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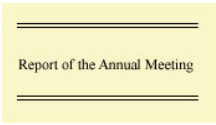

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THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY IN THE 1890's

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This paper is an attempt to describe what happened to the Conservative Party in the eighteen-nineties, and, in particular, to offer an explanation for its defeat in the general elections of 1896 that differs somewhat from the explanations commonly put forward. The attempt rests upon a thesis that the Confederation of 1867 was a compact, not in the usual sense of an agreement between separate provincial governments, for this can scarcely be sustained, but in the sense of an agreement between two cultures to put their racial and religious differences aside in provincial compartments, and to cooperate on the national plane on certain projects of mutual benefit. Chief among these projects was the acquisition of a vast empire in the west and north. It was part of the compact also that French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians would have an equal right of way throughout the whole of this new domain. The Manitoba Act of 1870 and the North-West Territorial Act of 1875, providing for separate schools and the official status of French as well as English, are sufficient proof of this fact.

The Conservative Party, which had been the first to recognize that Canadian political life rested upon a cultural dualism, was the progenitor of this compact, and under the leadership of Macdonald and Cartier was the faithful guardian of its observance. In the eighteen-nineties, however, the Ontario wing of the Party lost sight of the historic alliance between a tolerant Ontario Toryism and a conservative Quebec, upon which the Liberal-Conservative Party (to give it its full name) was based. More specifically, the Ontario wing of the Party fell prey to what can only be described as militant Protestantism and aggressive Anglo-Saxon racialism, which destroyed the alliance. A new political alignment on the part of Quebec was the result.

It may be objected that the eclipse of the Conservative Party in the eighteen-nineties can be explained without recourse to such a thesis. There were the successive leadership crises following the death of Sir John A. Macdonald; the depressed economic conditions of the first half of the decade; the series of scandals which erupted during 1891 and the years immediately following; and, finally, the troublesome Manitoba school question which plagued the Conservative Government from 1890 onwards. The way in which the Party handled the problem of leadership and the school question illustrates the thesis of this paper. The other two issues — depressed economic conditions and the scandals — do not appear to have had an important bearing on the fate of the Party in 1896.

II

The depression prevailing in the world generally, with consequent low market prices and financial stringency, together with the 'exodus' of population to the United States, have tended to obscure the fact that Canada continued to make substantial economic progress during the first half of the eighteen-nineties. Precise figures are lacking, but there is every indication that foreign capital continued to flow into Canada during at least the first four years of the decade, [1] and that, if anything, net capital formation was greater in 1890 than it was in 1900. [2] There was also a healthy growth of secondary industry and of commerce under the aegis of the 'National Policy'. In short, the policies of Macdonald Conservatism were helping to create the requisite conditions for what a contemporary economist has termed the 'take-off period', in which economic growth becomes self-sustaining. [3]

Moreover, it is not generally realized that Canada fared much better during the depression of the eighteen-nineties than the United States and many other countries. Even Liberal journals were constrained to admit on occasion that Canada had experienced far less real distress and had had a remarkable immunity from the financial disasters, and the farm and labour discontent, which had occurred in the United States and elsewhere. [4] It is true that Canadian industry, which was just emerging from a small-shop system to large-scale factory production, was not yet able to absorb fully the labour which was drifting from the farms to the urban areas, and thence to the United States, where opportunities for employment were more varied. The Liberals made much of this 'exodus' of population to the United States, but the Conservatives could justifiably contend that reducing or ending protection of Canadian industry would not stop the emigration. It would only deprive Canadians of the opportunity of finding employment in Canadian factories. [5]

The Liberal trade policy of the early eighteen-nineties was both disastrous and illogical — disastrous because it resulted in the Party being tarred with the brush of disloyalty and annexationism; illogical because their policy of 'unrestricted reciprocity' with the United States, even supposing it could have been obtained (which is highly doubtful), raised almost insuperable revenue problems in a pioneer country where

1 Jacob VINER, *Canada's Balance of International Indebtedness, 1900-1913* (Harvard, 1924), p. 37.

2 O. J. FIRESTONE, *Canada's Economic Development, 1867-1953* (London, 1958), p. 112.

3 W. W. ROSTOW, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge, 1960).

4 *The Globe*, January 1, 1893.

5 It is not generally realized that the years of heaviest emigration have been the ones of heaviest immigration as well. Moreover, that throughout much of Canadian history there has been an 'exodus'. For example, emigration exceeded immigration during 26 of the 33 years from 1867 to 1899 inclusive. See Firestone, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-1.

governmental expenditures to assist economic development were a necessity. The Liberals also remained curiously oblivious to the possibilities of the British market. Canadian exports to Britain continued to greatly outstrip those to the United States until by 1898, the year of greatest disparity, exports to Britain amounted to approximately 68% of the total, while those to the United States were approximately 28%. Liberal obsessions about the "sixty million market" and "the continent to which we belong" were thus being dispelled by the course of economic events. There can be little doubt that the policies of the Conservative Party on tariffs and trade were sound ones which met with the approbation of the Canadian public.

Nor do the scandals seem to have had the adverse effect on the Conservative Party's fortunes that one might have expected. The Public Works scandal, which destroyed Sir Hector Langevin in 1891, was followed by another involving Sir Adolphe Caron and other Conservatives in 1892, and by the 'Curran bridge' scandal at Lachine in 1893. Sir John Thompson showed no disposition to be lenient in probing these scandals to the bottom, and his relentless prosecution of some of the malefactors may have helped to assuage any public indignation. [6] One prominent Liberal M.P., William Mulock, confided to Laurier that: "Notwithstanding the slips Sir John made, politics are cleaner for his having been premier." [7] At all events, the Government seemed to survive the scandals without serious loss of public support.

The best evidence that neither the 'hard times' nor the scandals seriously affected the Conservative Party's fortunes is the fact that the Party continued to win by-election after by-election in the years following 1891, until by the time of the Parliamentary session of 1895 its majority of thirty-one had increased to sixty-three. The Conservatives sustained a few losses during the succeeding year, but their majority was still fifty-eight on the eve of the general elections of 1896. In summary, out of eighty-three by-elections between the general elections of 1891 and those of 1896, the Conservatives won sixty-two, the Liberals twenty, and Independents one. [8] It is clear that the electoral upset of 1896 has to be explained with reference to factors other than those of depressed economic conditions and scandals.

[6] Whether there was any, or much, public indignation is of course difficult to determine. Thomas McGreevy, whom Thompson had sent to goal for his part in one of the scandals, was elected for Quebec West in a by-election in 1895 (!)

[7] Public Archives of Canada (P.A.C.), Laurier Papers, 8, Mulock to Laurier, December 14, 1894.

[8] See N. Omer Côté (ed.), *Political Appointments, Parliaments and the Judicial Bench in the Dominion of Canada, 1867-1995* (Ottawa, 1896), pp. 285-294; and *Supplement, 1896-1903* (Ottawa, 1903), pp. 526-528.

III

The successive leadership crises following 1891 were much more important. At the time of Macdonald's death the Party had two extremely able men available in Sir Charles Tupper, the High Commissioner to London, and Sir John Thompson, the Minister of Justice. Tupper declined the pleas of prominent Party members that he accept the leadership, and urged his son, Charles Hibbert Tupper, Minister of Marine and Fisheries, to give his "hearty support" to Thompson. [9] One Party member said that at least three-fourths of the Conservative rank and file in the House of Commons had wanted Tupper for leader. "But small men did not want a *big* leader." [10] That Tupper would have responded to a Party 'draft' seems evident from his letter in reply to a flattering one from Dr. George M. Grant, Principal of Queen's University :

> I confess I thought I had some reason to fear that I would be called upon to lead the Party after Sir John Macdonald's death, but was greatly relieved by that responsibility not being placed upon me.... I am sure after what I have done for my Party you would not consider it my duty to re-enter Parliament and compel, as I doubt not I could, jealous and ungrateful men who owe their official existence to my efforts to accept my leadership. Besides if I am right in the impression that unrestricted reciprocity with its annexation tendency is dead I am not justified in thus shortening my life. [11]

Sir Charles Tupper obviously did not believe in hiding his light under a bushel (a fault which mars his *Recollections)*, but this does not alter the fact that he was a capable and aggressive leader. Dr. Grant felt that the Party had made a great mistake and would have to send for him yet.

Having passed over Tupper, whose capabilities even political foes conceded, why did the Party also pass over the other outstanding man, Sir John Thompson ? The explanation of the Party's failure to press the leadership upon Thompson is simple, if sad. Thompson was a Roman Catholic convert from Methodism, and in the swelling tide of militant Protestantism (or secularism, masquerading as such [12]), which seemed to

9 P.A.C., Tupper Papers, 23 (Journal), May 31, June 3, 1891.

10 *Ibid.*, 9, Donald Macmaster to Tupper, August 14, 1891. (Macmaster's italics). The "small men" were the members of the Cabinet.

11 *Ibid.*, 7, Tupper to Principal Grant, October 20, 1891.

12 See John S. Ewart, "Isms in the Schools", *The Canadian Magazine,* July, 1893, pp. 356-366. Ewart makes the interesting suggestion that the main enemy to Roman Catholic schools was not militant Protestantism, but secularism; that it was "the sceptics ... (not merely those so avowed, but that very much larger class that is practically unbelieving, although still pronouncing the shibboleths) that are the most determined in their hostility to the Catholic religion being taught in the Catholic schools." Ewart may well be right in seeing a disguised secularism behind this 'militant Protestantism'. The confusion arises from the fact that the proponents of 'national schools' insisted, at the same time, upon religious teaching in the schools. This religious teaching was to be "free from denominational bias". It is arguable that what most of these people were aiming at was simply ethical and moral training, and that the 'religious' teaching which they envisaged for the schools was so diluted as to be scarcely religious, let alone Christian.

be engulfing much of English-speaking Canada at that time, such a leader was deemed to be unacceptable, especially in Ontario, where the Orange Order was strong. One prominent Ontario Orangeman, Sam Hughes, who was always proferring Thompson advice, wrote him that "many of our best men" felt that "Sir John is the right man but it is a d..... pity he is a pervert." [13]

When the Governor-General recognized Thompson's manifest merits by calling upon him to form a government, Thompson declined, bowing instead to the 'sectarian climate' of the times. "A modest, unassuming man... who at the same time leaves an unmistakable impression of ability", as Lady Aberden had written, [14] Thompson did not press his claims upon the Party. "I will never forget the unselfish way in which you have sacrificed yourself for the Party", wrote David Creighton, Managing Director of *The Empire,* official Party organ in Ontario. "I believe it was unnecessary, for as I told you, we could have carried things through with you as Premier, even though such men as Dr. Douglas exhibited bigotry, for you would soon live down any prejudice." [15] Nevertheless, Lady Macdonald confided some time later that :

> Sir John Thompson was right to refuse the Headship of the Government. There would have been, I am sure, a stampede of Ontario supporters. It is not so much his religion, as the fact of being a pervert — but he is a tower of strength in his post & really our very best debater. [16]

In the light of such considerations the Conservative Party passed over its two most obvious candidates for the leadership and settled upon Senator J. J. C. Abbott. Seventy years old and in ailing health he had already contemplated retirement, and, moreover, did not want the post. As he himself said at the time, "I am here [as Prime Minister] very much because I am not particularly obnixious to anybody.... Something like the principle on which it is reported some men are selected as candidates for the Presidency of the United States... that they are harmless and have not made any enemies." [17]

Abbott was thus a 'stop-gap' Prime Minister until such time as the Party could bring itself to accept its first Roman Catholic leader. When, nearly a year and a half later, the Party reluctantly accepted Thompson's leadership, it was with the tacit understanding that he associate himself with a prominent Protestant leader from Ontario. It had been strongly urged by many Party members in Ontario that William Ralph Meredith,

[13] *P.A.C.*, Thompson Papers, 135, Hughes to Thompson, August 15, 1891.
[14] *Ibid.*, M.G. 27; I; B5; Vol. 6 (Lady Aberdeen's Diary), Sept. 29, 1890.
[15] *Ibid.*, Thompson Papers, 130, Creighton to Thompson, June 17, 1891. Rev. Dr. Douglas, Principal of the Wesleyan Theological College, Montreal, had made scurrilous attacks upon Thompson, denouncing him as a "Jesuit", an appellation he did not intend as a compliment.
[16] *Ibid.*, Tupper Papers, 17, Lady Macdonald to Tupper, November 4, 1891.
[17] *Debates of the Senate,* 1891, pp. 97-98.

Provincial Conservative leader, should be brought into the Cabinet, while a smaller number also favoured the inclusion of Dalton McCarthy, Conservative M.P. for North Simcoe. Since Meredith had been 'riding the Protestant horse' in the Provincial elections of 1886 and 1890, while McCarthy had been conducting a crusade against the French language and separate schools in Manitoba and the North-West Territories, it was an ominous sign that so many Conservatives should wish to see them in the Cabinet.

Despite his misgivings, Thompson made an attempt to bring Meredith into the Ministry. What stopped the appointment was the opposition of the redoubtable Dr. James Vincent Cleary, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kingston, who considered Meredith an unpardonable bigot because of his constant attacks upon the Roman Catholic separate schools of Ontario.[18] Thompson thereupon abandoned the attempt to secure Meredith, and settled instead upon Nathaniel Clarke Wallace, M.P. for West York, and Grand Master of the Orange Lodge of British America since 1887.

As one of the 'Noble Thirteen' (or 'Devil's Dozen'), who had broken Party ranks in 1889 to vote for disallowance of the Jesuit Estates Act, Wallace was expected to fulfill the role of a 'Protestant Champion' to balance the Roman Catholic Prime Minister. In fact, however, Wallace proved to be a serious source of weakness. His chief aim was to vie with Dalton McCarthy and the Protestant Protective Association in arousing racial and religious bigotry. More than one member of the Ministry, and many people outside it, complained to Thompson about this.[19]

Sir John Thompson was Prime Minister when Protestant extremism and Anglo-Saxon racialism seemed to be irrepressibly obtruding upon the national scene. Confronted with the assault on Roman Catholic separate schools and the French language in both Manitoba and the North-West Territories, Thompson bent over backwards to avoid even the appearance of favouring his co-religionists. It is arguable that in the process he did them less than justice. At the very time when he was being cruelly attacked as a 'Papist' and a 'Jesuit', not to be trusted, by the Protestant Protective Association, and by such men as Rev. Dr. Douglas (Principal of the Wesleyan Theological College, Montreal) and Rev. Dr. Carman

[18] *P.A.C.*, Thompson Papers, 141, Bishop John Cameron to Thompson, November 17, 1891; *ibid.*, 143, James G. Moylan to Thompson, December 20, 1891. Bishop Cameron, Moylan, and others interceded with Cleary at Thompson's request to no avail.

[19] *P.A.C.*, Thompson Papers, 179, J. J. Curran (Solicitor-General) to Thompson, March 22, 1893; *ibid.*, 223, Senator Sir Frank Smith (Minister without Portfolio) to Thompson, October 24, 1894. Curran felt that Wallace did not have "the art of making his Yahoos cheer without putting his foot in it", and said that the Government had gone too far in the direction of catering to the *ultra* Protestants; while Smith complained that Wallace was giving the public the impression that the Ministry was composed of "P.P.A. men".

(Superintendent of the Methodist Church), Thompson was also being assailed by J. Israel Tarte (Liberal M.P. for L'Islet) as "... the instrument of fanatical Protestants and consequently our worst enemy." [20] The first charge was completely unfounded and purely malicious, but the Tarte verdict had a measure of truth. It was the extreme Protestant wing of the Conservative Party in Ontario to which Thompson had surrendered, and which occasioned all his difficulties.

Sir John Thompson's tenure of the leadership was too brief to leave its impress, or to demonstrate whether he could have rallied his Party. Although he lacked the genial personality of Macdonald, and the dynamic nature of Tupper, Thompson was a man of formidable intellect and unquestionable integrity, and a worthy predecessor to Canada's two other Roman Catholic Prime Ministers. It was tragic irony for any Roman Catholic to be Prime Minister at a time when racial and religious bitterness was rending his country and Party. For Thompson, with his agonizing concern to be impartial, it was also a pitiable dilemma.

With Thompson's premature death at the age of 50 in December, 1894, the Conservative Party was faced with its third leadership crisis in as many years. With Macdonald, Abbott, and now Thompson gone, and no other men of remotely equivalent stature in the Cabinet, the choice pointed unmistakably to Sir Charles Tupper, the High Commissioner to London. Despite his seventy-three years, Tupper towered above all his Conservative colleagues in political astuteness, and in the vigour and breadth of his conceptions. That he was not called upon to lead the Government is traceable to two factors : first, the knot of jealous and feuding individuals in the Cabinet, who in pursuit of their own ambitions disregarded the undoubted wishes of the rank and file members of the Party in the House of Commons and the country generally; and second, but by no means less significant, the fact that the office of Governor-General was "...held by a man so little fitted for its responsibilities as the Earl of Aberdeen...." [21]

The Earl of Aberdeen had succeeded Lord Stanley as Governor-General of Canada in September, 1893. Both he and his wife, Ishbel, had been actively engaged in British Liberal politics and carried their partisanship into Canadian politics. It was not merely that the Countess revealed a marked preference for Laurier and the Liberal Party in her Diary. Such partiality might well have been excused, especially in view of Laurier's personal charm, had it not been manifested on a number of occasions which proved crucial to the future of the Conservative Party. The partisanship was bad enough, but the Aberdeens had, in addition, a violent and unreasoning dislike of Sir Charles Tupper, whom they were

20 *The Empire*, August 18, 20, 22, 1894.

21 Maurice POPE (ed.), *Public Servant : The Memoirs of Sir Joseph Pope* (Toronto, 1960), p. 104.

determined to keep from the leadership at all costs. Sir Charles, who admittedly was not an impartial witness, later described Aberdeen as "...a weak and incapable Governor under the controll [sic.] of an ambitious and meddlesome woman...".[22] That Aberdeen was an amiable mediocrity, dominated by an able and aggressive woman (to paraphrase Tupper), seems beyond question. The occasions on which the Governor-General's wife was permitted to discuss affairs of state, not only with members of the Conservative Party outside the Cabinet, but with members of the Opposition as well, were too numerous to allow any other conclusion.[23]

The influence of the Aberdeens, on the occasion of Thompson's death, is clear from the Countess' Diary. In discussion with her husband, the two of them decided against George Eulas Foster, the Minister of Finance, as a successor to Thompson. They went on to consider two other possibilities in the Cabinet :

> And Mr. Haggart who is the strongest man is admittedly a Bohemian & also idle -- he would probably not serve under Mr. Foster nor Mr. Foster under him. Mr. Mackenzie-Bowell [*sic.*] himself is 75, rather fussy & decidedly commonplace, also an Orangeman... but he is good and straight man & he has great ideas about the drawing together of the colonies & the Empire, as was evidenced by all the trouble he took about getting up that Conference.[24]

On the same day the Countess went to console Lady Thompson, who, despite her grief, was able to talk of political matters. In the course of conversation, reference was made to "...that old fox Sir Charles Tupper, who has been manoeuvring so finely through all this. He was in truth a bitter enemy of Sir John's & gave him much trouble, & constantly tried to trip him up, to step in his shoes & to make difficulties so as to pave the way either for him or his son." Lady Thompson said that if Tupper were called upon by the Governor-General to head the Government she would consider it an insult to her husband's memory. "I was able to reassure her as to H.E.'s [His Excellency's] intentions about this", Lady Aberdeen wrote in her Diary. "Never if he could help it should Sir Charles be again in Canadian politics. He is another of those who are able mysteriously to provide largely for his sons & daughters."

This fixed determination of the Governor-General to exclude the most able Conservative from the leadership had fatal consequences for the Party. Quite aside from the impropriety of such an attitude, and particularly of allowing his wife to divulge it to an outsider, the allegations that Sir Charles Tupper had "been manoeuvring so finely

22 *P.A.C.*, Tupper Papers, 18, Tupper to Moberly Bell (of the London *Times*), June 7, 1897.

23 For one example, see the episode related by Sir Joseph Pope in Maurice Pope (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 113.

24 *P.A.C.*, Lady Aberdeen's Diary, December 12, 1894. Bowell, incidentally, was not yet seventy-one.

through all this", and that he was "in truth a bitter enemy of Sir John's", seeking to step into his shoes, were completely without foundation. So far from seeking the leadership at the time of Macdonald's death, Sir Charles had rejected the overtures made to him by various Party members and had urged his son to give his "hearty support" to Thompson.[25] If he were "in truth a bitter enemy of Sir John's", then the numerous letters which he wrote to his son, avowing his friendship for Thompson, were a form of deceit one would scarcely expect to find between two so devoted members of a family.[26] If Lady Thompson had in fact expressed such a view of Tupper as the Countess attributes to her, it must be assumed that she was reflecting her late husband's attitude as well. In that event Thompson had been imposed upon by false friends, for the evidence does not bear out the charge.

Moreover, on the occasion of Thompson's death, Sir Charles Tupper revealed no burning desire to "step in his shoes", despite the urging of very influential supporters, including Sir William Van Horne, Richard B. Angus, Sir Donald A. Smith, and Thomas Skinner.[27] Tupper showed no inclination to accede to these pleas, although once again, as at the time of Macdonald's death, he probably would have accepted a clear mandate from the Party that he assume the leadership. Only a few days previously, his doctor had advised him that his heart was "seriously affected", and had forbidden him to accompany Sir John Thompson's body to Halifax on H.M.S. *Blenheim*, or indeed to go as far as Portsmouth.[28] Tupper did say "yes" to his son's appeal that he at least agree to enter the Government, but wrote that "... I felt I was signing my own death warrant. I was inexpressibly relieved when the reprieve came."[29]

Such is the evidence of the "old fox" conspiring to depose Sir John Thompson during his Prime Ministership and to clamber into his place upon his death. It was with such misconceptions and prejudices regarding Sir Charles Tupper that the Earl of Aberdeen called upon the "fussy & decidedly commonplace" Mackenzie Bowell to form a Government.

[25] A fact which Professor John T. Saywell neglects to mention in his Introduction to *The Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen, 1893-1898* (Toronto, 1960). Instead, Professor Saywell prefers to say that Tupper "scoffed" at the idea of giving up the office of High Commissioner in order to succeed Macdonald, "while listing all the reasons which led him to fear that he might expect to be summoned!" (p. xli).

[26] For one example, see *P.A.C.*, Tupper Papers, 17, Tupper to Sir Charles Hibbert Tupper, November 28, 1893.

[27] *Ibid.*, 9, Thomas Skinner to Tupper, December 14, 1894. Skinner, long time financial adviser to the Canadian Government in London, mentioned the "...present interesting and supreme crisis in Newfoundland" as one of the reasons why it was desirable to have "an experienced and large-minded statesman" at the head of the Canadian Government.

[28] *Ibid.*, 23 (Journal), December 15, 1894.

[29] *Ibid.*, 18, Tupper to Sir Charles Hibbert Tupper, January 7, 1895.

The only mystery remaining in connection with Bowell's assumption of power is the willingness of the other members of the Cabinet to accept so tamely a leader whom they obviously regarded as their inferior. Bowell did not succeed in forming his Ministry until December 21st, so that there were eight days in which the Ministers could have refused to cooperate with him and presumably have compelled the Governor-General to make a more satisfactory selection. An explanation for this, although an incredible one, is contained in a Diary entry by the Countess some months later. During a conversation with Sir Charles Hibbert Tupper, Lady Aberdeen complained (on the behalf of her husband of course) about Bowell's "weakness & consequent shiftiness". Tupper told her that the late Sir John Thompson had concluded that Bowell was not fit for Cabinet office and had determined to retire him. Why then had he been Acting-Prime Minister during Thompson's absence in England? Simply because he was the senior Privy Councillor, Tupper replied. Tupper went on to say that when Lady Aberdeen's husband had been appointed Governor-General, Sir John Thompson and other Conservative leaders had feared that he would be very partisan and would do his best to put the Liberals in power. This was why the Cabinet Ministers had accepted Bowell as Prime Minister. They had been meeting one night and discussing how to keep Bowell from the leadership, when a telegram or newspaper item came to their attention stating that one of the Governor-General's aides had been seen with Laurier. "We all turned in like sheep into the fold at the very rumour. We thought it quite on the cards that H. E. would say, 'Well, you have had nearly a week — you evidently cannot form a Government. I will send for someone who can.' " [30]

That the Ministers thought it possible that Lord Aberdeen would have the effrontery to attempt a *coup d'état,* by calling on the Leader of the Opposition Party, which was in a minority of over sixty in the House of Commons at the time, was a tribute either to their naiveté or to the strength of their belief in Aberdeen's partisanship and poor judgment. However improbable the explanation, none other presents itself. The Governor-General and his wife were violently prejudiced against Sir Charles Tupper, the obvious selection, and were determined to exclude him. At the same time, the nucleous of jealous and largely mediocre men in the Cabinet, who doubtlessly did not want a "*big* leader", as Donald Macmaster had commented in 1891, were sufficiently frightened of Aberdeen's partisanship that they acquiesced in a choice which they knew to be disastrous. That it was indeed disastrous is best conveyed in the words of Sir Joseph Pope :

> All the chiefs had disappeared with the exception of Sir Charles Tupper, who on Thompson's death should have been summoned without

[30] *P.A.C.,* Lady Aberdeen's Diary, July 18, 1895. Cited in J. T. Saywell, "The Crown and the Politicians: The Canadian Sucession Question", *The Canadian Historical Review,* December, 1956.

> delay, but who for some inexplicable reason was passed over by Lord Aberdeen in favour of Mr. Mackenzie Bowell, a worthy, loyal man, but one as little qualified to be Prime Minister of Canada as Lord Aberden was to be Governor-General. Then followed days which I never recall without a blush, days of weak and incompetent administration by a cabinet presided over by a man whose sudden and unlooked-for elevation had visibly turned his head, a ministry without unity or cohesion of any kind, a prey to internal dissensions until they became a spectable to the world, to angels, and to men. [31]

Under Bowell's leadership the Government staggered from crisis to crisis, until by the time of the Cabinet revolt of January, 1896, Sir Richard Cartwright could exclaim with his usual caustic eloquence :

> Sir, as I understand it, we are in the presence of the Royal Ottawa Low Comedy Troupe.... What we have been listening to, after all, has been a series of rehearsals. We had number 1 rehearsal... a sort of undress rehearsal, as we may call it, in July, when three persons went out, and one of them, being a person of some honour and self-respect, stayed out. Then we have lately had what I may call a full dress rehearsal, when seven members went out, and practically seven came back, because the mere substitution of junior for senior, or senior for junior, really hardly affects the situation, as no one will more frankly admit than the hon. member for Pictou [Sir Charles Hibbert Tupper]. Now these hon. gentlemen being pretty nearly letter perfect, we can have the real performance, which will not long be delayed, when all go out and none come back. [32]

On the occasion of the Cabinet revolt the Aberdeens once again succeeded in keeping Sir Charles Tupper from the Prime Ministership. [33] It was not until April 27, 1896, barely two months before the general elections, that the Governor-General reluctantly called Tupper to the post which should have been his long before. It was well past the eleventh hour. As Laurier said of Tupper years later :

> Indeed, it has always been a mystery to me and to those who sat on this side of the House that Sir Charles Tupper was not sent for when the old chieftain died. He was sent for at last, but then it was too late. The battle was already lost and notwithstanding the vigour and brilliancy with which he threw himself into the battle, he could not redeem the fortunes of his Party. [34]

Such is the sorry record of the leadership crises which plagued the Conservative Party in the years immediately following Macdonald's

31 Maurice POPE (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 104.

32 *Debates of the House of Commons*, 1896, Vol. I, p. 75.

33 *P.A.C.*, Lady Aberden's Diary, January 12, 1896. The Aberdeens urged Bowell to reconstruct his Cabinet, rather than to resign as he twice tried to do. It is clear from the Diary that Aberdeen had resolved to call upon Laurier if Bowell failed in his attempt at reconstruction. Professor Saywell seeks to justify Aberdeen (in this resolve) by pointing to the sorry record of the Bowell Administration. (*op. cit.*, p. lxiii) He tends to overlook the fact that it was the Governor-General who had foisted Bowell on the Party and kept him there, despite the attempts of many Conservatives to secure Tupper as leader.

34 *Debates of the House of Commons*, 1916, Vol. I, p. 586.

death. Sir John Thompson had been kept from the leadership for a time, owing to the Protestant prejudices of the Ontario wing of the Party; and Sir Charles Tupper, who should have succeeded upon the death of Thompson, was excluded until the last moment by the prejudices and partisanship of the Governor-General. This last was of course an historical accident, but the first indicated a deep-seated malaise within the Party itself. This became evident with the advent of the Manitoba school question.

IV

The Protestant bigotry and Anglo-Saxon racialism, which Thompson had bent over backwards to placate and which Bowell was utterly incapable of stemming, continued to erode the Conservative Party, finally shattering it over the issue of Manitoba schools. The school question is much too complex to receive adequate discussion here, but certain points should be made about it.

The first is that the 'credit' for starting the agitation in Manitoba in 1889, against separate schools and against French as an official language, belongs almost entirely to Dalton McCarthy and the Equal Rights Association. It has been asserted that there was agitation in the Province prior to McCarthy's arrival, and indeed that the Provincial Government's policy on the school question had been announced before McCarthy's speech at Portage la Prairie on August 5th. This is not so.[35] On the contrary, the evidence suggests that the 'triumph' belonged to McCarthy and the 'Equal Righters' alone. The motives of Premier Greenway and Attorney-General Joseph Martin in capitalizing on McCarthy's inflammatory appeals to bigotry are, of course, another matter.

It was later alleged by the Provincial Government of Manitoba, as well as by many polemicists on the subject, that the separate schools had been inefficient, and that illiteracy was rife among the Roman Catholic populace. These charges were afterthoughts. Since the Provincial Government appointed the personnel of the Board of Education, as well as the superintendents of both the Protestant and Roman Catholic schools, and, moreover, was free to prescribe such secular standards as it saw fit, the responsibility for any inefficiency was clear. In fact, however, Martin thanked the former Board of Education for the "great good"

35 Canada, *Sessional Paper 20B*, 1895, pp. 105-6. This contains an account of John S. Ewart's personal confrontation with McCarthy, early in 1895, on this very point. That the Provincial Government had not in fact announced a decision to abolish the separate school system before August 5th, is evident from an editorial in the *Manitoba Free Press* of August 19th, which observed that "...it is not yet clear that the Provincial Government has resolved to assail the separate school system...." That the *Free Press* did not consider the agitation to be of local origin is equally obvious from the same editorial, which protested against "...Manitoba being made the batleground of Ontario fanatics, who dare not propose the abolition of separate schools in their own province".

which it had accomplished. "The Government's action", he said, "had not been determined because they are dissatisfied with the manner in which the affairs of the Department are conducted under the system, but because they are dissatisfied with the system itself." [36] Some years later, Senator Bernier said in a Senate debate :

> Never, before the Manitoba Government had announced its policy on this matter in 1889, never was any remark made to us about the alleged inefficiency of our schools; never was any suggestion thrown out to us; never was any blame cast upon us; never was a hint given us as to any drawback that was supposed to exist, or as to any improvement that could have been desired. [37]

Another point of interest in the Manitoba school question is the mishandling of the case of the Roman Catholic minority by Sir John Thompson. When the Supreme Court of Canada had unanimously ruled in favour of the minority, and the case was about to be appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England, Archbishop Taché urged Thompson to secure Edward Blake as counsel, along with John S. Ewart, who had acted for the Roman Catholic minority thus far. On three occasions Taché entreated Thompson to engage Blake, pointing out that this was Ewart's desire also. [38]

Thompson had a strong prejudice against Blake, however, and declined to engage him, counting instead upon securing a noted English lawyer, Sir Horace Davey. Thompson assumed that the Dominion Government's firm of English solicitors, Bompas, Bischoff and Company, had a general retainer on Sir Horace Davey which would give the Government first claim upon his services. This proved incorrect, however, for the technical reason that the name of neither the Crown nor the Dominion Government appeared in the title of the Barrett case.

In the end, Sir Horace Davey was retained for the Province of Manitoba, assisted by Dalton McCarthy and Isaac Campbell, a Winnipeg lawyer. The Roman Catholic minority was represented by Sir Richard Webster, assisted by Samuel H. Blake and John S. Ewart. Sir Richard Webster (later Lord Alverstone) had been displaced as Attorney-General of England as a result of the defeat, at this very time, of the Conservative Government of Lord Salisbury. Webster handled the case of the Roman Catholic minority very poorly, perhaps because his time may have been taken up with the general elections and the ensuing change of government in Britain. According to one source, John S. Ewart expressed the opinion that if the Roman Catholic minority had been represented by Sir Horace Davey, it would have won its case, but that Webster "...didn't look at the

[36] *The Manitoba Free Press*, March 5, 1890, reporting the second reading of the Public Schools Act.

[37] *Debates of the Senate*, 1895, p. 395.

[38] *P.A.C., Thompson Papers*, 140, Taché to Thompson, November 10, 1891; 144, same to same, December 29, 1891; 151, same to same, March 21, 1892.

brief, knew nothing of the case and blundered from start to finish so that Sam Blake could say nothing without contradicting his senior." [39] Taché, who had tried in vain to persuade Thompson to engage Edward Blake, subsequently wrote that "...le Gouvernement ne sut et ne voulut pas confier cette cause à ceux qui auraient pu la défendre avec le plus grand avantage, et elle fut perdue." [40]

A final point of interest, for the purposes of this paper, concerns the position taken by the Conservative Party on the Manitoba school question prior to and during the general election campaign of 1896. The Conservative Party is commonly represented as having campaigned on a platform which included remedial legislation to restore the rights of the Roman Catholic minority of Manitoba. In the elections the Conservatives lost heavily to the Liberals in Quebec, but gained the largest number of seats elsewhere in Canada, [41] and great surprise has been expressed at the behaviour of French Canada in thus repudiating a Party which was ostensibly seeking to aid the Roman Catholic minority of Manitoba. The usual explanation is that offered by Sir Mackenzie Bowell at the time :

> I have not yet recovered from surprise and astonishment at the returns from Quebec. What does it mean ? Have the people in that province thrown off the influence of the Church, or did the desire for a French Premier counterbalance all other considerations ? I am somewhat inclined to the latter opinion, race having had more influence with the people than creed. [42]

This view that nationalism triumphed over religion has been echoed by many writers on the election results of 1896. Undoubtedly the desire of many French-speaking Canadians to see one of their compatriots become Prime Minister was a factor, especially since Laurier had engaging personal qualities and was gaining popularity among both French and English. As an explanation of Quebec's behaviour it is not without some validity, but it is not a sufficient or necessary explanation. At best it requires drastic qualifications.

These qualifications concern the behaviour of the Ontario wing of the Conservative Party. From the very beginning of the school controversy, while the Federal leaders of the Party were moving in the direction of redress of the Roman Catholic grievance in Manitoba, the Ontario members were solemnly warning that the Party in their Province would not tolerate such a course. In the various Parliamentary debates

[39] *P.A.C.*, Thompson Papers, 160, N. C. Wallace to R. S. White, August 6, 1892. (Enclosed in White to Thompson, August 8, 1892). Wallace is quoting what he heard while in Winnipeg.

[40] *Ibid.*, 203, Taché to J. A. Ouimet, March 14, 1894.

[41] The standing in Quebec was : Conservatives — 16, Liberals — 49. Outside of Quebec it was : Conservatives — 72; Liberals — 69; Independents — 7 (4 McCarthyites, 3 Patrons). See James G. Foley, *Résumé of General Elections and By-Elections, 1896-1916* (Ottawa, 1916), p. 16.

[42] *P.A.C.*, Tupper Papers, 10, Bowell to Tupper 30, 1896.

on the school question, the Ontario members made it painfully evident that regardless of the outcome of the second court case (Brophy and Others vs. the Attorney-General of Manitoba), they were opposed to any remedy for the Roman Catholic minority. On one occasion, when it appeared that Bowell might proceed with remedial legislation in the summer of 1895, he was confronted with a 'round-robin' signed by a cabal of forty Ontario Conservatives, led by no less a person than the Party 'Whip' in the House of Commons. [43]

Nor did this attitude change when the Conservative Government at Ottawa, after long delay and internal dissensions, finally committed the Party to remedial legislation. In the election campaign which preceded June 23, 1896, nearly half of the Conservative candidates in Ontario pledged themselves to vote against remedial legislation, and many of the others gave it only nominal support or else sought to avoid the issue in their campaign speeches. [44]

Moreover, Sir Charles Tupper was apparently obliged to sanction this behaviour of the Party's candidates in Ontario. In letters to local Conservative organizations, he wrote concerning the nominee that "...notwithstanding his opposition to the Government on the second reading of the Remedial Bill, he is a tried and true supporter of our general policy, and as such I should be glad to see him succeed at the coming elections." [45] Typical is his letter to E. B. Osler, prominent Toronto lawyer and Conservative candidate in one of the Toronto ridings :

> I was very glad to learn also that you promptly refused to submit to the dictation of the McCarthyites who required you, I understand, to oppose the Government on everything if they brought in a measure to restore the privileges of the Roman Catholic minority in Manitoba which had been taken away from them. I think they should be quite satisfied with your pledge to vote against remedial legislation which is certainly all that they have a right to demand. [46]

There is no question of Sir Charles Tupper's sincerity in supporting remedial legislation, but the same cannot be said for some of his principal lieutenants from English Canada. *La Presse* of Montreal, which had the largest circulation of any newspaper in Canada at the time, lauded Tupper for his forthright and courageous declarations on the school question during the campaign, but complained on more than one occasion about the insincerity of some of his Cabinet colleagues, in particular Foster, Haggart, Montague, and Prior. It charged these Ministers with evading

[43] *Debates of the House of Commons*, 1895, pp. 4196, 4242. The Party 'Whip' was George Taylor, M.P. for South Leeds.

[44] Conservative candidates ran in 88 of Ontario's 92 constituencies. Of these, 48 were listed by *La Presse* (3 juin, 1896) as supporters of remedial legislation. Of the 56 Conservative M.P.'s from Ontario on the eve of the election, 43 sought re-election. Of these, 23 were supporters of remedial legislation.

[45] *P.A.C.*, Tupper Papers, 10, Tupper to Andrew Elliott, April 11, 1896.

[46] *Ibid.*, Tupper to Osler, May 19, 1896.

the issue of remedial legislation in their speeches, and suspected them of conspiring to eliminate it from the Party's programme. *La Presse* questioned the sincerity of "our Ontario allies", and observed that only a small number of the Conservative candidates in Ontario were prepared to do justice to the Roman Catholic minority of Manitoba, and had the courage to say so.[47]

Thus the commonly accepted view that the Conservative Party campaigned on the behalf of remedial legislation in 1896, is, so far as Ontario is concerned, simply untrue. Whatever the sincerity of Tupper and some of his colleagues, and whatever the pledges made elsewhere, the Party did not stand upon any such plank in Ontario.

In the light of this, the electoral result in Quebec is not at all surprising. The Equal Rights Association and the Protestant Protective Association had cast their spell of bigotry upon the Conservative Party in Ontario. Dalton McCarthy, Clarke Wallace, William R. Meredith, and many other prominent Ontario Conservatives; The Toronto *Mail*, The Toronto *World*, and, to a lesser extent, *The Empire;* all had 'fed at the P.P.A. through.'[48] The fortunes of the Liberal-Conservative Party rested upon a tolerant Ontario Toryism in alliance with a conservative Quebec, and the first of these no longer existed. Quebec voted against the Conservative Party in 1896 because of the evident bigotry and the manifest insincerity of the Ontario Conservatives.

The fact that the Roman Catholic Bishops issued a *Mandement* on the subject of Manitoba schools prior to the elections of 1896, has made some Protestant observers quick to see in Quebec's vote on that occasion a check to what they are pleased to term the "aggressiveness" of the hierarchy. The fact is, however, that the *Mandement* was very moderate in tone (much more so than the pronouncements of Protestant Church councils at the time), and did not operate in favour of the Conservative candidates because their Liberal opponents could (and did) pledge themselves to abide by it. It was not its ecclesiastical leaders which Quebec repudiated in 1896, but its former Ontario partners.

This becomes all the more apparent when one remembers the performance of the Conservative Party of Ontario under the leadership

47 *La Presse*, 27, 29, 30 mai; 20 juin, 1896

48 *The Mail*, owned principally by Charles Riordon and his brother-in-law, Christopher Bunting, long time Conservative, had been the official Party organ in Toronto until 1886, when its anti-Catholic tirades caused Sir John A. Macdonald to withdraw the Government's support, apparently on the representations of Archbishop Cleary. (*P.A.C.*, Thompson Papers, 199 Archdeacon Kelly to Thompson, February 6, 1894.)

The World, violently anti-Catholic and anti-French, was owned by William Findlay Maclean, Conservative M.P. for East York.

The Empire had on occasion done admirable work in combating the bigotry of McCarthy /and the *P.P.A.*, but it had stultified these efforts by its support of Meredith in the Provincial campaigns.

of William R. Meredith, in the Provincial elections of 1886, 1890, and 1894. By his continual attacks on the separate school system, and on the use of French in the schools of eastern Ontario, Meredith had earned the Conservative Party a reputation for bigotry and intolerance. By contrast, the Liberal Government of Sir Oliver Mowat, which had successfully resisted these attacks, emerged as a genuinely tolerant one and a suitable partner for Quebec in a political re-alignment. J. Israel Tarte, the master strategist who helped to guide Laurier and the Liberal Party to victory in 1896, saw this clearly. Writing to Laurier early in 1894, just after Sir John Thompson had refused to disallow the North-West Territories' School Ordinance[49], Tarte had envisaged the political possibilities as follows :

> Si j'étais les ministres français, je tiendrais ferme comme un roc. Sir John Thompson serait obliger de céder. Ses collègues tories d'Ontario se separeraient de lui — plusieurs d'entre eux, au moins — et nous verrions la repetition de ce qui s'est fait à la Confédération. C'est à dire qu'il se formerait un parti, appuyé sur le Bas Canada et sur le parti Mowat dans Ontario. Le programme de ce parti serait le respect de toutes les races et de toutes les ententes, ou conventions qui ont été la base de la Confédération. Nous écraserions McCarthy et L'Association Protestante. Nous reduirions à l'impuissance le toryisme pour quinze ou vingt ans. [50]

In subsequent letters to Laurier, Tarte reiterated this theme of an alliance between Quebec and the Mowat party of Ontario.

> Si vous commandiez à cinquante députés de la province de Québec, vous seriez bien maître de la situation, n'est-ce pas ?
>
> Si les évêques avaient du sens politique, ils vous feraient cette majorité, sans bruit.
>
> Je publierai, jeudi, sur le « Cultivateur », un article disant que le temps est venu pour les conservateurs de cette province de rompre avec leurs alliés d'Ontario. [51]

In 1896 French Canada did precisely what Tarte urged. In view of the behaviour of the Ontario Conservatives during the preceding few years, the re-alignment presents no mystery.

The militant Protestantism and Anglo-Saxon racialism, to which the Conservative Party succumbed in the eighteen-nineties, remained to plague it long afterwards. In the meantime, the events in Manitoba and the North-West Territories had broken the compact of 1867, and profoundly altered the nature of the Canadian Confederation. The hope of the 'Founding Fathers' that French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians would share the new western domain on equal terms was shattered. Henceforth French Canada could feel sure of its cultural rights only within the confines of the Province of Quebec.

[49] This Ordinance (No. 22), of December, 1892, seemed to imperil Roman Catholic separate schools.

[50] *P.A.C.*, Laurier Papers, 8, Tarte to Laurier, January 30, 1894.

[51] *Ibid.*, same to same, February 5, 1894.