

Mount Allison University

Unity Within the Nation

Submitted to:

Continuing Education
HIST 3441
Modern Canada

October 24, 1999

By

F. Norman Robitza

Canada was a country on the move in political circles by 1914. However, within Canada, unity was weak. The nation was united more along regional or ethnical lines than united as countrymen. As the nation grew larger and more people arrived, the country changed from an English-speaking majority to a more multi-cultural flavor. This along with the second-class citizenship of women, natives and children caused the country to be extremely divided.

As Canada was forming the government decided that to create a strong nation, strong citizens would be required. People came from all over the world to live in the new country and with them brought their cultures and beliefs. This was not what was expected. It was believed that immigrants would easily be assimilated into Canadian culture but what was Canadian culture? The Nation was created by people from different European countries that came to live in British North America. A Canadian culture was not established but a British culture was the standard. What of all the other cultures that came to this nation and what of the one's that were already here?

The nation also didn't have unity among the provinces. Each province was out for its own benefit. In the 1880's, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward had anti-confederation sentiments and wished to secede from the rest of Canada. This, however, did not last very long as New Brunswick backed because they believed it was a plan to make Halifax stronger and Prince Edward Island dropped the idea for the

belief that it would be controlled by the mainland.¹

The Atlantic Provinces were not the only to face the problems of power struggles with the central government. Ontario wanted to expand and Quebec worried for its language, education and culture being taken away. Then came the uprising in the North West. The natives and the Métis were not pleased with the way the central government was treating them and they took up arms. Louis Riel lead the peoples of the West into a conflict with the federal government. The rebellion lead to the execution of Riel which rose more problems in the east as the French-speaking citizens of Quebec cried out for the right of all French-speaking people throughout Canada.

The federal government attempted to make the world see Canada as strong internally and able to contend on an international level. Canada was considered the little fish in the big pond as it began to appear on the international stage. However, it would be backstabbed by its own motherland during The Alaska Boundary dispute. The United States purchased Alaska from Russia and wanted to have the entire west coast that the nation would be connected to its new territory. After British Columbia joined Confederation, the United States “denied Canada’s claim to several fiords with access to the Yukon. The news that gold had been discovered in the Yukon in 1897 suddenly

¹Francis, R. Douglas; Jones, Richard; & Smith, Donald B.; *Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation* (Harcourt Brace & Company, Toronto, 1996) p. 77

made the boundary question of utmost importance.”² A joint commission was set up between Britain, Canada and the United States to come to a decision on this matter. However, this ceased in February of 1899 and no decision was made. This created a great deal of hatred for Americans in Canada. This started to show a great deal of unity among the people of the nation but it was not enough to break away from the other issues that were causing the cleavage in unity within Canada.³

Britain was faced with several crises, the Boer War and the increasing scare of the Germans. This made them call out to the Empire for assistance and Canada was expected to respond. These issues brought a great deal of debate to Canada as the French did not want to get involved in conflict that did not directly affect them while the English wanted to defend the mother country at all costs. The government agreed to send men to join the British forces during the Boer War and helped by offering some funds for the British navy but created their own small navy to protect Canada’s borders.

The trade unions that started to emerge in the early part of this century helped to bring together the working class citizens. This was not always a good thing as many problems would arise from strikes, especially the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. “At

²Francis, R. Douglas; Jones, Richard; & Smith, Donald B.; *Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation* (Harcourt Brace & Company, Toronto, 1996) p. 110

³Francis, R. Douglas; Jones, Richard; & Smith, Donald B.; *Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation* (Harcourt Brace & Company, Toronto, 1996) p. 111

first, most unions were local, dispersed across the country, and specialized.”⁴ They were set up to help specific groups of workers get better working conditions, but as time went by they became national organizations.

Women were one of the most interesting groups to unite in the early part of this century. Women were not part of public life but existed within a domestic sphere. They were responsible for raising children and looking after the home. The industrial revolution and the new emerging technology began to give women more time to themselves. “By the 1890’s a “new women” had appeared, demanding an active role in society.”⁵ Several women’s organizations began to form and “by 1912 an estimated one out of every eight adult women — the majority of them middle-aged, middle-class, English-speaking Protestants — belonged to a women’s group.”⁶ Out of this would emerge the Women’s Suffrage movement which would lead to women getting the right to vote in Canada.

Sports made an attempt to unify Canadians but this again would not completely succeed. Sports became an important part of people’s leisure time and unity was created between sports groups. Sports were for men and women as the bicycle came into the mainstream. Women’s bicycle clubs began popping up allowing women a great

⁴Ibid. p. 148

⁵Ibid. p. 165

⁶Ibid. p. 165

deal of freedom. However, this only created minor unity within Canada. The athletes involved in the sporting event and the fans were behind their teams but a national unity was not really achieved.

Unity among Canadians changed from the view of National unity to unity among groups. A unity that reflects the way history is examined today. Today, historians study a more regional view of the past as we move to more of an emphasis on the history of women, the Maritimes, the Métis, and so on.