

## The founding fathers?

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Robert Baldwin (left) and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine brought a new approach to government in Canada; John Wycliffe Lowes/ June Forbes McCormack/Archives

It is on page three that John Ralston Saul's new book might first shock its readers. There, in the midst of describing a riot that clogged the streets of Montreal on an April afternoon in 1849, Ralston Saul describes Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine as "the first real prime minister of a democratic Canada." John A. Macdonald does not turn up for another 178 pages.

With all due respect to John A., the story of LaFontaine and his kindred spirit Robert Baldwin—set out in the latest instalment of the Penguin Extraordinary Canadians series edited by Ralston Saul—is about how we got to 1867. It is about how two complicated and burdened men brought Canada to responsible government. "If you got [George-Étienne] Cartier and Macdonald on the phone and said, 'Okay, how do you explain Canada?,' they'd say, 'Oh, it's really, really easy, LaFontaine and Baldwin.' Their idea was LaFontaine and Baldwin's idea," says Ralston Saul. "It's a technical, constitutional, boring detail as to how many votes and how you get a majority. Of course, in politics, you have to worry about these things. But that's not what it was about. It was actually about a different kind of relationship between peoples, between religions, between languages. A different approach toward the public good, non-violence and so on."

Indeed, in lavish detail, Ralston Saul revives not only Canada and Canadian life at the moment of this new beginning, but these two men as they found their respective ways as individuals and allies. It is a dramatic time, but it is amid the tumult that much of what has come to define

Canada—much of how we define ourselves—was established. As Ralston Saul writes, “The ongoing dramas of Canada—positive and negative—were shaped and energized as if in perpetuity by these two men and their great friendship.”

## **EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT**

*In April 1849, anti-democratic rioters—a mob that would destroy the Parliament buildings in Montreal—threatened to overrun responsible government in Canada. Under siege, LaFontaine and Baldwin scrambled to save their dream.*

The first characteristic of the LaFontaine–Baldwin philosophy was a devotion to restraint. In the violent context of the time this would be mistaken for weakness and indecision. Power was a metaphor for the constant maintenance of order. If this required violence, so be it. A government’s job was to disperse mobs, if necessary by opening fire. In 1849 in Montreal the local anglophone-dominated militia were probably not to be trusted to do that. But there were more than enough British regulars to do a professional job. Properly lined up, opening fire in raking blasts, they could disperse mobs many times their own size. That, after all, is how empires are held. The soldiers are always outnumbered by the locals. That’s why, when they open fire, their intent is to achieve a mass effect by killing large numbers. The Canadian government’s refusal to keep order by shooting the mob, in fact their refusal to keep order at all, was considered a failure of weakness by London, by the mob itself, even by much of the Reform elite.

Restraint was such a new and audacious strategy that its power was not at first self-evident. The rioting had begun on the night of April 25, and for five days and nights LaFontaine and Baldwin hardly left Government House. The cabinet operated from there. LaFontaine, his wife and Baldwin discreetly moved into hotels near the Château Ramezay, but the two men scarcely had time to use their beds.

They armed loyal civilians, disarmed them a day later, arrested troublemakers, released them, negotiated with selected Opposition leaders, calmed their own MPs. Cabinet meetings ran all night. There were reports, proclamations, a press campaign in Montreal, a press campaign across the two Canadas. There was urgent correspondence about local militia with military rifles who might attempt a coup.

Government leaders were attacked in the streets, their houses damaged. LaFontaine’s new and handsome house was sacked. When attacked coming out of the temporary Parliament, he was rescued by soldiers. The details of managing disorder almost always look and feel like confusion at the time, and this was no exception. But the underlying line was that of restraint.

It was 20 after two. A police officer ran in to tell them that the state coach had appeared at the far end of Rue Notre-Dame, a few minutes later that the mob was surging about it. Somewhere out of sight the highly experienced but rather ancient Lieutenant-General Sir Benjamin d’Urban, the senior military officer in the Canadas, was attempting to use his soldiers to ease the situation. He had agreed to the government policy that his troops would not open fire on the mob. The strain on d’Urban was so great that he collapsed and died a few weeks later.

LaFontaine and Baldwin could not help wondering if they hadn't miscalculated by bringing the Governor General into town. If he were killed or wounded, the mob would have defeated itself. The empire could never side with a party that killed its representative. But it would be a pyrrhic victory for the Reformers. The dye of violence and division would have been set. Their philosophy of restraint would also have been proved unworkable.

They could hear the mob degenerating into violence. Word came that Elgin was surrounded, blocked, effectively their hostage. Then Major Jones and his cavalry whipped up their horses and the carriage came bursting through, swerving into the courtyard half wrecked. Elgin emerged from his filthy, broken-in cage carrying a large stone and disappeared inside the château. He had lost his cocked hat. His uniform was a mess. The two friends gave orders that the parliamentarians should now be brought over from the Bonsecours Market to present their address, then followed the Governor General inside.

From the market to the château is a pleasant two-minute stroll when there isn't a mob blocking the way. The Opposition boycotted the ceremony, but 50 MPs—virtually the whole Reform caucus—led by the Speaker of the House, came down the wooden stairs from the ballroom and out under the hoarding of the uncompleted facade into the melee on Rue Saint-Paul. A regiment of regular soldiers created a protective ring around the MPs and attempted to push their way across Saint-Paul into the maelstrom of Rue Saint-Claude, the narrow street leading up to the château. Stones, eggs, rotten vegetables rained down on them. At one point the infantry charged with bayonets fixed and the mob fell back.

In any case these parliamentarians were a tough group. Dr. Wolfred Nelson and the young George-Étienne Cartier were among them, leaders at the Battle of Saint-Denis in 1837 when they had defeated a British force of regulars; Francis Hincks had created a gang of Montreal Irish Catholics for election riots; the solicitor general, William Blake, had taken to carrying a pistol.

We are often told that liberal intellectuals are soft, cut off in the world of ideas, while men of action—physical action—tend to be anti-intellectual and on the right. This government, which created the foundations of modern Canada, was led by intellectuals formed in physical action. It was all the more remarkable that their aim was to change the system in order to remove the violence. But if the soldiers couldn't protect them, they were probably capable of fighting their own way through the mob.

They eventually arrived in the courtyard of the Château Ramezay in the same filthy state as Elgin. The address was duly read out: "We have witnessed with feelings of deep sorrow . . . a mob of rioters . . . in a time of profound peace and tranquility have committed . . . wanton and disgraceful outrages . . . We further beg leave to express . . . our deep sense of the justice and impartiality which has uniformly characterized the constitutional government of Your Excellency . . ."

Elgin replied, "A free people can hardly fail to discover, in the faithful observance of all constitutional narratives, the best security for the preservation of their rights and liberties."

Then the MPs melted away and the cabinet sat down to a long strategy session, while fighting spread through the streets and barricades went up on Rue Notre-Dame to block the Governor General's departure. Elgin had to be extricated without a battle, so they slipped him out the east side of the courtyard, his carriage cutting along Rue Gosford, to Rue Saint-Denis and up to Sherbrooke. The mob got wind of his escape and dashed in their carriages and on horseback to cut him off at Sherbrooke and Saint-Laurent. They were, after all, the elite. They had carriages and horses. Now they began stoning him in earnest, and the carriage was broken in on all sides. His brother was badly wounded on the head. They escaped again by breaking off on a track to the right and going all the way around the back of the mountain. When Elgin arrived home he picked up two sharp cobblestones from the floor of his state carriage as presents for his pregnant wife. She wrote a label for each stone and glued them on, then had a box built for storage. He remained at Monklands for four months under military protection while things cooled off and the government governed. The box with the labelled rocks can be seen today in Ottawa in the National Archives. He would later use the same carriage for state openings of Parliament, its outside panels unrepaired, to remind the elite of how badly they had acted.

It would be several hours before LaFontaine and Baldwin knew that he had successfully escaped.

*From Extraordinary Canadians:*

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