MACDONALD'S ENDURING SUCCESS IN QUEBEC

PATRICE DUTIL is an author, commentator and occasional activist as well as a professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Ryerson University. Professor Dutil wasa visiting scholar at Massey College, University of Toronto in the last half of 2013 and visiting professor at the George Mason University *School of Public Policy* during the winter term of 2014. His main research interests are political and public sector leadership, the process of political development, and the study of elections.

Macdonald's relationship with Quebec has always been something of an enigma. His unbending support for Confederation and its constitutional dedication to "promoting the interests of the British Empire" was easily seen as nothing less than the projection of Lord Durham's assimilationist vision for French Canada.[1] It could have been, for him, a political disability in 1867. Long perceived to have been dependent on George-Etienne Cartier for political insights and support, he was practically muted upon his friend's death in 1873, just as the government was falling apart under the crushing weight of evidence pointing to corruption. Twelve years later, Macdonald again was considered particularly vulnerable after the hanging of Louis Riel in late 1885. Not least, Quebeckers left in droves under his watch—anywhere between 20% and 30% of the population left in order to find work, mostly to the United States. Already 400,000 had established themselves in New England by the mid-1870s.[2] Holding Macdonald and his government responsible for economic mismanagement, people voted with their feet more than they did with their ballots. Finally, Macdonald spoke no French and hardly campaigned in Quebec. About 20% of the population of Quebec in this period was Anglophone.

And yet Macdonald remained popular in Quebec during the entire period from 1867 to his death in 1891. He faced the electorate seven times, won a majority of seats five times (the exceptions were the debacle of 1874 and the rise of Wilfrid Laurier in 1891) and the popular vote in the province on every occasion. In fact, Macdonald proved to be generally far more in step with the ideas and attitudes of his Quebec contemporaries than commonly believed. He was always more popular in Quebec than he was in Ontario (only in the election of 1887 did his score of the popular vote in Ontario beat that of Quebec), and his support in the province proved far less volatile than in the rest of the country.

How did he do it?[3] Politically, Macdonald was adroit. His protectionist message clearly resonated, at least for those who stayed. He avoided intrusions into the province's affairs. He disallowed only four statutes of the Quebec legislature (compared to seven in Ontario, thirteen in British Columbia and eighteen in Manitoba!) and only once openly intervened in provincial politics. He did that in 1879 by removing a partisan Liberal lieutenant-governor so that, in turn, the controversial Liberal government could be dismissed. His respect for French Canada, in contrast with the anti-French attitude of George Brown, earned him steady support both at the local and the provincial level. His good-enough government, it seems, was more than sufficient for a plurality of the voters against Liberals led by Alexander Mackenzie, Edward Blake and even Wilfrid Laurier. Macdonald brilliantly allied himself with a creative assortment of key political opinion leaders, local political entrepreneurs and, not least, the Catholic Church, an institution in which he had no interest or tie. The eulogies of Macdonald in the House of Commons, not surprisingly in light of this particular popularity, were led by two French Quebeckers, his friend Hector Langevin and his adversary, Wilfrid Laurier.

How was this success expressed? A close look at the very detailed electoral results in Quebec provided by the Parliament of Canada offers some clues.[4]

In part, Macdonald was lucky in his adversaries. In 1867, the issue put before the people was Confederation itself. The shell-shocked opposition of essentially nameless Liberals were was informally led by Brown, a man who detested French Canada. In that first election, 14 Conservatives were acclaimed as were five Liberal-Conservatives—almost a third of the 65 seats—while the Liberals were acclaimed in only four ridings. Macdonald's Conservative Party took 37 of the 65 seats in the province and 29% of the vote while the Liberal-Conservatives won 11 seats and 12.1% of the suffrage, for a combined total of 48 seats and 41.1% of the vote. The Liberal party, in contrast, only took 17 seats and 28% of the vote. Their putative leader, Antoine-Aimé Dorion, won Hochelaga, the large district that encompassed the eastern part of the island of Montreal, with only a handful of votes to spare against a total unknown. The Conservative coalition and the Liberals scooped all of the province's seats, hiding the fact that another 31.8% of the votes had gone to a wide variety of independent candidates, though none were actually elected to office. Support for non-affiliated candidates was part of a national trend at the time: Ontario voters gave 37.6% to a mixture of independents, New Brunswick 39.3% and Nova Scotia 24.4%.[5]

Facing a tougher opposition in the informal leadership team of Blake (who was premier of Ontario) and Mackenzie in 1872, Macdonald emphasized the enormous accomplishments of his first mandate and pleaded for more time to complete the job of Confederation. As in 1867, 19 ridings were uncontested in Quebec — nine went to the Conservatives, five to the Liberal-Conservatives and five to the Liberals. For the rest, the campaign in Quebec turned on Macdonald's position of neutrality regarding New Brunswick's withdrawal of funding for Catholic schools. That issue enflamed the rising ultramontanes and the increasingly confident Liberal leadership of Louis-Amable Jetté, who renamed his party the Parti national. Jetté ran against Cartier himself in Montreal East, and beat him. Macdonald's coalition of Conservatives, Liberal-Conservatives and one Independent Conservative (in the riding of Beauharnois, which elected either an "independent" Conservative or a Conservative tout court in six of seven elections) still took 38 seats and increased its share of the vote to 44.3%, though it lost ten seats, most notably in Montreal and along the south shore of the St. Lawrence. As in the first national election, almost one in four electors voiced their support for local, unattached candidates (in this last vote before the secret ballot was introduced in 1874).

The shockwave of the Pacific Scandal rocked Macdonald's party in Quebec in the debacle of 1874. Facing a much stronger united Liberal party under Mackenzie and Dorion, and deprived of Cartier's help, Macdonald's vote collapsed in Quebec. His Conservative/Liberal-Conservatives still won by acclamation in 14 ridings, but the Liberals tripled their acclaimed victories and took 16 seats. In the ridings with contests, Macdonald's coalition collected 38.1% of the vote, more than a 20% drop, and only 29 seats. This disastrous result, all the same, was comparable to what the Liberals managed. They collected 36.7% of the vote but took 36 seats — more than the Conservatives for the first time. Over 25% of Quebec voters again chose a wide variety of independents.

Macdonald came roaring back in 1878, capturing 48 seats and 50.9% of the vote, while the Liberals dropped to 17 seats and 21.2% of the vote. While the ballot for independent candidates continued to drop elsewhere, in Quebec it climbed again, reaching over 27% of the votes — more than a quarter of the voting public could not commit to supporting a party. Macdonald's coalition won by acclamation in only three ridings, while the Liberals took just one without a contest — another dramatic change in Quebec politics. All the same, the gains were impressive as Quebec voters manifested their disapproval of the Mackenzie government and tripled their bets on Macdonald's proposal for a National Policy. Macdonald's provincial team was, now headed by Langevin (who lost his seat, ironically, and would have to run in a by-election to return to cabinet) and Israel Tarte, the master organizer.

The popularity of the Macdonald government continued into 1882, and no less than 16 of his partisans were elected by acclamation to the House of Commons. The Liberals only took one seat in this

manner. Elsewhere in the province the Tories fared well before the opposition led by Blake. Macdonald's coalition of Conservatives, Liberal-Conservatives, Nationalist Conservative and Independent Conservative increased its take with 52 seats and 50.3% of the vote. Finally, the support for no-label candidates in Quebec was beginning to erode, translating into even more support for Macdonald. The Liberals lost three seats and their share of the popular vote dropped to 24.1% — almost 4% less than the vote for the candidates with no party labels at all. It was, for them, their most humiliating defeat of the Macdonald era.

Macdonald's popularity was riding high when the troubles of the insurrection in the West in 1885 and the subsequent hanging of Louis Riel that November threatened to destroy his name in Quebec. The timing could hardly have been worse for the government, but Macdonald called an election to be held fifteen months after Riel was executed.

Facing Blake again, Macdonald could have expected a drubbing in Quebec in February 1887, and he got one in terms of seats, losing 16 of 52 (he collected 23 seats among Conservatives, eight among Liberal-Conservatives, and two Independent Conservatives for a total of 36). Three Liberals were acclaimed, while three more Conservative seats were taken without a contest. For the rest, what was remarkable was the Macdonald coalition's take of the popular vote: 50.1%, a rounding error of a drop over the 1882 result! All the same, the Liberal gains could not be dismissed. Blake, with Laurier increasingly taking a visible place in the Liberal party leadership, more than doubled the Liberal vote, seeing it climb to 41.5%, and practically wiping out the independent vote. Macdonald lost what he might have expected in terms of seats (though he still won overall), but his dominance of the popular vote must have surprised even him.

Macdonald's remarkable resilience was confirmed four years later, in 1891, his last election. Once again, that contest turned on the National Policy and the Liberal alternative of a more free-trading form of commercial exchange with the outside world. It was Macdonald's last campaign, the one run on the banner of "The Old Flag, the Old Policy, the Old Leader"—Macdonald reminding his Quebec voters that he was running in favour of the empire, on an economic platform that had hardly brought prosperity to the land. Somewhat hurt by the allegations of corruption around Langevin and his Quebec-West backbencher Thomas McGreevy, Macdonald faced no less a figure than Laurier, Quebec's native son, as leader of the opposition. Honoré Mercier, the Quebec Premier and leader of the Parti nationaliste, also campaigned against the Tories. The situation was made worse by the fact that one of Macdonald's most promising Ontario backbenchers, D'Alton McCarthy, was leading an anti-French crusade. The aging Macdonald could not muster much of a campaign in Quebec, and the Conservatives lost another six seats as a result. Before the votes were counted, one Conservative had been acclaimed, and both Langevin and McGreevy

had been reelected. When the votes attributed to the various independent "Conservatives" were counted, Macdonald had collected an astounding 49.1% of the vote, a loss of 1% on the result of 1887. The Liberals took 33 seats — three more than Macdonald — and had finally taken the Quebec stronghold, not because more people had supported the party, but because its vote had been more efficiently distributed.[6]

Macdonald was successful in attracting solid, if sometimes lackluster, candidates, and he seldom lost a cabinet member from Quebec in a general election. Cartier, certainly, was of the highest rank, putting his friends in the service of the conservative cause. Cartier cemented a strong base in Quebec that allowed Macdonald to show himself — and his administration — as friendly to Quebec. The first cabinet contained three French Canadians (all from Quebec): Cartier (Militia and Defence), Hector-Louis Langevin (Indian Affairs, then Public Works) and Jean-Charles Chapais (Agriculture and Statistics, followed by Receiver General). Others would join Macdonald in cabinet over the evolution of the mandate with various degrees of success, including two former premiers of Quebec, Joseph-Alfred Mousseau and Adolphe Chapleau, and others such as Theodore Robitaille, Louis F.G. Baby, Rodrigue Masson, Adolphe Caron.

For 110 years, in the heart of Dominion Square in downtown Montreal, a monument in memory of John A. Macdonald has stood. It was funded by local citizens and unveiled by the Governor General on June 6, 1895. It is still today the most elaborate commemoration of Macdonald, as he is dressed as Knight of the Order of the Bath and stands under a stone baldachin topped by a female figure carrying a horn of plenty (representing Canada). People may wonder why such an imposing cenotaph stands in the heart of the second-largest Francophone city in the world, but it stands as an eloquent reminder of how popular the man was in Quebec in his time.

NOTES

1 *Constitution Act, 1867*, preamble.

2 House of Commons *Debates*, 1 May 1888, column 1096.

3 This issue has not been addressed. The federal elections in Quebec from 1867 to 1891 are mentioned in passing in Arthur Silver, *The French Canadian Idea of Confederation, 1864-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) and in Ramsay Cook, The Maple Leaf Forever (Toronto: Macmillan, 1971), particularly chapter 5. The meta-treatments do not give Quebec particular attention. See John Duffy, *Fights of our Lives* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2002) and Lawrence Leduc, Jon Pammett, Judith McKenzie, André Turcotte, *Dynasties and Interludes: Past and Present in Canadian Electoral Politics* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2010).

4 The statistics used in this study are drawn from the Parliament of Canada's "History of Federal Ridings Since 1867" website: http://www.parl.gc.ca/About/Parliament/FederalRidingsHistory/HFER.asp. These results are far more detailed than the commonly used figures provided by J. Murray Beck, *Pendulum of Power: Canada's Federal Elections* (Toronto: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1968).

5 Remarkably little has been written about the 1867 election in Quebec. Marcel Bellavance underscores the high level of abstention but neglects the high level of support for "independents" in his study of the 1867 election in Quebec. See *Le Québec et la confédération : Un choix libre ? Le clergé et la constitution de 1867* (Sillery : Septentrion, 1992). Bellavance argues that clergy were heavily involved in the election. An opposing view is Walter Ullman, "The Quebec Bishops and Confederation", an article that originally appeared in the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1963 and reprinted in Ramsay Cook (ed.) *Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967). The period is broadly discussed in Michel Brunet, « Les Canadiens français face à la confédération (1867-1966) » in Michel Brunet, *Québec-Canada Anglais : Deux itinéraires, un affrontement* (Montréal : Editions HMH, 1969).

6 The campaign is well described in Christopher Pennington, *The Destiny of Canada: Macdonald, Laurier and the Election of 1891* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2011).