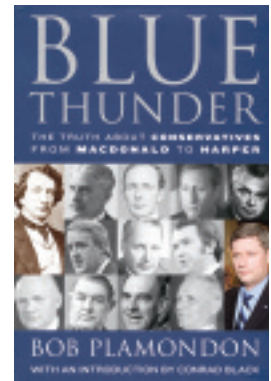


Sir John A. and all his Tory heirs

Bob Plamondon *Blue Thunder: The Truth About Conservatives from Macdonald to Harper*. Toronto, Key-Porter Books, 2009

Review by Adam Daifallah



“So, who was the worst Conservative leader of all time?” a friend asked during a conversation a few months ago. “Was it Robert Manion, J.S.D. Thompson or maybe George Drew?” I had never pondered this question, but considering I had scarcely heard of two of the three names he mentioned, I figured it would not be an easy choice. Indeed, there is no obvious answer (I’ve almost settled on Kim Campbell), and this book confirms it.

Bob Plamondon’s *Blue Thunder* is a long overdue book that chronicles the lives of each of the Conservative Party’s 18 leaders since Confederation. Plamondon, himself a Conservative partisan and one-time candidate, sets out to survey, evaluate and comment on these leaders and their legacies (or lack thereof). This was clearly not an easy task owing to the paucity of information available about some of the leaders, particularly for those who served during the gloomy period in the wilderness between the death of Sir John A. Macdonald and the party’s return to power under Robert Borden. Plamondon also covers the split on the right that plagued the conservative movement for more than a decade.

Many political parties and movements have the past to look to for inspiration. This is not the case for Canada’s Conservatives. The book’s

subtitle, “The Truth About Conservatives from Macdonald to Harper” reveals a “truth” that occasionally borders on the depressing. One is left with the impression that the Conservative Party is either the biggest amateur hour organization in the history of politics, or that they were simply trying to lose election after election. That being said, Plamondon, whose last book, *Full Circle*, chronicled the story of the unification of the right, succeeds admirably in bringing about a better understanding of these individuals and who they were, not just as political leaders but as human beings.

The best portrait in the book is that of Sir John A, a man who exemplified all the necessary characteristics of successful Conservative leadership and who won a staggering six majority governments. A visionary who believed in the need to build coalitions (he used the term “catching loose fish” to describe the need win over unaligned voters), the Tories’ first and most successful leader still stands as the model for what the party could and should be.

Sir John A.’s razor-sharp instincts for doing what he needed to win included an unmatched understanding of Québec, once declaring of la belle province, “Treat them as a nation, and they will and they will act as a free peo-

ple generally do — generously. Call them a faction and they become factious.” Amazingly, it took nearly 100 years for another Tory leader to come along — Brian Mulroney — who understood this fact of Canadian political life as well as Macdonald. Unfortunately, Sir John A. squandered some of the good will he had built with Quebecers with his miscalculation of the reaction to the hanging of Louis Riel, but his record as the country’s greatest nation builder lives on. Helpfully, Plamondon also debunks the myth, inculcated in the minds of many students today, that Macdonald was little more than a hopeless drunk, which historical evidence shows is a wildly exaggerated claim.

The towering presence of Macdonald was felt long after his death. Indeed, the leaders who immediately followed him — Abbott (who essentially hated politics), Thompson (who died in office) and Bowell (who bungled the Manitoba school crisis) — were such disasters that neither survived as leader long enough to fight an election. It wasn’t until Robert Borden, another reluctant leader who once called the vocation of politics “a miserable irregular life.” took over the reins of the party that the Conservatives made any sort of respectable comeback.

After Bennett, it was another long period in the wilderness — 22 years, in fact. R. B. Bennett won one

election in 1930 and implemented a sort of Canadian version of the Roosevelt's New Deal. Robert Manion hardly made an impression, Arthur Meighen led twice with less than stellar results — we all know the King-Byng affair — and John Bracken and George Drew both failed to win. Hopes had been high for Bracken, who had served as the Progressive party's

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Premier of Manitoba for 20 years, but he was crushed by Mackenzie King. George Drew, who followed, was a two-time loser who refused to support federal family allowance legislation because he did not want to encourage more child-rearing by those "French Canadian bastards."

The Conservatives came back to life with Diefenbaker at the helm, winning two minority governments and a landslide majority in 1958 thanks to some help from Maurice Duplessis in Quebec. Then it was another long period out of power under the tutelage of Stanfield, who lost three times, the Joe Clark interregnum, Mulroney's tremendous back-to-back majorities (the first since Macdonald) and back to being on the opposition again for nearly 15 years before Stephen Harper brought the party back to electoral viability.

The chapters on Mulroney some of the strongest, offering a positive but not entirely uncritical assessment of his successes and failures in office, with a good examination of the national unity file and Mulroney's policy achievements. Paradoxically, Plamondon reminds us that Charley McMillan, Mulroney's senior policy advisor, used to say Mulroney was as ideological as a coffee pot. But Plamondon then goes on to write that "Mulroney's record of transformative change easily marks him as Canada's most ideologically conservative prime

minister." This may be true, but I don't think the claim is easily made.

One of the most interesting lessons in this book is how the same problems have continued to bedevil the Tories from Confederation until the present. The principal failure, of course, is the party's tin ear when it comes to Québec. What began with Macdonald's

miscalculation of Quebec's reaction to Louis Riel's hanging led to the bungled Manitoba schools crisis under Bowell, the conscription crisis under Borden (and to a lesser extent under Meighen), to a series of insensitive and sometimes bigoted comments over the decades, to just a general misunderstanding of what Québec wants. Other than Macdonald, Mulroney was the only Tory leader to truly master Québec, in no small part because he was perceived as a francophone inside Quebec and as an Anglophone by the English provinces. Stephen Harper has made noble and good faith efforts to warm Québec to the Tories with mixed success.

Insofar as the 1990s are concerned, too little attention is paid to the important role of the Reform and Canadian Alliance parties in forcing the old Progressive Conservatives to modernize and adapt. Plamondon presents the Reform-Alliance movement and its leaders (Preston Manning, Stockwell Day and then, briefly, Stephen Harper) in a more negative light than it deserves, almost as if it were less important than the PC party during the elections in which both parties competed. In fact, for three straight elections (1993, 1997 and 2000) the Reform-Alliance party was the main conservative alternative to the Liberals, not the PCs. The Conservative Party created by Peter MacKay and Stephen Harper in 2003-

2004 is not simply a return to the old PCs but an amalgam of two former entities and policy programs, cultures and legacies. An interesting debate could be had over whether the Reform and Alliance parties were necessary developments to save the PC party from itself, or whether it would have been more productive for discontented conservatives to work from within the

PC party to bring about change. (Although this could have never realistically happened — as Plamondon points out, Manning was never a PC Party supporter and had been preparing to start a new right-of-centre party for most of his adult life.)

There are two main problems with this book. The first is that Plamondon's writing is not lively. One must concede that making some of these individuals appear colourful is a fairly Herculean task, but reading about even some of the more interesting leaders presented was sometimes trying. The second is the relative lack of depth when it comes to the elections these leaders fought, and their opponents. Precious little time is spent discussing the great leaders with whom these leaders clashed, such as Laurier, Mackenzie King or Chrétien. One might tend to believe that Plamondon's personal ties to the Conservatives would taint his writing, but it does not. He writes critically where he needs to, even presenting Stephen Harper in a somewhat critical light.

Overall, this is very informative and useful book that is chockfull of lessons for the current and future generations of Conservative politicians. If they want to avoid the mistakes of the past 100 years — the biggest of them being failing to repeat past mistakes — they should study this book carefully.

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