The Ontario Political Heritage

Todd Decker

The early political heritage and development of Ontario were based upon and influenced by considerations of state security and sovereignty. As early as the American Revolution when annexation attempts were made on Canada defence was one of the prominent and enduring features which defined Canadians and Canadian life. The major urban centres of today – Ottawa, Kingston, Toronto, St. Catharines and Niagara – began as defensive outposts.

The American Revolution affected Canadian political life in another way. It injected a new immigrant class who were loyal to the Crown and had left the United States in the face of rejection there. This class, predominately English speaking and Protestant was used to owning its own land and found land ownership laws in the old Province of Quebec much different from what they were used to. While the French appreciated the seignorial system of farming, the Loyalists had aspirations of private land ownership and participatory government. The conflict between them and the French Canadian Catholic majority was pronounced. It led eventually to the division of Quebec into Upper and Lower Canada on August 24, 1791.

The Constitutional Act provided for political governance of each of the Canadas. A Lieutenant-Governor was appointed for each province with an Executive Council appointed to assist him. A bicameral legislature was created, consisting of an appointed Legislative Council and an elected Legislative Assembly. The franchise extended only to males owning a prescribed amount of land.

In July 1792 a colourful and important character in Ontario history came on the scene when John Graves Simcoe, the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, was sworn in at Kingston. He commenced a series of civil reforms and advancements. Although some of his reforms, notably in the field of education, were not successful, he was a couple of generations ahead of his time in banning the importation of slaves into Upper Canada. The abolition of slavery throughout the rest of the British Empire was achieved only fifty years later.

Simcoe issues two proclamations after taking office, the first provided for the division of Upper Canada into nineteen counties. The second provided for elections to the Legislative Assembly.

Following the American War of Independence, a great number of irritants affected relations between the United States and British North America. The resolution of these problems, including important boundary conflicts, was achieved with the signing of *Jay's Treaty* in 1794.

Despite the treaty, the Canadians continued to develop their defences. Since Michilimackinac, Detroit, Niagara, Oswego, and Oswegatchie had been given to the Americans, an alternative chain of forts took root on the Canadian side of the border – Fort Wellington for Oswegatchie, Kingston for Oswego, Fort George for Niagara, Fort Malden for Detroit and St. Joseph's Island for Michilimackinac.

Britain, at war with France, was desperate to maintain its supremacy on the high seas and its greater military strength. To replenish and add to its naval force the British followed a policy of "impressment" whereby merchant ships were raided and their crews pressed into British naval military service. Although some of these crew members were the offspring of naturalized Americans, Britain did not accept this doctrine of naturalization.

The Americans fought back. President Madison declared war on Britain on June 12, 1812. It was obvious that America could not challenge Britain on the sea, so it challenged British sovereignty to the North. Major-General Isaac Brock responded quickly to the declaration of war and supported by native Indians with whom he had great rapport, seized Fort Michilimackinac. With support from some Indians, he took Detroit. The Americans next attacked Queenston Heights and Brock again successfully defended the site although he was killed in the battle.

The Americans attacked and occupied York. When they left six days later they burned the "Palace of Government" and stole the Mace. The original Mace had been ordered by John Graves Simcoe for the convening of the first parliament at Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake) in 1792. This early symbol of legislative authority was exceedingly primitive in appearance. The soft wood, perhaps pine or fir, was turned on a lathe, the design unstudied and the workmanship ordinary. It was used regularly until captured by the Americans. They kept it at the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland until 1934 Franklin D. Roosevelt, in honour of the centennial year of the founding of York. Since its return, the mace has been on display in the Legislative Building at Queen's Park and has also been exhibited at the Royal Ontario Museum and at Fort York.

The war lasted two and one half years until it became apparent that neither side could successfully conquer the other. As Britain and France ended hostilities in Europe the Prime

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William Lyon Mackenzie (Ontario Archives)

John Sandfield Macdonald, first Premier of Ontario (Ontario Archives)

Minister, Lord Liverpool, and U.S. President Madison agreed that a negotiated peace should be pursued in North America. The *Treaty of Ghent* was signed on Christmas Eve, 1814. Representative government under the Crown and the strength and security of Canada were assured.

Pre-Confederation Politics

For many years, the government of Upper Canada worked fairly well. There were, of course, disagreements between appointed and elected officials. Two basic political groups gradually developed: the conservatives and the reformers.

The conservatives wanted appointed officials – the Lieutenant Governor, the Executive Council and the Legislative Councils to be stronger than the elected Assembly. The reformers, on the other hand, believed that the Assembly should be the strongest part of the government. The appointed officials tended to look out for the interests of a small and relatively wealthy section of the society. The elected members of the Assembly were more likely to defend the interests of the ordinary settlers. The conservatives believed that the Executive should be able to raise and spend money without interference from the Assembly and to give people jobs, or dismiss them, as they wished. They felt that the control of education, the granting of land and financial support of the Church of England should be in the hands of the appointed Executive. They feared that a more democratic system would give farmers and labourers too much power.

The reformers wanted the Assembly to control government money, jobs and land grants. Many did not want the government to support any church at all. They wanted the Lieutenant Governor, who was appointed by the British government, to listen to the Assembly and take its advice. In sum, the reformers wanted to lessen the power held by the small, wealthy ruling group. While most reformers wanted Canada to remain under British rule, they thought there were some aspects of the American form of government that were valuable and should be part of their political system. They believed that the British system could be adjusted to their needs. The reformers included two groups – the moderates and the radicals. The moderates occasionally agreed with the conservatives on certain issues; the radicals never did.

The best known radical was William Lyon Mackenzie. He founded a political journal – the *Colonial Advocate* – which attacked the group who really controlled the government. They came to be known as the Family Compact. Mackenzie maintained that this small group, connected by family, marriage and other ties, controlled most of the government offices and benefitted most from land grants and from such institutions as the Bank of Upper Canada, the Welland Canal Company and the Canada Company. The Family Compact ran Upper Canada for its own benefit at the expense of the people. The Family Compact dominated the Executive and Legislative Councils of Upper Canada until 1837. Its leader was John Strachan.

In 1837 Mackenzie became convinced that change would not come quickly enough by peaceful means. He and Samuel Lount led rebel forces – mostly farmers – down Yonge Street north of Toronto to the city. Their aim was to overthrow the government but they were easily defeated. Mackenzie escaped to the United States but others were not so fortunate. Some were imprisoned; others, like Lount, were hanged. Mackenzie later returned to Canada under an official agreement that he not be punished.

The British government realized that something was wrong. Lord Durham, an important aristocrat who strongly sup-

The First Parliament of Ontario (Notman and Fraser)

ported reform in Britain, was sent to Canada as Governor-in-Chief and High Commissioner to investigate the unrest. His Report condemned the Family Compact and recommended a better land granting system as well as the reuniting of Upper and Lower Canada. It called for "responsible government", meaning that the Colonial Executive Council should answer to the Assembly. If the Executive lost the support of the majority of the Assembly, it would have to resign. The Governor would have to take the advice of the responsible Executive. In this way the Assembly's voice would be the strongest in the government. Britain granted this important reform in 1848. It came because of changing attitudes in Britain along with the demands for it from Canadian political leaders.

By 1841, Upper Canadians had created a flourishing agricultural society. In many ways it had passed beyond the pioneer stage. Farming areas along the lakeshores and in the Niagara Peninsula were developing features of a mature society: villages and towns which served farmers' needs, mills, roads, and regular stage coach service carrying passengers and mail. Farm machinery, agricultural societies and big new homes and barns were other indicators of maturity. Communities like Toronto, Kingston and Niagara were no longer small settlements on the edge of the forest. They were busy urban centres whose merchants dealt with such distant cities as London, England and New York.

The political leaders of this era, Robert Baldwin, Francis Hincks, George Brown, Allan MacNab, Sandfield Macdonald and John A. Macdonald were strong characters who sought to maximize gains in the areas in which Ontario excelled or could excel.

At the same time the parliamentary system based on British principles, a political system different from that in the United States continued to evolve.

Following Confederation, the first legislature of Ontario met in December 1867. The eighty-two members, whom commentators of the day expected to be little more than a "glorified city council", were elected from the same constituencies that elected members to the federal House of Commons. The principle of dual representation was abolished during the term of office of Edward Blake and broke the link between the federal and provincial legislatures.

The Buildings of Parliament

The first Parliament of Upper Canada met in Navy Hall, Newark and various other locations have been used over the years. The first legislative building to be built to a design was completed in 1796. It faced west at the foot of Parliament Street in York overlooking the Bay. The buildings were given a rather grand title "Palace of Government". After they were burned by the Americans the Assembly met in some unusual buildings including Jordan's Hotel in York and a house later owned by Chief Justice Draper.

A new building finished in 1820 lasted only four years before it went up in flames. The old General Hospital served as the Legislature from 1825-1828 but the urgent needs of the hospital for its original purpose dictated yet another move. This time the exodus was to The Old Court House.

In 1832, the Assembly moved to the Parliament Buildings on Front Street. Between 1840 and 1867 the joint legislature of the

Oliver Mowat (Ontario Archives)

United Province of Canada wandered from one capital to another; first to Kingston, then to Montreal, then back and forth between Toronto and Quebec City. After Confederation the provincial legislature returned to the Parliament Buildings on Front Street but soon legislators were demanding better accommodation. The old Building was in no condition for rehabilitation nor could additional space be added. It was, therefore, decided to build a new Parliament Building and a site was selected on a knoll north of College Street in Queen's Park.

The present building, finished in 1893, was dedicated by Oliver Mowat who is rumored to have said upon arriving for the ceremony, "My God, how will we ever fill it in 100 years." That, of course, proved to be no problem. There were other problems, though.

In September, 1909, a disastrous fire destroyed the west wing of the building, begun when tinsmiths working on the roof got careless. The wing was rebuilt but not in a fashion symmetrical with the east wing.

Significant changes in the Chamber have been undertaken recently to bring the Assembly into the Twentieth Century. However, every effort has been made to preserve the Chamber's historic decor.

The greatest renovation project since the construction of the building will soon occur to accommodate a proposed permanent electronic Hansard system. The Chamber will be fitted with five remote controlled cameras. One will film the Speaker from an opera box over the main entrance to the Chamber. The other four will be recessed into the walls of the Chamber at each corner. The system will be fully automatic and will provide "gavel to gavel" coverage of the proceedings commencing in the fall of 1986.

To accommodate the camera set up, the three-tiered arrangement will be modified to four tiers and a completely new sub-floor installed to support the members' desks. An indirect lighting system is also being implemented to provide adequate illumination for the cameras.

The pre-eminent factor in the extensive renovations will be preservation of the character of the Chamber and integration of all new components to be consistent with the decorum of the Chamber. Even the advancements of the technological age are being manipulated in such a way as to preserve the Legislative Building itself, the proudest and most beautiful tribute we have to our parliamentary heritage. ■