

Notes for an Address

**“What Can Non Partisans and Partisans Learn from
Sir John A. Macdonald's Career?”**

Sir John A MacDonald Dinner
Kingston Historical Society

**Check against delivery*

Sunday, January 12, 2003
Officers Mess, Royal Military College
Kingston

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The politician we celebrate tonight, some one hundred and eighty eight years after his birth, would, I think, look down from his perch and be genuinely puzzled. He would be puzzled by all the political correctness in which our political system is awash; he would be especially sad to know that most politicians, bureaucrats and media would rather drink mineral water, and, that some media would see having a drink with a politician as fraternizing with the enemy. He, it must also be said, would see much of today's Canada and be quite proud.

The "survival of the union", the durability of Confederation itself, the continued existence of a northern country from sea to sea, its growth, its diversity and its economic capacity would surely give Sir John A. a great sense of how all that drinking in Charlottetown and Quebec City – and all the hard work and relationship building in the 1860s had built the relationships that really mattered – between people. And how those relationships built a country that has not only lasted but prospered. To understand the majesty of his work it is important to set aside the narrow partisan perspective.

While not all partisan perspectives are narrow – it has been helpful for me, over the last half decade to look at the world through a non-partisan perspective – and that perspective also helps me to understand the true majesty of John A. MacDonald.

While he was the Toryist of Tories, someone who had stood up to the armed rabble at Montgomery's Tavern when it mattered – as a member of the loyal militia – John MacDonald was a man of ideas. And while his principles were well expressed in the Tory conservatism of the day, he was a person who built coalitions in support of ideas. When the coalition was about a large idea that would serve his countrymen well, he would invariably succeed. When the fight was for the survival of a hapless government for a few more days – he could be dramatically less successful.

In fact, while it may pain today's purists, the origins of what is today the Progressive Conservative Party really came together from a strange amalgam of different groups in 1854. While Alan MacNab became the Premier of the Province of Canada, it was John A. who pulled the pieces of the new government together. As Don Swainson of Queen's chronicled so well ¹ the pieces of other parties, and the leaders of other parties assembled were key to his success.

French Canadian reformers who had been loyal to Lafontaine, Liberals from Canada West – or reformers from Canada West as they were then called – who had been with Baldwin and Hincks, ultra Tories like MacNab and more moderate Tories like John A. himself all came together. If there was a left-right spectrum in the Province of Canada – this new coalition government pretty well represented all of that spectrum – and John A. assembled the best of it for the MacNab government.

Cajoling, working with the elected members in bars and restaurants on statecraft, then, was what he did best and he was an absolute dynamo at it. He understood the difference between the bureaucrat and the politician and he preferred to be a politician. If it took many drinks to get someone on side, convivial to be sure...it was a sacrifice he was prepared to make for the cause. I like to call this "glass by glass for a better tomorrow". If he had stood on ceremony, about party names or labels, or let the Women's Christian Temperance union get in the way... well, we might all be Americans today. What he understood, viscerally, was that the public good was simply more important than any party's narrow partisan interest. What he

¹ Swainson, Donald; Sir John A. MacDonald, The Man and the Politician, Quarry Press, 1971, pp41-44.

understood is that a party that campaigns only for its own survival – and for no greater good, is of little national importance. And, what was of genuine national importance then – railroads, roads, defence, economic growth – the priorities of his day, or defence, health, education, and economic competitiveness, the priorities of our day, are of far greater national significance than this or that political party. For Sir John A, building coalitions always had a purpose beyond the coalition itself!

The Confederation Coalition, a decade or so after the 1854 government was headed by Taché, and had in it Reformers like Thomas Darcy McGee, old Quebec Conservatives like Georges Étienne Cartier, Reformers like Brown, along with Sir John A. and Alexander Galt.

In fact, it was 140 years ago in the great by-election in Leeds South, when John MacDonald campaigned with Thomas Darcy McGee by his side in a crucial electoral contest where the Tory, David Ford Jones, won against the favourite, from the other side, Richards. The two of them, McGee and MacDonald, Catholic and Protestant, Reformer and Tory, campaigned together, spoke, imbibed, and sang to crowds throughout the hinterland to elect the Tory. Once they were from different provinces and on opposing sides. Now they stood, campaigned and drank, for the forces of light, and they did so together.

The Globe was less than happy with this outcome, calling MacDonald a “pretended Orangeman” and McGee a “pretended Roman Catholic”.

But the message to our generation is that two people who had once fought each other bitterly were now on the same side for a greater good. That was the majesty of McGee and MacDonald. That was the lesson of Leeds South, and that, I submit to you all – is the core message of Sir John A.’s career.

You turn foes into allies by reaching out, not closing in. You embrace tomorrow by refusing to be a prisoner of yesterday.

John MacDonald understood that politics was both the art of the possible – and an endless debate – a series of moving coalitions that exist for specific public purposes. Those who want the banner of the party label, not as a platform for working with others, but as a shield against change or openness, misunderstand what political parties are. They are not private clubs with crests and membership restrictions. They are public trusts, which belong to all Canadians, and, are made real and relevant by citizens of good will in the public interest.

And Sir John A. understood the public interest of his day; his National Policy – higher tariffs, the rapid construction of the CPR, heavy immigration – became the policy he built while in opposition to regain power. It was a policy that built the foundations of Canada. This was a man unrestricted by left or right, even as they were defined in his day. Reformers, ultra-conservatives, those who had been on both sides of the barricades in the rebellions decades earlier – all were welcome when the cause was Canada. In fact, even though John A stood with the Crown against the rebellion, as a lawyer he had, later on, defended a supporter of the rebellion in court. While in government, the same man who afforded the CPR such a wide corporate franchise to open the west and unite the country, also approved the first legislation allowing unions – for the printers union in Toronto. Excess sobriety ranked right up there with narrow partisanship as tools of little value and less import to John A.

And, he would look down now on all who had once shared the Conservative label in Canada – who now have two maybe three separate parties – if you count those who stay home – and say “Laddies – you have

work to do." To his own successors in the present Progressive Conservative Party he would say: "first, tend to your knitting, pay off your debts.... strengthen your organization...build a solid policy plan for all Canadians that reflects your history and your principles.... fight for a better Canada, one stronger and more competitive, one more humane and business friendly....one where social progress and economic performance stood together....a Canada that paid its way, could discharge its own defence obligations with honour and capacity at home and abroad, with our allies and, where necessary, on our own....a Canada where the creation of honestly earned wealth was celebrated and encouraged.....and where any Canadian who fell behind through no fault of their own, was one Canadian too many....." And I believe that any assessment of John A Macdonald's career would argue that when his Conservative party had strengthened its resolve, paid off its debts, focused its policy priorities and rebuilt its organization and team, he would expect it to reach out to find allies with whom to pursue common cause. It would do so from strength. It would do so from principle. It would do so for Canada.

And, even from a non partisan perspective, it strikes me that Sir John A. would have a point. He would offer a firm "fiddle faddle" to those who said that all differences between parties of the right were irreconcilable. "They would only be irreconcilable if you want them to be", he would say.

In fact, my friend, Lewis Mackenzie – was likely wrong when he suggested in the newspaper the other day, that those who opposed his plan to put the two parties together had pictures of Sir John A. in his kilt over their beds. Any Tory, who understood the true essence of Sir John A. understands that if the cause was right, if the policy was required, then making a new coalition, reaching out and up was the right course.

So what is the message of Sir John A. for the Canada we love and the party he created? There can be no competitive democracy, where at least two possible governments face each other across the floor, and across the country until the obsession with party labels is replaced with a passion for democratic choice.

He would want the conservative Parties of Canada to find a way to sit around the same table and build a new coalition – not only and cynically to win more seats, because why would the voters possible care – but behind a better idea for Canada – behind a compelling public good.

And, he would remind us that just as the whole spectrum mattered then – and it matters now. Ideally, he would want a Conservative Party that had no fear of being both progressive and conservative as the social or economic issues and priorities dictated. A national coalition that was to the left of Paul Martin on income security and assistance to the farming and agricultural communities, i.e. more humane and caring.... and one that was more to the right on defence, reducing waste in government, moderating taxes and foreign policy priorities is not only conceivable...but if Canadians are to have real electoral choice....perhaps even desirable.

He would be desperately troubled – perhaps to the point of drink – by the notion that one could accept with equanimity an apparent one party democracy that could only change its government when that one party chose a leader from a one candidate leadership slate. He would be especially upset that it wasn't his party!

But even as a non-partisan these days, I humbly suggest that democracy is best when it is competitive, and even the perpetually governing party benefits from real democratic pressure both in the House of Commons and on the hustings.

For the politician we honour tonight, if it was worthwhile, it was worth arguing about, it was worth drinking about, it was worth reaching out for; it was worth reaching across the political spectrum to advance.

That is how this dominion was built. It is how we have faced every real challenge – every historical watershed in our past.

He would want us to show no less resolve for the future.

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