

A Liberal Dose: Some Books about Public Men and Backroom Boys

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additional significance of federalism, which “implies a guarantee of her [Nova Scotia’s] right to continue as a community” (p. 186). Too little attention has been paid (this was in 1935) to the reconciliation of provincial interests in order “to achieve some rough equality in standard of living as between the provinces” (p. 187). A concluding comment that “inequality is always on the defensive” (p. 187) deserves to stand as sufficient dismissal of some of the elaborate nonsense of contemporary economics.

When regional development was politically popular the cause was briefly taken up not only by some over-enthusiastic entrepreneurs but even by economists prepared to argue that it was in fact the path to maximizing total Canadian income. In the Maritimes we would do well now to rely more on the perception of Bladen and the direct case for reasonable efforts to avoid the dissipation of communities. We can be developers without being seduced through dreams of marvellously high growth rates, of new bonanzas round the corner. Some at least of our regional priorities are surely now clear. We have to be enterprising and efficient in the marketing and producing for which we do have the resources; in other words, not repeat the errors so clear in the salt fish story. We have to ensure that the federal government redresses the structural imbalance of the economy by tilting the movement of capital firmly and steadily in our direction. As a region we have to learn to work in alliance instead of permitting provincial governments to paddle their own canoes so blindly and so competitively as they continue to do.

Such priorities are clear but to get them accepted and acted on is extremely difficult, which perhaps explains why there has been so much inclination to look to the economists and bureaucrats for completer theories and grander designs. Yet it is escapism, and to read the literature is to confirm that what lies that way is continuing disappointment. If we are really concerned for the relative position of the region we have to organize ourselves for case-by-case, opportunity-by-opportunity, hard-headed policy-making and creative enterprising. Perhaps the time will come when Canada has an appreciable volume of economic literature that provides insights for such work. But he would be a poor policy-maker or businessman who waited for it. Meantime the world moves and we cannot let the inadequacy of economic theory deter us from applying what wisdom we can to the tasks of improvement in the Maritime region.

TOM KENT

A Liberal Dose: Some Books About Public Men and Backroom Boys

In one of the most interesting books about Canadian politics to appear in many a day, *The Government Party: Organizing and Financing the Liberal*

Party of Canada, 1930-58 (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977), Reginald Whitaker remarks, as others have, on the surprising indifference of academic writers to the history of the Liberal party: “. . .when one considers that after the brief ‘Diefenbaker interlude’ Canada has returned once again to uninterrupted Liberal domination of national government, the silence and obscurity within which the Liberal party of this earlier [pre-Diefenbaker] era has been wrapped becomes a matter of serious concern to those who wish to inquire into the present state of Canadian politics” (p. xi). Never mind that since those words were written time has its wonders wrought, that Liberals, for now, no longer form the “government party” at Ottawa or anywhere else. Whitaker is right. We do need more scholarly attention to the history of both our major parties, not only to clarify the present but to light up the past for its own sake. Alone among our national parties, the Progressives, who did not want office, and the CCF, which never came within a country kilometre of it nationally, have had their histories written in single authoritative volumes, thanks to W.L. Morton and Walter Young respectively. Social Credit, which, as a manifestation remotely reflecting the Douglas gospel, was always light years away from power outside Alberta, has had its background and development exhaustively examined. For the two old parties, however, the slate is almost clean as far as published book-length works go. A few volumes limited in scope have appeared — J.L. Granatstein’s *The Politics of Survival: The Conservative Party of Canada, 1939-1945* (Toronto, 1967) and David Smith’s *Prairie Liberalism: The Liberal Party in Saskatchewan, 1905-71* (Toronto, 1975) come to mind — and to these *The Government Party* is a distinguished addition. As for more general works, John R. Williams’ *The Conservative Party of Canada: 1920-1949* (Durham, N.C., 1956) seems even less adequate now than when it appeared and there is nothing comparable even to it as a history of the Liberal party.

No doubt the writing of really satisfactory general histories will have to await the appearance of additional specialized works such as Whitaker’s, but the prospects for enough of them being done do not seem awfully bright. As Whitaker himself has acidly remarked, “To many political scientists, it would appear, the historical horizon is limited to the two or three years it has taken to administer their most recent questionnaire”.¹ Nor is political history now as much in fashion among historians as it once was, though in their ranks there are notable exceptions, as there are to Whitaker’s remark among political scientists. Whitaker appears, in fact, just a trifle defensive before his colleagues in political science about *The Government Party* being simply history. “Its major thrust”, he confesses near the end, “has been descriptive rather than analytical” because “so little has been known about Liberal party organization and financing in this period that the mere marshalling of the historical evidence from primary sources

1 Reginald Whitaker, “‘Confused Alarms of Struggle and Flight’: English-Canadian Political Science in the 1970s”, *Canadian Historical Review*, 60 (1979), p. 1.

is of legitimate interest" (p. 401). It will betray the present writer's bias to say that there is nothing "mere" about this, that more can be learned about political culture and process from studies like this than from all the conceptualized, modelled, analytical, quantitative, behaviourist treatises in Christendom. Anyway, the book is not just descriptive. It contains a lot of analysis and the expert blending of the two elements is what makes it so valuable, though some readers will dispute certain of Whitaker's interpretations.

As the sub-title of *The Government Party* indicates, it deals only with party organization and finances. That Whitaker has written a thoroughly engrossing book of 500 pages on these seemingly hum-drum topics is a tribute to his literate style (save for split infinitives that will make the old fashioned wince) and to his talent for exploiting an impressive array of documentary sources. Someone essaying the same task for another party or period would lack, to be sure, such enormously rich lodes as the Mackenzie King and Norman Lambert diaries. But the fact remains that Whitaker has made uncommonly good use of these and numerous other collections. There is so much in the book, so much worth commenting on, that no brief summary or cursory discussion could possibly do it justice. It recounts the efforts, tribulations and contributions of unsung party organizers and fund raisers in the recovery of the national party after 1930. Much light is cast on their operations, on their relations with one another and with the elected politicians, especially the leader, and on intra-party stresses, both within the national party and between it and its provincial wings. Besides traversing a lot of ground that will be unfamiliar to most readers, it covers some that is more familiar, but even here — in his discussion of the King-Hepburn feud for example — Whitaker adds substantially to our knowledge. All in all, *The Government Party* is an impressive achievement. May we have more such books.

If studies of Liberal party history are few, there is no serious dearth of recent books by and about Liberals. For one thing, the Mackenzie King industry continues to produce its variegated wares, although it may be approaching the point of diminishing returns. King would be less than pleased by much that has been written about him but he might be gratified, if not fully satisfied, by its quantity. We have had biographies, either general or limited to a particular period or aspect of his life, by Lewis, Rogers, Ludwig, Hardy, Hutchison, Ferns and Ostry, Dawson, McGregor, Neatby, Stacey and Granatstein, plus four volumes of what is essentially autobiography edited by Pickersgill and Forster. In addition, in numerous books and countless articles these and many other authors have ventured (his defenders might prefer "presumed" in certain instances) to write extensively about him. To add to all this comes *Mackenzie King: Widening the Debate*, edited by John English and J.O. Stubbs (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1977), a collection of eleven essays, some of them presented at a colloquium in 1974 marking the centenary of King's birth. Blair Neatby's "Mackenzie King and the Historians" leads off, followed by short

memoirs by J.W. Pickersgill, Paul Martin and Malcolm MacDonald. Then comes the real meat of the volume, seven scholarly articles, and at the end a King bibliography, a vast assortment of items "by" him (many were undoubtedly ghost-written) as well as a useful list of books and articles by others.

Such collections are a reviewer's bane. Without intending discourtesy to any of the contributors, I shall confine my attention to a few of the essays that happened to interest me especially. However, the remaining ones among the group of seven referred to above must at least be mentioned. Stephen Scheinberg throws more light on the King-Rockefeller relationship, Keith Cassidy compares and contrasts King's "social philosophy" as revealed in *Industry and Humanity* (which has lately been receiving quite a lot of rather solemn attention) with the ideas of the American Progressives, and William McAndrew examines King's less than enthusiastic reaction to the Roosevelt New Deal. These all repay careful reading.

Neatby's strictures on certain historians will impress those who embrace the conventional wisdom and provoke those who do not. Certainly they ought to have provoked discussion at the colloquium and perhaps that was their purpose. His contention, buttressed by selective references and quotations, is that historians have not, by and large, given King his due. "In our history", he asserts in a vein reminiscent of Bruce Hutchison's facile categorization of Canada's prime ministers as successes or failures, "the forceful leaders and the dramatic figures have been the failures" (p. 32). Historians who have seriously criticized King have judged him "not by what was possible, but by an unrealistic ideal. They have been looking for a national leader, a national hero, who could transcend regional and cultural divisions and fuse the Canadian mosaic into a national community with a sense of national purpose" (p. 4). But such transcendent statesmanship is out of the question: "...until historians admit that regional and cultural diversity is a fact of Canadian life, they will never put King into a political context which would make a balanced assessment possible" (p.4). Then, having cited a number of "unbalanced" assessments by various writers, he concludes: "When Canadian historians analyse Canada as well as Mackenzie King, their appraisal of his political leadership may well be more positive. Their judgments will at least be more professional" (p. 13).

Dear me, that seems to put some of us beyond the pale but, at the risk of being unprofessional, one must take issue with all this. Quite apart from what Neatby says about forceful leaders and dramatic figures being very debatable, it exaggerates the importance of leaders and their personal qualities, while attaching insufficient weight to the varied and complex circumstances confronting them. Presumably longevity in office is one of the criteria of success; by that yardstick King was the undisputed champion while R.B. Bennett, for instance, was knocked out in an early round. Did Bennett "fail" because he was too forceful and dramatic, unlike his rival? To explain it in these personal terms is altogether too simplistic. The contest of opposing political leaders is not like

that of two boxers isolated in a ring where skill, strength and stamina are all that really count. Now will any historian who, blindly questing for a national hero, refuses to recognize regional and cultural diversity as a fact of Canadian life please stand up? Who could possibly deny such an obvious fact? But does it follow, as Neatby apparently believes, that any sense of national purpose is unattainable, that only the Kingsian model can assure "success" and, more than that, the avoidance of ruinous confrontation and discord in the country? "King or Chaos" may have been an effective campaign slogan in 1935 but it cannot be taken seriously as one of the "lessons" of history.

John Courtney's "Prime-Ministerial Character: An Examination of Mackenzie King's Political Leadership" caused some comment when it first appeared elsewhere. Using J.D. Barber's model, with its intersecting "Active-Passive" and "Positive-Negative" axes, Courtney reaches the rather unexpected conclusion that King belongs in the Active-Positive quadrant. The value of this pseudo-scientific, graphic approach to something as complicated as leadership is lost on me, I must admit. Locating a leader along the one axis according to how much he enjoyed political activity does not tell us much after all, and where the other axis is concerned, on the basis of the evidence presented by Courtney (and others) "reactive" rather than "active" seems the appropriate term for King. But the evidence Courtney does present about King's character, worldview and style, chiefly drawn from the inexhaustible fount of the diaries, and not the Barberous trappings, make his essay, though it affords no startling revelations, a worthwhile addition to the literature.

Among these seven papers the only one, and it is a good one, about external relations, which J.L. Granatstein in his contribution calls King's "area of expertise", is Norman Hillmer's "The Pursuit of Peace: Mackenzie King and the 1937 Imperial Conference". The relative neglect of that field is not inappropriate in a sense, since King himself told the conference "how I had endeavoured to prevent discussion on foreign affairs in Parliament by persuading the members in caucus to leave the matter alone in the House of Commons" (p. 157). Not that King and Canada had no role to play in the world. He thought of himself as peacemaker and linchpin with singular qualifications to foster understanding between Britain and the Reich. He explained to Ribbentrop, as recorded in a remarkable if characteristic diary passage, that he had been born in Berlin, Ontario, had represented a riding with a large German element, and (like Hitler) both sympathized with workers and had known hard times. More than that, his grandfather had fought for the people a century before and had been exiled in the United States where King's mother was born. These influences, he told the ambassador, "helped to give me, I thought, the sympathy with movements of the people, to appreciate motives, desires, etc." Ribbentrop's invitation to visit Hitler bore out in King's mind "what I saw in the vision before waking this morning of combining social and political relations with a view of furthering friendship between men of different countries" (p. 161).

Those words seem somehow to epitomize the never-never world that was in the 1930s.

No collection of essays about King would be complete without one on the art of cabinetry. Granatstein obliges with "King and His Cabinet: The War Years". This highly interesting narrative shows how King handled various thorny problems which necessitated repairing or refinishing the cabinet on occasion, in order to dispose of an unwanted minister or to relocate another, always with his finely honed political sense alive to possible consequences of what and how actions were taken. It is often not a pretty story. As Granatstein observes, "King's separate acts do not always appear honourable, fair, or just. Too often expediency, power considerations, or patronage appear to shape policy, and the individual parts of the whole often look pretty shabby". However, he adds, "the entire picture should not be distorted by too much emphasis on the bits and pieces" (p. 189). Perhaps not, and perhaps the end does justify the means. In any case, he concludes (and here the typesetter did him dirt), "if we stand off a ways [*sic*] and look at his career with [*sic*] rancour, we may find that Mackenzie King does look better and better" (p. 189). Well, rancour really has nothing to do with it and whether King looks better or worse, about which there will continue to be two opinions, does not matter much. What matters is to comprehend the man and how he operated; on that score Granatstein in this readable essay has contributed a good deal.

My own favourite among all the contents of *Widening the Debate* is Robert Bothwell's "The Health of the Common People", which strikes me as the most original, most solidly researched paper in the collection. It tells in some detail of the rise and fall during the war of a project for a national health insurance system. This emanated from the Department of Pensions and National Health, whose minister, Ian Mackenzie, did his inadequate best to promote the plan. He was outgunned by its critics, in Ottawa and elsewhere, among whom the Finance Department and the Quebec Government, backed by the Church, were the most influential. The scheme was scuttled, or at least steered off course into a special parliamentary committee on social security, during whose deliberations it quietly foundered. For this the Prime Minister was ultimately to blame, according to Bothwell, who writes: "At first King was enthusiastic, apparently believing that he was confronted with an idea whose time had come. The objections and obstructions of the Finance Department gave him the pause that quenches, and his subsequent burial of health insurance in the limbo of the Social Security Committee guaranteed it an early death at the hands of special interest groups" (p. 216).

While the literature on King is large and still growing, the St. Laurent period suffers as yet from comparative, though not complete, neglect. The same cannot be said of the Pearson years. The "tenth decade" has received a lot of attention from journalists in the print and electronic media. Each of its two principal political figures has been memorialized in three autobiographical volumes and

many other actors on that stage have either, in a few cases, written their memoirs or shown a readiness to start recollecting at the drop of an interviewer's tape recorder. Material of this kind may often be self-serving but it can afford invaluable grist for the historian's mill.

Two books which future historians of the Liberal party and of Canadian affairs will find useful, and which will interest the present generation of readers, are Walter Gordon's *A Political Memoir* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1977) and Peter Stursberg's *Lester Pearson and the Dream of Unity* (Toronto, Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1978). The latter is the first of a planned two volume set of oral history to complement Stursberg's two volumes on John Diefenbaker. This one concentrates on domestic issues and politics; its successor will be devoted to external relations and Pearson as diplomat. Stursberg has edited material garnered in more than sixty interviews and woven it with brief connecting passages of his own to produce a quite fascinating eye-witness treatment of Pearson as Leader of the Opposition and as Prime Minister. Just about everybody who was anybody on the political scene, in and out of Parliament, is among the contributors. Oral history, like autobiography — and like contemporary documentary material for that matter — has obvious limitations as reliable historical evidence. At the same time it can add to the record information that will never be found in documents. Much depends on the ability of the questioner and Stursberg, a very experienced journalist, knows how to elicit a response from his subjects.

On the whole the book does not enhance Pearson's image and reputation. There is no denying his famous charm, his winning, self-deprecating sense of humour, his lack of "side" and the impression he gave of being in league with the angels. He engaged the affection and loyalty of many people. Pauline Jewett tells how she intended to vote CCF in 1957 but "I saw Mike's face just as I was about to put my 'x' down. It was Mike's face, nobody else's, that . . . said to me 'Tch'. And I said to myself, 'I cannot vote against the party that has Mike Pearson'" (p. 40). (So much for issue-oriented politics.) It is equally true, though, that he presided over a somewhat shambling, accident-prone and dissension-ridden administration; if one can rely on the versions of events offered here, much of the blame for that rests on him. Perhaps his chief failing was too great an anxiety to be liked by everyone which, along with his ingrained habits of diplomacy, made him go to almost any length to avoid unpleasantness and confrontation. The results were vacillation and evasiveness bordering on duplicity, an impression of weakness and indecision, and various damaging squabbles that might have been avoided by a more straightforward style. T.C. Douglas reports an unnamed friend of Pearson as saying, "If you're giving advice to Mike, it's always wise to be at the end of the line" (p. 167). Tom Kent, who worked very closely with him, has much the same to say: "Mr. Pearson could be an escapist. He found it very difficult to say anything unpleasant to anybody face to face, and most people who talked to Mr. Pearson tended to

leave him thinking that he'd agreed with them. . . even if the views of A and B in succession were rather diverse. . ." (p. 239).

Anyone who paid attention to politics during those hectic years will enjoy having his memories refreshed and his grasp of things enlarged by Stursberg's book. It is all here: Pearson's bilingual pledge; his curious relationship with Diefenbaker (Jean-Luc Pépin calls it "Freudian" while Kent uses the analogy, not to be taken too literally, of the rabbit and the snake); the famous motion, contrived by Pickersgill, that Diefenbaker resign in Pearson's favour; the scandals, but with a noticeable lack of comment by the politicians and backroom boys on the Hal Banks case; the Munsinger affair; the flag debate; cooperative federalism; the three wise men from Quebec; the de Gaulle bombshell, and so on. Official bilingualism, the maple leaf flag and a more flexible federalism were the chief ingredients in Pearson's recipe for national unity. That they were lacking in efficacy, as distinct from intrinsic merit, is now painfully evident. Maurice Sauvé, usually odd man out in the Liberal party, puts the matter bluntly: Pearson "had the wrong interpretation of the situation, and this was mostly given to him by Maurice Lamontagne who interpreted the difficult political relations between. . . the French Canadians and the Anglophones as. . . a cultural problem. . . it's not mainly cultural, it's mainly economic. . . . The problem in Canada is fundamentally a problem of economic domination of the French Canadians by the Anglophones" (p. 15). Thus the voice of realism.

Walter Gordon, one of Pearson's closest friends and associates until their ways parted and a leading contributor to the Stursberg collection, has also written an interesting volume of memoirs. Indeed, it is more an autobiography than a mere political memoir, as he calls it, and it is engagingly written, though with a quite marked air of self-satisfaction. Judged by this book, Gordon seems to be one of those fortunate individuals who are seldom troubled by self-doubt, and that may help to explain why he was moved to add to Denis Smith's excellent biography his own account of his life and times.² Inevitably the memoir repeats a good deal of what the biography contains but it does offer slightly different interpretations of some things. In addition it goes somewhat more fully into Gordon's public service as distinct from his political career, that is, his work on various boards, commissions and committees both before and after his years as an active party politician. Considering the biography and the memoir together, one can now confidently affirm that Walter Gordon has been "done".

While books such as Stursberg's and Gordon's are interesting in themselves, their value in the long run will lie in the raw material they provide for scholars, whatever their particular discipline, who persist in thinking, as some will, that our political past is well worth continued study. One does not belittle the

2 Denis Smith, *Gentle Patriot: A Political Biography of Walter Gordon* (Edmonton, 1973).

importance of the many other specialties in which students of Canadian history are currently absorbed, much less assert that history is merely past politics, in remarking that how we have been governed is, after all, central to our common experience and therefore to an understanding of ourselves. *The Government Party* and much of *Widening the Debate* demonstrate how rewarding, how illuminating, research in that aspect of the past can still be.

ROGER GRAHAM