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POLITICAL 'PARTYISM' IN CANADA *

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SELF-GOVERNMENT IMPLIES discussion. Discussion predicates differences of opinion. Differences of opinion, to be translated into action, require organization. Organization for political action brings forth political parties. The party system, therefore, is inherent in self-government. Party is not exactly the crown and glory of self-government but it is one of the most useful adjuncts, as necessary to self-government as is the humble snow-shovel to the Canadian home.

I employ in my title the awkward abstraction 'partyism' because in this paper I wish to look at some of the more general aspects of the subject and to refer to specific historical phenomena only by way of illustration. Canadian party evolution is now fairly well known and before an audience of historians, one may take details for granted. Various aspects of the subject, however, still call for investigation.

Among other matters, I think of the internal history of parties, particularly their organization. How little we know of this. In the 1850's, we hear talk of "The Liberal Committee" or "The Conservative Committee", of a requisition being "got up", and so on. All this is vague. Alexander Mackenzie was chosen secretary of the "Convention of Reformers" called at Strathroy in 1860 to select a candidate for the Legislative Council. But who called it and who had a right to go to it? We know that Sir John had to have another ten thousand, but who spent it for him? What was the hierarchy of party organization in his day? How were the delegates chosen to the two Liberal Conventions of 1859 and 1893? Who paid their fares and their hotel bills?

The convention as a party device is another insufficiently studied subject. I recall G. W. Brown's article on the Convention of 1859 but little more. Since 1893 we have had a number of conventions, both provincial and Dominion. In the Dominion field, Conservative conventions chose R. B. Bennett, Dr. Manion, Mr. Bracken, Mr. Drew; Liberal conventions chose Mackenzie King and Mr. St. Laurent. Except for current journalism, virtually no study of the phenomenon they represent has appeared. I have myself been present at two conventions, the Winnipeg convention which chose Mr. Bracken, 1943, and the Ottawa convention of 1948 which chose Mr. St. Laurent. Both were vital and deeply human occasions. At both I had expected to see my friends the political scientists — to say nothing of the historians — all swarming about taking notes and peeping behind the scenes. In Winnipeg I did see a number of my colleagues — but many

* After I had written this paper, I discovered that the subject as specified, did not entirely agree with what I had had in mind. I take consolation, however, in the fact that the audience having already heard two papers, will now have only a very foggy notion of what I am saying anyway.

more of my students! At Ottawa, a historic occasion, I saw none of either. So much for the interest of the Canadian political scientist and historian in the stuff of politics.

Still another area of study is constituted by the so-called pressure group. We Canadians are too proper, or perhaps merely too lethargic, to say much about pressure groups in our formal writing. But do they exist? Today the Canadian economy has become a branch plant economy, with control from across the line. Has that fact anything to do with our tariff policy or with still broader aspects of policy? After his National Policy election, Sir John Macdonald frankly invited the manufacturers to come up to Ottawa and tell him what they wanted. That much we know. What happens today?

If you or I go to Ottawa, we may drop in to see personal friends, either in Parliament or the Civil Service. It is unlikely that we ask for anything, or seek to influence immediate decisions. If the president of the country's largest private railway system goes there, as he probably does on occasion, whom does he see and what do they talk about? At present we are almost as much in the dark about the past and the present of all this behind-the-scenes element in government, with which the question of party is inter-related at infinite points, as if it occurred in Tibet. In other words, Canadians have only dim notions of how they are governed. They take the occasional snitch of debate in the House for "government".

We have never known what goes on behind closed doors and we have had little curiosity to know. It is hardly enough to assert that our system of "Responsible Government" averts from us the necessity for knowing, for that implies super-responsible governors, of whom the supply is never large. Only when some especially heavy flood of wrong-doing overflows the banks does the public, historians included, get a glance at the inner workings of government. The party system is usually considered as one of the most substantial guarantees of good public behaviour in the incentives it offers to oppositions to ferret out the dark deeds of men in power. My impression, however, is that men in power, for about ninety per cent of the time, have as little difficulty concealing what is going on from a vigilant opposition as from the general public. Yet everyone will agree that without representative institutions, much more could be concealed and that while the conduct of public business is far from ideal, it is on an infinitely better basis than in non-free countries. But just let us not take too much for granted.

We usually assume, for example, that our laws being made in Parliament under Responsible Government, every measure of importance that reaches the statute book is a government measure. But let us not forget the large domain of private bills. In the 1850's much of the Grand Trunk railway legislation must have been in the form of private bills. Such material is not directly related to party, but, almost certainly, party considerations come into quite a bit of it. How a particular bill will affect the votes in a given district is only one of the more obvious points of entrance. There are darker channels, carrying more noxious liquids. Affairs in the Ontario riding of Renfrew, 1955, indicate their nature.

These darker channels it is which the historian finds so much difficulty in tracing. In Canada we have explored the Pacific Scandal — though not to the bottom — and the McGreevy scandals of the 1890's. The press at the time gave us much information on the Beauharnois Canal and the Customs scandals which occurred under Mackenzie King. No doubt this sort of thing has always been with us and is with us still. It is part of the structure of our politics — corruption. In 1877, one of his henchmen wrote indignantly to Macdonald that he was being sued for a large sum by a former personal friend on the ground that he, the henchman, had embezzled the money, \$4,000, which the friend had given him to help a Conservative candidate fight an election. The personal friend had advanced the money because Macdonald wrote to an intermediary and the personal friend had "got what he wanted": what he wanted, a postscript explained, were certain timber limits "which he still holds." Further back there were the dark doings that resulted in the libel suit by Malcolm Cameron against the *Lambton Shield*, edited by Alexander Mackenzie (1854). This ended the *Shield* and preserved Cameron's reputation.

History, I am quite aware, does not consist solely in the disinterment of ancient wrong-doing: nevertheless if we are to have for Canada books similar to Namier's studies on the structure of English politics in the 18th century, we historians must collect more scandals. In the period to which these papers are supposed to be specifically devoted, who can tell us, for example, whether the charges levelled against Lafontaine's great Bill were correct? Did it subsidize rebels? Who got the money, why and how?

One of the difficulties people profess themselves to labour under is the inability to tell a Liberal from a Conservative. I recall no formal attempt to work out the difference, if one exists. And yet does not our whole scale of political values depend on this difference? I would like to see not one but several pieces of work devoted to elaborating these differences in political philosophy. The topic has, it is true, been attacked by bits and pieces. A student of mine, who formerly worked with Professor Underhill, has been doing a thesis on "Who were the Liberals?" with reference to the period of the 1870's and 1880's. Another has been examining the notions conjured up by the word "democracy" as of the 1860's. Still another is examining Methodism in the 1850's, to find out, among other things, what its place was in the elaboration of political ideas. I would like to see more of such work. A few years ago, Professor Trudel's almost revolutionary work, *L'Influence de Voltaire au Canada* shed a flood of light on *le parti rouge*. The origins and tenets of the Clear Grits had already been made reasonably plain. As to Conservatism, we know in general that historically a Canadian Tory has been strong for the British Connection, very possibly an Anglican and one of those who favoured protecting home industries. But that only begins the analysis. Consider the many varieties of Conservatism. Contrast McNab, Macdonald, Cartier, Hincks. Contrast Sam Hughes and Sir Robert Borden. Contrast the Orangemen of Ontario with the Montreal tycoons, the British-American League with the Annexation Asso-

ciation. Contrast as Creighton has done, the Toronto and the Kingston Tories of the 1830's and 1840's.

We do not even have a good work on the Orange Order or the Anglican church, let alone a history of Conservatism. An M.A. thesis on Orangeism resting in my office and a Ph.D. thesis now proceeding on Toryism stand at the service of the historians who are willing to use them; why allow so much good work to lie in these graduate theses? I have mentioned a few of them simply to indicate the opportunities they present. A good history of Conservatism in Canada would vastly increase our depth of sociological insight.

Similarly with Liberalism. It is not sufficient merely to say that Canadian Liberalism has contained a good deal of Jeffersonianism, that Liberals have been apt to be for provincial rights as against the centre, that they have been individualistic, not so much attached to large developmental projects as Conservatives, more nationalist because the national capital is closer than the Imperial dream-capital of the Tories, and so on: these are elementary generalities. But they require documentation and expansion. In other words they require studies in political philosophy and in historical sociology.

There is a vast amount of fixity in a party structure — just ten years ago I was reading a paper on that subject in this very building — and people vote as they do, not out of anything that can really be called conviction but mainly out of tradition. The voting pattern of district after district in the older provinces was laid down a century and more ago and I doubt if in all that time, sons have departed far from their fathers' habits. An abundance of tales and anecdotes illustrates the point.

Professor John Meisel has been making a study of the last Dominion election in Kingston riding, with a view to bringing out some of these things. I hope we shall soon see it and that we shall have others of the sort.

A recent book on party politics in Alberta has received a good deal of attention. It is an exceptional book to be written in Canada in that it contains a new idea: it enunciates the thesis of the "quasi-party" system. As I understand it, Mr. MacPherson's view is that we do not now have a genuine, or "classical" party system in Canada but only a modified one-party system, under which certain groups dominate the provinces and another group dominates the Dominion. The thesis is no doubt intended to suggest the resemblance between "party" in Canada and certain countries not as "advanced" or as free as our own.

Whatever the merits of the phrase "quasi-party system", one may ask whether in this country we have ever, except for relatively brief intervals, had a strictly two-party system of politics. One could further ask whether there is anything sacrosanct about a two party system. Before I take a glance at our history in a search for answers, let me say that I cannot believe that terms are important — except to those who make them substitutes for a knowledge of history. What interests us, as historians, is the actual condition of affairs and its evolution into other conditions. Human affairs are fluid; terms, being static, can never be satisfactory for more than a brief period.

Let us direct a historical glance at the classical two-party notion. How many brands of "reformers" were there in Upper Canada before 1837? How long did the Baldwin-Lafontaine "party" hold together? What became of its components? How many parties, groups, factions, cliques, personal "tails", call them what you will, were there in the Province of Canada during the 1850's? In those days, the stability of our politics owing to the lack of a genuine party system had become a byword: for a number of years Canada had much the same kind of group government, formed in much the same way, and as evanescent, as that of republican France. For another parallel, take England from the resignation of Walpole until the Prime Ministership of Lord North. In all three cases, to talk of "the classical two-party system" is nonsense. In all, governments were formed on personal attachments, intrigue, interest and so on, with perhaps just a dash of principle as seasoning.

Take the highly complex period from 1851 to 1854. Mr. Malcolm Cameron had been strenuously opposed to the Lafontaine-Baldwin administration, especially on the Clergy Reserves question. On its fall, he took office under Hincks. That same year George Brown entered the lists against his candidate, and was elected. This began the short career of the group that followed him, known as "The Brownies" which was later to swing around and form a section of the so-called "Grits". Brown himself had just been defeated in Haldimand by another "Reformer", William Lyon Mackenzie. Hincks Brown gaily referred to as "The Hyena". To disregard Canada East we can thus distinguish about five different sets of Canada West "Reformers"; Mackenzie, now pretty much a lone wolf, "Brownies", "Clear Grits", Hincksites "Ministerialists" and whatever was left of Baldwinism after that statesman's resignation. The major thing in common between them all seems to have been a claim to the name Reformer and unmeasured capacity for abuse of everyone else. Where in this mêlée was the two-party system?

In 1854 the celebrated coalition was made which, with an interval of seven years — and four days! — was to govern Canada until 1896. As late as 1864, after ten years, it was still being criticized as a coalition, a mere union of expediency. Until the end of the 1850's, perhaps later, Cartier had been calling himself a Reformer. Probably the coalition *was* a union of expediency, the only kind of combination, apparently, that could govern and in that the precursor of the nation-wide, federal party, with its relative indifference to programme. During its long period of office, what was the opposition? After Confederation, as before, there were Upper Canadian "Reformers" of numberless varieties—to name only a few, Brownites, Blakeites, Cartwrights! There were Nova Scotian secessionists, Quebec *rouges* of several stripes — old Papineau-istes, men of the centre like Laurier and followers of Mercier, friend of the Jesuits. There were various assortments of Liberals from the new western provinces. Could "the two-party system" be said to have been functioning in the decade or two after Confederation?

It was not until the hammer blows of the North West Rebellion and the Manitoba School question were struck and a dominating and

healing personality arose in Laurier that a national Liberal party emerged. And within a few years, it, too had begun to show serious cracks; these must be familiar to everyone.

Much the same kind of record could be produced for Conservatism after the death of Macdonald. The two-party system is largely a myth. What happens is division on issues, great or small — and this may be simply response to pressures — quarrels among leaders about whom groups form, and then, response to great personalities when they appear. I do not deny, of course, that in all this there is considerable continuity both of notions and of organization. But we are dealing with self-government, the freedom to do something about your fate, so change is constant and the word "system" unimportant.

Hence the innumerable groups we have had, some of which have been stable enough to earn this over-rigid appellation "party". In a country like this, endowed with free institutions, where there are widely separated geographical regions, competing economic interests, a tremendous hodge-podge of inherited religious, political and racial traditions, to say nothing of the two cultures, all joined to freedom of expression, how can much stability possibly be hoped for? Except in the late 1850's and early 1860's it has been our good luck so far to have escaped the fate of France and that has often, especially in periods of reasonable prosperity, been accomplished through the existence of one dominating group. This may or may not be the "quasi-party system": It is the way we have run our affairs, and I can see no resemblance in it to the party structures of countries where monopolistic political religions, complete with priesthoods, masquerade as political parties.

What seems remarkable to me is not the evanescence of groups but the vitality of tradition. Generation after generation, whatever the names, people seem to swing about the same poles. After all, we can still see the 17th century written plainly upon our politics: Roundhead and Cavalier are still good terms, as those who remember the atmosphere of Canada in December, 1936, will. I think, agree. The basic divisions of society in the English-speaking world were effected in the 17th century and they have never been removed.

That Tories and Liberals as of today have grown much alike — as shown by the efforts of both in this present, June, 1955, Ontario election, to prove how different they are — does not affect the general thesis. In mid-nineteenth century, for Tories "The British Connection" was a fighting creed: today the fire has gone out of that issue and one wonders now that it has grown cold, if there is any further logical reason for the existence of a Tory party. Still, even today a Canadian Tory, like his ancestor of 1855, is quite apt to be, in Lord Hugh Cecil's phrase of a half-century ago, a "church and king" man, and the current weight of Canadian Conservatism lies in some such area, as the recurring controversies over a flag indicate. A century ago, it was being said that the Tory party was dead, if it would only have the grace to recognize the fact. Tory parties, however, have the asset of immortality: they cannot die, because the psychology that inspires them is inherent in the human race and if it does not get one issue to centre around, it will get another.

The same might be said with less confidence, about reform parties: they will always be with us, as long as we have self-government, because they correspond to aspects of man's mind. In every generation, they might be regarded as not founded upon venerable political tradition—that is, in our case upon civil war and revolution, but in reality, we discover that they grow naturally out of our traditions — or if they do not, as the Communist party does not, they soon devitalize themselves.

Mr. St. Laurent, thanks to the phrase-making abilities of a secretary, described the members of the C.C.F. as "Liberals in a hurry". It was a good phrase and a good description and it would have applied to almost any of the left-wing deviants throughout our history, from Robert Gourlay on down. The usual fate of left-wing deviant groups has been re-absorption in the main body of Liberalism, but there have been some exceptions. Clear Grittism became the nucleus of the main body of Liberalism, shoving some Liberals over into Toryism. Clear Grits thus transferred a certain amount of their hurry to what was to become the historic Liberal party. Not an embarrassing amount, however, for they found themselves carrying along a good many men who were not in a hurry. Except on occasional specific issues, it is hard to see Brown, Blake, Cartwright, Mowat, as men in a hurry over Liberal issues. Some of them, such as Mowat, were merely Conservatives, disguised as Liberals. "The mechanics have determined to get up a political debating club As all of them here, except — are Radicals, I am afraid much evil may arise from this club, and if I could prevent its formation, I would do so." So Mowat, as an old man of 20!

I am not suggesting that the C.C.F. party will, like the Patrons of Industry, simply fall back into Liberalism. I do not think it will, and that because the growing complexity of our society, its increasing urbanism, demands expression in a collectivist movement of some sort. But the C.C.F. will have to wait for such complexities to catch up with it: at present it is ahead of our stage of historical evolution. Meanwhile it remains — a phenomenon that we have frequently had in Canada before — a party of virtue! W. L. Mackenzie stood for virtue. The Clear Grits, after a fashion, stood for virtue. Alexander Mackenzie was a virtuous man (and an unsuccessful politician as a result). That country is fortunate which has a group of men who constitute themselves, and who by reason of their own integrity may be the conscience of the country. No party close to power can remain such, for it must take men, with their mixture of good and evil, as it finds them. "Mr. King admires Mr. Woodsworth", a prominent Liberal once said to me, "he admires him tremendously. He would like to be just such another himself — if it did not cost so much!"

On one end of the political spectrum, we find eagerness, righteousness, expectancy, utopian idealism: in the middle these qualities are tempered by realism: after any party has been in office for long, it grows old and fat and accustomed to sin. On the right of the spectrum, we find tradition, respect for what has already been done, inertia, dominance and the well-known qualities usually associated with right wing parties. In a new country like Canada, reliance on things as

they are must always be precarious. A century ago this could only be supported through reference by newcomers — and all were newcomers, except in French Canada — to things as they were in the former place of habitation, mainly Great Britain. Canadian Toryism, later Conservatism, always had something of the artificial about it. Except in that it represented vested interests or mere natural conservatism, it tended to be a party not based on the local scene. This could hardly be more forcefully illustrated than by the way in which Ireland's religious brawls were renewed on Canadian soil. That issue bubbled and hissed all during the mid-nineteenth century.

And now, today, it looks as if Canada was at last finding its own expression in a native conservative movement. This is how I see Social Credit, a kind of native conservatism, based on distrust of the big world, on the simplicities and suspicions of the lower middle class form of life. As such it may go far, especially if it succeeds in joining forces with the immense numbers of people of exactly this sort in Eastern Canada.

In this paper I have not attempted detailed research. My purpose was mainly to glance over the scene as a whole and to raise questions for my successors to answer. I ask pardon for not having stuck closely to the period designated. It seemed to me better to suggest some of the general considerations into which parties, in a free society, must always fit. As I grow older, I am afraid that as a historian I come more and more to accept the saying "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."

DISCUSSION

Mr. Mason Wade saw historians of French Canada manifesting interest in political corruption, which matched their English compatriots. *Professor G. W. Brown* agreed that there was still a large field for research into political parties. He noted the variations in the three countries, governed by geographical environment and differing political frameworks. *Professor Soward* saw in British Columbia and Alberta the material for analysing the early development of party traditions. *Professor MacNaught* felt that we should be more definite in the knowledge that North American parties were based upon principle. The public concern behind the founding of the Republican Party, and the Canadian examples of Responsible Government and Confederation bore witness to principle. *Professor Underhill* agreed with this. He suggested that historians were in danger of over simplifying or over complicating the pattern of party development. Sociologists would find an intelligible pattern, if historians did not. *Professor Lower* suggested a tentative pattern, where civil wars and revolutions wound up the mechanism, which proceeded to unwind between crises. *Professors Lightbody* and *Binkley* concluded by discussing a comparison of English Whigs, and small planters of the American south.