ACADIAN COLLECTIVE IDENTITY BEFORE AND AFTER CONFEDERATION: THE CASE OF NEW BRUNSWICK ACADIANS

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a brief review of the Acadian reaction to Confederation before and after 1867. In the years leading to the creation of the Dominion of Canada, the Acadians from the Maritimes provinces strongly opposed the proposed confederation. Notably, in New Brunswick, many Acadian constituencies rejected the union of the provinces, even when their religious superiors advocated its adoption. What reasons motivated the Acadian elite to refuse Confederation while the Catholic Church and the French Canadians saw it as an advantageous repositioning? And how did the newly emerged Acadian elite from Collège Saint-Joseph continue to shape Acadian identity while navigating around this new level of government after 1867?

INTRODUCTION

Pascal Poirier wrote in the Acadian newspaper *l'Évangéline* on February 5, 1903: "The College in Memramcook and, indirectly, the confederation of provinces, saved our French nationality." Attributing the safeguard of Acadie to the Collège Saint-Joseph, the first post-secondary institution in Acadie founded in 1864, goes without saying. However, the second part of this statement may be surprising, given the tenacious opposition of Acadians to the proposed confederation. What motivated this radical change of position? In an effort to answer these questions this article provides a brief review of Acadian reactions to Confederation before and after 1867. More specifically, I suggest that the analysis of discourse on the Confederation by the Acadian elite after 1867 may shed new light on the situation of Acadians as a minority community at the time of the creation of the Dominion of Canada.

Indeed, the Acadians in the Maritimes had spoken strongly against the proposed confederation while Quebec, dissatisfied with the union of Upper and Lower Canada that prevailed earlier, came around to the idea in 1865 (Doucet, 250). Quebec guaranteed a significant French presence in the country project; therefore fear of English dominance was not the main cause motivating the Acadian people to reject it. In addition, although Acadians from the four Atlantic provinces were opposed to Confederation, the objection was most strongly voiced in New Brunswick. It is worth pointing out that, at the end of the 19th century, this province had the highest concentration of Acadians in the Atlantic provinces. Prince Edward Island was generally opposed to Confederation, which makes it difficult to assess the Acadian attitude as it is difficult to separate it from the anti-federalist mass of the island. Similarly, Newfoundland remained resolutely opposed to Confederation until the mid-20th century. As for Nova Scotia, Landry and Lang are of the opinion that "it is not really possible to elaborate on the position of the Acadians from Nova Scotia regarding the federal project." (159) Indeed, the opinion of Nova Scotians - Acadian or otherwise - is not clear because they had not been consulted prior to their entry into Confederation, although they attempted to undo the union thereafter (Conrad and Hiller, 132). In New Brunswick, however, there is a sharply divided demarcation between Acadians and anglophones on the question of Confederation.

OPPOSITION TO THE PROPOSED CONFEDERATION BEFORE 1867

New Brunswick Prime Minister Leonard Tilley, favorable to the proposed union, was at the end of his term in the winter of 1865 and called an election in the hope of obtaining a mandate from the people to enter into Confederation (Forbes and Muise, 37). The project was rejected and the Tilley government suffered a crushing defeat. In addition to the Acadian ridings in the counties of Westmorland, Kent, Northumberland, Gloucester and Victoria-Madawaska, who expressed strong opposition to the project, there was also significant resistance on the part of the Catholic clergy. At this time, Catholic Acadians in the Maritime provinces were under the control of an Irish clergy. Given the lack of a means of mass written communication before 1867 - the date of the creation of the first French-language newspaper in Canada - the Catholic Church conveyed most official messages to the Acadian people. It is therefore understandable that the Acadians had added its voice to that of the Irish clergy in its opposition to entry into Confederation. Unanimity within the Catholic Church was such that a pro-federalist, Charles Fisher, observed: "I find them in a solid phalanx united against Confederation and I know that no argument but one from the church will reach them." (Bailey, 391).

Yet the following year, in 1866, a pro-Confederation government was elected in New Brunswick, at least partly because Archbishop Thomas Connolly, in Halifax, had flip-flopped on the issue. He urged his bishops to instruct the Catholic people to vote in favor of Confederation, fearing annexation to the United States (MacNutt, 19). Although Bishop Sweeny of St. John was unfavorable to the union of provinces, Bishop Rogers of Chatham supported the directive and asked Irish Catholics to back the project. Acadians, including those counties within the diocese of Bishop Rogers, however, remained stubbornly against Confederation. Westmorland, Kent and Gloucester counties expressed their disagreement by electing anti-confederalists but this time, the Acadian minority failed to prevent the project from moving forward. The question remains as to why the Acadians and their priests disobeyed their religious superiors.

Many reasons have been put forward to explain the persistence of the Acadians in opposing the union of the provinces. Some suggested that because they had been persecuted for so long, Acadians resisted any change due to an atavistic reflex (Doucet, 262). Moreover, despite directives expressed by bishops Connolly and Rogers, parish priests generally disapproved of the Confederation and thus their flocks would have obeyed their priests while disobeying their bishops (Doucet, 256). Indeed, a priest closely involved in the establishment of Collège Saint-Joseph, Father Francis Xavier LaFrance, confirmed in a letter to the archbishop of Quebec that he had advised the Acadians to oppose Confederation (quoted in Doucet, 256). Some have suggested that the Acadians had not sided with Quebec because they accused them of "not having really considered the French minorities of Upper Canada and the Maritimes" (Wade 31, quoted

in Doucet, 259). Indeed, the *Constitution Act of 1867* (Section 133) allowed francophones and anglophones to speak either language in parliamentary debates taking place in Quebec or in federal court, but the language rights of francophones outside Québec had been completely ignored:

> *The linguistic minority in both provinces [Ontario and Quebec] was also protected: Quebec anglophones, by a linguistic protection and the right to denominational schools, a right also granted to Catholics in Ontario, including the Francophone minority. Acadians, in turn, even if they were a significant demographic segment of New Brunswick, were completely neglected. (Migneault, 17).*

When Bishop Connolly, seconded by bishops Rogers and Sweeny, claimed similar guarantees for religious minorities in the Maritimes provinces at the London Conference in 1866, he was turned down on the grounds that "under the new constitution that would soon be in force, education would become a provincial jurisdiction." (MacNutt 21).

In short, some general conclusions can be drawn from the Acadian opposition. Enjoying a renaissance at the time, the Acadians enjoyed a strong enough collective consciousness to dare to go against the current. By joining the Dominion of Canada, the Acadians were gaining another level of government, which might slow their progress. The emerging members of the first Acadian elite were slowly beginning to get access to professions which would open the door to politics and state affairs, and thus had no interest in further diluting their number. Although there were no forums for collective expression until the national conventions which started in 1881, the nationalist sentiment was already fermenting within their ranks and the Confederation project was probably perceived as incompatible with the Acadian nationalist project. Ultimately, Confederation amounted to assimilation for Acadians who cultivated a new pride as a separate people - distinct from the English-speaking peoples surrounding them of course, but also distinct from other peoples with whom they shared a language and religion, notably the Province of Quebec.

IDENTITY DISCOURSES IN POST-CONFEDERATION ACADIE

Following New Brunswick and Nova Scotia's entry into Confederation in 1867, and Prince Edward Island in 1873, Acadians living in the Maritimes had to face the fact that they were a minority people within the new country. How did the Acadian elite that had strongly opposed the project cope with this new reality? And how did they negotiate the various levels of government and collective identities, ranging from a colonial identity to a state identity?

Despite this new complication, the Acadian Renaissance movement only gained strength and reached its peak during the 1880s. Patriots of the Acadian Renaissance worked to restore the collective memory, and in 1881, at the first Acadian National Convention, a national holiday was chosen after an intense debate. Some advocated the adoption of Saint-Jean-Baptiste, in order to express solidarity with the French Canadians, while others insisted that Acadie should maintain a separate identity by choosing its own national holiday: the Assumption. Conscientious of the importance of maintaining links with the province of Quebec, speakers reminded their audience of the commonalities between the two peoples and evoked Confederation as the guarantor of this union:

> *The same religion, the same language and the same origin will keep us united as we have always been. We will also be united in another way, by a political union elevated above that of political parties - the way that we, French Canadians, English, Scottish, Irish, are united together by ties under the great Canadian Confederation. (Rev. Stanislas Joseph Doucet, Memramcook, 1881, quoted in Bourque and Richard, 137).*

Paradoxically, this reference to Confederation suggests that the relationship between Acadians and French-Canadians was on the same level as that which united all other peoples of Canada. Implicit in this speech is the notion that if the union of peoples under one flag may be favourable to the development of a nation, it was essential that everyone could maintain a separate collective identity within the new country – and this included an Acadian identity distinct from French Canada. The specter of

assimilation was an effective means of encouraging delegates to choose a distinct Acadian holiday. Reverend Marcel-François Richard went as far as provoking his audience with the following facetious suggestion: "by Confederation we have all become Canadians, and therefore there should be only one national holiday. In this case, the English and the Irish should be invited to meet with us to celebrate one national holiday, the Saint-Jean-Baptiste, because they are all Canadians." (Bourque and Richard, 151).

For his part, Pascal Poirier, the first Acadian senator, spoke more diplomatically:

> *National Acadian Day should not be, if we stay true to our past, that of the Scots, the Irish, or even the French-Canadians; though we are all citizens of the same Confederation and French Canadians are consanguineous brothers we love and with whom our destiny is inextricably linked. Each nationality has its national day, its family celebration. Why would the Acadians not have theirs as well? Either we must choose only one national holiday for everyone and then this holiday will be on July 1, the day of Confederation. Or each nationality that makes up the Dominion, not excepting the Acadians, must have its own celebration (without prejudice to the official holiday of July 1), and then there will be as many national holidays as there are nationalities in Canada. (Bourque and Richard, 144-145).*

The arguments of these Acadian patriots carried considerable weight, and most of the Acadian delegates opted for the preservation of their identity rather than the association with a stronger group. This choice was decisive for the Acadians, as it marked a desire to maintain the identity and history of the Acadians as distinct from French Canada. Nevertheless, some managed to find political benefits within the new Confederation.

In fact, the Acadian elite of the first Acadian National Convention saw Confederation as a way to preserve its distinct status because according to its constitution, all Canadian citizens were considered equal. Speakers frequently insisted on the fact that they were only asking what was given to other Canadians. Pierre-Amand Landry, president of the 1881 convention of Memramcook, spoke briefly in English in order to address the English dignitaries attending the event:

> *[…] Divine Providence in its wisdom has made this Dominion of ours one composed of different nationalities and of different creeds, each one as it were forming a separate family and the whole united forming a nation called the Canadian nation. The French Acadians are one of these families, and the members of this family are widely scattered and disseminated. As a compound part of this young but growing and prosperous Canadian nation, our family of French Acadians is equal in the eyes of our Constitution to the families of other origins. (Bourque and Richard, 184-185).*

This excerpt is particularly interesting and representative in its use of the word "nation," which means Canada ("the Canadian nation"), and its use of "nationalities," which refers to the different peoples who coexist within its boundaries. In this vision announcing a uniquely Canadian multiculturalism, the nation is composed of peoples, or "nationalities" of various origins.

Similarly, still in 1881, Rev. Philéas-Frédéric Bourgeois pointed out that Confederation guaranteed the Acadians the right to practice their religion: "Elsewhere in the Confederation, family and religion have found timely, forceful advocates for their rights. The state has granted to each sect, every religious denomination equal protection" (Bourque and Richard, 206). In other words, the equality of all citizens of Canada represented an advantage, at least theoretically, for minorities.

CONCLUSION

Opposition to Confederation on the part of the Acadians was not surprising given their position as a minority group and their desire not to be assimilated into Quebec or English Canada. During the 1860s, an Acadian elite began to emerge and a strong nationalist current fed into a resurgent collective identity. The Renaissance was characterized by the use of a collective memory which needed to be preserved by recalling a distinctive past – distinct not only from English-speaking peoples, but

also from French Canada. The Dominion of Canada had devised a place for French at the federal level and in the province of Quebec, but not in the Maritime provinces. It was logical and natural that the Acadians could not see how the entry into Confederation would be an advantage for them.

However, they were not numerous enough to prevent their provincial governments from entering the Confederation. Put before the *fait accompli*, the Acadian elite who spoke at the Acadian National Conventions recognized the advantage that claiming equal status might confer upon them, since it guaranteed them the same religious and linguistic rights as their fellow citizens. In the speeches published in newspapers after Confederation, the Acadian elite often insisted that they were only asking for the same privileges others already enjoyed, and they managed to adapt their collective identity to this new governmental structure. To illustrate this fact, it is worth pointing out that at the ten Acadian National Conventions which took place from 1881 to 1937, Acadians sang both God Save the Queen and Ave Maris Stella (the Acadian national anthem) and declared loyalty to the British crown while claiming an Acadian "nationalism" within the Canadian "nation." For post-Confederation Maritime Acadians, this identity scaffolding offered the necessary flexibility to ensure the survival of a collective memory, without offending the federal government, and provided a model that eventually allowed them to successfully claim official bilingualism in the province of New Brunswick.

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