

THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF ONTARIO

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Ontario is the heart of Canada -- just ask any Ontarian! A person from another region or province may well proclaim that he is foremost an Albertan or Québécois or Islander -- with special pride in his particular region. But, typically, the person from Ontario would not stress the importance of part over whole -- the province before country. That's because, to him, Ontario and Canada are synonymous -- or, at least, they should be. It is at once a sense of pride and presumption for which Ontarians are known. This essay will attempt some understanding into the reasons for such an attitude, by way of briefly looking at some of the factors which have helped determine the political culture of Ontario.

Almond and Verba define the term "political culture" as referring to "...the specifically political orientations -- attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system."<sup>1</sup> These orientations result from an individual's appreciation of his political system, including the functions of its institutions; the role of the particular form of government; the positions of the actual "participants" in the decision-making process; as well as the purposes of the policies and

governmental regulations that result. These orientations also reflect the individual's evaluation of the performance and legitimacy, in whole or in part, of this perceived political system. Professors Almond and Verba ask of the individual within society:

...what knowledge does he have of his nation and of his political system in general terms, its history, size, location, power, "constitutional" characteristics, and the like? What are his feelings towards these systemic characteristics? What are his more or less considered opinions and judgements of them?

...What knowledge does he have of the structures and roles, the various political elites, and the policy proposals that are involved in the upward flow of policy making? What are his feelings and opinions about these structures, leaders, and policy proposals?

...What knowledge does he have of the downward flow of policy enforcement, the structures, individuals, and decisions involved in these processes? What are his feelings and opinions of them? 2

Further, these political attitudes depend greatly upon the individual's feelings toward his interrelation with the system, his real and imagined effectiveness in the process whereby the political system actually determines, in Harold Laswell's term, "who gets what, when, how." <sup>3</sup> The individual is asked how he feels the political system affects his world, (the downward flow of policy enforcement), and to what degree is he aware of or does he participate in attempts to utilize the political system to his benefit, (the upward flow of policy making).

...How does he perceive of himself as a member of his political system? What knowledge does he have of his rights, powers, obligations, and of strategies of access to influence? How does he feel about his capabilities? What norms of participation or of performance does he acknowledge and employ in formulating political judgements, or in arriving at opinions? 4

In The Civic Culture, Almond and Verba enumerate three broad classifications of political cultures -- parochial, subject and participant -- which can be used as methodological tools in studying political behaviour. The measure of political awareness and interest, combined with the degree to which the individual becomes involved, helps to categorize his adherence to one or another type of "political culture." As the labels of these three classifications suggest, the "parochial political culture" represents the lowest level of interest, knowledge, and participation in the political system, while the highest degree of awareness, interest and involvement in the political system is exhibited in the "participant political system".

Inferentially then, a definitive paper dealing with the current "political culture" of Ontario would concern itself with an inquiry into these orientations and attitudes and require extensive field research to categorize a representative cross-section of individuals throughout the province. Recognizing the limitations of its scope, this essay will instead

focus upon Ontario's historical and ideological origins, and thereby endeavour to give some insight into the resulting nature of the "political culture" of the province. This approach stems from the premise that the democratic institutions established by a free people, and the way in which they use those institutions, indicates the attitude, the orientation (i.e. the political culture) of the people themselves.

This method of examining the political culture of Ontario is based upon the assumption that whatever the orientations evident today toward the political system in the province, they were obviously not formed in a political void. To be sure, cultural and social forces finding their beginnings centuries before 1867 helped to mould political structures for what was to be the new Dominion of Canada. It follows that these social values and ideological preferences, embodied in the Canadian political system, (and also in the manner that the Canadian nation was brought about), would have a profound influence on the attitudes of those people for whom the system was designed.

So, to begin to understand contemporary political culture, we first look back to Confederation and describe it as a

statement, as it were, of the prevailing political and social desires in British North America in 1867. Those orientations found in Ontario today toward the Canadian political system (previously defined as being the "political culture"), might then be viewed as the result of the dynamic interplay between the political structures established in 1867 with the changing needs, desires and demands of the people of Ontario in the years since Confederation. The collective ability, or inability, of political structures and politicians to fulfil those desires and to cope with the realities of an increasingly complex and technological society, significantly effects the view that Ontarians take of their political system.

Around Confederation converged many ideological influences which made Canadian political maturation different from that of its North American partner, the United States. The well-established, even slightly entrenched, conservative absolutism of New France mixed with and reinforced the Loyalist and European collectivist sentiments which were highly sceptical of the democratic liberalism to the south. Thus was formed a basis for the desire on the part of the Fathers of Confederation for a strong central government in a land where a federal-type union was more practically appropriate. A strong central government would be designed as the sole authority able to

assure Canadian political and economic survival in a hostile "democratic" North American environment, and to direct Canadian expansion to the Pacific. This federal authority coveted by the Fathers of Confederation was to provide the stable political leadership needed for the country, which they felt the excessive liberalism in the U.S. could not provide. Bruce Hodgins writes of the prevailing attitude at the time of the Confederation meetings:

The Quebec scheme involved a deliberate attempt to establish a union with a constitution similar in principle to that of Great Britain. It involved an attempt by British American leaders to create a viable, legitimate nation apart and different from the revolutionary, republican and aggressively democratic nation to the south. In the United States democracy had allegedly resulted in a lack of moral force, in a weakening of the sense of authority and responsibility, and in government by faction. 5

Deeply embedded in the minds of the Fathers of Confederation was this suspicion that the democratic liberalism in the United States fostered instability and uncertainty. This perceived lack of "a sense of authority and responsibility," and the absence of "moral force", was seen by them as promoting a political climate unfavourable to the growth and development of the British North American colonies into eventual statehood. In his book, The Sense of Power, Prof. Carl Berger notes that

this suspicion of American republicanism was echoed in the writings of an historian of the day:

The Christian religion, Todd believed, was part and parcel of the British constitution: "the entire framework of our polity is pervaded with ennobling influences and restraints of religion." The Americans, on the other hand, deliberately left out of their constitution any acknowledgement of a Supreme Being, declared "the people" the source of all power, and expressed no national preferences for Christianity over Judaism, Mohammedanism, or infidelity...

In the United States "there is a grievous lack of the restraining influences of government to repress the abuses of free thought, in social and religious matters." 6

This concern over the abuses of excessive individualism predisposed the British American leaders against the loose type of federalism found in the United States. Had Canada not been so physically vast and culturally diverse, their preference would have been to institute a unitary state. Provincial or sectional administrations were deemed necessary but their powers were to be severely limited in the Canadian political system. The divisive nature of the "states rights" sentiments in the American republic was readily apparent in the 1860's to the framers of the Canadian constitution. Donald Creighton notes:



The obvious corrective to the disruptive forces of "states rights" was a strong central government; and this the Fathers of Confederation were determined to create. British American union, they admitted, would have to be federal in character; but at the same time it must also be the most strongly centralized union that was possible under federal forms. 7

The rights of individuals and minorities could not be left to the jurisdiction of the regional bodies at the risk of weakening the central governing power. The federal authority, by virtue of its legislative strength, could better guarantee the observance of minority rights. As Sir John A. Macdonald argued:

...the provinces should only have such powers as are absolutely necessary "for local purposes," to enable them to legislate for "sectional prejudices and interests. Thus we will have," he asserted, "a strong and lasting government under which we can work out constitutional liberty as opposed to democracy, and be able to protect the minority by having a powerful central government." 8

As will be shown later, Ontario fit into Macdonald's Confederation scheme not only as one of these parochial local authorities, but along with her sister province Quebec, as one of the main beneficiaries of the new union. Under the auspices of the powers afforded the federal Parliament in an attempt to provide for "peace, order and good government," the inhabitants of the Dominion were free to develop materially,

socially and even linguistically. Within the framework formed by government to protect social "virtue", the individual would be uninhibited in his pursuit of his interests. As F.F. Schindeler notes:

General laws were to be devised to prohibit conduct disruptive of order, and the courts and the police force were to be relied upon to see that offenders were dealt with according to their just deserts. Within these limits individuals were to be free to compete in the never-ending struggle of life out of which would eventually evolve the good society. 9

However well protected by this centralized political framework, it became evident to the Fathers of Confederation that the aspirations of the Canadian business and agrarian communities to consolidate their markets and attempt to compete in the face of American political and financial strength, required more from Canadian government than just "moral force" and leadership. Legislation for the maintenance of the above-mentioned constitutional directives were not enough. Perhaps the philosophy of the "negative state," as Dr. Schindeler describes it, was indeed preponderate in the minds of the Fathers of Confederation. However, what was demanded by the precarious existence of Canada was direct governmental participation in the market-place in order to assure the nations's separate survival, and along with it the

economic and political independence of its population. This was a step further than the notion of the "negative state" which Schindeler describes in Responsible Government in Ontario:

...the activities of government should be limited generally to the preservation of peace or the waging of war in external affairs, the maintenance of justice and order in domestic affairs, and the provision of those public works that could be obtained in no other way. 10

The reflection of this Canadian "conservative" desire at Confederation for the restraining influences of government to check potential abuses of democracy, plus the more "collectivist" tendency to tolerate, if not encourage, increasing governmental involvement in the economic (and more recently, the social) affairs of the nation, is certainly evident in the present day "political culture" of Ontario.

Aside from the political association Ontario shares with the other provinces of the Canadian political system, undoubtedly one of the reasons why these Canadian "national" political ideals found themselves transposed upon society in Ontario is the simple fact of the province's significant presence in the original federal union. The overwhelming representation of the United Provinces of Canada (Ontario and Quebec) in the Confederation talks made these two areas chief beneficiaries

of the plan. The British North America Act of 1867 exemplified more of the Upper and Lower Canadian political convictions than those of any other original participant in the federal "bargain." Indeed, the reactions of both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia testify to the essentially "Canadian" authorship of the Confederation scheme. More than this, as McDougall and Westmacott point out, the political elites resident in Ottawa and Toronto were remarkably similar in composition. Unquestionably this elitist community of interest extended to matters of political philosophy and attitudes toward the Canadian political system in general:

From 1867 to 1872, political resources were common and a separate provincial political entity did not appear until the Costigan Act of 1872 precluded members of provincial legislatures from sitting in the House of Commons. Political leaders such as John Sandfield Macdonald, Edward Blake, and Alexander Mackenzie were leaders in both the federal House of Commons and the Legislature of the Province of Ontario. 11

So, not only was Ontario a major physical portion of the new Dominion, but its shared "political resources" also ensured that Ontarian political culture exerted a considerable influence on the outlook and direction of the country. This disproportionate influence has been diluted somewhat with the appearance and growth of other provinces, and hence the broadening of the federation. Nevertheless, the political impact of this one

province on the whole nation has consistently been strong, in so many ways. Though certainly not conclusive proof of Ontarian "domination" of the central Parliament, nor control over federal policies, the record of 43 out of 110 years of rule<sup>12</sup> by federal Prime Ministers from Ontario, says something of the commonality of orientation between Ontario and Canada.

Therefore it can be argued that the aspirations of Ontarians have more closely matched those one might attribute to the central government in Ottawa than has been the case for any other province in the "union". Probably no western province would attempt to dispute that. When occasions arise (and undoubtedly they will do so more frequently as the problems of Quebec and the West divert the energies of the federal government elsewhere) - that the purposes of Toronto and Ottawa do not meet eye-to-eye, it is typically of less than crisis proportions -- such as a dispute over jurisdiction of Ontarian development: the province desiring something faster or greater than the federal government would find acceptable within the constraints of Confederation.

The items which have perhaps contributed most to Toronto-Ottawa differences of opinion resulted from the rise in importance, unforeseen at the time of Confederation, of educational

and social services as jurisdictions of government. Plainly delineating these as responsibilities of the provincial authorities, the framers of the Canadian constitution merely reflected their relative importance as concerns of government. As Desmond Morton points out, had the Fathers of Confederation:

...imagined that education, roads and "hospitals, asylums, charities and eleemosynary institutions" would ever matter as much as railways, canals and promissory notes, they might well have added them to the responsibilities of the central government. 13

His statement alludes to the previously mentioned desire for strong centralized government in the new Dominion, a desire unchanged despite quirks of political fate. For while these changing roles and new expectations of provincial governments strained the federal-provincial relationships formulated by the B.N.A. Act of 1867, they had little effect on the views Canadians and Ontarians held toward government and the political system in general. For, while the actual governmental balance affecting day-to-day life in Canada has shifted, and provincial administrations have become more visible, important and vociferous in asserting their rights in economic and resource matters, yet these changes have taken place and have been accommodated within the original Canadian political framework. The changes and tensions have prompted recent attempts at finding a constitutional amending formula and

even suggestions of a "new Confederation," but it is significant that the provinces have never reached unanimity among themselves in seeking to alter the power base away from a still powerful central government.

Perhaps an additional manifestation of the acceptability, to Ontarians of the political attitudes expressed by Confederation is the singular ability of the Conservative party in the province to maintain itself in power at Queen's Park. Excepting for two intervals, 1919 to 1923 and 1934 to 1943, the Conservatives have held the reins of government continuously since 1905. This longevity of the Conservatives has created a political strength and atmosphere conducive to their continuance in government. As Jonathan Manthorpe notes: "Power attracts talent, and generally the Tories have attracted better candidates and better party organizers than either the Liberals or the NDP."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the political impotence of the provincial Liberal ranks has been further exacerbated by that party's successes at the federal level; another application of this centripetal force exerted upon talent by political power. The provincial Liberal organization, Manthorpe states, "...is weak and lacking in talent, because any Liberal with ability and ambition naturally gravitates toward federal politics, where the Liberal party has the corner on power."<sup>15</sup>

How can this tradition of the Conservatives' grip on Queen's Park be interpreted? Is their electoral success due mainly to the fortunes of recruitment and the corresponding disappointments of the Liberals? Desmond Morton hesitatingly offers the easy manageability of the province as a major factor in the repeated successes of Ontarian governments:

The explanations for the durability of Ontario governments must be cautious, subjective and, frequently, flattering to the regime in power. The most significant reason may well be, quite simply, that Ontario is relatively easy to govern. As the chief beneficiary of the Confederation arrangement, her industrial and financial growth has been systematically secured by tariff protection and low-cost energy. 16

Yet, Morton's observation does little by way of explaining specifically why the Conservative party in Ontario has managed so well to the detriment of the Liberals and the NDP. While acknowledging the factors already noted, especially with regard to the traditional weakness of the opposition, one must ask what specific characteristics attaching themselves to the Conservatives, have made that party more desirable to Ontario voters since 1905? Morton seemingly denies the utility of political gender in Ontario provincial politics:

The politics of prosperity normally become the pre-occupation of an elite. Ontarians can certainly relish a well-fought election campaign. In contests at the federal level, they have acquired a reputation as discriminating and even fickle voters. However, few treat elections as more than a spectator sport. 17



As a commentary on the political orientations of Ontarian society, Morton goes only half-way in explaining the continuity of provincial governments. Given the diversity of the population, he says the disgruntled voters usually divide themselves between the opposition parties and fail to overthrow the government.<sup>18</sup> This, however, does not answer why the Conservatives, as one of the three major political parties in Ontario, has consistently "failed to disgruntle" enough voters in favour of one of the other parties.

Jonathan Manthorpe, in his exposition on the Conservative party in Ontario, The Power and the Tories, equated Ontarian politics with a "one-party system", hinting that even the United Farmers of Ontario and the Liberal interludes since 1905 really "...represented no real diversion from the norm."<sup>19</sup> Small-"c" conservatism has apparently been the political watchword in Ontario:

...The Conservatives have been able to keep in reasonable step with the desires of the people, because the Conservaties are seen to be "safe" (Ontarians aren't risk-takers), and because the Conservatives have reflected Ontario's view of itself and its role in Canadian Confederation, they have been able to maintain a successful electoral record. 20

An even more lucid interpretation of Manthorpe's point is that of Prof. Wilson in The Ontario Political Culture.<sup>21</sup> Wilson advances the view that the Conservative party has helped

to ensure its longevity in government by reflecting the "desires of the people"; and interprets voters' preference for the Conservatives as evidence of particular values in Ontarian society. He reminds us of the advantages the incumbent party has in attempting to retain governmental power yet succinctly warns "...there is more to it than mere technical<sup>22</sup> incompetence..." in losing an election:

...the occasion of a change in government which has been brought about by the electorate may be one of the few times in a developed liberal democratic state when the particular dimensions of its political culture come into public view. 23

Accordingly, the consistent public acceptability of the Conservatives as the governing party may well reflect a desire in Ontario for "stability". Wilson recalls the penchant of Canadians to rely on the "restraining influences of government" in commenting upon the remarkably few occasions when changes in government of the province have taken place.

The fact that power has changed hands so infrequently at Queen's Park lends support to the idea that those values which have been assigned to the whole of English Canada - "ascriptive," "elitist," "hierarchical," "stable," "cautious" and "restrained" - belong in fact only to Ontario. And it is easy to see the province's reluctance to engage in change for the sake of change as a natural extension into the twentieth century of the conservatism which distinguished pre-Confederation politics in Upper Canada. 24

While, as Wilson points out, the desire for stability and continuity on the part of a conservative "political culture" may very well explain the few changes in provincial administrations, it fails to account for the changes which have, in fact, taken place despite the "restraint" and the "cautiousness" of Ontario society. These changes of the party in power (in 1905, 1919, 1923, 1934 and 1943), reflect another dimension of Ontario's "political culture", -- touching upon the previously mentioned capabilities of governmental institutions and individual politicians (or parties) to fulfill constitutional desires and to ultimately cope with the changing demands of a growing modern society. Part of these demands has taken the form of increasing pressures on the provincial government to provide more educational and social services -- industrialization and urbanization has had to be met by government in the form of increased responsibilities. Morton points out that:

In 1867 the province was overwhelming agricultural. Toronto, the provincial metropolis, had only 59,000 people. As late as 1941, the census found that almost precisely as many people were gainfully employed in agriculture as in manufacturing - 23.2 percent of the work force. By 1971 agriculture had dropped to eighth place in the census categories of employment - a mere 3.8 percent. 25

Similar drastic alterations to the province's religious, ethnic and linguistic shape strained the institutions of

government with their new demands, and those "participants" in the political process lacking the resources to cope with these increased pressures faced the risk of being left behind by the electorate. To its credit, Wilson notes, "...the Conservative party has managed to preserve its position in the province...simply by ensuring that no sector of Ontario society could ever realistically claim to have been left out of the reckoning."<sup>26</sup>

Of course, what Wilson suggests reinforces the argument that the historical and philosophical origins of the country are reflected in the "political culture" of Ontario. This political culture seemingly reaffirms the view that government is both the foundation or framework of society, and an important and necessary participant in the life of that society; the political system being the method which enables society to utilize government for its own benefit.

The "politics of prosperity", as Morton termed it, though certainly the type of political situation any political figure would want to be in, is not as cut and dried as he suggests. The Ontario "political culture" demands of its political system both the leadership and participation needed to continue this prosperous state of affairs. Thus far these

demands seem to have been met by the provincial Conservative party to the satisfaction of the electorate, and its continued privileged position depends upon the party's ability to reflect the "specific set of values" held by Ontarians. John Wilson reflects upon these values:

...The two requirements which appear to characterize the kinds of demands which the Ontario people make of government are really only variations on a single theme: the desire for stability. Yet each of them reflects a different, and perhaps conflicting set of values. On the one hand the demand for sound leadership...suggests a rather conservative cast of mind, oriented only to the maintenance of order. The idea that a balance must be maintained between interests, however, points in a different direction, to the rather more progressive notions of fair play and equal treatment for all. 27

If, as Wilson believes, the foregoing expresses the desire and demands a citizen of Ontario makes of his provincial government, it can be seen why that same citizen identifies his province with Canada, and vice-versa. Designed to ensure "stability," the federal government was also expected to ensure "fair play and equal treatment for all" in Confederation.

The same mandate has been given the central government by Ontarians since Confederation and would be renewed today. Despite the changes Ontario would demand -- in keeping with the growth of those provincial responsibilities given it at Confederation, a renegotiated Confederation would even today result in this province seeking a strong central government, as it advocated in 1867.

As one of the chief, if not the predominant, force in giving Confederation its political shape, Ontario helped to bring about a central government designed to promote, and dedicated to preserve, stability. In the governing of their own province, the people of Ontario have been faithful to that same goal of stability. Perhaps that steadfast attitude says more than anything else about the political culture of Ontario.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Almond, Gabriel A., et al, The Civic Culture, p. 13
2. Ibid, pp. 16-17
3. Laswell, Harold, Politics: Who Gets What, When, How, World Publishing Co., New York, 1958
4. Almond, Gabriel A., op cit., p. 17
5. Hodgins, Bruce W., "Democracy and the Ontario Fathers of Confederation" in Ontario Historical Society, Profiles of a Province, p. 88
6. Berger, Carl, The Sense of Power, p. 158
7. Creighton, Donald, Canada's First Century, p. 10
8. Hodgins, Bruce W., op cit., p. 87
9. Schindeler, F.F., Responsible Government in Ontario, p. 1
10. Ibid, p. 1
11. McDougall, A.K., et al, "Ontario in Canadian Federation," in Donald C. MacDonald, ed., Government and Politics of Ontario, p. 195
12. Information Canada, The Prime Ministers of Canada, Ottawa 1975: Combining the total years in power of Macdonald, Mackenzie, Bowell, King and Pearson, prime ministers from Ontario served 43 years; Abbott, Laurier, St. Laurent and Trudeau with their 34 years of service make Ontario and Quebec, collectively, majority shareholders of executive power in Ottawa. From the West, Meighen, Bennett and Diefenbaker account for 15 years of prime ministership, while from the Atlantic province of Nova Scotia, Thompson, Tupper and Borden served for 12 years.
13. Morton, Desmond, "Introduction: People and Politics of Ontario," in Donald C. MacDonald, ed., op cit., p. 2
14. Manthorpe, Jonathan, The Power and the Tories, p. 7
15. Ibid, p. 12

16. Morton, Desmond, op cit., p. 5
17. Ibid, p. 8
18. Ibid, p. 5
19. Manthorpe, Jonathan, op cit., pp. 7-8
20. Ibid, p. 7
21. Wilson, John, "The Ontario Political Culture," in Donald C. MacDonald, ed., op cit., pp. 211-233
22. Ibid, p. 215
23. Ibid, p. 215
24. Ibid, p. 217-220
25. Morton, Desmond, op cit., p. 3
26. Wilson, John, op cit., p. 227-8
27. Wilson, John, Ibid, p. 230



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12. Schindeler, F.F., Responsible Government in Ontario, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1969