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# Henri Bourassa's Career in the Quebec Legislative Assembly

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by Gilles Gallichan

*Henri Bourassa's career as a Quebec legislator was as brief as it was spectacular. Elected in 1908, he sat for only four sessions and withdrew from parliamentary life in 1912. In the eyes of his contemporaries, however, those four years were a major episode in the political life of French Canada. He had an acute sense of certain problems still current in political life today, he understood the mainsprings of Quebecers' existence as a nation, yet he continued to cling to certain outdated ideological notions. Henri Bourassa remains a pivotal figure in Quebec's political and intellectual history. His name resounds like a clarion call, and he has stood as an example for generations of Quebecers. This article examines the life of a man who, in his own words, preferred the triumph of his ideals over the trappings of power.*

In 1908, at age of 40, Henri Bourassa had for many years been a major political figure. Born in Montreal on September 1, 1868, he was the son of Napoléon Bourassa, an artist and man of letters, and Azélie Papineau, daughter of Louis-Joseph Papineau. He was thus the grandson and, in a way, the spiritual heir of that famous Lower Canada patriot. After studying at the École polytechnique de Montréal, the young Bourassa completed his education at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, a region where many Franco-Americans had settled.

## **In the Political Arena**

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Back in Quebec, Bourassa lost no time in demonstrating his entrepreneurial talents. He went into business, founded a model farm at Montebello, and revived a Franco-Ontarian newspaper, *L'Interprète* of Clarence Creek. In 1889, at the age of 21, he became the mayor of Montebello. He went into politics, which was to be his lifelong passion. In Ottawa, Wilfrid Laurier, the leader

of the Liberal Party, was on the verge of taking power and in the 1896 election he recruited the brilliant young Bourassa, who was elected MP for Labelle.

Laurier soon came to understand the complex personality of his protégé, who was both radical in his ideas for political reform and national progress and conservative on social and religious issues. Bourassa, he wrote, was an unnatural creature: a "red beaver". The "beavers" were the ultra-conservative Tories, while the "reds" formed the radical left wing among the Grits. In his political life, Bourassa would successfully carry off this apparently paradoxical blend of ideological contradictions.

The participation of Canadian troops in the Boer War of 1899 opened a rift between Bourassa and Laurier who had made the decision to send volunteers to that war of Empire without submitting the issue to Parliament. Bourassa considered this akin to collecting a tax in blood, and considered that war, decided upon in Britain, to be a violation of the Liberal principle of "No taxation without representation." On October 26, 1899, he resigned. Re-elected as MP for Labelle, he sat as an independent.

This episode made him a national political figure. Over the next few years, he debated major issues such as

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immigration, French-language schools in the west, the *Lord's Day Act*, and British imperial policy. On this latter issue he exerted pressure on Laurier to affirm ever more clearly Canada's independence within the British Empire.

In 1903, the Catholic Association of French-Canadian Youth was formed. The Association would leave its mark on the turn-of-the-century generation in Quebec. A weekly newspaper, *Le Nationaliste*, was also founded. With Olivar Asselin as editor, the new newspaper railed against old politicians ensconced in power, political parties in the pocket of cartels, and corrupt governments. For the rebellious youth, Bourassa was an intellectual guide, a master philosopher, and his public appearances were always enthusiastically applauded by youthful audiences.

The agitation Bourassa stirred up was of great concern in English Canada, which saw him as an agent of dissent and an instigator of division. Bourassa's views also irritated the French-speaking elites, for example when he sadly noted that the most abject betrayals of the nation "have found among us ready apologists and even among our elites; those we have most trusted, those we have honoured with the most servile humility, are the very ones who have rushed to abandon us."<sup>1</sup>

In 1907, Bourassa found a disciple, Armand Lavergne, the young MP for Montmagny. Lavergne had been elected as a Liberal MP in 1904, but his criticisms of the government had obliged Laurier to oust him from the party. Lavergne was particularly opposed to Laurier on the issue of French-language schools in the west. He found the government's attitude on this issue humiliating, requiring Liberals, as he put it, "to retreat while appearing to advance". There was soon another nationalist MP in Ottawa. Lorenzo Robitaille, the new MP for the Quebec riding, caused great surprise by winning a by-election against the star liberal candidate Georges-Élie Amyot.

While active in Ottawa, the nationalists also kept an eye on Quebec City and the government of Lomer Gouin, who serve as a target for their relentless attacks. In *Le Nationaliste*, Asselin missed no opportunity to criticize Minister of Colonization J.B.B. Prévost, and Minister of Lands and Forests Adélar Turgeon. Bourassa was especially interested in these areas, which he considered fundamental to the nation's future. Although at the meetings he attended, the MP for Labelle often addressed issues of provincial jurisdiction, he hesitated to run personally against the Gouin government.

On August 5, 1907, at Place Jacques-Cartier in the Saint-Roch quarter of Quebec City, the nationalists organized a public meeting. Bourassa's and Lavergne's adversaries perceived this meeting, in the heart of



**Henri Bourassa in 1912**  
(Archives nationales du Québec à Québec,  
Fonds Famille Napoléon Bourassa)

Wilfrid Laurier's constituency, as a deliberate provocation. The meeting soon degenerated into a pitched battle, with groups of young Liberals throwing stones and other missiles. Lavergne, slightly injured by a flagstone, would ever after accuse Louis-Alexandre Taschereau of having provoked the riot.

After the Saint-Roch meeting, the quarrels between Bourassa and the provincial Liberals grew ever more heated. Turgeon challenged Bourassa to run against him in a by-election in Bellechasse. His honour piqued, Bourassa agreed. To those who urged him not to fall into this trap he said, "I would rather be beaten than taken for a coward." Bellechasse was a rural constituency made up of old, traditionally Liberal parishes. The fight would indeed be an uneven one.

Despite a gallant election campaign, on November 4, 1907, Bourassa was beaten by 700 votes. The Cabinet was pleased because the nationalist leader had been obliged to resign his seat as MP for Labelle in order to stand for the Bellechasse by-election and he now had no parliamentary forum in which to expound his views. But this was far from the end of Bourassa's career.

With great skill, Papineau's grandson laid claim to the Liberal heritage, denouncing the Liberal careerists who were using the party merely as a "stepping stone". Bourassa's campaign against the Gouin government was an effort to restore the party's honour and wrest from the hands of the Liberals "the old flag that they have torn and sullied".<sup>2</sup> Prévost, who had resigned from the Cabinet, also attacked Gouin's policies. This former Minister would run as an independent Liberal candidate in Terrebonne, and would become an objective ally of Bourassa's. The Conservative Opposition also took advantage of the Bourassa phenomenon. In preparation for the election, Opposition leader Évariste Leblanc set his sights on forging an electoral alliance and withdrew his candidates from ridings where nationalists were running.

In working-class and union circles, however, there was mistrust of Bourassa's social conservatism and his ultraconservative clericalism. Where Laurier was concerned, a tacit agreement of mutual respect was established between the Prime Minister and Bourassa. They avoided making ill-advised personal attacks on one another, each instead saluting the prestige and talents of his former friend and adversary.

The election was called on May 6, 1908. It was an important vote for Gouin, since it was the first time he had run for election since ousting his former leader, Simon-Napoléon Parent, in 1905. His opponents did not fail to point out that he was in power not by the will of the people but by "the force of betrayal". Bourassa, who had sought revenge since being defeated in Bellechasse, made so bold as to run in the Saint-Jacques riding, which had been represented by Gouin for more than 10 years.

The electoral legislation of the time allowed candidates to run in more than one constituency in the same election. A cautious man, Gouin also ran in Portneuf. Not to be outdone, Bourassa ran in Saint-Hyacinthe as well. Nationalist groups put up half a dozen candidates, all independents since Bourassa refused to create a new political party.

The aura of popular sympathy that surrounded Bourassa was of some concern to the Liberals. *Le Canada*, the Liberal Party's newspaper in Montreal, compared this phenomenon to "boulangisme", a political movement in Republican France that was focused on the person of General Boulanger and proved to be a mere flash in the pan:

"We are indeed cousins to the French, who acclaimed General Boulanger, were ready to fight a revolution for him, and six months later had forgotten him."<sup>3</sup>

The electoral campaign worked to the advantage of the nationalists. On June 8, the Liberal Party was returned to power but in Saint-Jacques, Bourassa defeated Premier

Gouin by 43 votes. and in Saint-Hyacinthe, a recount gave Bourassa a majority of 38 votes. This narrow victory in two ridings was a veritable triumph. When the winner arrived in Montreal from Saint-Hyacinthe late in the day; a throng of his supporters were waiting for him at Bonaventure Station. Bourassa's carriage car was literally borne by wave of humanity to a platform set up on Sainte-Catherine Street, across from the offices of the newspaper *La Patrie*, which had supported Bourassa's campaign. A crowd of 10,000 persons blocked all traffic in central Montreal. The correspondent for *L'Action sociale* wrote, "A wind of enthusiasm blew through the crowd escorting the grandson of Papineau. It was as if we were witnessing the birth of a new movement of popular opinion that will go on to take root and grow strong in the Province of Quebec."<sup>4</sup>

The newly elected Bourassa, his voice quaking with fatigue, improvised a speech. He concluded in a flight of lyrical oratory: "I seek to bring men together in agreement on a new patriotism, imposing a government whose aspirations will bear it ever higher, and not to abase it, to plant upon the mountain the torch of an ideal that you have lit this evening, that you will never allow sordid politicians to extinguish."<sup>5</sup>

In the summer of 1908, Bourassa travelled to France, Belgium and England. He returned to Canada in time to see Wilfrid Laurier re-elected in October. In Quebec, Gouin took his time summoning the first session of the new legislature, wanting to perfect a legislative agenda that would refurbish his government's image. The two Houses of the Quebec legislature did not meet until March 1909.

### The Years in Quebec

Public opinion awaited that session with impatience. Omer Héroux, the editorialist for *L'Action sociale* and Bourassa's future collaborator at *Le Devoir*, wrote that people expecting something new at that session, a "spectacle such as had not been seen for a long time". He predicted, "If attacked, the two nationalists (Bourassa and Lavergne) will retaliate. They have thus far shown little predisposition for patience."<sup>6</sup>

Not since the Mercier-years had such interest been shown in a session of the legislature. Bourassa's speeches were among the most popular events in the provincial capital. In his memoirs, Lavergne recalls sittings at which it was difficult to accommodate the masses of people crowding the galleries. When it was known that Bourassa was to speak, people literally packed the Assembly. On March 9, 1909, *La Patrie* noted:

Some minutes after the doors were opened, there was no longer an inch of space in the area reserved for the public.

Hounded by their constituents, the MLAs vainly sought admission for them. The constables were no longer able to restrain the lucky few who had managed to gain entry and who, pushed by the swell, nearly overflowed onto the floor of the Assembly. All observers agreed: such a spectacle had never before been witnessed in the Legislative Assembly.<sup>7</sup>

That day, in the Assembly, Bourassa took the floor at 11:00 p.m. and gave a speech lasting over three hours, yet succeeded in holding the densely packed crowd of spectators spellbound into the small hours of morning. The forcefulness of his oratory earned him many comments from his Liberal adversaries. He was caricatured and ironically awarded the title of "master" or "saviour of the nation". His admirers, on the other hand, saw him as the illustrious successor of Papineau and a champion of national rights. Songs were composed to folk tunes, testifying to the popularity of the two nationalist MLAs.<sup>8</sup>

Évariste Leblanc was not re-elected in 1908, at which point Joseph-Mathias Tellier became the Leader of the Opposition. He had neither the panache nor the charisma of Bourassa, and the Liberals attempted in vain to stir up animosity between the two men. The Leader of the Opposition was an honest man who knew how to avoid the pitfalls of personal rivalry. He carried out the duties of his office in a responsible manner, and allowed Bourassa ample opportunity to confront the Government. What was more, Tellier admired Bourassa and was honoured to be his friend, going so far as to share his office as Leader of the Opposition with Bourassa since at the time ordinary members did not have their own offices.

***Bourassa was at his most combative during the 1909 session. Often during his lengthy speeches he advanced onto the floor of the Assembly almost to the Clerk's table, a practice that was hardly in keeping with parliamentary usages.***

Throughout the session, he attracted a student audience that often voiced its approval despite numerous calls to order by the Speaker. The fervour demonstrated by Bourassa's admirers caused members of the Government to remark that there were only two nationalists on the floor of the Assembly, but that they were supported by "the gallery Opposition".

After the 1909 session, the Conservatives tried to build bridges to fraternize more with the nationalists. Even though he mistrusted party organizations, Bourassa

played along because he needed support from the barons of the Conservative Opposition to raise funds to found a newspaper. This plan became a reality in the fall, and when the House met again in March 1910, the member for Saint-Hyacinthe had become the founder and director of a new daily newspaper, *Le Devoir*.

Bourassa was anxious to preserve *Le Devoir's* status as an independent newspaper and to defend it against outside interference. Journalism allowed Bourassa to address questions of national as well as provincial and municipal politics. It enabled him to speak out on the naval issue or free trade, subjects of the greatest interest to him. The nationalist leader, increasingly absent from Quebec City, made considerable use of the new forum offered by the daily newspaper. Still, he continued to criticize the Gouin government in the Legislative Assembly on issues such as colonization, natural resources, municipal administration and public education. On this latter issue, he denounced the pauper's wage the government was paying to elementary school teachers, considering it a simple question of justice to provide the women who taught school with a decent salary. While such a stance may not transform Bourassa into a feminist, it does cast a new light on his alleged misogyny.

Bourassa's reputation as a brilliant speaker and defender of the nation was confirmed on the occasion of the Eucharistic Conference held in Montreal in September 1910. In a famous speech given at Montreal's Notre-Dame Church, he responded to remarks by Monsignor Bourne, the Bishop of Westminster, that in America Catholicism would continue to grow and develop only in English. Bourassa presented a scathing rebuttal that brought him a new surge in popularity. This speech, widely publicized, confirmed Bourassa in his role as a national leader. This speech, broadly distributed, confirmed Bourassa in his role as national leader. His adversaries mocked the image of saviour of the nation that he appeared to be assuming: "He is now firmly convinced that nation and language and religion are incarnated in himself alone."<sup>9</sup>

In that year the naval question led Bourassa to make a final break with Laurier, whom he bitterly denounced at every turn. He made another trip to Europe in the fall, travelling to Rome, where he had an audience with Pope Pius X. That trip caused him to miss the opening of the session of the legislature in Quebec City in January 1911. Although often away, Bourassa still stood up to the government. Proposed legislation on tramways in Montreal led him to raise the issue of the monopoly of the Montreal Light, Heat and Power Company and the issue of municipal autonomy. He also took part in the

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great debates on electoral reform and the impact of free trade on Quebec's economy.

The summer of 1911 was taken up by the federal election campaign. The nationalists formed an alliance with Robert Borden's Conservatives in order to overturn Laurier on the naval issue and the issue of reciprocity between Canada and the United States. On September 21, the federal Liberals were defeated after 15 years in power. For Bourassa, who had campaigned against Laurier, this triumph was only a modest one, because the new government very quickly disappointed its Quebec allies. Borden's naval policy was just as disappointing as Laurier's had been, and the rights of Francophones were respected less and less. By the end of 1911, the Liberals lost no opportunity to state that Bourassa, the nationalist, had helped the "voice of Toronto" to win.

The session of the Quebec Legislature that opened in January 1912 was Bourassa's last. His appearances in the Assembly became increasingly rare. He made a few major speeches on the economy and on marriages between Catholics and Protestants, an issue where federal legislation interfered with Quebec civil law. In the opinion of his adversaries, Bourassa remained a singular character, independent and unpredictable. He disdained prestigious positions, money and high-sounding titles. He was a proud man, but coveted no position as a political leader. He preferred "to stand above leaders, the better to hurl against them his impassioned pronouncements and vengeful indignation." He preferred "to be above the leader, so as to turn against him his inflamed pronouncements and vengeful indignations".<sup>10</sup>

### Retirement from Politics

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Rumors of Bourassa's imminent withdrawal from parliamentary life intensified. *Le Canada* wrote:

We note that the member for Saint-Hyacinthe:

"less and less interested in the business of the Legislative Assembly. His appearances in the Assembly, toward the end of the sittings, seem to be a pure formality, merely so that he may collect his salary [...] And if we observe that, as a rule the member for Saint-Hyacinthe never attends

the meetings of the various standing committees of which he is a member, we may very well ask: what is the master doing?"<sup>11</sup>

In fact, on March 26, one week before the end of the session, Bourassa informed Tellier that he was retiring from parliamentary life, a fact he announced officially on April 9.<sup>12</sup> On that occasion, *La Presse* published a harsh indictment of him. However, retirement would not stem Bourassa's activities as a journalist, speaker, essayist and polemicist.

He continued to speak out during the conscription crisis. He spoke out on international political issues, the French language, the rights of the church, and women's suffrage. He continued to direct *Le Devoir* for 20 years, and returned to represent the federal constituency of Labelle in Ottawa from 1925 to 1935. He made his last public appearances in support of Maxime Raymond's Bloc populaire during the second conscription crisis, in 1942.

Henri Bourassa died on August 31, 1952, the day before his 84th birthday. Eluding all simplistic categorizations, he remains a complex and fascinating figure, who dominated Quebec political life for several decades.

### Notes

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1. See L. Groulx, "Le rôle politique de Henri Bourassa" in *Hommage à Henri Bourassa*, 2nd edition, Montreal, *Le Devoir*, 1952, p 26.
2. Quoted by R. Rumilly, *Henri Bourassa, la vie publique d'un grand Canadien*, Montreal, Éditions de l'homme, 1953, p 274.
3. *Le Canada*, May 27, 1908, p 4.
4. "La journée du 8 juin 1908", *L'Action sociale*, June 9, 1908, p 1.
5. *Ibid.*
6. O. Héroux, "La prochaine session", *L'Action sociale*, January 29, 1909, p 4.
7. *La Patrie*, March 9, 1909, p 4.
8. "Les torts de Bourassa et Lavergne", (to the tune of "Marianne va-t-au-moulin"), *L'événement*, March 15, 1909, p 2.
9. "Sa vraie vocation!", *Le Soleil*, January 28, 1911, p 4.
10. *Le Soleil*, January 14, 1911, p 4.
11. *Le Canada*, March 11, 1912, p 3.
12. "La retraite de M. Bourassa", *La Presse*, April 9, 1912, p. 4.