THE GREATEST LESSON OF OUR HISTORY

THE HONOURABLE STÉPHANE DION, was Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs between 1996 and 2003, longer than any other Canadian since Confederation. In that capacity, he was instrumental in bringing countless federal-provincial negotiations to fruition and played a major role in the promotion of Canadian unity. As Minister also responsible for Official Languages, he crafted a renewal plan that was very well received in the community.

As Minister of the Environment from 2004 to 2005, he secured one of the greenest budgets in the history of Canada and contributed to the rescue of the Kyoto Protocol while chairing the UN Conference on Climate Change, held in Montreal in 2005.

In 2006, having been elected as Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and having become Leader of the Official Opposition in the House of Commons, he proposed a visionary plan to make Canada richer, fairer and greener. Following the 2008 election, he retained his seat as Member of Parliament for Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, a seat he has won seven times in a row since 1996.

Before entering politics, Stéphane Dion taught Political Science, first at Université de Moncton in 1984, then at Université de Montréal from 1984 to 1995. He has authored many publications.

Born in Quebec City, he studied at Université Laval before obtaining a Doctorate in Sociology from the Institut d'études politiques in Paris, France. He was also awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the Carlos III University of Madrid. He was the recipient of the 2011 Couchiching Award for Public Policy Leadership and sits on the External Advisory Board of the *Yale Climate and Energy Institute*.

At the present time, he chairs the Liberal Caucus Legislative Committee and acts as Liberal Critic for Intergovernmental Affairs, the Queen's Privy Council of Canada, Democratic Reform, Official Languagues and La Francophonie. Additionally, he is the Liberal Representative on the Sub-Committee on Private Members Business.

As we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Association for Canadian Studies and prepare for the 150th anniversary of Confederation, it is good to remember – as this book does – that Canadian history deserves to be known and taught and that this calls for the "active dialogue" proposed by Steven Schwinghamer. No, the history of Canada does not end here; as Randy Boswell says, it will survive the doomsayers who announce its death. To conclude, I will insist on what I think is the main reason for studying this history and examining it closely from every angle.

Our history is neither the most illustrious nor glittery – if by that, we mean pump, conquest and power. But at the risk of sounding provocative, I will argue that there are few histories closer to the democratic ideal than Canada's. Even with its failures and darker moments, which this book mentions, and its never-ending regional squabbles, echoed by Donald J. Savoie, the history of Canada compares favourably with that of

other countries in terms of the values associated with liberal democracy. If only for that reason, it must be known because it carries a wealth of lessons for the future.

March 11, 1998 marked the 150th anniversary of responsible government in Canada. On this occasion, historian and University of Edinburgh professor Ged Martin wrote:

> *"In the crucial combination of mass participation, human rights and self-government, Canada's history is second to none in the world."* [1]

I can think of no achievement of which a country could be prouder. If we were fully aware of this, we would certainly have celebrated the 150th anniversary of responsible government in Canada with as much fanfare as the French rightly celebrated, also in 1998, the 100th anniversary of Émile Zola's article *"J'accuse"*. In 2012, we would have done more than barely mention the thirtieth anniversary of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. And we would not have let the government of Canada stop, for all intents and purposes, supporting Canadian studies abroad; as Thomas H.B. Symons writes in this book, that was a "great mistake". We would also put more emphasis on celebrating the memory of John Peters Humphrey who, as Stuart Murray reminds us, was the principal author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We must understand the extent to which parliamentary democracy is a very recent – and still incomplete – victory for humankind. When I was a university student in the late 1970s, Eastern Europe, almost all of South America, a large part of the Mediterranean region and Asia all lived under authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Even in the democracies of the time, parties and ideologies advocating the dictatorship of the proletariat and other theories hostile to parliamentary democracy found a wide audience in labour movements, universities and ballot boxes.

The democratization wave that has swept through the last two decades of the 20th century is one of the most extraordinary phenomena in human history. Millions of human beings now enjoy the kind of democratic rights that Canada was fortunate to gain much earlier.

In fact, Canada is a pioneer of democracy. It is true that elected assemblies were established in Virginia in 1619 and in Massachusetts in 1634; but we were quick to follow, with Nova Scotia in 1758, Prince Edward Island in 1773, New Brunswick in 1785 and Lower and Upper Canada in 1792. It is an exceptional and admirable fact that, since 1792, our country has almost always been governed by a political regime comprising an elected assembly.

Those assemblies were elected by limited suffrage, through rather rudimentary procedures. Expanding voting rights and cleaning up electoral practices turned out to be difficult achievements for all fledgling democracies. There again, 19th century Canada was a leader.

Census-based suffrage was established in Canada following essentially the same rules as in Great Britain, but because our social structure was more egalitarian and property less concentrated, suffrage was in fact less restricted in Canada.

The powers of the first elected assemblies were much more limited than those of parliaments today. Here again, Canada was at the forefront of reform. As I said earlier, the system of responsible government in Canada is now 165 years old, one of the oldest in the world. Specifically, it was on March 11, 1848, that Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine became the first Prime Minister of Canada – which was then known as the Province of Canada – after the coalition of reformer parliamentarians in the two Canadas that he led with Robert Baldwin convinced the Governor General to appoint a Cabinet that had the support of the majority of the assembly. From that moment onward, a real link between government and governed was established. Responsible government had also been established in Nova Scotia a few weeks earlier. Those elected assemblies had powers that were quite extensive for that period, especially since, because we have never had a real aristocracy, our non-elected upper chambers did not have the same influence as those in Great Britain.

It would have been far preferable if the colonial authorities had consented to responsible government without a single drop of blood being spilt, that is, without the rebellions that were put down in Lower and Upper Canada (as Quebec and Ontario were then known). On the whole, however, the victory of democracy was achieved here under much more peaceful conditions than elsewhere, without the need for bloody revolution

to abolish royal despotism or civil war to abolish slavery. As noted by Allan Gordon, we should keep this comparison in mind when studying the rebellions that took place in Canada.

As well as their democratic dimension, the rebellions of 1837-38 in Lower Canada had a national dimension, to which the Durham Report's advocacy of the assimilation of French-Canadians reacted. But it must also be realized that the emerging liberal democracies of the 19th century considered active homogenization of their populations and linguistic assimilation to be the standard to follow, notably by means of a one-size-fits-all public education system. In the words of linguist Jacques Leclerc: *"The centralizing authoritarianism which consists of unilaterally imposing a single language throughout a territory and ignoring linguistic pluralism [...] was standard practice in the 19th century."* [translation] [2]

Today, we tend to forget just how recently the recognition of linguistic and cultural pluralism has become a value in democracies. True, this oversight is the hallmark of nationalists, whose ideology Marc-André Éthier and David Lefrançois invite us to examine more closely. But even the liberal and progressive thinkers of the last century tended to see assimilation as a necessary condition for equal opportunity for individuals. Durham, for example, while certainly a staunch imperialist, a narrow-minded advocate of assimilation, a *"mange-Canadiens",* was also, and here is the paradox, a liberal enamoured of equal opportunity, who was nicknamed 'Radical Jack' at home and supported the right to vote, public education and land reform. His report recommended that responsible government be established in Canada. In the same era as Durham, Tocqueville, one of the great thinkers in the history of liberalism, sought the means to assimilate Algerians into French civilization.

What is exceptional in Canada is not that assimilation was sought, but that it was not achieved. The union of the two Canadas, by which Durham hoped to assimilate French-Canadians, instead paved the way for the Baldwin-Lafontaine alliance. The English Protestant and French Catholic populations laid the foundations for agreement, rather than fighting as they had done hitherto too often wherever historical circumstances brought them together. Without that agreement, who knows what would have become of the French fact in Canada? There have been – and still are – too many Francophone Canadians who have lost their language, but it would be difficult to find a country with a better counterbalance to the forces of assimilation in today's world where, for the first time in human history, the number of languages spoken is decreasing rather than increasing.

This cohabitation experience between British and French populations has prepared them to give newcomers of all origins a better welcome and to build a kind of federalism that has been described as an original form of fraternity.[3]

As Hector MacKenzie rightly points out, we must always place ourselves in the context of the time. For example, one might feel that it would have been better if the Constitution of 1867 had been put to a referendum, rather than simply being approved by the Parliament of the Union. But the fact remains that the parliamentary system that prevailed in the province of Canada in the 1860s *"was in some respects in advance of any other in the world at that time".*[4] Even today, there are too few countries that, like Canada, were born in their modern form out of an act of Parliament rather than an act of violence.

In fact, Canada was born long before 1867. It was born out of the relentless pursuit of a dream: that of Samuel de Champlain, superbly narrated in David Hackett Fisher's book, *Champlain's Dream*.[5] Hackett Fisher shows to what extent the project Champlain wished to associate with Canada's genesis was one of harmony between peoples, of a warless world where Aboriginal and European nations would learn from one another and together, build something larger than the sum of its parts. Granted, the history of Canada did not live up to that ideal, did not fulfil that dream; but it is good to know that what inspired the Canadian project, right from the start, was the harmonious coming together of different peoples.

It is this history that, despite its errors and stumbles, made Canada a reputable and respected nation, a country that never built an empire, fought bravely in two world wars and sent troops abroad only to defend justice and democracy, a country that was able to bring diverse populations together to achieve common goals, combining overall cohesion with great diversity. Canada is also: provinces and territories with mutually-reinforcing strengths, two official languages that are international

languages, two legal systems – common law and civil law – that allow us to speak the same legal language as the majority of countries, a geographical location that gives us access to Europe, Asia and the Americas, a multicultural population that gives us influence on all the continents. Clearly, we have managed to turn our diversity, democracy, federalism and humanism into a strength for which we will have more and more need as our population becomes even more diverse, as pointed out by Catherine Duquette speaking of Quebec.

Let us reject complacency; let us be ambitious for Canada: this is what our Governor General, the right Honourable David Johnston, is urging us to do. Let us realize that our country's true greatness lies in that ability to give tangible expression to universal values. That is my response to Penney Clark when she wonders how we can raise the interest of new generations of Canadians in their nation's history. From our history, with its errors and successes, let us draw the lessons that will help us pursue the objectives identified by Stephen J. Toope: a prosperous country with one of the world's strongest levels of social mobility, a welcoming country that takes full advantage of its population's cultural diversity, a country that reaps its resources while protecting the environment, a Canada that helps humankind find the path towards peace, justice and sustainable development.

What is most admirable about Canada has less to do with what is particular to it, such as its oft-sung vastness, than with what is universal. The Canadian ideal is that of a country where human beings have the best chance to be considered as human beings. Let us always strive to live up to that ideal. And for this, an essential condition of success is knowledge of our history.

NOTES

1 This quote can be found in: Stéphane Dion, "Respect for Democracy in Canada", notes for an address to the Faculty of Law, Université de Montréal, March 18,1998. This text is based on that address which can be found in: Stéphane Dion, *Straight Talk: Speeches and Writings on Canadian Unity*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999.

2 Jacques Leclerc, *Langue et société*, Laval, Mondia Éditeurs, 1986.

3 Samuel V. LaSelva, *The Moral Foundations of Canadian Federalism : Paradoxes, Achievements, and tragedies of Nationhood,* McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996.

4 S. J. R. Noël, *Patrons, Clients, Brokers*, University of Toronto Press, 1996.

5 David Hackett Fisher, *Champlain's Dream*, Knopf, 2008.