

Ballots and Brawls

The 1867 Canadian General Election

PATRICE DUTIL



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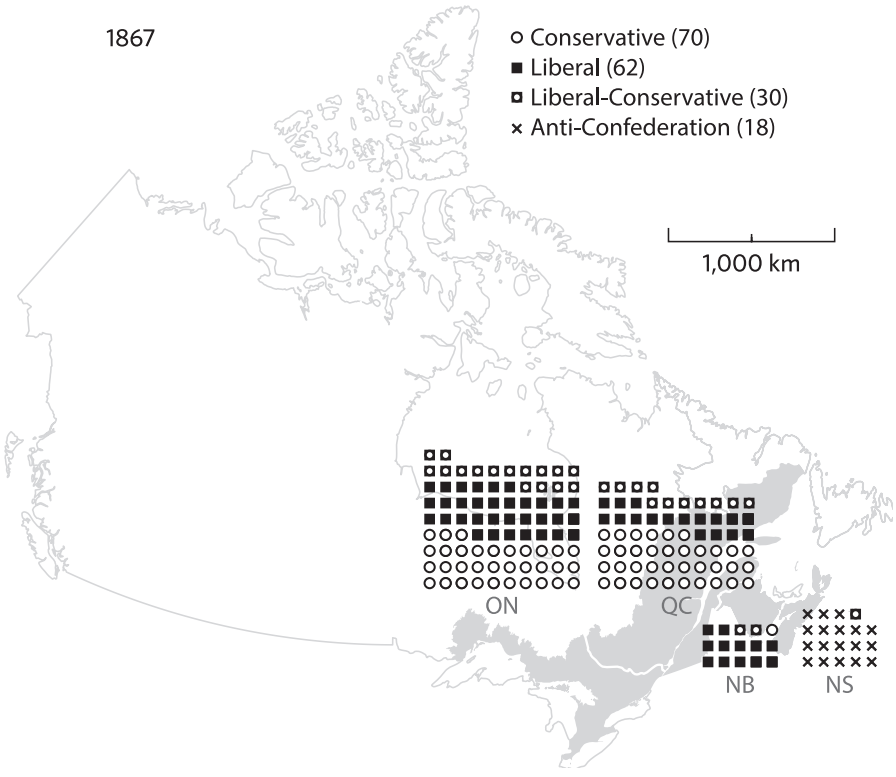
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1867

- Conservative (70)
- Liberal (62)
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Introduction

**The nation of the United States is a MIRACLE. That of
Canada is a MYSTERY.**

– Henry Olivier Lacroix, *The Present and
Future of Canada*, 1867¹

CONFEDERATION WAS NOT simply an affair of lawyers, businessmen, journalists, and priests; it also had its bard. In anticipation of the first general election in Canada, Henry Olivier Lacroix, treasurer of the Montreal-based Institut Canadien, published a remarkable thirty-two-page pamphlet, *Opuscule sur le présent et l'avenir du Canada*. It was immediately translated as *The Present and Future of Canada* – a rare feat indeed, perhaps the only work translated spontaneously that summer. By day, Lacroix was an employee of the Customs Office; by night he was increasingly known as a *spirite* who claimed to speak to men and women of the past. Inspired either by his job or by his spiritualism, he was moved to a rhapsodic optimism about his new country, even though he thought the whole idea of Canada defied gravity.

For him, writing two years after the end of the American Civil War, which had claimed the lives of over half a million soldiers as well as that of a president, the *nation* of the United States was a miracle of survival (the capitalized letters in the text were his idea). In the same time frame, Canada – a new composite of disparate ethnicities, geographies, and political cultures born of circumstances that only the most acute observers of constitutional politics could explain – was an unknown that awaited its first test of democracy. His Canada was a mystery – the product of three hundred years of unofficial and unrecognized existence. Until 1867, it was a country “in infancy,” its existence always in doubt, shrouded in a macabre “silence of death.”² “The world was ignorant almost of its existence,” he wrote, “should the crowning work not exist?”³

Lacroix, forty-one, was born in the United States, the son of Quebec migrants in search of a better life. As a teenager and young adult, he criss-crossed the Western Hemisphere before settling in Montreal. Contrary to his parents, he saw a promise of fraternity and general prosperity in Canada. “Hope! Believe!” he urged in conclusion, ready with a twist of Charles Darwin’s thinking (*The Origin of Species* had appeared in 1859): “With these two motors, humanity, from the bottom of the *humanimal* [sic] scale, has attained its present progress. This is a lesson of history, summed up in a few words, which cannot be contradicted, and which embraces all the periods of universal life.”⁴ For him, the past promised a great destiny for British North America’s “new” Canadians.

Lacroix’s Institut Canadien (IC), a learned and nationalist organization that hosted debates and maintained a library for its hundreds of members, was gravely divided on the Confederation issue. Lacroix personally had no doubts that he loved the new country, and he did not hesitate to present his remarks to the members of the IC.⁵ His text explored the various challenges of the new land and called for fresh attitudes. He welcomed direct taxes – perhaps the only man in the country to think this way – as a way to compensate for the

unpredictability of revenues flowing from custom duties. Most politicians were instead calling for reduced import taxes in order to compete internationally for trade and commerce. His best hope was not taxes, however: it was that a new spirit of fraternity, with the help of providence and good faith, would allow this “miracle” to actually sink roots.

A Tight Race

A hundred and fifty years after the mystical Lacroix, the 1867 election challenges twenty-first-century readers because the results showed that Canada was in doubt. In this hotly contested battle for ballots, the victorious Liberal-Conservative/Conservative/*Bleu* coalition led by Sir John A. Macdonald certainly earned more votes than any other formation. The competing coalition, led by an unfathomable combination of George Brown Liberals in Ontario, *Patriotes*, and anti-Confederationists rallied to Antoine-Aimé Dorion’s *Rouges* in Quebec, and New Brunswick nationalists tied to the Timothy Anglin Liberals in that province, barely received a fifth of the vote. In New Brunswick, the Liberals received far more votes than the Conservatives, but, more importantly, four in ten voters pronounced themselves *against* both the Liberals and the Conservatives. In Ontario, over 60 percent of voters did not support the chosen candidates of the Macdonald coalition. The Quebec figures are much harder to analyze, but it is clear that a third voted against the Macdonald coalition *and* against Confederation. Nova Scotia was not so equivocal: the final count gave Joseph Howe and his Liberal/Conservative Anti-Confederation coalition over 57 percent of the vote, and another 25 percent of voters voiced their protest by voting for independent candidates. The federalists took only 18 percent of the vote. This election was no rubber stamp for the new Macdonald government.

Hard politics shaped Canada’s first, and most bewildering, campaign: nationally, a staggering proportion of the electorate (over

42 percent) did not vote for either the Liberals or the Conservatives. Beyond the 8 percent of the entirety of electors across the country who voted for Joseph Howe's secessionist party, over one-third supported men who carried no reported label. Considering that it was the elite of the new country that voted – those few men with enough money to qualify for the right to vote – the result is all the more suggestive of the fragile new country's political culture. The great campaign of 1867 remains unique in the annals of Canadian political history.

Voter intentions notwithstanding, Macdonald's party was able to secure 100 of the 181 seats in the House of Commons, while the Liberals became the official opposition with 62 seats and Howe's defiant Nova Scotia delegation took all the Nova Scotia seats save one (it went to Charles Tupper, the former premier who led the Conservatives in the province).

The general Canadian attitude at the time defied easy interpretation and added to the mystery. Historians today can no more rely on public opinion polls to get a sense of what people felt was important than the politicians of the day. One Ontario newspaper conceded that it had trouble discerning issues. "The new and complicated constitution has to be carried into effect and doubtless great issues will be soon presented before the people by the dissensions in Parliament," it wrote, "but at the present the electors seem at sea, with no one able to tell them where they are."⁶ And yet, the issues that animated the kitchen tables and tavern bars are still current. Unresolved then, they remain lively in our political conversations today: the balance of power between Ottawa and the provinces, the place of a regional identity in the face of quasi-rejection of the nation-state as a model,⁷ the rapport with the United States, the relevance and practices of democracy, the nature of the promised "prosperity," and even the influence of international elite were debated.

The 1867 election had the strains of a tax revolt – people resented having taxes sent to Ottawa. The *Ottawa News* put it this way: "The

truth is that the union is in danger from extravagance and corruption. Already a fear permeates every class of society that the complicated machinery of the new Government is going to press down the people with fearful burden of taxation.”⁸ The politics of that contest also bore important traces of the always vital issue of “belonging,” as debates were marked by transnational issues such as imperialism (the notion that Canada’s identity was bound to the United Kingdom), Fenianism (an extension of Irish nationalism in North America, dedicated to undermining British influence), ultramontaniam (a hyper-Catholicism that placed allegiance to that religion above all other considerations), French radicalism (an ideology dedicated to intellectual freedom and opposed to any form of conservatism), and Americanism (the notion that the United States held out more promise than the Canadian project).

A Forgotten Race

There’s more to the enigma. It says something that even though photography was fairly common in 1867, there are precious few photographs of what happened in Canada on July 1, and there are no photos of the 1867 election on record. Here was a newborn country about to undertake its first democratic test, but only a small minority of people seemed to really care. Perhaps some like Lacroix were so excited that they forgot to hire photographers, but for every one of those, there were many who hated the Confederation project so much that they would have been positively hostile to the very idea of capturing the memory. The election campaign that followed – it started four weeks after Dominion Day because it took Canada East more time to compile the list of eligible voters⁹ – suffered the same fate. Perhaps partly as a result of this neglect, or perhaps because it involved only the United Province of Canada (today Quebec and Ontario), New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, few writers have been tempted to write about it. It’s almost as though historians were happy to move on to other topics after placing a final period on

their treatments of how Confederation actually came about. In other words, July 1 and the subsequent election were seen as the negligible end of a story, not the beginning of a new one.

The indifference was acutely felt as Canada celebrated major anniversaries of the first election. Few of the people who fought the battle of 1867 in favour of Confederation were remembered 50, 75, 100, 150 years later, and their individual bicentennials were all but ignored by Canada's politicians. In their day, however, the wheels that drove Confederation – the names of Macdonald, Brown, Cartier, Galt, Macdonald, McGee, Tilley, Tupper, and others – were on everyone's lips.

Another reason for the neglect might be that there are no touchstones of Confederation Canada left today. The committee rooms, banquet halls, hotels, and restaurants where men argued, laughed, drank, negotiated, and fought the first election in Canada have almost all disappeared. Province House in Halifax and the East Block on Parliament Hill in Ottawa – the building that housed the offices of most cabinet members, the prime minister, and the Governor General – practically stand alone as tangible reminders of what people and politicians saw on July 1, 1867, and during the first Canadian general election, which took place that August and September. (Province House in Charlottetown, of course, still stands, but Prince Edward Island did not join Confederation until six years after the first election.)

The *Queen Victoria*, the legendary ship that carried the Canadian delegation to Prince Edward Island for the fateful Charlottetown Conference in September 1864, was ripped apart by a Caribbean hurricane in 1866. The Hotel St-Louis on Haldimand Street in Quebec City, where the terms of Confederation were hammered out a few weeks later, was gravely damaged in a fire in 1947 and eventually closed. The old *parlement* of Quebec on Côte-de-la-Montagne, where the likes of Antoine-Aimé Dorion, George Brown, Alexander T. Galt, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, and John A. Macdonald jostled,



Old Quebec Parliament, circa 1880.

Fonds J.E. Livernois Ltée, Archives nationales à Québec, 322751

was demolished in 1894. The Legislative Assembly building in Fredericton, where Confederation was angrily debated, burned down in 1882. The Parliament building on Front Street in Toronto, which witnessed the first Ontario debates, was abandoned in the mid-1880s and demolished in 1903. The Centre Block in Ottawa, which welcomed the winners of the first election, was reduced to cinders in 1916.

The Question of Identity

Buildings may disappear, but the legacy of that first election is undeniably still with us. The issue of “belonging,” for instance, still recognizable today, mattered immensely in each of the provinces. Many intellectuals were concerned that being a Nova Scotian, a Quebecer, or a New Brunswicker was incompatible with belonging to “Canada” as a “great nation,”¹⁰ the idea espoused by the likes of

John A. Macdonald, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, Étienne-Paschal Taché (the Quebec MP who first wondered aloud about the idea in 1857), or the shadowy Henry Lacroix. It was less of an issue in Ontario, but even there the notion of being recognized as a distinct part of a new country was very much alive. How could justice be attained if Ottawa controlled so many of the strings of power, such as the courts, the Senate, Lieutenant-Governors, the key revenues of the Customs Office, and all key appointments?

Beyond political labels lay the fundamental question of national unity. "The question to be decided," wrote the editorialist for the Conservative *Ottawa Times*, "is that of the Union and the Government as against disunion and the opposition."¹¹ That paper leaned strongly in favour of Macdonald's Liberal-Conservative coalition, a uniquely Canadian mix of political impulses. It saw through the protests of the Joseph Howes, Timothy Anglins, and Médéric Lanctôt because it did "not believe in the sincerity of the men who have raised the standard of faction in some of the Provinces." There was a larger stake here for that writer: a Canada that spread itself from coast to coast. A win by the provincialists would "indefinitely postpone" the "completion of the scheme to its ultimate purpose; and that such a result would undoubtedly imperil, if it did not destroy, the new Constitution."¹² In 1867, a win for Confederation was essential to the expansion of Canada.

But there was also the issue of distinguishing British colonies from the United States. "Every loyal and patriotic man in the Dominion has now a most important duty to perform," wrote the *St. Catharines Constitutional*, "for the approaching election will decide whether this country is to be ruled by the statesmen who have labored long and earnestly in the cause of the Union, or by those who are openly or covertly hostile to our new constitution and in favor of annexation to the United States."¹³ The stakes were high, as the new government would have the duty of putting the new constitution into "practical effect."¹⁴



Province Hall, Fredericton, circa 1870
Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, P5-396

Canada was not founded because there was a widespread public clamour for it. A strong element of Nova Scotians was positively repulsed by the terms negotiated to join the Canada project. Many francophones across the country were alarmed at the likely consequences of submerging their ability to maintain the institutions that protected the core of their identity – law, religion, and education –

in a country that would henceforth be governed by a majority of English-speaking Protestants. Protestants, in turn, were afraid of being dragged into a distorted country shaped by a demanding Catholic minority. The promises of those who aspired to a better day by doing away with such identities were hardly credible.

It's not impossible to visualize. Even today, it would be difficult to imagine populations across North American agreeing to yield sovereignty to a central authority the way those three provinces did a century and a half ago. Like all state-building practices in the nineteenth century, the founding of Canada was engineered by a handful of men who were motivated by a wide range of interests. They wanted a political stability that featured the traits of Westminster democracy, some measure of economic predictability, access to credit in order to build the infrastructures (harbours, bridges, roads, and especially railways) that were likely to bring a level of prosperity and a degree of security – the sort of defence of sovereignty that might discourage American adventurers. Many of Confederation's champions, however, had greater ambitions than simply creating a new level of government. They aspired to conceiving no less than a new “nationality,” a mindset that would transcend what they considered lowly local concerns that too often impeded general progress. Lacroix told his readers:

The national awakening shows [it is] still a task to be accomplished, and what is done heartily and with wisdom, will render the rest easy before long. Between the idea and its accomplishment there must be time; there are roads to be made through woods, meadows, hills, mountains; sometimes there are tunnels to be pierced before the end is reached.

For him, the thousands of problems that awaited the new country would be solved by people of good faith, people who demanded betterment in every aspect of life.¹⁵

Political parties were viewed with some suspicion. Egerton Ryerson, the highly influential superintendent of education in Canada West (now Ontario), made a strong argument against them in *The New Canadian Dominion: Dangers and Duties of the People in Regard to their Government*, a thirty-five-page pamphlet published in the summer of 1867. Ryerson, who “rejoiced” in “our new birth as a nation,” deplored the divisiveness of political parties and hoped that civic education would be promoted instead in order to ensure the country’s prosperity: “It devolves on the electors of Canada, in the spirit we now cultivate, and in the choice we now make of our first legislators, to stamp upon our country its future character, and determine for our children their future destinies.”¹⁶

But Ryerson’s voice was ignored, dismissed as naive. Party labels mattered, even if they were sometimes fudged. “Liberal” was commonly used in Ontario and New Brunswick, and to some degree in Quebec. It was a term claimed to signal an ideological inheritance from the “Reformers” who had challenged British dominance in the affairs of Nova Scotia and of Upper and Lower Canada. It also echoed the British party of the same name that had supported Sir Robert Peel’s (“the Peelites”) renunciation of trade protectionism. Over the years, dominant politicians such as Lord John Russell, Lord Palmerston, and William Gladstone distinguished themselves as “Liberals” in Parliament, and the habit gradually rubbed off on the Canadians. In Upper and Lower Canada, the Liberal moniker made its appearance in the 1850s and was in common use by the 1860s. Joseph Howe in Nova Scotia liked to call himself a “Liberal” on occasion, as did Leonard Tilley in New Brunswick (that is, until he became a Conservative!).¹⁷

The Liberals liked to continue thinking of themselves as rebels. In Ontario, they drew inspiration from the actions and thought of William Lyon Mackenzie. They seemed comfortable with being “opposed” to government – far more, it seemed, than to form government themselves. They liked to promote “freedom” and “rights,”

and especially “free trade” and smaller, money-conscious government. Some went further than others in all these areas. In Ontario, a small group of rebels called themselves “Clear Grits,” though by the time of the 1867 election that nickname had disappeared.

In Quebec, “liberalism” was too extreme a label. The “opposition” had its roots in the *Parti patriote* that had arisen in opposition to the British presence on Canadian soil. In the aftermath of the 1837–38 rebellions, the men who recognized themselves in opposition to trade protectionism and the inherent arbitrariness of monarchical government called themselves *Rouges*.

The Conservatives were far more confident in their beliefs, which were strongly anchored in old Toryism that had roots in British and Canadian soil. Conservatives enjoyed authority and relished exercising it. They liked the attitude of the Tory Party in the United Kingdom that had been prompted into existence by another of Robert Peel’s actions: the Reform Bill of 1832, which had extended electoral rights to the middle class. If “Conservative” was nothing more than a nickname in British politics, it was easily adopted in Canada. In Quebec, the more conservative members grouped under a “*Bleu*” banner. Their program favoured economic growth, protection of trade if necessary, an appreciation for British traditions, an intense fidelity to the Roman Catholic Church, infrastructure building, and a sense that principles of subsidiarity should be favoured.

Both the “Liberals” and “Conservatives” were hothouses of diverging opinions, and their leaders never had the luxury of being confident that they had the unanimous support of the members. There were extremists as well as moderates on all sides. The “coalition” of Liberals and Conservatives that formed the government in the Province of Canada in 1854 gave birth to a new label, prompting Macdonald to label himself a “Liberal-Conservative” to the end of his days.

For the most part, in most areas, the issue in 1867 was far more likely to dissolve into a battle between Canada-friendly parties or local-preference parties. Thus, in Nova Scotia, the Confederationists,¹⁸ led by forty-six-year-old Charles Tupper (a good friend of Sir John A. Macdonald), were opposed by the provincialists (the “Nova Scotia Party,” or “antis”), led by Joseph Howe. In New Brunswick, it was a contest between Leonard Tilley, forty-nine, the ardent defender of Confederation, and an uneven pair: Albert J. Smith, the Liberal premier of New Brunswick for seven months in 1865–66, and the Liberal journalist Timothy Warren Anglin, forty-five, who just hated the idea of Confederation. In Quebec, there was a slightly clearer situation. On the Confederation side, the leader was the recognizably beardless George-Étienne Cartier, fifty-three, who represented the Macdonald government. His adversary was the Liberal Party (or the Reform Party as it was sometimes known, or simply the *Rouges*) led by Antoine-Aimé Dorion. Dorion, forty-nine, was not particularly clear in terms of his allegiances. Once, he had been in favour of joining the United States. Now, he instinctively hoped for an independent Quebec, but he did it with little conviction. He did not trust its possibility or even its desirability, given its intensely conservative and fundamentally Catholic orientation. His penchant was to support the status quo for the moment: to live with the current system, but perhaps with the idea of creating in Canada a federal system, where French Canadians could have their own jurisdiction in Quebec and Ontarians would have the same in Toronto.

Dorion was far less enthusiastic regarding Canadian confederation in the summer of 1867, but seemed resigned to it. At the same time, there were other *Rouges* who rejected that compromise completely. Chief among them was Médéric Lanctôt, just twenty-nine years old. He was so utterly convinced of his cause that he personally ran against Cartier in the riding of Montreal-Est.

The contest in Ontario was personified by Macdonald himself, now fifty-two, and the leader of the Reform Party in Canada West, George Brown, forty-nine. Another force in Ontario was William McDougall, forty-five, once an ally of Brown's and an arch critic of federalism, who now bought Macdonald's vision and even joined his cabinet. His constant campaigning in the new province – and his sharp targeting of his former friends – made him a singularly influential and hated figure in the campaign.

A Harsh Political Culture

Oh, and there were brawls of all sorts. Something unusual happened in Prescott in Eastern Ontario. It was, according to a young law student, “the most disgraceful, scandalous, may we add sacrilegious, riots, which ever desecrated the house of God.” The young author, a certain John Gray, accused Father E.P. Roche of St. Mark's Parish of getting involved in the election campaign. Worse, Roche had used “Five Point epithets,” called infants “brats,” and treated women as “dirty sluts” and “filthy swine.” Father Roche had been the pastor since 1845 and was known to deliver “very high falutin and windy” sermons, but now seemed unchained. Prescott tended to vote for the Reform Party, and Roche was determined it would not happen again. Walter Shanly, a noted and accomplished civil engineer and railway specialist, was the Conservative candidate federally and Macneil Clarke, the mayor of Prescott, ran in the provincial riding of Grenville South. Both were born in Ireland.

On September 1, Father Roche “threatened his hearers with an electioneer harangue” while arguing in favour of Shanly and Clarke, and most of the parishioners walked out. After Mass a week later, on September 8, he launched another “violent harangue” against the Liberals and claimed that “the interests of the Catholics of this section were more secure in the hands of Macneil Clarke” than in those of his opponent John McCarthy, who was also a Catholic. Apparently, Father Roche threatened to withhold the sacraments

from those who did not follow his wishes. There might have been a thousand people at St. Mark's that morning, and again they stampeded out of the building.¹⁹

The language in Prescott seemed emblematic of the campaign, prompting a *New York Times* journalist to observe that while “Canadian politics have always been very stormy,” new heights of rhetoric were being scaled and that the country's newspapers were just “too passionate in their politics.”²⁰ Alexander Mackenzie actually called the journalism of his friend George Brown “Globe terrorism.”²¹ “Backwoodsman” from the village of Saint-Élie, near Sherbrooke, Quebec, said that the progress made in Canada had distinguished it from countries such as Spain and Mexico. That said, he called for a “higher tone of political morality,” stating that too often good manners were forgotten in times of election. Politicians too often were “deceitful, rude, boisterous or ill-mannered.” He concluded that Canadians had to “respect themselves” and that passions should be cooled so that “the science of politics should be better understood and appreciated by us, for it is really a noble science.”²²

British North America was not the place where existentialist questions were debated in coffeehouses and *salons de thé*, the way Camillo Benso (the Count of Cavour) and Giuseppe Mazzini famously used them to create the networks necessary to achieve Italian unity just a few years earlier (Giuseppe Garibaldi's guns helped also, no doubt). In Canada, it was the newspapers that provided the venue for debate. A count carried out in 1864 revealed that there were about 23 daily newspapers across British North America, as well as 27 tri-weeklies, 16 semi-weeklies, 226 weeklies, and 27 monthlies.²³ Timothy Anglin, Leonard Tilley, Joseph Howe, Charles Tupper, George Brown, John A. Macdonald, Médéric Lanctôt, Antoine-Aimé Dorion, and George-Étienne Cartier all had newspapers express their views on the issues and about their adversaries. Anglin, Brown, and Lanctôt were active, professional editors. In this regard, the

practice of politics of 1867 is very different from what it is today, but the critical role of communications was no different.

The *New York Times* journalist was also struck by the fact that “the different factions seem to be more violent than ever,” noting that colourful (not to say purely invented) epithets such as “annexationists” and “disloyalists,” as well as “corruptionists” and “knaves,” were routinely hurled (he could have included “unmanly” and “turn-coats”). He recounted that “leaders fall foul of each other in a style that might teach something even to the extremists of this country.” In light of the raw new habits being developed, he also hoped that the new Canada would not become “another Mexico” after its independence.²⁴

The Act of Voting

There was no privacy of politics in 1867, and ballots were contentious acts. On polling days, voters verbally expressed their choice in front of an audience. Except in New Brunswick, which had been inspired by Australia in adopting the secret ballot in 1855,²⁵ voting in 1867 was in the open – everyone knew how everyone else voted. (The secret ballot was widely adopted in 1874, two years after it was introduced in Great Britain; the practice started in 1884 in parts of the United States.)

Elections were loosely arranged affairs, a practice that left room for a good deal of abuse. Polling took place on different days in Quebec, Ontario, and New Brunswick, depending on the riding. The votes were typically held over a two- or three-day period. On the first day, candidacies (or “nominations,” as they were called then – and anyone could declare himself a candidate) would be announced. If one candidacy went unchallenged, that person would be acclaimed. In some cases, voting would begin immediately. Most of the time, voting would begin the next day, and the tally would be revealed at the end of the first day of voting. Voting would resume the next day (giving each campaign a measure of how many voters

they had to rally to the polling station), and a victor would be declared. Sometimes, the winner would be revealed a day later. To complicate matters, the same man could stand for election in both the provincial and federal legislatures in Ontario and Quebec. A candidate could run in any number of ridings if he so chose (and many did).

It was rumoured that the Macdonald government angled to make sure that winnable ridings were scheduled early so as to build momentum, but the evidence is unconvincing and its impact remains certainly debatable. Nova Scotia deliberately scheduled its vote (exceptionally, held on one day only) on the last possible day so as to have the last word. The voters there knew full well that Macdonald's coalition was to form the first elected government when they voiced their choices.

Voting was an act of citizenship, to be sure, but it was also an act of courage. In Canada, particularly, the conduct of pre-1867 elections had been fraught with violence, manipulation, and corruption of the worst sort.²⁶ One had to stand on conviction, or at least on a suitable bribe or promise of drink (little wonder that the prohibitionist movement grew strong in those years). The *Christian Guardian*, the Methodist publication founded by Egerton Ryerson in 1829, was not alone in its concern. "The body of the people should unite," it urged, "with entire unanimity to vote against any candidate who employs or even encourages, any kind of bribery or intimidation in order to gain his cause."²⁷ "Does anyone doubt that such a state of things is common?" asked the *Sarnia Observer*. Critics of the Conservative Party, in particular, consistently levelled the accusation that railway money steered votes away from Liberal candidates. The practice was no doubt widespread, but it is impossible to measure its impact. No records were kept and the results are simply too puzzling to allow any observer to conclude that any particular riding was "bought." It is evident that candidates on both sides did their very best to secure enough money to buy votes. In

Ottawa, for instance, Edward McGillivray, a leading businessman and former mayor, pulled out of the race against Joseph Merrill Currier, a wealthy lumberman and publisher of the *Ottawa Daily Citizen* (as well as the MP for Ottawa in the Province of Canada), because he could not compete with Currier's purse. "If what he says is true," the *Quebec Gazette* commented, "then the Metropolis of the Dominion is one of the most ingeniously corrupt constituencies on the face of the earth, and needs to be looked after in any future context." McGillivray reported that the bribery was not confined to a few cases but that "men by the score" had pledged to vote for Currier, "demanding that they should be paid for carrying them." He felt that he "could not be a party to such utter demoralization of the community." Without an ability to buy voters, his defeat was certain. The election was fraudulent and he would have no part in carrying out such an "open flagrant crime."²⁸ Did it make a difference? Currier, as the incumbent, had a tight hold on the seat, and many allegations of bribery were undoubtedly valid, but they went unproven.

Currier's people made their own accusations. The *Daily Citizen* charged that in the election of Dr. Grant in the riding of Russell, "the most flagrant bribery and corruption of the electors were resorted to; an unscrupulous and lavish expenditure of money – obtained somehow – was made, and voters were purchased wholesale and openly."²⁹ Bribery was seen as a disease of electors, not of the government. "The principle of a democratic government for enlightened people is faultless, but nothing tends so thoroughly to destroy the benefits arising therefrom as bribery in the elections," wrote the *Sarnia Observer*. Any candidate who won by bribing voters could not claim to represent anything other than "his own purse." The paper went further, calling bribery "high treason" and "a crime against honesty and morality."³⁰ Some suspected that American money (rumoured at around \$50,000) was behind the Brown "Liberal Republican" party. "Will the lovers of British institutions

and British freedom, permit those vile factionalists, in the West, and their Rouge and annexationist allies in the east, to triumph even with the aid of ‘material assistance’ from their Yankee sympathizers?” asked the *Ottawa Times*. “Up loyal men, and at them! Down with the traitorous Coalition!”³¹

Ontario was not the only place where votes were bought. In Quebec, such purchases were made in cash and drink. Brian Young has advanced the idea that the Tories spent an average of \$10 per vote, and perhaps up to \$100 per vote, to support the campaigns of Thomas D’Arcy McGee and George-Étienne Cartier.³² In Nova Scotia, Archbishop Connolly estimated that in some ridings, votes were bought for twenty pounds.³³ Timothy Anglin, the New Brunswick anti-Confederation leader, later conceded that everybody was trying to buy people off during these elections.³⁴

Not everyone was entitled to vote. One had to be a male of at least twenty-one years, and had to own property of some sort – \$150 in Nova Scotia, \$200 in rural Quebec, \$300 in urban Quebec, \$200 in Ontario, and 100 pounds in New Brunswick. If a voter in New Brunswick had no property but did have an annual income of at least 400 pounds, he could vote. In Nova Scotia, such a voter had to show a minimum income of \$300. A voter who met the property requirements in more than one riding could vote in another also. Anyone working for government or who was in receipt of any assistance from the state (which was exceptionally rare) was not allowed to vote. Indigenous men were specifically disallowed the franchise in Ontario, unless they lived off-reserve and received no money from the government.³⁵ (Regrettably, this is the only mention of the Indigenous realities in this book, because they were never invoked in the debates.) It meant that roughly 15 percent of the entire population was actually entitled to express a view on polling day.³⁶ By twenty-first-century standards, it was a completely undemocratic election, but few made that point in 1867 (or since) because no states had ever been created as the result of a democratic

vote. The two countries that were created roughly simultaneously with Canada, Germany and Italy, were the products of wars and decisions made by local duchies. The United States was created because elected representatives made that choice, and the 1864 presidential election saw Abraham Lincoln re-elected by 15 percent of the electorate also, as in Canada. If anyone had a problem with the process, it was mostly because they disagreed that elections should take place at all. They opposed Confederation, in large part because they saw the constitutional arrangement as illegitimate in the first place.

And there was undoubtedly a share of dirty politics. The historian Marcel Bellavance argues that the *Bleus* won at least two seats in 1867 by literally kidnaping the opposing candidate on election day, and points particularly to the riding of Montmorency, which ultimately acclaimed the Conservative Joseph Cauchon.³⁷ Violence against voters was deployed in more than a few ridings as teams squared off in intimidating each other's voters. It also meant that threats were likely. The local scenes were not much different from the famous one depicted a hundred years earlier by the English painter William Hogarth. His *The Polling* (1758) memorably depicted a tumultuous scene of intimidation and inducements where even the sick and the dead were processed in their civic duties. Except for all the wigs, it could well have been a Canadian vignette in 1867, complete with a red (Liberal) and blue (Tory) flag. The *Cleveland Herald* noted the violence, reporting that "affairs in the new 'Dominion' open badly." Reporting on the state of affairs in Montreal, it argued that the event did "not speak well for the future welfare or the new nation that is to be." It emphasized that there was no harmony between the provinces or even among the peoples of each province, and the future of Canada did not seem promising. The "old differences between French and English, Roman Catholics and Orangemen have been prominent and bitter."³⁸



The Humours of an Election III: The Polling,
1754–55, by William Hogarth (1697–1764)

© Sir John Soane's Museum, London

There was also some vote suppression. Elections in each riding were placed under the direction of a returning officer appointed by the government, and there were instances of abuses of power. In Montreal, for example, polls were supposed to be arranged in alphabetical order, but that rule was not always respected and the process soon degenerated into a confusing free-for-all that discouraged voters. In other ridings, polling stations were placed at the most inconvenient locations so as to give particular electors a hard time.³⁹ In Verchères, the returning officer had electors pledge their allegiance twice in order to slow the voting procedures, hoping that Liberal supporters would leave.⁴⁰ In New Brunswick, Catholics (including Acadians) had long been repelled by the demand that they pronounce an oath of allegiance to the monarch in order to

vote.⁴¹ That said, Catholic Church leaders left no doubt that the eligible members of their flock had an obligation to vote and to avoid violence. Father Patrick Dowd, an Irishman who had studied at the Séminaire de Saint-Sulpice in Paris before taking up his post at St. Patrick's Church in Montreal in 1848, remarked during Mass that the city had been peaceful after the infamous riots of 1849 and that the disturbances around polling stations as elections began were unacceptable. "Is that happy state of things to be disturbed by a lawless set of misguided men, in peaceable citizens to be deprived of their right to vote by brute force?" he reportedly asked. The popular priest answered himself in his usual colourful language worth citing at length:

No, no, that cannot be; I know that there are not many of them here, but I called upon everyone of you who are present to become Apostles of Peace, and tell those misguided and foolish men that the peace of the city is to be maintained at all hazards. If the civil force is not sufficient, the military force will be called out to the last man, and, if needed, I will myself shoulder a musket, and shoot down those who dare to intimidate and keep back from the polls peaceable citizens. I am no party man; nor could I be; I never followed any man or party. I only know you as your pastor, and, as such, if it was required of me, I'm willing to spill the last drop of my blood in your defence. In the name of God, let not the peace of this fair city be disturbed; let each man vote for whom he can conscientiously record his voice, in keeping with the teaching of our venerable bishop. But do not attempt to prevent others from exercising their rights in the same way. I care not who is elected, if the peace of the city is only preserved, and every man is allowed to vote as he chooses. Then I should be satisfied, and God's blessing of rest upon you.⁴²

Clearly, there was a sense of duty to answer the call of democracy and, to a certain degree, to legitimize the new state. The *Advertiser*

and *Eastern Townships Sentinel* in Quebec observed that “the duty of every man is to do nothing that will precipitate the County, at a busy season of the year, into a contest out of which no great good to the country can be gained.” It encouraged men to vote their “hearts” in selecting the best representative. “There should be no hanging back,” it continued with nationalist flourish, “for the man who has not the moral courage to vote either one way or the other, has not the interest of the country at heart.”⁴³

The electoral campaign was launched on August 7, when the writs were issued. The results had to be returned on September 24, making for a six-week campaign. (The ridings of Gaspé, Bonaventure, Chicoutimi, and Saguenay received exemptions because they were so vast; they had to return their writs on October 24 and they voted for the newly formed government.)

Although Macdonald made efforts in this direction, there were no real national campaigns organized in 1867, certainly not in the sense that they would be understood in the twenty-first century. Communications efforts were made through newspaper networks as roads and railways were not sufficiently developed for a leader (or his representatives) to be able to cross provincial borders. Canada’s electoral history was thus born in a spirit of harangue and dispute – hardly a basis on which to predict a grand democratic and united future.

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