
A Robert Baldwin Day for Ontarians

by Andrew W. Redden

Despite his prominent role in Ontario's political history very few people know much about Robert Baldwin. A prominent lawyer and political leader in the nineteenth century, Baldwin is best remembered for his role in democratic reform. He developed and promoted the concept of responsible government for Upper Canada and envisioned an Executive Council that would be accountable to an elected legislature. This became a reality with the passage in 1841 of the Act commonly known as the Act of Union and remains the basis of Canada's system of parliamentary government to this day. Baldwin was also active in the reform of local government. Passage of the Act commonly known as the Baldwin Act allowed for the incorporation of townships, villages, towns and cities. These respective levels of government were formed around the notion of having a democratically elected council in each community. This article proposes recognizing the accomplishments of Baldwin by establishing a day in his honour.

Since July 1985 members of the Ontario Legislative Assembly, staff and thousands of tourists have passed by the portrait of Robert Baldwin hanging just to the left of the entrance to the Legislative Chamber. Most have little or no knowledge of who the man is or what he accomplished. A poor understanding of the Baldwin legacy leads to a poor understanding of Ontario's political history. As a result many Ontarians lack a sufficient understanding of their parliamentary and monarchical system of government.

Knowing our history is very important. Our sense of entitlements and obligations are our civic values which bind our society. But with the loss of history, these values cannot survive.¹ We risk losing our Canadian culture to the United States if we do not make a significant effort to

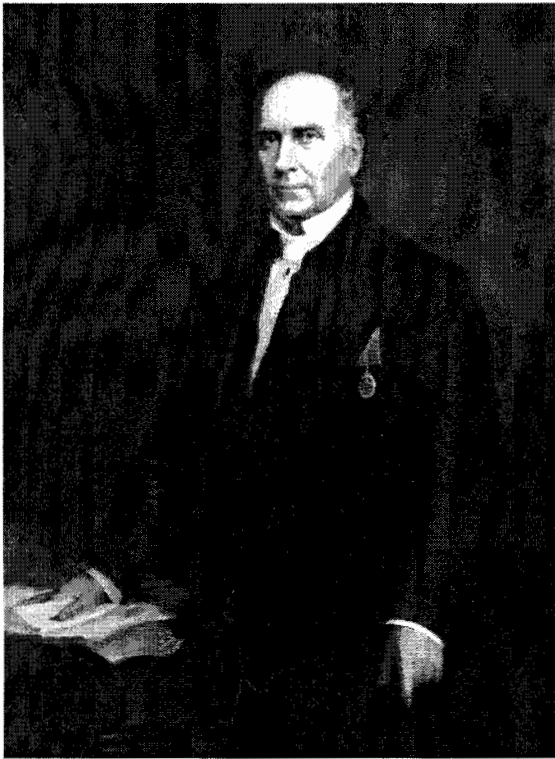
remember and acknowledge our unique political history.

A 1997 paper published by the Dominion Institute surveyed 1100 Canadians between the ages of 18 to 24. It found that 64% of young Canadians did not know when Confederation occurred, and over half of these did not know in which century Canada was founded. Only half of young Canadians could name the first prime minister and only 15% knew when Canada's constitution was patriated from Great Britain. Clearly, there is evidence of a poor understanding of our political history.

Responsible Government

Originally, the Governor General as a representative of the Queen, ruled the colony. Robert Baldwin strongly opposed this by disputing that it was "impossible to have a British-type constitutional monarchy in a colony." The Governor General should reign but not rule. This holistic and alternative approach to the monarchy instigated the rebellions in the Canadas during the early 19th century.

Andrew W. Redden is a native of Campbellford, Ontario and holds a B.A. (Honours) from Carleton University. While working at the Ontario Legislature, he wrote this paper in support of a private member's bill tabled by Dr. Doug Galt, MPP, to establish Robert Baldwin Day.



Robert Baldwin
(Government of Ontario Art Collection)

The imperial authorities in London were embarrassed by the rebellions. As a response to these events, the British Government sent a noted Liberal, the Earl of Durham, in 1838 to be Governor-in-Chief and make recommendations on the discontents in British America. Durham experienced a great deal of difficulty and abandoned his hope for a broader union of British North America.

Eventually Lord Durham discussed these matters with Robert Baldwin. Baldwin proposed that the best reform would be the recognition of the "principle that a colonial governor should choose his closest advisors, the members of his Executive Council, entirely from the leadership of the majority group in the Assembly." The representative of the Crown should be governed by the advice of the Assembly in all matters "that could be construed as *domestic concerns*".

The logic of Baldwin's proposal attracted Durham's fullest attention. The result was the "monumental" *Durham Report* of 1839 which dealt with issues concerning land policies, oligarchic misrule, judicial reform, and education. The *Durham Report* made a number of recommendations. His report is remembered for two specific proposals – responsible government whereby a governing ministry or cabinet would depend on the will and confidence of the elected representatives; and secondly a

union of the two Canadas which he thought would absorb French Canadians in one broader province with an English-speaking Majority.

Although the British government agreed with Durham's recommendation for union, it still remained reluctant to implement responsible rule. And so in 1841, the Act of Union took effect in the Canadas which was steered by a new governor-general, Lord Sydenham. Upper Canada became Canada West and Lower Canada became Canada East.

Despite the union of the mainly French-speaking and Roman Catholic community of Canada East, and the English-speaking and Protestant community of Canada West, the "communal division" continued during the era of Union parliament. The Union parliament still provided equal representation to the two old Canadas, meaning divided parties and "double-headed" governments. But this changed with the introduction of the "*Reform Alliance*" party headed by Robert Baldwin in Canada West, "faithful advocate of the responsible principle", and Louis Hippolyte Lafontaine in Canada East.² Regardless of their cultural differences and backgrounds, they agreed to work together forming a coalition government.

When the Reform party of Baldwin and Lafontaine won the 1847-48 election, the "Great Ministry" came to power. In 1848, Colonial Secretary Lord Grey accepted Baldwin's principle of responsible government for the Colony. From that point forward, Canada was a land "where one man's vote was as good as another's, and where the will of the majority was the ultimate sanction." Baldwin was finally successful in his cause of insisting on the assembly's right to hold executive councillors responsible for government action.

Another major change introduced by Baldwin was a system of local government. This was achieved through the Municipal Corporations Act which was viewed by some historians as a grand extension of democracy and as Baldwin's creation. The *Municipal Corporations Act* was a 68-page document "laying out a full range of municipal structures and their powers, and also jury laws." By providing municipalities with elected councils, they were allowed some independence from provincial control, something government reformers had been crying for. It was of such high quality, that it "stood the test of time and was copied by other provinces."

With the exception of many historians, how many citizens actually know that the previously mentioned changes to our system of governance were initiated, promoted, and accomplished by Robert Baldwin? This author argues that our parliamentary and monarchical system of government can best be understood and respected with an understanding of our historical origins

as a British colony, and an understanding of how our present system of government was initiated by Robert Baldwin. Therefore, proclaiming a day in Robert Baldwin's name will help to promote the Baldwin legacy and encourage the remembrance of our political history.

Canadian Political Culture

Baldwin also contributed to the Canadian tradition of peaceful evolution rather than violent revolution. It was Robert Baldwin and his associates who initiated separation from Great Britain. Baldwin demanded that Canadians manage Canadian affairs. In 1846 during a debate on the militia, he insisted that Canadians were capable of defending the province without British help. But while the United States had their violent War of Independence, Baldwin and Lafontaine favoured independence through negotiation. This reasonable and cautious *Canadian way* is a major separating factor between Canadians and Americans.

In *The Founding of New Societies*, Louis Hartz and Kenneth D. McRae discuss English-Canada's political culture as being rooted in a liberal fragment "etched" with a Tory streak coming out of the American Revolution in the late 18th century. Gad Horowitz has generalized the arguments of both Hartz and McRae by stating that: "the difference is that while the United States is the perfect bourgeois fragment English Canada is a bourgeois fragment marred by non-liberal imperfections, a Tory 'touch'".³

This Tory touch has resulted in the obvious amount of conservatism inherent in English-Canada's political culture. This conservatism has historically involved loyalty to the Monarchy and to the opposition to revolutions.

In a speech by historian Desmond Morton delivered in a 1999 conference sponsored by The McGill Institute, Morton states that Canada will survive in accordance with each generation's understandings of the "arrangements and compromises we all inherit".⁴ If our history as Canadians is to continue, then learning our history is vital to our survival. As Edmund Burke noted, "People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors".⁵

Essentially, history has a social role in a nation like ours, as historian Jack Granatstein argues:

The values and traditions of Canadian life should be force-fed; history explained in ways that demonstrate how and why we have regularly settled our disputes without force, how our political system has functioned, and why we have on many occasions gone to war or joined alliances, not for aggressive reasons, but to protect our democratic ideals.⁶

Granatstein's idea of "force-feeding" values and traditions may sound a little barbaric. However, force-feeding common historical achievements shared by both English and French-Canadians may serve as a working tool to provide the Quebecois with an emotional bond to the rest of the country.

Baldwin and Canadian Dualism

During the Quebec referendum of 1995, Canadians living in Quebec and elsewhere, were very upset with the action taken by our federal leaders to combat the separatist campaign. It appeared as though our federal leaders could only think of "economic self-interests and the United Nations' declaration that Canada is a really swell place."⁷ Why could Canadian federalists not muster a coherent emotional force to keep Canada together? Where were the appeals to the alliance of Robert Baldwin and Louis Lafontaine?

John Ralston Saul argues in *Reflections Of A Siamese Twin*, that it is worth realizing that the cooperation of LaFontaine and Baldwin was much more than a political coalition. Probably our federal leaders should consider referring to the Baldwin and LaFontaine alliance when it comes time to muster emotional unifying forces.

Saul also states that LaFontaine and Baldwin banded together for the first time in Kingston, where the legislature of the newly unified colonies was meeting, and became each other's closest friend for the rest of their lives. "A small detail: Baldwin immediately began sending his two sons and two daughters... to be educated in French in Quebec City."⁸

Baldwin and LaFontaine put aside their differences and put together a complex reforming coalition. Saul acknowledges the importance of this historical relationship to Canada. But many have forgotten, or more importantly, have never been made aware of the historic working relationship between these two leaders. Their relationship serves as an historical example of English and French-Canada working together.

A Baldwin family history book, written by and for descendants of Robert Baldwin, provides a good description of the Baldwin and Lafontaine partnership:

(it) was based on mutual friendship, trust and loyalty and was to last their lifetimes. The imperial policy of "divide and rule" could not break this unique relationship because they consulted each other and made joint decisions. They were not willing to play ethnic or class games. As moderates, they abhorred violence and believed in developing a fine balance of interests and respect for others.⁹

It is too bad that this could not be a description of today's relationship between Quebec and the rest of Canada. But it was a reality in Baldwin's day. His

contribution to French-English cooperation was one of his most important legacies to Canadian politics.

Conclusion

The proclamation of a *Robert Baldwin Day* will help Ontarians remember their unique political history. I would suggest that May 12th, his birthday, be designated as *Robert Baldwin Day*. Recognizing his accomplishments with a day in his name not only provides him the respect that he deserves, but it provides people with a reason to remember their history, gain a better understanding and grasp of their political culture, and restore our historic and emotional connection with Quebec.

Notes

1. Daniel Gardner, *Youth and History: Policy Paper*, Dominion Institute, Toronto, 1997 p. 2.

2. John Finlay and D. N. Sprague, *The Structure of Canadian History*, Prentice-Hall, Toronto, 2000 p.241.
3. Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1968 p.7.
4. Desmond Morton, Speech at 1999 conference sponsored by the McGill Institute.
5. Angela Partington Ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, "Edmund Burke", p. 158.
6. Jack Granatstein, "Does History Matter", <http://www.greatquestions.com>.
7. *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 9, 1997, p. A14.
8. John Ralston Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, Viking, Toronto, 1997 p. 65.
9. Baldwin Family History, *The Baldwin Legacy*, p. 14.