebirth of the spirit of “Canada First”, a spirit strengthened by the recognition of Canada as a distinct entity in the international community. Nowhere was this spirit more evident than among the small groups of young university teachers and professional men in the major cities across the country who established the *Canadian Forum* and debated public issues through its pages, who founded the Canadian League and later the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and the Couchiching Conference, and generally tried to promote the study and discussion of national and international issues from a distinctly Canadian point of view. Professor Lower's recently published memoirs<sup>3</sup> illustrate the energy and intelligence that a small group in Winnipeg brought to the task of trying to think through a Canadian foreign policy.

<sup>3</sup> A. R. M. Lower, *My First Seventy-Five Years* (Toronto, 1967).

Expressions of the new national consciousness were not confined to intellectuals. The post-war years saw the revitalization of existing organizations of national scope involving Canadians of many occupations and interests. Among the most significant of these were the Canadian Clubs. With the appointment of its first national secretary, the Association of Canadian Clubs launched a drive to establish new clubs and in the two years 1926 and 1927 alone their number increased from 53 to 120. The 1920's also saw the birth of a host of new national organizations with an enormous range of purposes and membership, as a small sample will show. They included the Native Sons of Canada, self-consciously and vigorously committed to promoting a Canadian sentiment; the Canadian Legion, bringing together several organizations of war veterans; the Canadian National Parks Association, devoted to the preservation of areas of "the true north, strong and free" that the Group of Seven was teaching a whole generation to see as something uniquely Canadian — and the list can go on through the Canadian Credit Men's Trust Association, the Catholic Women's League, the Canadian Council of Child Welfare, and the National Federation of Canadian University Students.

The precise effect on the country of this growing trans-continental network of concerns and personal relationships is impossible to document but its significance in strengthening the fabric of the nation cannot be questioned. Most organizations held national conventions; the travel and discussion with counterparts from coast to coast which such gatherings entailed enhanced the mental picture of Canada held by thousands of Canadians who were thus engaged in common enterprises that often had to be accommodated to the necessities of regional differences. What a rich source of Canadian social history would be open to us if we had records of the conversations carried on in the cars of trans-continental trains during the inter-war decades. Surely they would demonstrate that never before had so many Canadians shared a universe of discourse that was so distinctly Canadian in its references.

In later life, one of the young activists of these years, Brooke Claxton, observed that "... every kind of organization, national and local, cultural and religious, political and commercial, was at a peak of activity hardly equalled since... All these were manifestations of the growth of national feeling — it was nationwide, spontaneous, inevitable. It cut across political, racial and social lines; indeed, it was curiously a-political."<sup>4</sup>

The existence of this national feeling helps to explain why the depression did not seriously inhibit the growing sense of a national

<sup>4</sup> Cited in E. A. Corbett, *We Have With Us Tonight* (Toronto, 1957), p. 104.

identity, a sense which contributed to the broad nationalism underlying the work and recommendations of the Rowell-Sirois report. That same national feeling played a decisive part in the establishment of the national system of public broadcasting, and was of no little consequence in the creation of such diverse national institutions as the Bank of Canada, Trans-Canada Airlines and the Dominion Drama Festival.

Two features of these developments are worthy of note. One is the relatively slight participation of French Canadians in these manifestations of national sentiment. It is true that the Canadian Clubs enjoyed considerable success in Quebec and their national secretary, Graham Spry, is credited with the earliest recorded use of the word "bicultural", in an address in Quebec City in 1929.<sup>5</sup> The Canadian Radio League found essential support in Quebec in its campaign for public broadcasting, especially through Georges Pelletier, managing director of *Le Devoir*. Other examples of French Canadian participation could be cited, but in the main the initiative, the leadership, and most of the membership in national organizations of all kinds came from English Canadians. Their counterparts in French Canada were apparently engaged in the affairs of groups with more provincial and confessional concerns.

A second feature of this same period is the relative absence of anything that can be called "anti-Americanism", at least after Canadians recovered from their pique over American reluctance to accept Canada's new post-war international status. Although the literature of the time affords ample evidence that most Canadians understood that their historical traditions had made them different from Americans, there was also increasing emphasis on the significance of Canada's geographical position as a North American nation. The titles of two published addresses are typical of dozens more: Sir Robert Falconer's *The United States as a Neighbour* (1925) and John Dafoe's *Canada: An American Nation* (1935). There were no serious disagreements between the two nations and Canadian feeling for and interest in the United States was greatly enhanced by the admiration so many of her citizens felt for Franklin D. Roosevelt. Relatively few Canadians saw any ominous import in the fact that in the 1920's the United States replaced Great Britain as the primary source of foreign capital and as the leading purchaser of Canadian exports, a trend that was continued in the following decade. Professor Morton has described the years 1927-1941 as "the period of acceptance", and the era of the "good neighbour".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*, Book I (Ottawa, 1967), p. xxxi, quoted from *The Canadian Nation*, Vol. I, February 1929, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> W. L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity* (Toronto, 1961), pp. 71-72.

Inevitably these developments, and especially their general spirit rubbed off on English Canadians who were growing up, as I was, in the thirties, first in a prairie city and then in one of the smaller centres of southern Ontario. Looking back, it seems to me that I was always a nationalist, in the sense that I was proud of being a fifth generation Canadian and had no real doubt of the solidity and durability of the country. If I had had to say which of the several streams in the family heritage I rated most highly I would have chosen the Scottish, at the expense of the English, German, and Irish, but in fact I rarely thought that way at all. I suppose the most elemental component of my nationalism was simply a natural love of the land itself, although the only regions with which I was familiar before adulthood were Ontario (north and south), the prairies, and the section of the Rockies I had seen on one trip to Banff. My family were hardy cottagers in some rather underdeveloped Alberta resorts, as well as indefatigable picknickers everywhere, and I cannot remember a time when I wasn't excited by the physical features of the country.

Another channel of attachment to the nation was perhaps especially strong because it was intimately related to religion as I knew it. As a member of a family that was staunchly and actively United Church I was fully exposed to the high level of "Canadian content" which has always characterized that institution, most notably in its early years. As John Porter has observed, the United Church is "as Canadian as the maple leaf and the beaver".<sup>7</sup> The Sunday School papers I read as a teenager were strongly laced with accounts and pictures of various places in Canada, biographical sketches of great Canadians, and poems and stories many of which, I fear, were published mainly because they were the work of aspiring *Canadian* authors. The United Church's sense of being uniquely Canadian, a pioneering ecumenical experiment which reflected Canadian experience and was at the same time a model that the rest of the world might one day emulate, came across strongly in those years, as did its feeling of responsibility for the character of Canadian community life. The church paper, *The New Outlook*, ably edited by W. B. Creighton and his successor, Gerald Cragg, exuded a sturdy Canadianism and in the thirties paid much attention to the social problems created by the depression. A regular reader was bound to know something about a wide range of Canadian issues and interests.

In these same years I was aware of the existence of the thousands of "new Canadians" who had come to the west before and after the war. "Bohunk" was not an acceptable word either in school or church,

<sup>7</sup> John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic* (Toronto, 1965), p. 519.

or home, but "New Canadian" was approved. Relatives and friends visiting Edmonton from Ontario were often shown the variety of life in the city by a drive along a street boasting some fifty "ethnic churches" in the course of less than two miles. As I try to recapture the spirit of those introductions to the western mosaic, I believe the dominant tone was one of acceptance of the recent immigrants. We knew that they were needed in the building of the nation, and although they seemed "foreign" in many respects, there was no doubt that they were Canadians. Dare I confess that in my first year of high school I won a public speaking contest with an oration on the role of the prairie provinces, with their mixed population, in the growth of Canada. My finest moment was the final peroration, borrowed, naturally, from Thomas D'Arcy McGee: "I see in the not remote distance one great nationality bound like the shield of Achilles by the blue rim of ocean."

Although I had nothing whatever against the King, I always sang "O Canada" with greater gusto than "God Save the King", and if I had been asked at the age of fifteen to choose this country's national anthem I would not have hesitated for a moment. A little later, as part of a high school audience assembled in front of the Brantford Collegiate Institute listening to the Governor-General, Lord Tweedsmuir, extolling the glories of the land he had so quickly come to love, I sensed nothing unusual in his assurances that it was our first duty to understand and serve Canada. Such advice seemed quite unexceptional and I would have been shocked to have been told anything else. I was unaware, then, of the storm that such sentiments on the lips of the Crown's representative created in some sections of English Canadian society.

Before long we students were again assembled for a public occasion, this time at the railway station, when the first local contingent, which included two of our youngest and most popular teachers, went off to the Second World War. Most of us were totally unaware of the significance attached to Canada's separate declaration of war, but we believed, rightly or wrongly, that the group we were farewelling was going to fight for Canada. Subsequently, the CBC did more than any other agency to keep the public informed of the life of Canadians overseas and to interpret the war as a struggle in which Canadians had a direct and distinctive interest.

In these early years I had no first hand acquaintance with French Canadians and certainly no sophisticated knowledge of French Canada, but Fathers Brébeuf and Lalemant were very high in my childhood list of heroes, and I would have been hard put to express a preference between Wolfe and Montcalm, for they were equally

a part of the Canadian story as I knew it; if pressed, I would probably have given the edge to Montcalm, since his was the greater and more heroic struggle, and because I tended to have an automatic identification with *whoever* held Canada. In the Canadian political history that I learned in high school Laurier was "the first Canadian" because he had done more than any other leader to develop national unity. (As I recall, the political disunity of the First World War years was rather quickly passed over, probably because by the thirties many English Canadian educators were less than proud of some aspects of that era.) Thanks to the enthusiasm of one of my high school teachers, I knew something about Bourassa's version of an all-Canadian nationalism, and it did not seem odd that a French Canadian should be the author of an acceptable definition of a Canadian. If any French Canadian had told me what many of them then apparently believed — that most English Canadians were just Englishmen who happened to be living in Canada — I would have rejected the charge with the utmost vehemence, and I think I would not have accused them of being merely Frenchmen. In short, French Canada was a substantial and sympathetically perceived part of my early imaginative picture of Canada, although I had no direct connection with it and little appreciation of the emotional distance that lay between the two ways of life. The first French Canadian I ever heard discussing Canadian problems was the Abbé Arthur Maheux who made a deep impression on me and my fellow undergraduates when he visited United College in Winnipeg during the war.

I recount these personal experiences and attitudes because I believe they were far from unique. Although the details would vary with region and social circumstances, hosts of English Canadians could tell roughly the same stories of their exposure in the inter-war years to much the same influences, with similar results. Professor Morton has recently described the nationalism of the 1920's as "a mist that hung over the vortex of Canadian life; it was, in its drift and changes, lit by sunlight, eye-catching and seemingly solid, but it was in large part mist". This observation stems from Morton's hostility to what he calls the "political opportunism" of the first King decade, as exemplified in King's use of nationalism in the election of 1926 and his promotion of the dissolution of Empire into Commonwealth in "the acid of nationalism".<sup>8</sup> But surely it can be demonstrated that there were more solid and enduring forces at work in Canada than were reflected in the immediate politics of the time. Some evidence that this was so lies in the number of important

<sup>8</sup> W. L. Morton, "The 1920's", in J. M. S. Careless and R. Craig Brown (eds.), *The Canadians, 1867-1967* (Toronto, 1967), p. 232.



national institutions established in the succeeding decade, in the capacity of the country to survive the depression without catastrophic division and to enter the war with a high degree of national unity.

In the Second World War the character of the English Canadian nationalism that had been building up in the preceding two decades was revealed: it was sufficiently all-Canadian in its orientation to encourage judgments of the war effort appropriate for Canada that were based far more on calculations of the interests of Canada than had been the case twenty-five years earlier. It was against this English Canadian nationalism, and not only against Mackenzie King's solid base in Quebec, that movements for national government and full-scale conscription came to grief.

What I have been trying to delineate are some of the origins and the emotional content of the brand of nationalism discussed so lucidly and more generally by Professor McNaught in his essay, "The National Outlook of English-speaking Canadians".<sup>9</sup> I believe it is the outlook of the post-war generation and of most of the young to-day, as much as it is that of those of us who are now middle-aged. It is a view of Canada which has made it possible for thousands of European immigrants who have arrived since 1945 to feel a ready and often passionate identification with this country. It fosters a nationalism which sees continuing validity in George Étienne Cartier's declaration of the purpose of Confederation as the creation and nourishment of a "political nationality". Its essential category is not that of "race", but of individual liberty and self-realization in a community which admits of cultural diversity as one of the conditions of the good life for all its members. I do not want to idealize my youthful comprehension of the implications of this outlook, or to exaggerate the extent to which it has been embodied in our institutions and social practice: the opportunities for full participation in Canadian life have been different in Winnipeg's River Heights than in the north end of the city, and greater in the Town of Mount Royal than in Point St. Charles, and anyone who remains skeptical about that need only be referred to John Porter's *The Vertical Mosaic*. What I do want to stress is the general direction of what I suppose I must call "the English Canadian dream", but what I would like bodily to call "the Canadian dream".

This English Canadian nationalism has been much misunderstood, not least in French Canada. As Pierre-Elliott Trudeau notes, "Anglo-Canadian nationalism has never had much of an edge"<sup>10</sup>,

<sup>9</sup> In P. H. Russell (ed.), *Nationalism in Canada* (Toronto, 1966), pp. 61-71.

<sup>10</sup> *Cité Libre*, April 1962, cited in Frank Scott and Michael Oliver (eds.), *Quebec States Her Case* (Toronto, 1964), p. 59.

and it has therefore sometimes been thought to be non-existent. This illusion has been fostered by our professional "non-nationalists". They "would rather let the country fall apart than be accused of nationalism", John Holmes charges, and they "find pride in our having conceived the immaculate non-nation".<sup>11</sup> That group, long a minority among Canadians who think about their country, is a rapidly dying, if not extinct, breed. In the decade of the sixties it is hard to find anyone in English Canada who professes indifference to the question of Canada's survival or who will reject out of hand all consciously devised economic and cultural measures to foster it. There is a great gulf between the programme of the *Canadian Dimension* socialist-nationalists<sup>12</sup> and the approach represented by Kierans' belief that somehow the great private corporations, with the Canadian Development Corporation filling in the gaps, can be made to serve Canadian independence.<sup>13</sup> But there is agreement on the immediate objective — to keep open or win back the possibility of some choice for Canadians in the direction their society will take.

The intensification of nationalism in English Canada at the present time is largely a response to two other nationalisms, those of French Canada and the United States. It is a reaction, a typically slow, Anglo-Saxon one, to be sure, to an increasing realization of the strength of nationalism in Quebec and of its meaning for Canada. Because their own nationalism is so different, it has been hard for English Canadians to grasp the significance of the present surge of Quebec nationalism. Fortunately, there is little evidence that having grasped it, nationalism in English Canada will assume the proportions or character advocated by Professor Gad Horowitz — a distinctly English Canadian nationalism which would then confront French Canada head-on and find political expression in a federation of two "associate states".<sup>14</sup> Clearly this would meet René Levesque's prescription for our ills, but it is entirely incompatible with the outlook of the vast majority of English Canadians who would see in any such development the total abandonment of any meaningful concept of nationhood.<sup>15</sup>

English Canadian nationalism in the sixties is also a response to growing pressure from the overwhelming presence and power of the

<sup>11</sup> John Holmes, "Nationalism in Canadian Foreign Policy", in Russell *op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>12</sup> Any issue of the periodical *Canadian Dimension* (Winnipeg) provides expositions of this view, but see especially, "An Open Letter to Canadian Nationalists", Vol. 4, No. 4, May-June, 1967.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Kierans, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *Canadian Dimension*, Vol. 2, No. 5, July-August, 1965.

<sup>15</sup> Donald V. Smiley, *The Canadian Political Nationality* (Toronto, 1967), especially Chapter 5, is an interesting commentary on this outlook.

United States. This is a problem for the whole world, but for Canada proximity creates unique difficulties in trying to live with the uneasiness generated by many of the present attitudes and policies of the wealthiest, the most militarily powerful, and probably the most nationalistic nation on earth. American imperialism, especially as it is expressed in the war in Vietnam, and increasing doubt about the capacity of the United States to give social expression at home to ideals which Canadians have long shared with Americans, are giving powerful impetus to nationalism in Canada.

What are the most important features of English Canadian nationalism to-day? First, it is, as always, conducive to pragmatic attitudes toward politics. It is a mood that encourages the tackling of specific grievances rather than glorying in theoretical discussions of "special status", "associate statehood", or compact theories of Confederation. Book I of the Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, although it is not entirely lacking in philosophical underpinnings, takes this pragmatic and practical approach. Because it thus accords well with the spirit of the political culture of English Canada, its recommendations are likely to enjoy a good reception.

Another aspect of the dominant English Canadian attitude to-day, and again this is not new, is the refusal to treat the constitution as a sacred cow. The basic commitment of the majority is to the country and to the political nationality the British North America Act was meant to serve, and not to the particular form of federalism that is established by the Act. This is true despite the recent utterances of some provincial premiers, and despite the highly accurate, but for present purposes irrelevant, expositions of the intentions of the Fathers of Confederation, especially on the language issue, by a few of our historians.

The attitude of the majority toward the constitution is one proof that English Canadian nationalism is purely and simply Canadian to an increasing degree. There is full recognition that Canada's "British century" is over, and that Canadians are now on their own in North America. It seems somewhat ironic that just at this time in our history many French Canadians appear to crave a filial-dependent relationship with France which is oddly reminiscent of the one English Canadians often cherished with Britain fifty years ago.

So "Canadianized" has English Canada become that the monarchy is now "negotiable" to the majority, at least so I would judge. The abolition of the monarchy would be accepted, although only with sorrowful reluctance in many quarters, if such a move seemed likely to serve Canadian unity. A great deal is to be learned from

what I believe to be a fact, although I cannot prove it: that the deep emotion which so many Canadians felt at the death of Governor-General Vanier was due much less to feeling for the Crown, than to the conviction that General Vanier represented distinctive Canadian traditions and values.

In English Canada to-day there is greater acceptance than at other times in our history of the permanence of English and French cultural differences, and a growing willingness to accept a "French Canadian style" of being Canadian as possessing equal validity with "the English style".

At the same time there is a recognition that at many points English and French Canada are becoming more alike in their economic and social structures.<sup>16</sup> One consequence of this is that the aspirations of both groups are conditioned more by imaginative pictures of the future rather than by romantic versions of the past. For French Canada *survivance* through reverence for "notre maître, le passé" is no longer enough: emancipation, economic expansion, and full participation in a pluralistic and affluent society are the objectives, as they are in the rest of Canada. Moreover, Quebec today, again like the rest of the country, looks increasingly to the state as the agency for the extension of the conditions of the good life to all its citizens. The question Quebec is trying to answer now is whether the state of Canada can serve at all as the instrument for implementing her new ambitions, or whether all hope must be placed in the state of Quebec. Looked at from an all-Canadian perspective the question is the one put by the current Royal Commission: "How can we integrate the new Quebec into present-day Canada, without risking the breaking up of the country?"<sup>17</sup>

In trying to demonstrate the usefulness of the state of Canada to Quebec, English Canadian nationalists can point to certain broad objectives which all present Canadians share, objectives that would be much harder, and probably impossible to achieve, separately: We desire economic policies that will reduce our dependence on the United States. To Canadian nationalists of whatever stripe, it is intolerable that we have less control over our economic affairs than a nation conquered by force of American arms, Japan. Although the French Canadian nationalists' scepticism about the "Canadianism" of the present English Canadian business elite is explicable, it is at least arguable that a joint attack on the "domestication" of the branch

<sup>16</sup> These points are elaborated in D. Kwavnick, "The Roots of French-Canadian Discontent", *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, Vol. XXXI, No. 4, November, 1965.

<sup>17</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* (Ottawa, 1967), p. xlvii.

plant economy is likely to be attended by more success than separate efforts. Further, we all need a foreign policy that begins in recognition that all Canadians have more interest in a world open to Canadian trade than in a world safe for American democracy and overseas investment.

And can we not argue convincingly that our chances of building a modern technological society fit for human beings to live in, and reflecting our own historical and cultural inheritances, are much greater if we capitalize on the assets with which our dual culture has endowed us? Is it not also arguable that if we can devise a viable federalism for our second century it will be a political achievement valuable not only to ourselves but an example of some relevance to other peoples who seek ways of providing stability, material progress, and personal liberty in multi-cultural communities?

Agreement on such general objectives and directions will solve no specific problems, but it is the indispensable condition for the beginning of the search for solutions. The traditions and current mood of English Canadian nationalism justify the hope that on one side at least of the dialogue that has now begun in earnest the prospects are favourable.