FORMIDABLE, FLAWED MAN 'IMPOSSIBLE TO IDEALIZE'

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A few years ago, I was asked to take part in a *Maclean's* magazine exercise to rate Canada's prime ministers. "Demonstrably corrupt," was my only quoted comment about John A. Macdonald.[1] It is undeniably true, yet Macdonald was so much more.

How did Macdonald dominate Canadian political life until his death in office in 1891? It is tempting to idealize "statesmen" of the past in comparison to "politicians" of today, to leave our critical faculties at the threshold when we travel back in time. Despite what we sometimes imagine, Macdonald did not survive and thrive by dint of steely convictions and far-seeing vision. Instead, the very qualities of nimble pragmatism — and sometimes slippery evasion — that we are apt to deplore in politics today account for his longevity. Macdonald was no more able to boldly bend events to his will than are contemporary politicians; the same sort of impediments stood in his way. But he was a master of what Otto von Bismarck called "the art of the possible." He was nothing if not canny, seldom tipping his hand and revealing his strategy too soon. And the most decisive factor in his success is the hardest one to quantify. Macdonald had a gift for friendship, an enormously natural and appealingly human quality. He mixed easily with people of all ranks, as pleasantly congenial with Dukes as with tavern-keepers. Even over the distance of time, his letters radiate charm.

Macdonald's myriad successes might create the impression that he had things all worked out in advance. But opportunism was more often the factor. He would take what he could get now, trusting to tomorrow for the details. Even Confederation was, he admitted, not "the best plan but the only practicable plan." He would have preferred a simple union of the British North American colonies, but consoled himself that governments at the provincial level would organically wither away over time. "This is as plain to me as if I saw it accomplished," he wrote privately, "but of course it does not do to adopt that point of view in discussing the subject in [French] Lower Canada."[2]

We can observe Macdonald at close hand through the prosaic issue of tariffs. History has rendered Macdonald's tariff policy more consistent and coherent than it really was. Today, we remember Macdonald's Conservatives as devoted protectionists who implemented the National Policy to shelter Canadian industry amid the economic downturn of the 1870s. But it was not that simple.

For Macdonald, the protectionist National Policy was Plan B. During the 1871 Washington Treaty negotiations, Britain, Canada, and the United States sought to resolve a number of outstanding issues. As the Canadian delegate, Macdonald hoped for a renewal of reciprocity, or free trade, with the United States, using access to Canada's inshore fisheries as leverage. But the Americans proved unwilling. They had suffered trade deficits under the old Reciprocity treaty, and the diplomatic climate was chilly after the Civil War. Some Americans even hoped that refusal might force Canada into political union. Macdonald knew the British were eager to repair American relations, and saw an opportunity to exploit this and get compensation from the British for accepting the disappointing treaty. His tactic to win this was Machiavellian in its conception, but slapstick in its execution.

Macdonald tried to convince the British that his cabinet colleagues were intransigent, refusing to accept the treaty terms. To prove it, he supplied copies of his "private" correspondence with them to the governor general, Lord Lisgar, with the request that he pass the letters along to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Kimberley. But Macdonald appears to have blundered, and passed along one letter that laid bare his scheme. Amid the Washington negotiations, Macdonald wrote to his Finance Minister, Francis Hincks, to tell him that he had "worked out a plan in my head." If, he wrote, the cabinet implied they would not ratify the treaty, Britain "in her desire to close every possible cause of dispute," would "make us a liberal offer. We should lose all this advantage if we showed any symptoms of yielding." Lisgar obediently passed the letter along to Kimberley, adding a puzzled P.S: "'I cannot however think it was written with the intention that it should be placed in my hands."[3]

Kimberley was outraged at Macdonald's "knavery,"[4] but Lisgar nevertheless persuaded him to provide a railway loan guarantee as compensation for Canada. The Conservatives were facing a tough battle in the upcoming election and could have trouble over the terms of the treaty, Lisgar urged, although he admitted that Macdonald should not "play fast and loose" with the imperial government as he did with "intriguers in local politics."[5] He admitted privately that one "unpleasant part of what is going on is that I am almost sure we have not Sir J.A.M's real opinion…. [H]e is so Protean one cannot say what he may be at from day to day."[6]

As Lisgar predicted, Macdonald's Conservatives did indeed struggle to win the 1872 election in the wake of the treaty's ratification. They held on to power with a scant margin of six seats and a razor-thin edge in the popular vote — 49.9% to 49.1%.[7] Macdonald's desperate strategy to win as many votes as possible came back to haunt him, and in 1873 he would be compelled to resign amid scandal — more on that in a moment.

Alexander Mackenzie's Liberal administration (1873-78) had the misfortune to preside over a period of economic depression, with their own promising free trade negotiations with the Americans foundering at the stage of U.S. Senate approval. Liberal finance minister Richard Cartwright candidly admitted in 1877 that they were as powerless to affect economic cycles as "any other set of flies on a wheel."[8]

Macdonald's Conservatives offered a much more optimistic message to win the 1878 election: that protection for Canada's infant industries — the National Policy — would bring a return to prosperity. While in opposition, Macdonald had hectored Mackenzie over his allegedly uncertain tariff policy. Macdonald claimed that Mackenzie had endorsed free trade during a speech in Dundee, but promised protection to Montreal's manufacturers: "He was a Free Trader in Scotland, and a Protectionist in Montreal."[9] Macdonald opted for a metaphor to describe his own policy: if you build a wall, he said, it would be like a dam "which backs up the water of a stream until it overflows the country and does a great deal of mischief." But if a moderate amount of water was allowed to go over the wall, "that water can be used for fertilizing, manufacturing," and other good purposes. "Do you want to dam protection?" a testy Mackenzie countered. Macdonald playfully scolded him for swearing in the House.[10]

In later years, Macdonald proudly trumpeted the success of protectionism. In an 1881 speech to the workingmen of Toronto, he congratulated the crowd on having better looking hats and coats than before the 1878 election, when all had "sinking hearts, empty pockets, and empty larders." As a "bloated" office holder, he himself was "not a bit the worse for my three year's salary," he remarked. He encouraged the crowd to be sceptical of Liberals' promises that they would not interfere with manufacturers but "educate them to free trade by slow degrees" and show them the fallacy of protection. He likened it to a farmer's experiment to gradually reduce his horse's feed to eliminate extravagance. The farmer succeeded in reducing it to a wisp of straw, but, despite the successful experiment, the horse died.[11]

His later claims notwithstanding, Macdonald's own plan for tariff policy was far from transparent when he returned to power in September 1878. Britain's cabinet wished to be informed about what direction Canada would be taking; in theory, Britain could still veto measures implementing differential duties affecting the mother country. But the governor general had difficulty communicating Macdonald's intentions. A couple of months after the 1878 election, the Marquis of Lorne wrote privately to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, that Macdonald assured him that the "English papers were entirely mistaken" in their idea that Canada planned to implement a protective tariff. "It would be a Revenue Tariff."[12] Even as late as February 1879, a month before the budget, Lorne reported that, according to Macdonald, the policy was for a "strictly revenue tariff."[13] Lorne's predecessor, Lord Dufferin, who had sworn in the new Macdonald administration just before his departure, had been no more certain. He admitted that Macdonald's "utterances on the subject [of the tariff] have been so purposely vague that I have been hardly able myself to gather his intentions."[14] Macdonald promised to submit any financial proposals to the British government in advance,[15] but only in the very week that the budget was to go before the house was Lorne able to hurriedly telegraph the proposals to Britain, leaving no time for any meaningful discussion.[16] Hicks-Beach privately admitted that any British veto was effectively a dead letter—"it would be useless for us to try."[17] Macdonald seldom opted for direct confrontation with British authorities, but this would not be the only time in which he gained his point through procrastination and equivocation.

And what about that demonstrable corruption? The nadir of Macdonald's political career was undoubtedly the Pacific Scandal that broke in April 1873: damning revelations that, during the 1872 election campaign, the Conservatives had sought funds from Sir Hugh Allan in exchange for the contract to build the railway to British Columbia. In early July 1873, the Liberal *Globe* published the sordid details, including a memorandum from Macdonald's Quebec wingman, George-Etienne Cartier, listing the monetary "requirements" of each politician, including $35,000 for Macdonald himself. Macdonald's own published telegrams to Allan promised support for his bid to lead the CPR consortium, but cautioned that "the whole matter [is] to be kept quiet until after the elections." In one particularly candid message, Macdonald pleaded that he "must have another ten thousand. Do not fail me."[18]

During the 1872 campaign, Macdonald had been compelled to hurry back to Kingston to fight for his own seat. The city had been drained of its lifeblood with the withdrawal of the imperial garrison, and prominent merchant John Carruthers was running a spirited Liberal campaign. But Macdonald's return to the hustings in his own hometown may not have given him the boost he hoped. He wildly and implausibly accused Carruthers of a far-reaching conspiracy to inflate the price of fuel oil. When Carruthers denied the accusation, Macdonald slapped his face and tried to grab him by the throat. He was evidently "much excited," according to a local newspaper — a description that historian Ged Martin decodes as a euphemism for "drunk." Macdonald hung on to his seat by 131 votes.[19]

Cartier, despite his efforts, was defeated in Montreal East, and had to be parachuted into a seat for Provencher, Manitoba. But as the details of the railway scandal began to seep out, the fifty-eight-year-old Cartier suddenly succumbed to Bright's disease while away in London. Macdonald received the cable on the morning of 20 May 1873 and announced the news in the House of Commons that afternoon. He burst into tears, and stood mutely reaching toward the empty seat Cartier once occupied.[20]

Macdonald was left behind to weather the storm that was growing over the course of the summer. By early August, he had repaired to Rivière du Loup on a drinking binge, beyond the reach of friend or foe. The *Globe* speculated that he had committed suicide.[21] Parliament was due to resume sitting in mid-August, and the governor general agreed to an immediate prorogation of the house on August 15, despite a delegation of MPs bearing a 92-signature petition of protest. Macdonald had hoped to avoid a new session until February 1874, but Dufferin insisted on a shorter break.[22] In the event, the prorogation only delayed the inevitable, and when the house began a new session on October 23, it became evident that Macdonald had lost crucial support. By November 5, he tendered his resignation to the governor general, and began five years in the wilderness of opposition.

The Pacific Scandal is well known, but Ged Martin has shed light on a later forgotten episode that might have ended Macdonald's long career in utter disgrace. Just as Cartier's sudden death in 1873 spared him from the consequences of the emerging Pacific Scandal, Macdonald succumbed to a fatal stroke in June 1891 as devastating new revelations were on the horizon. What Martin terms the Bancroft scandal has been "laundered out" of Macdonald's life story.[23]

Macdonald's precarious hold on his home riding of Kingston had been cinched with a new dry-dock for the city, open to competitive bids in 1889. But shortly after Macdonald's triumph in the 1891 election, a parliamentary committee began investigations into deep-seated corruption on the part of Minister of Public Works Hector Langevin and contractor and MP Thomas McGreevy. This investigation threatened to uncover a wider story entangled with the McGreevy scandal: awkward questions were surfacing about the successful bidder for the Kingston dry-dock project, an unknown called Andrew C. Bancroft, whose only address was a post office box. Bancroft, Martin reveals, was an invention, created to give the appearance of proper arm's length procedure in the awarding of the dry-dock contract when the real principals had links to Langevin's office. The 1891 investigations ended Langevin's cabinet career — along with his hopes to succeed Macdonald — and yielded jail terms for McGreevy, his brother, and other associates.

Was Macdonald aware of the fraud? Martin considers it a certainty. The prime minister paid close attention to patronage matters, even ascertaining the political affiliations of those who supplied firewood to Kingston's penitentiary. Further, he was likely to have taken an interest in the dry-dock project personally, since he had business experience with docks and wharves.[24] At fifty-eight, Macdonald had passed through the ignominy of the Pacific Scandal. But by 1891, after a punishing election campaign, the 76-year-old prime minister no longer had the resilience to bear a fresh scandal.

Closer inspection, then, makes it impossible to idealize John A. Macdonald. He was a successful politician, and, as many idealists have discovered, long-term success demanded flexibility and compromise. He found ways to move forward, to embrace the possible, even if not precisely what he sought. Some of his compromises proved to be moral ones. After years in office and habits of association with party insiders and fixers, Macdonald crossed the line between when it was acceptable to yield and when it was not. But it is also impossible to study Macdonald, to read his letters, without developing an affection for him. Our fondness for Macdonald does not depend on his perfection — or even probity — and on the 200th anniversary of his birth, Macdonald still wins our grudging admiration.

NOTES

1 *Maclean's* magazine, 10 June 2011.

2 As quoted by Ged Martin, "Archival Evidence and John A. Macdonald Biography," *Journal of Historical Biography* 1 (Spring 2007): 91.

3 Library and Archives Canada [LAC], Kimberley Papers, A 314, Lisgar to Kimberley 11 May 1871, enclosure, Macdonald to Francis Hincks, n.d. and postscript by Lisgar. It is ironic that historians subsequently blamed Lisgar for hampering Macdonald's diplomatic negotiations by passing on his private letters to British officials.

4 LAC, Kimberley Papers, A 314, Lisgar to Kimberley 11 May 1871, enclosure, Macdonald to Francis Hincks, n.d., Minutes by Kimberley, 23 May 1871; Gladstone 25 May 1871.

5 LAC, Kimberley Papers, A 314, Lisgar to Kimberley, private, 17 August 1871.

6 Library and Archives Canada, 314 Kimberley Papers, 30 August 1871 Lisgar to Kimberley, private.

7 The other 1% of the popular vote went to "other" candidates. Parliament of Canada, Electoral results, 2nd election, autumn 1872, http://www.parl.gc.ca/parlinfo/Compilations/ElectionsAndRidings/ResultsParty.aspx?Season=0&Parliament=4190e40c-3fa8-409c-bab7-5a4008b89f47

8 As quoted by Ben Forster, "Alexander Mackenzie," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mackenzie_alexander_12E.html

9 John A. Macdonald, 7 March 1876, *House of Commons Debates*, 3rd Parliament, Third Session, vol. 1, 495. http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC0303_03/536?r=0&s=2

10 Ibid.: 493.

11 John A. Macdonald, speech to the Workingmen of Toronto, 30 May 1881 https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/primeministers/h4-4035-e.html

12 Lorne to Hicks-Beach, 3 December 1878, Lorne MS, A 717.

13 Lorne to Hicks-Beach, 8 February 1879, Lorne MS, A 717.

14 Dufferin to Lorne, 22 August 1878, LAC, Dufferin MS, A 416.

15 Hicks-Beach to Lorne, 31 December 1878, Lorne MS, A 717.

16 Lorne to Hicks-Beach, - [?] March 1879, Lorne MS, A 717.

17 Hicks-Beach to Lorne, 11 February 1879, Lorne MS, A 717.

18 As quoted in J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe*, vol II: *Statesman of Confederation*, 1860-1880 (Toronto: Macmillan, 1963): 305.

19 Ged Martin, *Favourite Son? John A. Macdonald and the Voters of Kingston, 1841-1891* (Kingston: Kingston Historical Society, 2010): 83-94.

20 J.-C. Bonenfant, "George-Etienne Cartier," Dictionary of Canadian Biography http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/cartier_george_etienne_10E.html.

21 LAC, Dufferin Papers, A 407, Dufferin to Kimberley, private, 9 August 1873.

22 Dufferin to Kimberley, despatch 197, 15 August 1873, and enclosure "Memorial" presented 13 August 1873, William Leggo, The History of the Administration of the Right Honorable Frederick Temple, Earl of Dufferin (Montreal: Lovell Publishing, 1878),160-168; LAC, Dufferin Papers, A 410, Dufferin to Macdonald, private, 31 July 1873; Barbara J. Messamore, Canada's Governors General, 1847-1878: Biography and Constitutional Evolution (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), chapter 8.

23 Ged Martin, Favourite Son?: 154.

24 Ibid.: 158.

ACKNOWLEDGING PATRIARCH'S FAILURES WILL HELP CANADA MATURE AS A NATION

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In 2015, as the bicentennial of John A. Macdonald's birth is being marked, our first and most important Prime Minister has become a lightning rod for a debate over Canada's past but also over its present. As an historian, I am gratified to see such a thoughtful debate sustained over so long; it seems like Canadian history, and Macdonald's place in it, finally matters. The poles in the argument over his legacy were most succinctly staked out in the debate in the *Walrus* as the anniversary of Macdonald's birth in January 2015 grew near. On one hand, Stephen Marche described our first PM as a corrupt drunken racist deserving our "considered and active contempt."[1] At the other end of the debate, Macdonald's most recent biographer, Richard Gwyn, defended his protagonist portraying Sir John A. as "Canada's First Scapegoat," accused by 21st-century writers of being "a cover for our own failings" as a nation.[2] In his defence of "Old Tomorrow," Gwyn rightfully defended his hero on the charges of corruption (they were all corrupt in those days), on the alcoholism issue (he was sober for most of his time as P.M.), and on his racism (which Gwyn notes was surpassed in the case of the Chinese by Macdonald's Liberal successor, Wilfrid Laurier, who raised the notorious Head Tax by 500%).