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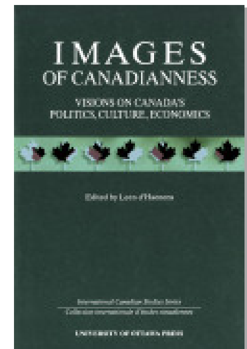

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THE LIBERAL IDEA OF THE CANADIAN NATION-STATE

By Louis BALTHAZAR

I INTRODUCTION

It could be argued that the very foundation of modern Canada rests on a terrible ambiguity. For most English-speaking Canadian leaders in 1867, the British North America Act was creating a new nation. For French Canadians however, the new country was the result of a pact or a contract between provinces, especially between the French-speaking province of Québec, which received special guarantees of autonomy, and the other English-speaking components of Canada.

There does not seem to be any doubt that John A. Macdonald, for his part, would have much preferred that Canada be a legislative union in order to avoid the type of conflict that had tragically afflicted the United States federation and for the new government to be in a position to foster a strong east-west economic system. But, as a realistic politician, he accepted a compromise. Canada would be a federation because union would have otherwise been impossible. To avoid following the American model, however, provinces would be subordinated to the federal government, just like colonies in the British Empire. With the residual clause, the power of disallowance and the authority to appoint provincial lieutenant-governors, Macdonald was confident that, with time, the central authority would prevail so that a true national spirit would take shape. In 1868, he wrote a colleague:

> (...) I think the Dominion must win in the long run. The powers of the General Government are so much greater than those of the United States (...) My own opinion is that the General Government or Parliament should pay no more regard to the status or position of the Local Governments than they would to the prospects of the ruling party in the corporation of Québec or Montréal (Cook, 1969: 10).

This attitude corresponded well with the general liberal trend of the nineteenth century. Liberalism often espoused the cause of nationalism but the enlargement of nations was much more favoured than the creation of small entities through secession. Thus Macdonald, as Tory as he was, can be seen as a liberal nationalist and one of the first proponents of the idea of a strong, indivisible Canadian nation. Three factors, however, prevented this idea from being realized. First, Canada was still British North America, a quasi-sovereign state but in fact a colony of the United Kingdom. For many years, Canadian nationalism would be countered by strong imperial sentiments and devotion. Second, Canadian liberalism was fashioned by *laissez-faire* conceptions of the state. Ottawa would not act as a national government for the very reason that it hardly acted at all. Thirdly, this reluctance to intervene was reinforced by the political situation. The provinces – first among which Québec on account of its own traditional

social structure that was so different, but also the Maritime provinces where regional allegiances and interests were well entrenched {- would not allow the federal government to assert itself too much. This political heterogeneity was recognized and given legal sanction by various judgments of the Privy Council's judicial committee in London which, as the final constitutional authority, was mostly ruling in favour of provincial autonomy. In spite of these factors, the liberal dream of the Canadian nation was kept alive and would come back in force in the 1930's. A new elite of intellectuals in the universities, in the civil service, in journalism and other circles would reanimate the national idea and give it strong credentials.

This paper is an attempt to assess the force of the liberal idea of a Canadian nation-state in the 1930's. Nationalism, socialism and new economic theories will be considered as ingredients of a modern conception of Canada leading to a serious revision of the British North America Act. In more ways than one, the intellectual effervescence of these years is the foundation of today's Canada. The fact that this is an English-Canadian phenomenon purporting to represent Canada as a whole gives a tragic twist to an otherwise enlightened movement.

II THE NEW INTELLECTUAL ELITE

Given the relative prosperity of the 1920's and other factors, a growing number of Canadians had access to universities so that an impressive new generation of graduate degree holders was filling various posts in law, the civil service and schools of higher learning throughout Canada. Douglas Owram has done a magnificent job in identifying the personalities and their role in various movements like the League for Social Reconstruction, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the Radio League, the Canadian Clubs, the Liberal party and, to some extent, the Conservative party when it was in power between 1930 and 1935 (Owram, 1986). People like Brooke Claxton, a lawyer, a professor at McGill University and later a prominent member of the Liberal government, Graham Spry, the founder of the Radio League and also active in politics, Adam Shortt, a history professor and a civil servant, Norman Rogers, a political science professor and a member of the King cabinet in 1936, Frank Underhill, a historian and the founder of the League for Social Reconstruction with Frank Scott and Eugene Forsey of McGill, Clifford Clark, an economist at Queen's University who would become deputy Finance minister, just to name a few, were all believers in a Canadian nation and a stronger, more active federal government.

Most of them belonged to institutions such as the Canadian Political Science Association or the Canadian Clubs, wrote articles in the Canadian Forum and, by 1935, the Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science. Given the relatively small population of the country and in spite of its impossible geography, they formed a tight community of people who all knew each other and were amazingly mobile. They moved easily from academia or the practice of law to the civil service and vice versa. They also moved geographically, from the University of British Columbia to

Dalhousie for instance, although the core of their activity took place in the Toronto-Montréal-Ottawa triangle. Their ideas circulated well enough between Vancouver, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Kingston, Montréal and Halifax.

However, in spite of the fact that many of these intellectuals lived in Montréal or came to the metropolis often enough, they had very little communication with French-speaking Canadians. A few men such as Édouard Montpetit, of the University of Montréal, and Father Georges-Henri Lévesque, of Laval, joined them occasionally but, by and large, it is fair to say, that the idea of a united Canadian nation was virtually nonexistent in French- speaking Québec. Even federal politicians such as Ernest Lapointe did not connect with the concept of political centralization.

The fact is that the Québec education system was falling far behind that of the other provinces and that Québec politics were very traditional and inspired by ideas that were foreign to modern liberalism. This allowed the English-speaking intelligentsia to ignore their Francophone compatriots. They just hoped that, in a not too distant future, some French-speaking intellectuals would join them and embrace their view of the Canadian nation. Still, conceiving a new framework for Canada – one which failed to take into account the aspirations of a high proportion of its population – did not seem to be a concern for them. It apparently never crossed their mind, from what it seems, that they were imposing an English-Canadian dream to Canada as a whole.

III NATIONALISM

Oddly enough, it was a French Canadian who first promoted the idea of an independent Canada, free of any colonial obligation toward the British Empire. But Henri Bourassa's ideas, framed as they were in an orthodox Catholic philosophy, never had much appeal among English Canadians. When, in the 1920's, the new generation of intellectuals applauded the Dominion's gradually gained autonomy, which was legally sanctioned by the 1931 Statute of Westminster, they did not show any willingness to extend a hand to Henri Bourassa, a feeling that was amply reciprocated.

The pride of belonging to an independent Canada never went as far as using negative-sounding words as "separation" or "leaving" the Empire. Only the opponents of a complete Canadian sovereignty alluded to "separation," a case in point being R.B. Bennett who, while leader of the opposition, blamed the King government for establishing an embassy in Washington:

> I am wholly opposed (...) to the establishment of this embassy at Washington. It is but the doctrine of separation, it is but the evidence in many minds of the end of our connection with the empire. For that is what it means (...) because if we are a sovereign state we cannot belong to the British Empire (Mahant & Mount, 1989: 127).

One is tempted to make a comparison with today's situation. Many Canadians would like a Québec referendum question to include the word "separation." But, had Canadians been asked in the 1930's if they wished to "separate" from the British empire, would they have said yes as wholeheartedly as they agreed with Canada's newly acquired sovereignty?

Thus the new elites were very proud of their Canadian allegiance. They could, after 1931, conceive of their country as a nation. But they were not only concerned with their independence from Great Britain, they were also highly preoccupied with building a strong Canadian nation, free from American influences. This was particularly the case in the new popular phenomenon of radio broadcasting:

> Many Canadian stations were purchasing American programs; some stations affiliated with US networks. A survey conducted in major centers throughout Canada in the early 1930's found that 93 percent of Canadian high school students listened to American radio programs (Mahant & Mount, 1988: 152).

This was enough to arouse Canadian nationalism. Already, in 1930, the Canadian Radio League was founded by Graham Spry and Alan Plaunt in order to promote government intervention in broadcasting. The Bennett government was slow to react. But, after a Court judgment awarded control of broadcasting to the federal government in 1932, the Canadian Radio and Broadcasting Commission was instituted to establish Canadian content regulation. Eventually the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was created in 1936 on the British model with a mandate to draw all Canadians closer. But the inevitable duality of networks kept the French-speaking population quite apart from English-speaking Canadians.

The CBC was nonetheless a triumph for the nationalist cause. It was the voice of Canada and it was in the hands of the central government. For Canadian nationalists, it was a foregone conclusion that the problems were best dealt with at the federal level and that only a strong central government could bring about a united and independent Canadian nation. Historian Frank Underhill put it bluntly in the Canadian Forum:

> The real question at issue now is whether we are sufficiently nationally-minded to insist upon a national authority which shall be strong enough to supervise and direct our social and economic life or whether we mean to parcel up so much of the authority among nine provincial governments that our national government will remain impotent to meet national responsibilities (Owram, 1986: 224).

This opinion was shared by most liberal intellectuals of the time. Among them, Frank Scott, Brooke Claxton and Norman Rogers were the most outspoken. They firmly believed that Canada was a federation in which all national matters ought to be managed by the federal government and that provincial autonomy should be reduced to local questions. For them, the Fathers of Confederation were undoubtedly economic

nationalists (Owram, 1986: 246). This is a typical feature of nationalists everywhere: promoting their cause as a return to the origins, fidelity to the source of the nation. As a consequence, nationalism often appears as conservative even in its radical demands:

> Those who sought to reform the constitution (...) were, far from defiling the sacred constitution, upholding its basic tenets. Proposed reforms could thus be posed not as dangerous innovations but as basically conservative attempts to return Canada to its founding principles (Owram, 1986: 247).

Nonetheless, in spite of the ardour of nationalist social scientists and civil servants in promoting a Canadian nation, they did not seem to be concerned with defining this nation. Of course, it was to include all Canadian citizens (i.e. British subjects until 1947). But was it to be bilingual? Bicultural? The latter word did not even exist, much less "multicultural." Liberal values could be considered universal but what if they were not shared by many Canadians, French Canadians in particular? These questions remained unanswered and "a single overriding sense of priority, purpose and authority" (Owram, 1986: 326) was still lacking at the end of the decade. This is often the paradox of nationalist movements, in that they fail to reach a substantial majority within the so-called nation. The nationalism of Canadian intellectuals remained elitist. But at the same time it was founded on a true sense of solidarity, compassion and a desire for social reforms.

IV SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

The accession of Canada to full autonomy coincided with the most terrible social and economic crisis of the century. Canada, like all developed countries, was hit by the crisis throughout the decade and depression gave rise to various movements of frustration and in-depth questioning of the established order. This was made all the more intense by the fact that the nation's political leadership, in the Liberal opposition as well as in the Conservative government, seemed impotent and unable to bring about any valid plan for social reform. Liberal *laissez-faire* was such a strong habit that any meaningful government intervention in socio-economic matters seemed unthinkable for years.

It would be up to the intellectuals to shake things up and suggest new remedies. In 1932, Frank Underhill and Frank Scott, along with Eugene Forsey, Harry Cassidy, Graham Spry, and Irene Biss created the League for Social Reconstruction. The organization was designed to stimulate new thinking and foster new proposals for reform. In their criticism of traditional capitalism, League leaders were often led to recommending radical measures, coming close to harbouring Socialist ideals. By and large, however, they remained progressive liberals, on the model of New Deal Democrats in the United States, or social democrats, like Great Britain's Labour Party. They advocated strong government intervention, the creation of national public institutions, economic planning and several social services to be fulfilled by the government. But very few of them crossed the line to orthodox Marxism.

They invariably conceived reforms to be realized almost exclusively at the federal level. For them "the importance of collective action through national governments" was indisputable; this action should be "equally effective in every portion of the national domain" (Brady, 1933: 42) and called for a redistribution of legislative powers. The main problem to be dealt with was unemployment and "the failure of Canadian capitalism to provide men with work and their families with a decent living" (Cassidy, 1933: 55). The solution proposed was "a generous and humane system of relief, a scheme of unemployment insurance, and a program of employment stabilization, all of them on national lines under the leadership and the direction of the Dominion government" (Cassidy, 1933: 59).

In this context, a party was created, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), to operate at the federal level. Several members of the League for Social Reconstruction would form the brain trust of the CCF. In the Regina manifesto, at the founding of the party in 1933, many radical measures were put forward: (1) the creation of a national commission of planned economy; (2) the socialization of transportation and communications; (3) a new labour code. Since all of this would come under federal responsibility, constitutional amendments were deemed necessary.

Although the CCF was too radical for many intellectuals who remained closer to traditional party circles, there was constant contact between the CCF and other parties, through the intellectual community. Even within the Bennett government, the sense of crisis was felt acute enough that the Prime minister called in outside advisers, researchers and consultants (Owram, 1986: 178). In 1932, Clifford Clark, an economist teaching at Queen's University, became deputy minister of Finance and engaged in some economic planning, thus partially responding to the intellectual elite's wishes (Owram, 1986). Within the Liberal party, Vincent Massey, who was evicted from the embassy in Washington after Bennett took over the government, set himself to bring about political, economic and social regeneration to respond to the CCF call for change (Owram, 1986: 188). But no one was more representative of the links between the left-wing intellectuals and the Liberal party than Norman Rogers, a political science professor at Queen's University, who became minister of Labour within the King Cabinet in 1936. Rogers created the National Employment Commission that led eventually to the National Unemployment Insurance Act. Like all of his friends in the CCF, he was a staunch believer in centralization and the building of a strong "national" government. Social and economic recovery programs were also strongly supported by new economic theories.

V NEW ECONOMICS

Doug Owram points out that the discipline of economics came of age in Canada in the 1930's (Owram, 1986: 192). John Maynard Keynes, who supported government intervention in the economy, did not publish his *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* before 1936. But he had become a renowned author as early as the 1920's and had many disciples in Canadian universities and, increasingly, in the civil service.

Even Conservative R.B. Bennett came to recognize the necessity of wealth redistribution before delivering his New Deal policies in 1935. He created a Royal Commission on Banking that recommended the creation of a central bank. The Bank of Canada was instituted in 1934, attracted the best minds in its councils (like Alex Skelton, John Deutsch and Louis Rasminsky) and would play an important role in regulating interest rates and currency value. During the 1930's, most Canadian economists were quite outspoken and not averse to recommending remedies to the flaws of the capitalist system. Adam Smith's paradigm of the invisible hand became considered as an illusion while a measure of control and regulation of private ownership was recommended. The Conservative government was persuaded to pass "a series of public works measures, first becoming involved directly and then providing a series of grants to the provinces" (Owram, 1986: 217). The new economic ideas, just like nationalism and the concern for social reforms, led to a quest for a greater role on the part of the federal government. Only the latter could adequately endeavour a redistribution of wealth, according to the intellectual elites and rising economists. Almost no consideration was given to the implementation of Keynes' theory on a provincial level. Québec economists, such as Édouard Montpetit, who opposed the creation of the central bank on the grounds of provincial autonomy, were quite isolated. The centralizing trend went as far as proposing that provincial budgets be placed under the control of the national bank in exchange for debt guarantees.

Consequently, "the very constitution of Canada appeared to be a structural problem, Reform of federal-provincial relations became, for many, the key to all other necessary changes" (Owram, 1986: 188).

VI CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

It is no exaggeration to state that the Canadian liberal intellectuals of the 1930's literally despised the provincial governments. According to Frank Underhill, provincial administrations were "characterized by a tendency toward long periods of bad government alternating with relatively brief periods of competence. The exception was Québec which was privileged to have bad governments all the time" (Owram, 1986: 222).

It became therefore an obsession of the intellectuals that the constitution of Canada should be amended in favour of a definite pre-eminent role for the federal government

so that it would fulfill its mission of being the national provider of services for the one Canadian nation-state. It is worth noting that, in the context of the worst economic crisis and the highest level of unemployment ever faced by Canada, the constitution was still seen as a priority. Frank Scott could state:

> No issue which faces the Canadian people is of greater importance than the problem of bringing the constitution up to date. Other matters loom more large upon the immediate horizon – unemployment, wheat marketing, the revival of trade must be seen to. But it is hoped that these difficulties are of a temporary nature, and in any case their solution involves us in constitutional questions which force us to examine with critical eye the present working of our governmental machinery. Even if they were solved tomorrow, however, the constitutional problem would still remain (Owram, 1986: 226).

Norman Rogers, both as a political science professor and as a minister in the King Cabinet, was also very outspoken about the need to reform the constitution and to falsify the theory, held dear in Québec particularly, according to which the Canadian constitution was a pact between provinces. For Rogers and a growing current of thought in the legal profession, the constitution was a simple law of the British Parliament instituting a new country. As a result, as W.P.M. Kennedy, a law professor at the University of Toronto, told a Parliamentary committee in 1935, there was no need whatsoever for the Canadian Parliament to consult the provinces to amend the constitution (Arès, 1967: 58). His colleague, Norman Mackenzie (1933: 247-8) had gone as far as suggesting "that the federal form of government is a clumsy device" but that the Fathers of Confederation "had achieved (...) a form of government which (...) would actually be a strong centralized government with almost unlimited power." All these arguments were brought forward in and out of a Dominion-Provincial Conference that was convened in 1935. One writer went as far as arguing "that the nation would benefit by the abolition of the provinces altogether" (Owram, 1986: 237) but provincial leaders were resisting and the Conference did not deliver any result. In such a context, one can understand the deep frustrations felt throughout the intellectual community when the judicial committee of the Privy Council in London ruled, in 1937, that most of the Bennett New Deal legislation was unconstitutional. This was enough to inflame Canadian nationalism. The Canadian Forum had an editorial entitled *Good-bye Dominion Status*: "(...) five old men in the Privy Council had threatened the meaningfulness of nationhood (...) we are nine peoples, not one" (Owram, 1986: 238).

The unbearable decision that "challenged the basic needs of modern Canadian nationalism" (Owram, 1986: 238) gave a definite urgency to a call that had been made for a serious independent commission that would bring about a complete overhaul of the BNA act. In August 1937, Prime Minister Mackenzie King appointed a Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations. The Commission was chaired by an old Liberal, Newton Rowell, who would eventually be replaced by a Québec notary,

Joseph Sirois, who was not connected to the English-speaking intellectual community that had called so vehemently for constitutional review.

As expected, the Report of the Rowell-Sirois Commission did recommend a thorough centralization of fiscal power and of the social programs. It was a great step in Canadian nation-building. Doug Owram (1986: 239) sums it up vividly as "the full-blown statement of a generation," the expression of the ideas of the best minds in English Canada. The report was released at a time when Canadian concerns were turned to other matters related to Canada's engagement in a world war. The federal government could not pay to the report the attention it deserved. Wartime necessities, however, converged with the report's recommendations. Provinces had to agree with Ottawa's taking over most of their fiscal power as centralization was in order at a time when national security was at stake. Also, one of the main proposal of the Commission, the creation of a national unemployment insurance system, was immediately implemented and the provinces were not in a position to resist a constitutional amendment transferring such responsibility to the federal government.

Was this a complete victory for the Canadian nationalists? Not quite. For in this whole process, Prime minister Mackenzie King remained, as a shrewd politician, very cautious and prudent. He somewhat resisted the centralist enthusiasm of most of his ministers and civil servants. He kept very close to Ernest Lapointe, his minister of Justice and Québec lieutenant, who constantly assured him of French-Canadian support. Lapointe would reflect another point of view on the Constitution, a message totally different from the voice of the English Canadian intellectual community. For good and deep-rooted reasons, Québec's French-speaking elites still saw Confederation as a pact and provincial autonomy as a sacred heritage to be preserved. Moreover, populist politicians, such as Ontario's Mitch Hepburn, added their voice to Duplessis's staunch resistance from Québec. King dealt very cleverly with these oppositions and he never quite reconciled himself with the idea of a strong nationalist and interventionist state. It was his successor, Louis St-Laurent, who would bring the centralist movement to its full-fledged expression in the 1950's.

VII CONCLUSION

In retrospect, the 1930's appear as the decade of a new start for Canada. The founding ideas of the modern Canadian nation-state were conceived, elaborated and expressed during these years. These ideas would come to fruition in the post-war era and Canadian nation-building would then progress constantly, except perhaps during the Diefenbaker and Pearson years. Canadian intellectual elites were not at ease with the old Conservative leader and his successor, Lester Pearson, who had to cope with the quiet revolution in Québec, showed some willingness to slow down centralization to pacify Québecers. Pierre Trudeau would revitalize Canadian nationalism and provide it with its great achievement and conclusion, the Constitution of 1982.

The great tragedy of this whole process, as stated above, was the total absence of French-speaking Québecers, at least during the seminal 1930's. This was later redressed in great part. During the post-war era, an intellectual elite that agreed with many of the tenets of modern Canadian federalism was formed in Québec. It had the disadvantage of falling behind but it brought fresh ideas and one could think, by the late 1950's, that the issue of Canadian unity would soon be settled once and for all.

Québec's quiet revolution unexpectedly dashed such hopes. Québec revitalized and modernized its autonomous posture. Not much was done, either to counter or to accommodate this trend. Especially with Trudeau in power, Canadian nationalism would go a long way to include French-speaking Canadians as individuals in the Canadian nation at large but would lamentably – albeit voluntarily – fail to meet the aspirations of Québec as a political entity. The tragedy of Canadian nationalism is that it never fully recognized that it collided with another strong nationalism in Québec. Even now, English Canada too often pretends to be speaking for all of Canada.

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