

Canada, 160 years later

Inheriting one of the oldest democracies is a responsibility



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Today is the 160th anniversary of Canadian democracy. This makes Canada the oldest continuous democratic federation in the world.

We are neither a new nor a young country, as our ahistorical political leaders keep telling us (or rather as their speechwriters keep telling them). Canadians are among the most experienced voters in the world. We know as much as anyone about how to use our vote to get some approximation of what we want. Or at least of avoiding what we don't want. What we are best at is voting to avoid the sort of impossible crises – civil wars, secessions, *coups d'état*, megalomaniac emperors or dictators – common in the democratic history of our allies.

After all, Britain has only just finished a low-grade civil war centred on Ireland. Spain is in the middle of one. The United States is still dealing with the outcomes of slavery, secession and a civil war. And France over the past 70 years has had a coup, a dictatorship, a new republic, a civil war, the collapse of a second republic, and an attempted coup. And then there are the experiences of Italy, Germany and Japan.

What happened on March 11, 1848? Actually, it happened first on Feb. 2, in Halifax, when Joseph Howe and James Uniacke were asked to form a government. Five weeks later, in Montreal, the Governor-General, Lord Elgin, asked Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine to form a Canadian government with his ally, Robert Baldwin.

At school, we were taught that this arrival of "responsible government" was a technical event. But 1848 was much more than that. Democracy comes in two great parts – choosing and governing. First thousands, indeed millions, of people must decide how to use their votes to produce some sort of statement of causes and representa-

tives. Then the representatives must pick leaders who can deal with the people's myriad of causes and govern effectively.

Already in the 1840s, Canada was well ahead on the first part – the franchise. Limited though the voters list would seem now, it was broader than in most countries, including Britain. As for responsible government, it had a double significance in Canada: first, that of the people controlling their own government; second, it was about independence from London. After all, the anti-democratic forces in Canada did not represent an authentic elite. They didn't carry with them an alternative project, as was the case with the anti-democratic elites in Britain or Europe. Ours were little more than the local hangers-on of the colonial system.

As for the timing of our democracy, 1848 was the year in which democracy made a great leap forward throughout the Western world. But in 1849, there was an equally widespread reactionary crisis.

Across Germany, France, Italy and much of northern Europe, democracy was rolled back. Canada also had an 1849 crisis – riots in Montreal, parliament burned down, attempts on the lives of Elgin, LaFontaine and Baldwin. Through the highly original leadership of those three, we got through the crisis without losing our democracy. In fact, weathering the crisis formalized what we now think of as the Canadian approach toward divisive situations at home and abroad.

There is one other essential element to 1848. LaFontaine and Baldwin had made it clear that their demand for responsible government was not a struggle for democracy or for power or for control over patronage. Nor was it a coalition of anglophones and francophones dividing the spoils, although both believed in the possibility of a bilingual society. Their fight was built on their desire to strengthen the public good. They believed that only a fully functioning democracy could accomplish this. And that is the touchstone from 1848 to today.

So, in three short years of power, the Great Ministry, as it was called, put through some 150 laws. These are the founda-

tions of modern Canada. Secular public universities, beginning with the University of Toronto. A solid base for public schools. Support funds for poor immigrants. A post office to democratize communications. The normalizing of trial by jury. The beginnings of labour law and a professional civil service. And on and on.

All of this astonishing work took place in four buildings. The Nova Scotia Legislature stands and works as it did 160 years ago. The Ste-Anne legislature was burned to the ground by rioters. There is no sign to indicate that the first great dramas of our democracy took place on that spot in Old Montreal. A short distance away is the Bonsecour Market, where the parliament met after the fire; again, there is no marker. In 1850, the parliament moved to Toronto. The building was ripped down late in the 19th century; it stood where the CBC headquarters stands on Front Street.

* The relevance of March 11 is that fundamental idea of democracy as the force required to strengthen the public good. Yet, Canada is filled with citizens alienated from that democracy. They see it as fixated on self-serving power struggles and obscure administrative methods. What would LaFontaine and Baldwin, transposed among us, see as the core failures of our public good?

Persistent poverty. Children at food banks. Working men so badly paid they sleep in homeless shelters. A lack of programs to get new Canadians involved in their society. The impossible cost for most citizens of getting justice via our legal system. The increasingly inaccessible costs of university education. A lack of doctors.

These are not complicated, abstract, theoretical problems. Nor are they particularly expensive to resolve. Inheriting one of the oldest democracies in the world is a responsibility. The meaning of responsibility hasn't changed over these 160 years. It means dealing with the sort of real problems that brought us to democracy in the first place.

» John Ralston Saul's new book, *A Fair Country: Three New Myths About Canada*, will be published this autumn.