

Canada, 160 years later

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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 speech writers keep telling them, having yet again pumped their old youthful clichés out of the computer. 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, cessions, 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, cession and a civil war. And France over the last seventy 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, Japan.

What happened on March 11, 1848? Actually it happened first on February 2, in Halifax when Joseph Howe and James Uniacke were asked to form a government. Five weeks later in Montréal 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 boring, technical event, as if it were not worth getting worked up about. 1848 was of course much more than that. Democracy comes in two great, troublesome parts – choosing and governing. First thousands, indeed millions of people who will never know each other must decide how to use their individual votes to produce some sort of statement of causes and representatives. Then those representatives must choose leaders who can deal with the people's myriad of causes and govern effectively.

Already in the 1840s Canada was well ahead of most places on the first part – the franchise. Limited though the voter's 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 equivalent 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 Montréal, parliament burnt down, attempts on the lives of Elgin, LaFontaine and Baldwin. Through the careful and highly original leadership of those three we managed to get through the crisis without losing our democracy. In fact, weathering the crisis formalized what we now think of as the Canadian approach towards 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 simply a struggle for democracy or for power or for control over patronage. Nor was it simply a coalition of anglophones and francophones dividing the spoils, although both were great believers in the possibility of a bilingual society and in each group's rights as a community.

Their fight for Responsible Government 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 over the years 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 foundations 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. Decentralized courts to serve poor farmers. The beginnings of labour law. The beginnings of 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 burnt to the ground by the rioters. There is no sign or monument to indicate that the first great events and dramas of our democracy took place on that spot in Old Montréal. A short distance away is the Bonsecour Market, where the parliament met temporarily after the fire. Again, there is nothing to indicate this. In 1850 the parliament moved to Toronto to a legislature in which The Great Ministry passed half of the laws which would shape modern Canada. The building was ripped down late in the 19th Century. It stood where the CBC headquarters stands on Front Street.

The relevance of March 11th today is that fundamental idea of democracy as the force required to strengthen the public good. Yet Canada is filled with citizens alienated from that same 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 for many. The lack of doctors for millions of citizens.

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.