

“This saving remnant”: Macdonald and the Catholic Vote in the 1891 Election

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If there was one thing opponents and followers alike conceded Sir John Macdonald, it was the Tory leader's ability to attract and retain the support of disparate elements of Canadian society, whether manufacturers and artisans, farmers and urbanites, or Protestants and Catholics. Macdonald's mastery of religious and cultural discord was graphically illustrated in a cartoon in the humorous magazine, *Grip*, in 1885. The artist, J.W. Bengough, portrayed the Old Chieftain as a circus trick rider with one foot on the saddle of each of two horses which faced in different directions. On his shoulders perched a demonic-looking urchin, obviously meant to be the *Métis* leader who had sparked the conflict in the Northwest a short time before. The horses were labelled “English Influence” and “French Influence” respectively; and the caricature bore the label “A Riel Ugly Position.”¹ As the cartoon suggested, by the later 1880s worried followers of the Tory wizard were beginning to fear that the old man was losing his grip on the affection of Catholics. Some modern analysts go so far as to suggest that, as a result of the Riel, Jesuits' Estates, and Manitoba Schools issues, Macdonald lost the Catholic vote and paved the way for the eventual disintegration of the Conservative Party in the 1890s.² The persistent dominance of the Liberal Party, with its base in Quebec and with strong support among Catholics throughout the country, through the twentieth century, is in large part the result of Macdonald's failure to hold on to the Catholic vote in the last years of his career.

In fact, the reciprocity election of 1891 gives the lie to this

¹ D.G. CREIGHTON, *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain*, (1955), p. 431.

² A.R.M. LOWER, *Colony to Nation*. (fourth edition, 1964), pp. 389-91; G.M. WRONG, *The Canadians*, (1938), quoted in H.B. NEATBY, *Laurier and a Liberal Quebec*, (1973), p. 27.

over-simplification of Canada's political revolution of the late nineteenth century. Far from showing a decreased sensitivity to Catholic and French susceptibilities, as one historian has argued,³ Macdonald's last years were illustrative of his patient analysis of political weaknesses and his thoroughly skilful efforts to prop up decaying parts of the Tory political fence. Rather than illustrating an uninterrupted Conservative slide into disfavour among French Canadians and English-speaking Catholics after the execution of Louis Riel, the 1891 contest shows to what extent Macdonald had reasserted the traditional Conservative grip on the country's religious minority.

I

There was a Catholic vote; and it was important. Catholics in central Canada had had to band together politically during the time of troubles, the debate over denominational education and related issues during the 1850s. Then it had been the Conservatives – French *Bleus* and moderate Ontario Tories – who had established the institutions of education for religious minorities in Canada West. And it had been the voluntarist Grits who had led the struggle against Catholic denominational schools, the incorporation of the Jesuit Collège Ste-Marie in Montreal, and ecclesiastical incorporations. For many years after Confederation the Catholics continued to support the Conservatives, even though the death of George Brown removed one of the spectres of Protestant intolerance from the scene. Liberal leader Edward Blake tried to make a dent in the solid phalanx of Catholic opposition by attacking Orange Incorporation in 1884 and criticising the Tories' decision to allow Riel to hang after the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. Blake's efforts were continued by his successor, Laurier, who had the obvious advantage of being both Catholic and French himself.

The federal election of 1887 had illustrated the importance of the Catholic vote. In Ontario the contest had been close, the Conservatives winning a comfortable margin of seats, but exceeding their opponents' popular vote by a mere 1.52 per cent. That is, as

³ R. HEINTZMAN, "The Spirit of Confederation: Professor Creighton, Biculturalism, and the Use of History," *Canadian Historical Review* [hereafter *CHR*], LII (1971), 270 note.

Macdonald's secretary, Joseph Pope, pointed out, "for every 304 Conservative votes polled, the Liberals polled 300."⁴ In Hamilton, the Conservatives won in part on the strength of three hundred Catholic votes in a contest so close that a switch of less than one hundred ballots would have resulted in the election of two Grits instead of a brace of Tories.⁵ The Conservatives also had to worry about the neighbouring Province of Quebec, where the 1887 results had shown a loss of fourteen seats to the Liberals. These defections, however, were attributable not to Catholic disenchantment with the federal Tories, but to internal bickering among leading *Bleus*, ill-advised provincial railway policies, and poor leadership in the Quebec and North Shore regions by Caron and Langevin.⁶ If Quebec was falling away from the Conservative banner because of dissension and poor leadership within the Party's French-Canadian wing, the votes of the Catholics in the evenly-divided Province of Ontario were all the more crucial to the Tories' future.

As the next few years brought continued conflict over questions of language and religion, the Tories worried over the Catholic vote in Ontario. In both the Macdonald and Bowell Papers, the results of a Religious Census of Ontario are to be found among the papers for 1888. In the neat columns of the report the numbers of Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics, Presbyterians, and "Other Denominations" were listed for each electoral district of the Province, and then totalled for each of the Western, Central, and Eastern Divisions. The results showed that Roman Catholics were merely about 12 per cent of the total population in the western and central regions, but that in the east, the traditional Tory heartland, they amounted to a more impressive 26 per cent of the total.⁷ In a province so evenly divided politically, Catholics represented approximately 16.7 per cent of the total population.

No sooner had the Tory leaders finished digesting these significant statistics than they were in the midst of a crisis that

⁴ J. POPE (ed.), *Correspondence of Sir John Macdonald*, (1921), 443 note.

⁵ PUBLICARCHIVESOF CANADA [hereafter PAC], Sir John Thompson Papers, E. Furlong to Thompson, Nov. 30 and Dec. 14, 1889.

⁶ J. POPE, *The Day of Sir John Macdonald*, (1915), pp. 140-3.

⁷ PAC, Sir John Macdonald Papers, Sessional Memoranda, 1888; PAC, Sir Mackenzie Bowell Papers, 98 and 100.

threatened to disrupt the Conservative-Catholic alliance. In the summer of 1888 the Quebec Legislature passed a measure to compensate several Catholic groups for lands, the Jesuits' Estates, that the British Crown had appropriated after the Conquest of New France. In Ontario the legislation was denounced as a cheap Papist trick to grant the Church money, money which would ultimately be raised by taxing the more prosperous Canadian Protestants. Although the Jesuits' Estates Act had nothing to do with the French language, it also became a pretext to attack the rights of French-Canadians. In Ontario the agitation against the Act led to the formation of a new organization, the Equal Rights Association, that was explicitly anti-French Canadian as well as antagonistic to what it called 'aggressive Catholicism'. In addition to calling for the disallowance of the Estates Act, the Ontario E.R.A. also demanded action to superintend more closely Ontario's Catholic separate schools and to roll back the onward-moving tide of French-Canadian cultural penetration of the eastern counties.⁸

The Estates Act agitation should not have hurt the Conservatives more than the Liberals, but it did. Both Grits and Tories, attacked the Act in Parliament, and Conservatives and Liberals were equally to be found in prominent roles in the new Equal Rights Association. However, the Liberals managed to convey the impression that the Equal Rights movement was largely a Tory organization. In Ontario, it was particularly easy to portray the E.R.A. as part of a Conservative tradition because of previous trends in provincial politics. For many years after Confederation there had been little to choose, from the Ontario Catholic's point of view, between Grit and Tory in provincial elections. However, in the contest of 1886, the Tories raised the 'No Popery' banner by attacking the use of French in Ontario schools and accusing Mowat's Reform government of undue favoritism toward the Bishops in separate school matters. The anti-Catholic implications of the 1886 Tory platform, combined with Oliver Mowat's

⁸ J.R. MILLER, "The Jesuits' Estates Act Crisis: 'An Incident in a Conspiracy of Several Years' Standing'," (forthcoming) *Journal of Canadian Studies*, IX (1974); "'Equal Rights for All': the E.R.A. and the Ontario Election of 1890," *Ontario History*, LXV (1973); "Honoré Mercier, la minorité protestante, et l'Acte pour le règlement des Biens des Jésuites," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, XXVII (1974).

reputation as an impartial arbiter among all creeds, resulted in the repudiation of the Tories.⁹

Ontario Conservatives now discovered that they were riding a tiger. The Jesuits' Estates Act aggravated the concern in Ontario that the influence of Roman Catholic clerics might be increasing at the same time that an influx of Francophones was altering the character of some of the eastern counties of the province. Even had Meredith's Conservatives wished to retreat from their 'No Popery' policy, the political climate in Ontario made such a withdrawal impossible. Irresistibly Meredith was carried along with the agitation that arose from the Estates legislation. The rhetoric about British-Canadian nationality, and the dangers posed to it by increasing numbers of Franco-Ontarians became steadily more heated throughout the summer and autumn of 1889. So serious had the situation become by the end of the year that a local Catholic Conservative organizer reported that "Meredith's policy has completely staggered us here," and that "we have about made up our minds that we cannot in any way support him." "[I]t would be injustice to ourselves and an injury to our dominion friends to attempt to induce our Catholic friends to support him."¹⁰

The federal Conservatives' relations with the Catholics were endangered by three separate, but related problems: Meredith, the Conservative press in Ontario, and a leading Tory Member of Parliament, D'Alton McCarthy. There was little that could be done about Meredith save to ignore him and the provincial wing. Macdonald's personal inclination to steer clear of the Ontario party was reinforced by a warning from Archbishop Cleary of Kingston that he would oppose the federal Party at the next Dominion election unless Macdonald remained absolutely aloof from the impending election in Ontario.¹¹ In the campaign in Ontario in the spring of

⁹ A.M. EVANS, "Oliver Mowat and Ontario, 1872-1896: A Study in Political Success," (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Toronto, 1967), pp. 193-4; Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Thomas Greenway Papers, W.T.R. Preston to Greenway, Aug. 17, 1889.

¹⁰ Thompson Papers, P. Kelly to Thompson, Dec. 27, 1889; and Thompson to Kelly, Dec. 30, 1889.

¹¹ Macdonald Papers, J.G. Moylan to Macdonald, May 8, 1890. Cleary, who was an advocate of Irish Home Rule, had been involved in a bitter conflict over separate schools with Ontario Conservation leader, W.R. Meredith, during the

1890, federal Tories were strikingly conspicuous by their absence from Meredith's campaign.

The Tory press, or rather a portion thereof, presented a more difficult problem. In the Lindsay-Peterborough area, maverick Sam Hughes was using his *Victoria Warder* to wage a campaign of slander against Roman Catholics.¹² Perhaps more serious than the excesses of the *Warder* were those of the larger and more influential *Hamilton Spectator*. From the Hamilton district came information that Catholics were offended by the *Spectator* and wanted its slurs against Catholics stopped by Macdonald's intervention.¹³ Macdonald, however, reminded Catholics in his Cabinet that the *Spectator* was an independent Conservative paper over which he had little control. Besides, he said, the "Conservative French press hammers away at Protestants & Protestantism. That is part of their stock in trade and so long as they support us we Protestants shrug our shoulders and laugh." Finally, what concerned Macdonald most in the wake of the Estates Act agitation was not Catholic sensibilities but Orange irritation. It would never do, he concluded, to attempt to muzzle the editor "under the state of feeling now existing. We want the Orange Vote in 1891-2 and *The Spectator* may be trusted to do its very best to keep that vote right. In order to hold his influence with them he must go a good way on the Equal Rights cry."¹⁴

Macdonald reacted more sharply to the transgressions of the party paper, *The Empire* in Toronto. When editor David Creighton reported on the feeling among many Ontario Tories that McCarthy should be encouraged to join Meredith in Ontario politics on a 'No Popery' cry and suggested that *The Empire* could support the Mere-

1886 Ontario election, and again prior to the 1890 campaign. In addition, Macdonald had used his influence to prevent Cleary's elevation to the Archbishopric of Toronto in 1888. See J.R. MILLER, "The Impact of the Jesuits' Estates Act on Canadian Politics, 1888-1891,"

(unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Toronto, 1972), pp. 62-3 and 310-2.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 339-40 and 370-1.

¹³ Thompson Papers, E. Furlong to Thompson, Nov. 30, and Dec. 5 and 9, 1889; Macdonald Papers, Father F.P. McEvoy to Macdonald, Jan. 29, 1890.

¹⁴ Thompson Papers, Macdonald to Thompson, Dec. 7, 1889; Macdonald Papers, Macdonald to Father McEvoy, Feb. 5, 1890.

dithite position, he received no encouragement from Macdonald.¹⁵ In fact, at the prompting of his Quebec colleagues, Macdonald urged Creighton to bring *The Empire* out more strongly in defence of French-Canadians.¹⁶ Creighton was most reluctant in view of public feeling in Ontario, but eventually he was persuaded.¹⁷ And when *The Empire* began to stray off into provincial fields with too many editorials on educational questions as the 1890 Ontario election approached, Macdonald sharply brought its editor to heel with a curt note.¹⁸ Even though *The Empire's* stand on the Jesuits' Estates and schools questions hurt the paper's circulation and contributed to the defeat of its editor in the Ontario election in June,¹⁹ the official organ of Conservatism in Ontario carefully avoided offending Catholics. *The Empire* even treated the sensational Parnell case delicately, for fear of offending Irish Canadians sympathetic to the cause of Home Rule.²⁰

It was not just with *The Empire's* editor that Macdonald had his problems; he was also vexed by the behaviour of one of the paper's directors, D'Alton McCarthy. The brilliant, but unpredictable Barrie lawyer was a sore trial to Macdonald, who felt at times like a political father spurned by his favourite child. Although he had brought McCarthy into federal politics and urged him to accept important Cabinet rank as the first step of what was obviously intended to be a meteoric rise to the leadership, McCarthy had first proved uncooperative and then had embarked on a course that was positively dangerous to Macdonald and the Conservatives. In the later 1880s, McCarthy began to denounce French-Canadian nationalism as a bar to national unity. Regrettably, he developed this thesis still further as a result of the Jesuits' Estates agitation. In Parliament and at public meetings McCarthy treated the Act as simply a manifestation of French-Canadian nationalism that proved

¹⁵ Macdonald Papers, Creighton to Macdonald, June 14, 1890.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Macdonald to Creighton, Sept. 21, 1889.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Creighton to Macdonald, October 1, 1889.

¹⁸ Macdonald Papers, Macdonald to Creighton, March 25, 1890.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, W.E. Sanford to Macdonald, June 13, 1890; and Creighton to Macdonald, June 3 and 7, 1890.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, J.J. Curran to Macdonald, Nov. 29, 1890; and Creighton to Macdonald, Dec. 3, 1890.

that Francophones, when led by unscrupulous nationalists such as Honoré Mercier, were incorrigibly antagonistic to the development of a strong, homogeneous Canadian nation. In particular, at Stayner, Ontario, on July 12, 1889, McCarthy fired the opening shot in a war on the extension of French-Canadian institutions outside Quebec by informing his constituents that he would move at the next session of Parliament for the abolition of the official use of French in the Northwest Territories.²¹ He repeated this inflammatory message in the West in August, and in the major cities of central Canada throughout the autumn of 1889.²²

Poor Macdonald! He was disappointed at McCarthy, who, in spite of the confidence the Prime Minister had shown in him, had thus illustrated his lack of political judgment.²³ As McCarthy embarked on his reckless course in 1889, the Prime Minister talked to him, if not like a political father, then certainly like a Dutch uncle. He wrote McCarthy, appealing to his protégé not to divide the Party by taking such an extreme stand on the Estates Act, a measure which, after all, was not very significant. He reminded McCarthy that his action would injure the Tories and benefit the Liberals. Was this what McCarthy sought? Macdonald delivered the same message to his Ontario caucus. He informed the Ontario Tories who were restive because of the Estates Act that he had always been “able to carry Ontario” because “he received the support of a certain percentage of what is commonly spoken of as the ‘Catholic vote.’” “This vote, though not large, was in a province almost equally divided politically, sufficient to turn the scale.” If McCarthy and some of his Ontario sympathizers continued to attack French-Canadians, they “would alienate this saving remnant, and so bring defeat and disaster to the Conservative cause in the Dominion.”²⁴ The lecture to McCarthy and the Ontario Tories had had some effect. Many Ontario Members who

²¹ *Toronto Daily Mail*, July 13, 1889.

²² J.R. MILLER, “D’Alton McCarthy, Equal Rights, and the Origins of the Manitoba School Question,” *CHR*, LIV (1973), 372 note; and “E.R.A. and the Ontario Election of 1890,” pp. 214-24.

²³ M. POPE (ed.), *Public Servant: the Memoirs of Sir Joseph Pope*, (1960), pp. 62-3; PAC, Sir James R. Gowan Papers, Macdonald to Gowan, July 10, 1890.

²⁴ POPE, *Correspondence of Macdonald*, pp. 442-3.

intended to vote against the Jesuits' Estates Act fell into line,²⁵ and McCarthy promised privately to avoid trouble.²⁶ But that undertaking was forgotten by the time of the Stayner speech, and through 1889 and 1890 McCarthy continued to argue his case for unilingualism, thereby infuriating many Catholics.

II

Electoral indicators forced Macdonald to take further action to avoid alienating the Catholics. In a federal by-election in the spring of 1890 in Haldimand, Macdonald became aware that McCarthy was meddling, trying to influence the local Conservative candidate to come out in favour of "the abolition of the dual language, and... the abolition of separate schools."²⁷ What was worse, when Macdonald tried to take a hand in the campaign, by writing the Catholic Bishop of Hamilton, he found that the local Catholics were still incensed by the behaviour of the *Spectator*.²⁸ In answer to Bishop Dowling's plaintive query, "Why cannot you curb it ?," Macdonald was able to report that he finally persuaded the reluctant editor of the *Spectator* "to be more careful in future."²⁹ Dowling, who had favoured the Tories all along, must have done his part, too, for Macdonald was able to report that the Bishop's efforts among his flock "had a marked and beneficial effect" on the successful Conservative's campaign in Haldimand.³⁰

Soon after this warning, Macdonald received another intimation of Catholic disenchantment in the Ontario provincial election of June, 1890. As the campaign warmed up, a Tory organizer informed the federal leader that he was having a hard time "to get the R[oman] Catholics to go" their man with Meredith "on his back," especially when the Grits were able to play Catholic Works Minister C.F. "Fraser for the R.C. vote and Mowat for the Protestant

²⁵ For example : J. POPE, *Memoirs of the Right Honourable Sir John Alexander Macdonald*, (n.d.), II, pp. 291-2.

²⁶ Macdonald Papers, J.F. Wood to Macdonald, July 26, 1889; and Macdonald to Wood, July 29, 1889.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, D'Alton McCarthy to J. Hull, Jan. 31, 1890; and Hull to Macdonald, Feb. 25, 1890.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Bishop Dowling to Macdonald, Feb. 12, 1890.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Macdonald to Bishop Dowling, March 25, 1890.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

ditto.”³¹ In northern Ontario a Conservative candidate complained to Macdonald that Tory strategists refused to send him an effective French-Canadian speaker,³² and in Kingston and the Peterborough areas the Roman Catholic voter was turning his back on the Conservatives.³³ The problem of Catholic disaffection was not confined to these regions, however, for throughout Ontario Conservative candidates fell before a Grit machine that enjoyed the backing of most Catholics.³⁴

Macdonald was of two minds about the results in Ontario. On one hand, he was glad Mowat had won, because he considered the old Reformer an essentially conservative politician, while he viewed Meredith as a dangerous radical.³⁵ He also hoped that the Ontario election would teach Meredith and McCarthy that the ‘No Popery’ and anti-French Canadian strategy was a disastrous one in an evenly-divided province such as Ontario.³⁶ It had been for these reasons that he had found it easy to withhold federal support for the provincial Conservatives in the campaign, as Cleary had insisted he should. But, on the other hand, he could not ignore the extent to which Catholic resentment had manifested itself in the contest. Macdonald’s response was to begin a diplomatic campaign to woo the Catholic Bishops once more, especially in Ontario. A new prelate in an eastern Ontario diocese was cunningly flattered in a congratulatory note. It was a “great pleasure,” the Prime Minister wrote, “to see that the diocese is to be again under the Episcopal care of a Scotsman and a Macdonell,” for he was a Scot and had been a good friend of Bishop Macdonell, the first Catholic Bishop of Upper Canada.³⁷ Several Bishops and Archbishops were thoughtfully provided with propaganda to counter some of the extreme charges of Equal Rights enthusiasts, who were still braying

³¹ *Ibid.*, R. Stephenson to Macdonald, May 20, 1890.

³² *Ibid.*, D. Purvis to Macdonald, May 30, 1890.

³³ *Ibid.*, J. Dobson to Macdonald, June 6, 1889 [viz. 1890]; J.H. Metcalfe to Macdonald, May 24, 1890; J. McIntyre to Macdonald, May 30, and June 6, 1890.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, J. Small to Macdonald, June 10, 1890; Thompson Papers, Father P.I. Noonan to Thompson, June 7, 1890.

³⁵ Gowan Papers, Macdonald to Gowan, July 10, 1890.

³⁶ PAC, Sir Charles Tupper Papers, Macdonald to Tupper, June 5, 1890.

³⁷ Macdonald Papers, Macdonald to Bishop of Alexandria, Sept. 4, 1890.

about the interference of the Pope in Canada's internal affairs.³⁸ When the Ontario Bishops gathered in Alexandria for the consecration of the good Scot Macdonald had congratulated, the opportunity to "mesmerize them in a batch" was taken by the Tories, who showed the party flag at the festivities.³⁹ Patronage requests from clergy were obliged, especially when the priest happened to be from "such close constituencies as West Middlesex."⁴⁰ Finally, even a request from the hostile Archbishop Cleary for a personal favour from the Minister of Customs, Brother Mackenzie Bowell, received the support of the Prime Minister.⁴¹

The campaign to win back the Church was subjected to an acid test in a federal by-election in Sam Hughes' bailiwick of South Victoria in December, 1890. The riding was neatly divided between Grits and Tories, and the Catholics represented close to one-fifth of the population.⁴² The best advice Macdonald could get was that the Conservatives would have to garner one-quarter of the twelve hundred Catholic votes to win.⁴³ The first step in the campaign to win Catholic support was to make Sam Hughes behave. Although Hughes wanted the nomination himself, Thompson vetoed the idea.⁴⁴ Hughes was privately disowned by Macdonald, and a moderate Orangeman with connections in the rural community was chosen as Conservative standard-bearer. Macdonald, Thompson, and their assistants then swung into action, making direct pleas to the Bishop of Peterborough and the Archbishop of Toronto, sending prominent Catholic Conservatives into the riding to campaign, and arranging for the influence of the priests of the

³⁸ For example: *ibid.*, Archbishop Cleary to Macdonald, June 28, 1890; and ARCHIEPISCOPAL ARCHIVES OF ST. BONIFACE [hereafter AASB], Macdonald to Archbishop Taché, Aug. 15, 1890.

³⁹ Thompson Papers, J.A. Macdonnell to Thompson, Oct. 11 and 31, 1890.

⁴⁰ Macdonald Papers, J. Pope to A.J. Jarvis, Sept. 17, 1890.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Archbishop Cleary to Macdonald, Jan. 18, 1891.

⁴² *Census of Canada, 1890-91*, (1893), II, pp. 284-5; Macdonald Papers, J.R. Dundas to Macdonald, Nov. 17, 1890; Thompson Papers, Thompson to J.C. Patterson, Dec. 1, 1890.

⁴³ Macdonald Papers, J. Dobson to Macdonald, Nov. 11, 1890.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Hughes to Macdonald, Sept. 22 and 23, and Oct. 29, 1890; and Thompson to Macdonald, Oct. 31, 1890.

University of Ottawa to be employed in the Tory interest.⁴⁵ The Conservative appeal to the clergy was based in part on the Party's record of defending Catholic interests in such issues as the Jesuits' Estates Act, and in part on implied promises of future assistance. The "Separate School question and the status of Catholics in Manitoba and the North West are both seriously threatened by the fanatical legislation at Winnipeg and we shall have to face a severe attack on our policy at the next Session of the Dominion Parliament," Macdonald wrote. Regardless of the sins of Sam Hughes, a successful Conservative candidate "will support the present Conservative Association in their policy of seeing that Justice is done to the Catholic minority in all parts of the Dominion."⁴⁶ It took strong arguments, but eventually Archbishop Walsh of Toronto consented to send for "and have an *informal* talk" with the Bishop of Peterborough on behalf of the Tory hopeful.⁴⁷

When the results were in, and South Victoria was safely in the Conservative column again, Macdonald anxiously analyzed the by-election results. Among the significant features of the contest was the fact that the hard struggle to win the Catholics back had succeeded. Apparently the Conservative candidate "got a fair share of the R.C. votes," and many Catholics who could not vote Tory stayed away from the polls.⁴⁸ To Sam Hughes the Prime Minister wrote that South Victoria was "the beginning of the fight which will be kept up until the next general election." Hughes should bear that in mind, and "in the meantime not lose any friends or lose the chance of converting foes." The by-election convinced him that the Catholics "will give *me* a strong vote at the next election, and they will therefore unless you raise their bile in the *Warder* either support you or refrain from voting against you. *A word to the*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Macdonald to J.R. Dundas (Oct. 24, 1890), to Bishop of Peterborough (Nov. 26, 1890), to Archbishop of Toronto (Nov. 26, 1890), to J.C. Patterson (Nov. 29, 1890); Thompson Papers, Thompson to Patterson, Dec. 1, 1890; Macdonald Papers, J. Dobson to Macdonald, Dec. 9, 1890, and Sir J.A. Grant to Macdonald, Dec. 10, 1890.

⁴⁶ Macdonald Papers, Macdonald to Bishop of Peterborough, Nov. 26, 1890.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Patterson to Macdonald, Dec. 9, 1890.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Dobson to Macdonald, Dec. 23, 1890.

wise.”⁴⁹

When Macdonald sprung an election on Canada in the late winter of 1891, the method of winning Catholic votes first formulated in Haldimand and refined in South Victoria was implemented once more. The usual entreaties to use his influence with the Hierarchy in Ontario poured in on Macdonald from anxious candidates and their agents.⁵⁰ In response to this pressure, the Tory leader wrote personally to the Bishops of Peterborough and Hamilton, arguing that “the Dom[inion] Government, who took a great responsibility in standing by Catholic interests, deserve the confidence and support of the Hierarchy.”⁵¹ Sir John Thompson was deputized to undertake a more extensive correspondence with all the Bishops of Ontario.⁵² Thompson’s diplomatic appeal, which reiterated the tried and true line that the Conservatives had defended the Catholics and suffered in the process, cleverly added a new theme designed to capitalize on the Prime Minister’s appeal to British-Canadian loyalty to counteract the attraction of the Liberal programme of unrestricted free trade with the U.S. Thompson’s missive concluded that in “the present campaign almost every interest which affects the security and the stability of the country seems to be more or less at stake,” and entreated the Bishops to come to the aid of Canada, and of Conservatism.⁵³

The Conservative ploy was an outstanding success. From several of the Bishops came warm letters of support. Indeed, one or two of the prelates entered so enthusiastically into the task of propping up the Tories that at times they came close to being unofficial agents of the Party.⁵⁴ The only serious setbacks came in Kingston, where Archbishop Cleary was still pursuing a quiet

⁴⁹ Macdonald Papers, Macdonald to Hughes, Dec. 19, 1890.

⁵⁰ For example: *ibid.*, Father W.J. Keilty to Macdonald, Feb. 10, 1891 N. McNamara to Macdonald, Feb. 14, 1891; and H.A. Ward to Macdonald, Feb. 24, 1891; Thompson Papers, Patterson to Thompson, Feb. 9, 1891.

⁵¹ Macdonald Papers, Macdonald to Bishop of Peterborough (Feb. 5, 1891), and to Bishop of Hamilton (Feb. 9, 1891).

⁵² Thompson Papers, Macdonald to Thompson, Feb. 5, 1891.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, (draft) Thompson to “My Lord,” Feb. 16, 1891.

⁵⁴ Macdonald Papers, Bishop Dowling to Macdonald, Feb. 13, and March 3, 1891; Thompson Papers, Bishop Macdonnell to Thompson, Feb. 26, 1891.

campaign against the Tories, and in the Ottawa Valley diocese of Pontiac. Here, the Vicar Apostolic, while sympathetic to the government and the National Policy, would not openly support the Conservative candidate, Peter White. White had been too noisily critical of Catholic schools, bilingualism, and the Jesuits' Estates Act. Even so, the effort was not completely futile in Pontiac, for the Vicar Apostolic promised not to oppose the Tory candidate.⁵⁵

Of course, it was not just the Catholics in Ontario who mattered to the Conservatives, although they were the most crucial. The much more numerous Catholic population of Quebec was also of immense significance, especially as Conservative fortunes had been slipping there ever since the mid-1880s. Macdonald had attempted to rally the feuding *Bleu* leadership late in 1890 and early in 1891, trying especially to bring Lieutenant-Governor Angers and a former Ultramontane leader, De Boucherville, into his Cabinet to offset Laurier's great appeal among his compatriots.⁵⁶ When both turned him down, he had to fall back on the wobbly *troika* – Chapleau, Langevin, and Caron – which even now was in the midst of one of its periodic crises over control of patronage.⁵⁷ Macdonald could not have been cheerful about the prospect of going to Quebec with such weak reeds as Langevin and Caron, and with his only strong lieutenant, Chapleau, in a sulk.

At the last moment, Dame Fortune smiled on Macdonald, as She always seemed to do. In Montreal, Archbishop Fabre astounded everyone by issuing a pastoral letter that seemed clearly to counsel Catholics against the policy of Unrestricted Reciprocity. Fabre reminded his flock that since the British Conquest it had been “providentially arranged” that in “the shadow of the flag which shelters us – protecting rather than dominating – we enjoy a precious liberty, sanctioned by solemn treaties, which enables us to preserve intact our laws, our institutions, our language, our nationality, and, above all, our holy religion.” These “precious advantages” were “peculiar to this land of ours (for even our

⁵⁵ Thompson Papers, Rt. Rev. N.Z. Lorain to Thompson, Feb. 25, 1891.

⁵⁶ Macdonald Papers, Macdonald to A.R. Angers (Dec. 29, 1890, and Jan. 19, 1891), and to De Boucherville, Feb. 6, 1891.

⁵⁷ For example: Thompson Papers, Chapleau to Thompson, Dec. 22, 1890; Macdonald Papers, Macdonald to Chapleau (Feb. 13, 1891), and to Langevin (Feb. 13, 1891).

neighbours do not share in them).” Accordingly, French-Canadians ought to “remain faithful to our traditions and our duties in this respect, so as not to expose our country to the loss of a settlement so much in its favour – a settlement which justly elicits the admiration of Catholics in other countries.”⁵⁸ One of Fabre’s priests expanded on the implied censure of the Liberals, when he “deplored that anyone should dream of annexation to the United States, or that Canada should enter into any arrangement with that country as would tend to weaken or sever the ties which bind us to the mother country.”⁵⁹ English Tories, who were normally prone to sneer at the credulous dependence of the *habitants* on their priests, now rejoiced that a loyal and docile people should be so ably led to see (and perform) their duty.⁶⁰ Copies of the pastoral letter were shipped to Ontario for use among Catholics there.⁶¹ It was simply the icing on the cake when a prominent Ontario Grit, John Charlton, gratuitously insulted French-Canadians by letting it be known that he believed that with “a French Catholic leader” like Laurier the Liberal Party did not have much of a future.⁶² The editor of *The Empire* in Toronto quickly sent a photographic copy of Charlton’s letter to Langevin’s newspaper, *Le Monde*. “The disparaging reference to a French Catholic leader ought to stir them up there,” Creighton noted happily.⁶³

Elsewhere, Macdonald did not have an intemperate John Charlton on whom to rely, but he did have the voluble help of the Catholic Hierarchy. A few short months before the election, the Grits had played into the Conservatives’ hands in Nova Scotia by publicly attacking the alliance between Bishop Cameron of Antigonish and the Minister of Justice, Sir John Thompson. The attack provided Bishop Cameron and Archbishop O’Brien of Halifax with

⁵⁸ *Montreal Gazette*, Feb. 23, 1891.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, statement of Father Marechal, curé of Notre Dame de Grâce, Montreal.

⁶⁰ PAC, G.T. Denison Papers, C. Mair to Denison, Feb. 23, 1891.

⁶¹ Macdonald Papers, J. Farrelly to Macdonald, Feb. 25, 1891; T. McCabe to Macdonald, Feb. 27, 1891; R. White to J. Pope, Feb. 28, 1891.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Creighton to Macdonald, Feb. 28, 1891; PAC, Sir Adolphe Caron Papers, J. Taylor to “Dear Sir,” Feb. 24, 1891; *Toronto Daily Mail*, Feb. 26, and March 3, 1891.

⁶³ Macdonald Papers, Creighton to Macdonald, Feb. 28, 1891.

an opportunity to counter-attack their Liberal opponents in the press, an opportunity they seized with glee.⁶⁴ The episcopal support was carefully used not just in Nova Scotia, but also in Montreal, and even in Ontario.⁶⁵ When the general election came on immediately after this *contretemps*, Bishop Cameron rejoiced that the newspaper controversy had proved “providential and eminently calculated to secure” Thompson’s re-election “by a triumphant majority.”⁶⁶ Bishop Cameron supplemented the “providential” assistance of the Liberal blunder with public moral and material support for the Conservatives, contributing to a Tory triumph by a margin of sixteen seats to five in Nova Scotia. Only in one Nova Scotia riding, where the Acadians were hostile, was the Catholic vote a negative factor for the Conservatives.⁶⁷

In Manitoba, too, the Conservatives managed to turn a delicate situation among the Catholics to their advantage by a combination of good luck and good management. The problem in Manitoba, of course, was that the provincial Liberal government had abolished the official use of French and the denominational school systems in 1890. Not unnaturally, local Catholics, led by Archbishop Taché of St. Boniface, had contended that the federal Cabinet should exercise its superintending power over education by disallowing the obnoxious schools legislation.⁶⁸ The Minister of Justice had explained to the Archbishop that the school issue appeared to the government to involve “mixed questions of fact and law which can only be ascertained satisfactorily by legal tribunals, and cannot fairly be disposed of by executive action.”⁶⁹ Taché had accepted that suggestion of contesting the legislation judicially, and, when the campaign began in early 1891, Manitoba Catholics were confident that they would win a test case that was then being heard.

⁶⁴ Thompson Papers, Bishop Cameron to Thompson, Dec. 27, 1890.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, C.H. Cahan to Thompson, Dec. 23, 1890; *Montreal Gazette*, Dec. 27, 1890; Macdonald Papers, Creighton to J. Pope, Feb. 5, 1891.

⁶⁶ Thompson Papers, Bishop Cameron to Thompson, Jan. 16, 1891.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Cahan to Thompson, Jan. 22, and June 1, 1890; J.C. Cameron to Thompson, May 24, 1890; Macdonald Papers, Macdonald to Archbishop O’Brien, July 7, 1890; Thompson Papers, T.C. Shreve to Thompson, March 6, 1891, and Father A.B. Parker to Thompson, March 6, 1891.

⁶⁸ AASB, (draft) Archbishop Taché to Thompson, May 7, 1890.

⁶⁹ Thompson Papers, Thompson to Archbishop Taché, May 17, 1890.

They also expected that, in the unlikely event that the courts found against Catholic denominational schools, the federal Conservatives would then exercise their power of disallowance. Joseph-Adolphe Chapleau had assured Archbishop Taché that the Conservative government “est tenu de protéger la minorité contre les actes de la législature de Manitoba, au sujet des Écoles séparées et de langue française,” and promised he would resign before he would allow the federal Cabinet to abandon the minority.⁷⁰ Taché’s good opinion of the reliability of the federal Conservatives was strengthened by the optimistic assumption of Bishop Lafèche of Trois-Rivières, who thought that the dissolution of Parliament was a prelude to disallowance of Manitoba’s school legislation.⁷¹ Naturally, then, the Manitoba Catholics supported the Conservatives, and took particular delight in combatting the author of the Public School Act, former Manitoba Attorney General Joseph Martin, when he sought a federal seat. The clergy, including a Jesuit in Brandon with the ironic name of John A. Macdonald, threw their influence into the contest against Martin in particular and the Liberals in general.⁷² The Conservatives received the votes, but the Manitoba Catholics did not get the action they hoped for. The federal government announced shortly after the election that it would not disallow the school legislation, which had recently been upheld by the appeal court in Manitoba.

The result of the combination of careful wooing and good luck was strong Catholic support for the Conservatives in the general election. This is not to say that there were not significant areas of Catholic opposition. There certainly were in Ontario, the

⁷⁰ AASB, Chapleau to Taché, Feb. 14, 1891; K.J. Munro, “The Political Career of Sir Joseph-Adolphe Chapleau,” (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Ottawa, 1973), pp. 281-3.

⁷¹ AASB, (copy) Bishop Lafèche to Archbishop Taché, Feb. 16, 1891.

⁷² Macdonald Papers, J.S. O’Brien to Macdonald, Feb. 28, 1891; AASB, Gabriel to Taché, Feb. 20, and March 3, 1891; Father Graton to Taché, Feb. 26, 1891; J.K. Barrett to Taché, Feb. 26, 1891; G.K. Brophy to Taché, March 7, 1891; Thompson Papers, Archbishop Taché to Thompson, March 25, 1891. See also: *Northwest Review*, Feb. 11 and 25, 1891; *L’Agriculteur*, March 1, 1891; *Winnipeg Tribune*, Feb. 20, 23 and 26, 1891; Greenway Papers, F. Schultz to Greenway, March 11, 1891.

Maritimes, and especially in Quebec.⁷³ Fabre's pastoral letter, Charlton's blunder, and the publicity given to Bishop Cameron's enthusiasm for Sir John Thompson could not overcome the problems of feuding within the Quebec Conservative Association, the impending disgrace of Sir Hector Langevin in the McGreevy-Langevin scandal, and the simple fact that Langevin and Caron were past their prime as political manipulators. But the striking fact was the strong endorsement given the Tories by the Catholics in the Maritimes,⁷⁴ in the West, and more particularly in the crucial province of Ontario.⁷⁵ It was in the eastern ridings of Ontario, where the Catholic minority was numerically most significant, that the Conservatives won their greatest success.⁷⁶ The average percentage of Catholics in Conservative constituencies was noticeably higher than in Liberal ridings in Ontario, 17.7% to 14.6%. In English Canada as a whole, the election showed that the more numerous was the Catholic minority in a constituency, the greater was the likelihood that that riding would vote Tory. All these indicators suggested that in English Canada, and especially in the pivotal province of Ontario, the Catholic vote went Tory. When it is recalled that the Conservatives won forty-seven of Ontario's ninety-two seats, while polling less of the popular vote than the Liberals, the significance of "this saving remnant" can fully be appreciated.

⁷³ Macdonald Papers, J.F. Wood to Macdonald, Feb. 29, 1891; R.R. Pringle to Macdonald, March 8, 1891; M. Anderson to Macdonald, March 20, 1891.

⁷⁴ See note 73; and *ibid.*, Hon. P. Poirier to Macdonald, March 17, 1891; and J. Pope to A.J. Jarvis, March 31, 1891.

⁷⁵ For example: *ibid.*, Archbishop Walsh to Macdonald, March 2, 1891; M. Blake to M. Mungovan, March 20, 1891; J. Pope to J. Costigan, May 27, 1891; Thompson Papers, D.A. O'Sullivan to Thompson, March 11, 1891; P. Kelly to Thompson, March 7, 1891.

⁷⁶ In Ontario's Eastern Division, where Catholics were 26% of the population, Conservatives won 23 of 32 seats. In the Western Division, where they were only 12%, Tories won only 7 of 29 seats. (Note: Protestant areas tended to be agricultural; Roman Catholic regions tended to be urban and manufacturing, or dependent on transportation systems connected with the National Policy.) Detailed tables and graphs that illustrate the strength of the Tories in areas where the Catholic minority was significant are available upon request from the author. These tables and graphs were distributed at the oral presentation of this paper, but had to be omitted from the printed version.

But why was the Catholic vote a Tory vote in English Canada? In part, the answer lay in Macdonald's careful management of the Hierarchy in all regions of the country. In luring them back to the Conservative cause, in spite of the irritants of the past few years, he had been assisted by the fact that the Catholics were traditionally Conservative anyway, and that political traditions died out slowly among the clergy.⁷⁷ And why not? After all, John Charlton, Thomas Greenway, and Joseph Martin were all Liberals as villainous as ever George Brown had been to Catholics. But the explanation of his success in 1891 goes beyond Macdonald's undoubted talent to cajole and manipulate. There was a stroke of genius in the selection of the Tory appeal in the 1891 campaign. The Conservative fight against Unrestricted Reciprocity with the United States made great use of the 'loyalty cry'. Macdonald and sympathetic newspapers stressed the necessity to demonstrate one's loyalty to Canada within the Empire, and indeed to British civilization as a whole, by rejecting the disguised annexation – the "veiled treason," as Macdonald called it – of Unrestricted Reciprocity. This was an especially potent appeal among Catholics. They, and particularly French-Canadian Roman Catholics, had been under attack for the previous few years for being obstacles to national development and for being quasi-Canadians with a partial loyalty to Rome. Catholic leaders were sensitive to these accusations, as was demonstrated during the ceremony at which Mercier paid over the compensation awarded the Catholics by the Jesuits' Estates Settlement Act. The Jesuit Superior took the opportunity to say that "You may tell the public that we are loyal to the Crown of England, as our history proves, and that the last drop of blood which shall be shed in this country in its defence may be shed by a Jesuit."⁷⁸ Macdonald's loyalty cry touched this need to be demonstrably loyal among Roman Catholics, and they responded warmly. Archbishop Fabre's pastoral letter, with its panegyric of British rule, was one example of the voluble loyalty of Catholics. Another, less public example, came in a letter to Sir John Thompson from the Vicar Apostolic of Pontiac, the man who wanted to support the Conservatives but

⁷⁷ For example, AASB, Bishop Lafèche to Archbishop Taché, May 19, 1890.

⁷⁸ *Toronto Daily Mail*, Nov. 6, 1889.

could not stomach the local Tory candidate. His letter of apology concluded with the statement that, "I hope and pray that the Holy Providence of God will throw light into the mind of the people, and that the party who wants to keep Canada for Canadians will come out best in the battle."⁷⁹ It is doubtful that Macdonald understood the feelings of Catholics so well that he chose his appeal to loyalty with the intention of psychologically coercing Catholics into joining him. The 'loyalty cry' seems to have been a piece of blind luck so far as its effect on the religious minority was concerned. Luck or skill, it proved the means of winning over "this saving remnant" to the Conservative cause.

III

On the morning of Thursday, June 4, 1891, while the Dominion's first Prime Minister lay dying of a stroke brought on by the exertions of the last campaign, a messenger left Parliament Hill on a special errand. He made his way to the Good Shepherd Convent, where he conveyed to the nuns the wish that they pray for Sir John Macdonald. The good sisters replied that they had indeed been praying for him "*and for Sir John Thompson too.*" When the messenger, in surprise, asked "what is the matter with Thompson?" a nun replied that his difficulty was that "he may be Prime Minister" upon Macdonald's death.⁸⁰ It was a fitting commentary on Canadian political life in the 1880s and 1890s that a devout group of nuns should have found it incumbent on them to pray for a Protestant politician who was about to give up the reins of power and for a Catholic convert who might be the man to assume the fallen traces. The event was also significant of the extent to which Macdonald had a grip on the affections of the Roman Catholic minority in the country, a purchase that allowed his tired and disintegrating administration to hold on to power once more in the crucial election of 1891.

⁷⁹ Thompson Papers, Rt. Rev. N.Z. Lorain to Thompson, Feb. 25, 1891. See also *Northwest Review*, Feb. 25, and March 4, 1891.

⁸⁰ Thompson Papers, Thompson to Lady Thompson, June 4, 1891.