



The Great Co-operators

Meet the Member for Rimouski, Robert Baldwin. And the Member for North York, Louis Lafontaine. Together they achieved home rule for Canadians. If you don't know their names, that's because they did it the Canadian way . . .



Robert Baldwin



Louis Lafontaine

□ Here and there you may find things that bear their names: a school, a park, a tunnel, an electoral riding. People familiar with these places are unlikely to have more than a vague idea of who Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine were. If they had accomplished what they did in another country, whole cities might be named after them. But this is Canada, and the reason they are almost forgotten is that they arrived at their accomplishment in typically Canadian style.

Like the liberators whose statues grace the capitals of the post-colonial world, Baldwin and Lafontaine gained self-government for their people. Unlike those liberators, they did so without costing the people a gunshot wound or a widow's tear. They waged a gruelling struggle against powerful and stubborn forces, but they never gave a thought to violence. Not the least of their legacy to future generations of Canadians was to establish a national tradition of resolving constitutional disputes by peaceful means.

They were men of moderation personally as well as politically. Baldwin was a fine-featured, soft-spoken lawyer from an affluent Toronto family; Lafontaine, also a lawyer, was the handsome son of a politically prominent farmer in Quebec. In the days of their great struggle when they were in their thirties, both were widowers who immersed themselves in the hard work of political leadership. Neither had much individual ambition. Both believed in selfless co-operation, which is why their names are inseparably linked.

The few personal details about them to be found in the history books make up a picture of everything

that is admirable in the Canadian character — admirable and unexciting. Baldwin is described as serious, thoughtful, kind and modest; Lafontaine as sober, steady, determined and reserved. Even the great cause for which they stood was presented in a drab understatement. Elsewhere in the world, it might have been couched in a ringing slogan like "power to the people!" Baldwin and Lafontaine called it "responsible government."

It is unfair but natural that history should place these subdued personalities in the shadows of two more spectacular characters who failed where they succeeded. In 1837, William Lyon Mackenzie and Louis-Joseph Papineau led armed rebellions against the governors and ruling cliques of Upper and Lower Canada respectively. Though Baldwin and Lafontaine shared the rebel leaders' desire for self-government, they could not go along with their republican and revolutionary views.

The Lower Canadian revolt proved a special act of folly. Papineau and his *Patriots* started it to give French Canadians more political power. It ended in the loss of what little power they had, with civil rights suspended in the primarily French-speaking colony. Sent by the British cabinet to inquire into the trouble, Lord Durham concluded that the only solution to the racial problem at its roots was to assimilate the French into the English Canadian culture. He recommended that Lower Canada be forcibly merged with its English-speaking counterpart. The Act of Union passed by the Imperial parliament to create the combined Province of Canada in 1840 sought to hurry this process along by grossly diluting French Canadian strength at the polls.

At the time of the merger, Lower Canada had a population of 630,000 to Upper Canada's 470,000. Yet the number of seats in the joint assembly of the new Province were apportioned equally. The capital was placed in English-speaking Kingston, and English was declared the sole language of legislative business. When the Province's first governor general, Lord Sydenham, appointed his eight-man Executive Council, not a single French Canadian was granted a portfolio.

Lord Sydenham believed that French Canadians were viscerally and uniformly disloyal to the British Crown and incapable of self-government. He wrote that "despotism would be far the best thing for Lower Canada," then set about exercising a despotism over the entire Province by ignoring the principle of majority rule.

Canadians today are so accustomed to living with that principle that many assume it has always been followed in this country. It implicitly decrees that the governor general represents the sovereign in a largely ceremonial capacity. The governor general is bound to consent to the policies of the cabinet. The cabinet must answer to the majority of Members of Parliament. If a cabinet cannot command a majority in Parliament, it must resign to make way for one that can.

This system had fundamentally been in effect in Great Britain since 1688, when the English people deposed a despotic king and replaced him with another who would heed the wishes of Parliament. But the British government would never admit that it could be applied to a colony, which is the main reason Britain lost its American colonies in 1776.

Sydenham's only concession to the lessons of the past was to replace the former aristocratic cliques with a coalition-style Executive Council whose membership spanned the political spectrum. Since they could be expected always to be at one another's throats, it was an ideal arrangement for a governor who intended to divide and rule.

Among the councillors was Robert Baldwin, who had emerged as the leading theorist of responsible government. Baldwin disputed that it was impossible to have a British-type constitutional monarchy in a colony. Essentially all it would take was an understanding that the governor general, like the Queen he represented, would "reign but not rule."

The great fear among British statesmen and Canadian loyalists was that responsible government

would lead to a republican system and thence to independence from Britain — and thence, some said, to absorption into the American republic. Baldwin argued that, on the contrary, internal self-government was the only way of keeping the British connection intact in the long run.

The link with Britain was important to the colonists. The government in London provided subsidies for public works such as roads and canals. Britain maintained a sizeable army in Canada as a deterrent to American invasion. Britain was by far the largest export market for Canadian produce, which entered at preferential tariff rates.

Beyond these practical considerations, many English Canadians were passionately loyal to the Crown. Both Upper Canada and the English areas of Lower Canada contained a high proportion of recent British immigrants and people of United Empire Loyalist stock. To them, any departure from the established system of British rule was tantamount to treason. They feared and despised the French Canadians who were in the majority.

Saving the country from the fate of Gandhi's India

They found their champion in Sydenham, who was resolved that no such "disaster" would occur. When Baldwin accosted him on the subject of ministerial government, he said that it was simply out of the question. He pointed out that the Provincial assembly held at least five different factions, none of which qualified as a proper political party. The two-party system in Britain meant that the cabinet could speak for the elected majority. In Canada, none of the factions had a majority, and they were so far apart in their thinking that any coalition among them would be unlikely to last for long.

Baldwin replied that at least, the largest group in the House should be represented on the Executive Council. These were the French Canadian nationalists under the absentee leadership of Louis Lafontaine. Lafontaine had been defeated in an election in April, 1841, which the governor general had shamelessly rigged to minimize the number of French Canadian members. Sydenham's attempt to prevent the growth of a strong opposition to his autocratic rule backfired ironically. For in June,

1841, Baldwin resigned from the Council to join forces with Lafontaine.

The latter had fiercely denounced the Provincial Union as a scheme to destroy the French Canadian nationality. Had he been of the temper of Papineau, he might have sown the seeds of civil war. But Baldwin — who, incidentally, was to become Lafontaine's best friend — convinced him that the place to fight for the restoration of French rights was within the system. The first step would be to combine Lafontaine's Lower Canadian Reformers and Baldwin's like-minded followers in a party that could wield a majority capable of unequivocally expressing the popular will.

Lafontaine's decision to enter into this alliance was, according to historian W.L. Morton, "one of the most crucial in Canadian history. He might have led the French members in a boycott of the Union; he might have led them in a permanent opposition bloc in the House. His decision to work with the English Reformers saved Canada from the fate of Gratton's Ireland and Gandhi's India, and made a plural and liberal society possible in British North America."

If the merger was to work, however, Lafontaine had to have a seat in the House. Following the accepted custom of the day, Baldwin had run in two ridings in the recent election and won in both of them. He resigned his "spare" seat in North York in favour of Lafontaine, who was elected in September, 1841, by a healthy majority — "a vivid illustration of how political principle had been put before racial sentiment," as Morton wrote.

The new party pressed hard for ministerial rule, but Sydenham adroitly held it off until his sudden death that September. His successor, Sir Charles Bagot, immediately asked the obvious question of how you could run a government without a risk of civil strife if the majority of the people, the French Canadians, had no voice in its executive branch. He invited Lafontaine and two of his lieutenants to join the Council, but Lafontaine refused to serve without Baldwin. After much manoeuvring, Lafontaine and Baldwin formed an administration along ministerial lines in January, 1842.

It was not technically a responsible government, but it was the first time a governor had agreed to follow the advice of a "cabinet" drawn mainly from

the majority party. Certainly it was close enough to majority rule to arouse furious opposition among the loyalist politicians and press. Bagot was excoriated not only in Canada, but in Britain. The storm was still raging when he died in May, 1843.

In the meantime, outraged Tories had relieved Baldwin of his seat in a riotous byelection. A Lower Canadian member resigned his seat in Rimouski, and — despite the fact that he always had a struggle speaking French — Baldwin ran in it and won. It was a curious situation — the Catholic, French-speaking leader of one section of the province representing a Protestant, English-speaking constituency in the other section, and vice-versa. The electors of North York and Rimouski alike had decided that there were bigger issues in the country than religion or race.

Bagot was replaced by Sir Charles Metcalfe, who had held governorships in India and Jamaica. With the support of his superiors in London, Metcalfe did all in his power to turn back the clock. He withheld Royal assent to bills passed by the assembly by referring them to the British cabinet. He made his own appointments to public offices without consulting the Executive Council. When Metcalfe rejected their protests, Lafontaine and Baldwin led the Councillors out of office in November, 1843.

The resignation precipitated the deepest political crisis short of rebellion yet seen in the Canadas. It was hotly debated on both sides of the Atlantic. Stripped of its subtleties, the issue was the old one of whether a governor could run the country in defiance of the elected majority. From the vantage point of today, it is surprising how many people thought that he could — and should. An influential minority believed in the God-given existence of a natural ruling class whose members knew better than the people what was good for them. The old line Tories who clustered around the governor thought that they had a right and even a duty to correct the errors of the democratic rabble.

Metcalfe tried for some months to manage the province's affairs with the aid of appointees, but such was the unrest that he was forced to call an election. The governor's supporters captured most of the Upper Canadian seats. The moderate Conservative William Draper formed a coalition government which represented a majority in the assembly but was riddled with internal differences among its constituent factions. When Metcalfe, dying of

cancer, retired in November, 1845, he left behind an impotent government shorn of its popularity.

The Oregon Boundary dispute had raised the threat of war with the United States, so the next governor general, Lord Cathcart, was an apolitical professional soldier sent to strengthen Canada's defences. When the danger receded, Cathcart was replaced by Lord Elgin, a young, bright, well-connected Scottish peer. Though a Conservative, Elgin was appointed by the new Liberal Government in Britain. Its Colonial Secretary, Earl Grey, favoured letting the British North American colonies conduct their own internal affairs.

A controversial bill puts home rule to its acid test

The capital had been moved to Montreal. Elgin arrived there in January, 1847, to find Draper's house of cards about to topple. The inevitable end of this misalliance came in April that year. Draper's administration was replaced by a Tory-dominated makeshift ministry which included only one French Canadian. Elgin put a merciful end to it by calling an election for January, 1848.

The Reformers won a decisive majority in both sections of the province. Lafontaine and Baldwin in effect became joint premiers of the Union, each in charge of policy for his own section. They installed a cabinet composed solely of members of the majority party. The governor general confirmed that he would bind himself by their advice.

Home rule had come to Canada at last — or had it? After passing a flood of overdue and much-needed legislation, the ministry introduced a bill to compensate claimants in Lower Canada for property losses suffered in the rebellion. A similar bill covering such losses in Upper Canada had been passed in 1846 by a Conservative administration, but now the Tories objected that there was a possibility that French-speaking property owners who had been rebels themselves would be "rewarded for their treason." The bill was nonetheless passed by a large majority, and responsible government came in for its acid test.

The Tories appealed to the governor general to disallow the act. Elgin himself believed the legislation to be "inopportune," but he refused to roll it back because it had been approved by a parliamentary majority. When he gave it Royal assent on April 25, 1849, his carriage was pelted with eggs and stones by a mob of English-speaking Montrealers. The mob went on to burn down the legislative buildings.

The Rebellion Losses Act could still be disallowed by the British cabinet. A mission of high Tories went to London to lobby against it, but Earl Grey and his colleagues refused to interfere. The significance of the episode was that all the tactics that had previously prevailed against responsible government now failed — loyalist rhetoric, appeals to the governor and to Britain, even violence. In their last frenzy, the privileged cliques were conclusively defeated. Canada had become a land "where one man's vote was as good as another's, and where the will of the majority was the ultimate sanction," as historian Arthur Lower wrote.

The self-effacing authors of this historic turn of events, Lafontaine and Baldwin, retired from politics two years later. Their great work was complete. Though Nova Scotia achieved responsible government a few months before the Province of Canada, it was according to the formula worked out by Baldwin as early as 1836.

That formula was later applied around the world to provide a comfortable half-way house for former British colonies on the road to nationhood. Neither Baldwin nor Lafontaine wanted full independence, but they opened the way to a peaceful evolution towards that historical inevitability.

It was the Canadian way, reasonable and cautious, and the men who found it exemplified these native characteristics. Unfortunately, it is also the Canadian way to take little interest in our national heroes. If people like Lafontaine and Baldwin were given the recognition they deserve, we might find less need to agonize over our national identity today.