MACDONALD'S PUSH FOR PROSPERITY OVERCAME CONFLICTS OF IDENTITY

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Right from the beginning of his political career, John A. Macdonald offered voters a clear choice between a politics of wealth and a politics of identity. In 1844, when he published his platform in the Kingston *Gazette*, Macdonald declared: "In a young country like Canada, I am of opinion that it is of more consequence to endeavour to develop its resources and improve its physical advantages, than to waste the time of the legislature and the money of the people in fruitless discussions on abstract and theoretical questions of government."[1] Macdonald always took the view that quarrelling could not resolve Canada's differences but development might. He backed those arguments with a personal warmth and bonhomie that extended even to political opponents. Maybe Canadians really *could* get along! But Macdonald's platform had a built-in bias in favour of wealth that fuelled economic polarization in the "gilded age" politics of late-Victorian Canada. The growing gaps between extremes of wealth and poverty added new fuel to old tensions and made classic Macdonaldian accommodations anachronistic.

Macdonald's attack on identity politics rested upon an underlying appeal to a shared British civic identity. He backed Confederation on grounds that it would reinforce rather than loosen the bonds between mother country and colony, and he campaigned to the end on the slogan "A British subject I was born and a British subject I will die." But British identity, for Macdonald, did not go much deeper than the British formula for economic and political success: parliamentary supremacy, liberal economics and a property franchise. Under force of circumstance — the rise of American protectionism — he abandoned liberal economics without much obvious regret and introduced a protective tariff that enriched both government and party coffers. He celebrated the achievement of a national property franchise in 1885 as his greatest achievement.

Ambitious Canadian politicians learned an enduring lesson from Macdonald's arguments against identity politics. While Grit and Liberal rivals tended to ramp up their anti-Catholic and anti-French diatribes, Macdonald drew French-Canadian support by continually damping down such appeals. In 1856, in a famous letter to the editor of the Montreal *Gazette*, he read the riot act to the Anglo-Protestants of Montreal, telling them to stop being so damn superior, so much like Northern Ireland's Anglo-Protestant governing classes. Montreal's Anglo-elite must, he argued, make an effort to appeal to the French-Canadian voters who were, after all, the majority in that region. Watch out, he warned, or they would notice just who *really* controlled most patronage. That imbalance would lessen in subsequent years as Macdonald's alliance with French-Canadian political leadership, above all George-Etienne Cartier and Hector Langevin, sent substantial public spending to Quebec. But even Macdonald could not really circumvent identity politics entirely. Macdonald couldn't do without the bellicose, Protestant, Orange Order, though it, too, received the riot-act treatment. Ethnic and religious communities were represented at the highest levels in Macdonald's government on condition that they moderate their demands. Canadian politics remained deeply infused with ethnic and religious resentments, but those resentments rarely broke out into open violence. A lifetime of reading that riot act must, over the long term, have helped to keep the body count down in Canada.

Macdonald was, in many respects, a man of the eighteenth rather than the 19th century in his distrust of popular nationalism. He resisted violent nation-building projects whether within or without colonial, national, or imperial structures of legitimation. He didn't like to pledge support to imperial armies and insisted that he had done his bit for troop movements by building a transcontinental railway. Nor did he like ordering out the troops at home, though he did it. His new federal government barely got around to creating federal mechanisms for law enforcement, and largely as an afterthought. At the outset, Macdonald's was a remarkably non-violent political vision of nationhood, although of course that didn't last long. At the time of the first

Riel uprising, he sent British troops to Red River but he managed to negotiate a peaceful end to the crisis. "'A long way to come,' remarked a lieutenant, 'to have the band play *God Save the Queen*.'"[2] Soon afterwards, a national, quasi-military police force was created to keep the peace in western Canada. And when Riel led a violent insurrection for the second time in 1885, Macdonald was forced to choose between Ontario's Orange Order and Quebec's French Canadians, and he definitively sided with the former. By this time, Macdonald was losing control of the French-Canadian wing: Cartier was dead and Hector Langevin seemed to be grasping for support by inciting rather than quelling violent excesses. Late in 1885, as the world waited on tenterhooks to hear Riel's fate, Montreal newspapers under Langevin's influence came perilously close to urging open insurrection against a Liberal mayor who was trying to contain a devastating smallpox epidemic by imposing compulsory isolation and vaccination. Under such strains, the moderate and moderating French-English alliance foundered.

Macdonald's governing project always had a centre: not identity but property. What Churchill said of democracy, Macdonald might have said of rule by property: that it was the worst except for all the others. If you privileged the propertied classes, you had the best chance of avoiding the kind of ethnic and religious demagoguery that Macdonald accused his old enemy, George Brown, of unleashing in the *Globe*. Macdonald realized that rule of property could rest relatively lightly on the shoulders of the propertied because most households were sufficiently propertied to enjoy the franchise in Canada around the time that he entered politics. Because property in Canada was cheaper and more readily available than in Britain, a British franchise of forty shillings freehold enfranchised far more than the 3% who voted in British national elections at the time. Appealing to a broad swath of population as propertied interests enabled Macdonald to frame a new constitution around a transcontinental interest in economic development and prosperity. Surely *everyone*, whatever their background, sought economic development and prosperity. The BNA Act, therefore, devolved social politics — education, religion, other elements of cultural identity — to the local governments so as to let the federal government focus on economic development.

But as the century progressed, growing numbers of unpropertied people, including an emerging urban proletariat, women, and racialized minorities such as Chinese immigrants, Metis, or status "Indians" made rule by property less palatable and more coercive, not to say openly violent. These people were more or less left out of the national prosperity project and their sufferings were more or less terrible as a consequence. In Montreal, for example, both infant mortality and smallpox struck the urban poor very hard and the resultant mortality statistics showed all too clearly that death tended to have a particular religion and ethnicity. Skilled at deflating ethnic tensions, Macdonald was much less able to deflate socio-economic tensions. You might credibly claim

to mitigate the former by throwing heaps of money at businessmen, but not the second, and the claim became especially threadbare as leftist critiques of Liberal-Conservative rule began to gain traction across the country. The widespread success of the Knights of Labour — a radical coalition of skilled and unskilled workers — in the 1880s largely confounded Macdonald. A Royal Commission on the Relations of Capital and Labour was created in 1886 as a temporary sop, but it raised more concerns than it resolved. The Knights began to decline, but people were still embracing unorthodox political organizations — ranging from socialist parties to farmers' associations to tax-reform clubs — in droves. Strong ethnic and religious leanings in some of these organizations worked to thrust old resentments back into federal politics. Provincial premiers yoked provincial rights campaigns to such grievances and when Macdonald brandished the federal veto, they took their complaints to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, the highest court of appeal, where the premiers tended to win their causes.

As for Macdonald's attempts to improve conditions for Indigenous peoples by civilization and enfranchisement, these deteriorated into a travesty of paternalism. Continued resistance led officials in the Department of Indian Affairs to expand rather than reduce the imbalance of power between themselves and "Indians." The result was predictable according to the kinds of classic political theories that Macdonald generally respected. Power, it turned out, corrupts. Macdonald should have known better. But he simply had no formula for dealing with poverty and that absence gave new strength and impetus to the radical critiques of Macdonaldian governance. As new kinds of social investigators began to emerge in university departments, philanthropic organizations, and provincial and municipal institutions, they began develop a wide range of conceptions of and remedies to resolve the problem of poverty. At their worst, they made poverty a function of biological identity, inaugurating a new kind of racism in early 20th century Canada. In such a world, Macdonald's classic mid-Victorian formula for a government of, by, and for generalized prosperity and clientelism could not but be anachronistic.

NOTES

1 Donald Creighton and P.B. Waite, *John A. Macdonald, The Young Politician, The Old Chieftain* (Toronto : UTP, 1998): 97.

2 John Herd Thompson and Stephen J. Randall, *Canada and the United States : Ambivalent Allies* (University of Georgia Press, 2010): 46.