

CLOUD OVER OTTAWA

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THE spectre that gibbers through the dreams of the honest liberal these days must surely be summed up in the query: Has democracy lost the power to adjust itself to a changing world? It is a spectre that will remain, no matter who wins the war. Only the complacent or mentally underdeveloped can believe that a victory for Britain will solve the major problems that beset democracy. Victory will remove the actual threat of extinction, but so long as those social and economic tensions, which the totalitarian way of life is a brutish attempt to resolve, remain unresolved, just so long will the democratic ideal remain in danger.

Karl Marx was not the first to see that the undisciplined freedom which our political system allows to the individual, to exploit his fellowman, must pile up intolerable abuses. Long before his day, the richest and most cultured cities were hemmed about by slums in which vice, crime and disease grew like tropic plants. But since then, and more particularly since the end of the last war, unemployment, with its physical and moral deterioration, has become a major human problem. Still later, class hatred, raised to a gospel by Communism, had broken through into revolution in some countries, was rumbling ominously in all countries. And finally this present war arose out of the social and economic tensions that had beset western civilization.

So victory for England will not salvage democracy, unless steps are taken to relieve its inner tensions by adjusting it more rationally to modern needs and aspirations. They seem to be realizing this in England. The radio broadcasts of J. B. Priestley, and the program recently brought forward by an earnest body of the Church of England under the leadership of the Archbishop of York, would certainly seem to point that way. The leaders of the British Labor Party, who in the past have been little more than bewildered apostles of gradualness, also seem determined not to let the locusts eat the years of the future as they did those of the two governments Ramsay Macdonald led before the bankers terrified him into conservatism. Even the *Times*, in editorials strangely lacking the ancient bombast, has hinted to its following that there is writing on the wall.

What about this continent? President Roosevelt's New Deal was an attempt to ameliorate some of the tensions that arose out of the economic follies of the '20's. But even the most unintelligent realize now that the New Deal put a series of props under a failing system rather than a knife to the root of its disease. The war, by increasing production and employment, has created a spurious American prosperity. But when the war is over, and industry returns to peace-time production, the problems of unemployment, among others, will become critical again. If—perish the thought—Germany were to win, these problems would be tremendously exaggerated. America—and this includes Canada—would have the choice either of developing a completely self-contained economy, or of competing in trade with a Germany that, using the conquered races as slave-workers, would be able to produce goods at a price America could meet only by lowering gravely her standard of living. If the American standard of living fell, fresh stresses would be created, out of which antagonisms to the democratic way of life would surely arise. In any event, then, there will be a period during which unemployed American youth, unable to find a normal outlet for its energies and ambitions, will be ready to follow blindly any gangster leadership. And because youth is credulous and impatient, it will follow the leader who offers the most in the shortest time; who is, in effect, the most accomplished liar.

What are the remaining democracies doing to create a "wave of the future" which will sweep away these dangerous tensions? In England a commission has been set up to look into the matter. Its personnel suggests that it is in the nature of a pious gesture, a sop to the over-vocal idealists like Priestley and the Church of England liberals. On this continent there is little evidence, beyond President Roosevelt's mellow generalities, that we are preparing to make the sacrifices necessary to a better way of life after the war. One gets the same impression one had in the latter years of the last war, the impression that most people feel that, once the war is over, some virtue arising out of peace will create a world safe for democracy; the impression that, with the end of the war, we will all breathe a sigh of relief and turn over to sleep on our untroubled side.

But if we do this, we shall certainly wake up to find that the forces we hoped were dead, and the greeds that no war kills, are attempting in the ancient jungle way to fight through a situation we had neither the wit nor the fortitude to prevent.

If we are not fighting against some other nation twenty years hence, we shall be fighting against ourselves, as they did in Russia and Spain. That raises the question: Will man never become moral enough to solve his social and economic problems rationally? Is there no way of resolving our national tensions except through the insanity of revolution? Can man free himself from the crushing yoke of tradition only through hatred, blood and tears?

The wellspring at the heart of democracy is tolerance. But when, in failing to adjust itself to a changing world, democracy permits intolerance to rise to such heights that it can release itself only in revolution, it has ceased to be democracy. Perhaps that is why men say that there is no real democracy in the world to-day. Perhaps that is why Huey Long and Father Coughlin were able to build up their intolerant followings in the United States. Are we going to procrastinate until some longer-lived Long, or some Father Coughlin whose heart is as bold as his tongue, capitalizes in the Lenin-Hitler way the stresses that must arise after the war? The alternative is to achieve a just and satisfactory solution of those stresses before they throw up the inevitable *Führer*.

We made such an attempt in Canada. The *Sirois Report* was, however feebly, such an attempt. But it failed. Dismally.

It is not proposed here to argue the virtues or failings of the recommendations contained in this Report. It was, in essence, an attempt to amend or clarify a *British North America Act* that had long since begun to creak with age. It was an attempt, therefore, to make Canadian democracy more flexible in the face of contemporary problems by defining, among other things, the responsibility for dealing with unemployment. Let us agree, for argument's sake, that its recommendations constituted a poor solution of the problems concerned. Let us agree that it was shot through with imperfections. Let us agree that in easing some tensions it would have created others. Nevertheless, it was an attempt to deal with problems which, in the past, Canadian democracy had not been able to handle effectively. As such, it deserved our tolerance and consideration. Perhaps the real tragedy of the Ottawa Conference is not that the report was given no consideration, but that it was given no tolerance. That it was given no consideration, is tragedy enough.

If our leaders had gone to Ottawa not as horse traders but as men prepared to create out of the *Sirois Report* a democratic wave of the future, they could have said to themselves: "Here is

a God-given opportunity to show the totalitarian powers that at least Canadian democracy can resolve its tensions without recourse to the barbarity of the knout, the tank, the bomb and the concentration camp. Here is an opportunity to show our young men that, when we asked them to fight for democracy, we were not asking them to fight for a hollow mockery, but were prepared to sacrifice our prejudices, jealousies and meaner local interests, to create a life in Canada worthy of the blood that is being spilled for it. Moreover, if we do not find within the *Sirois Report* the ways and means to do all this, we will tear it to shreds and create a report that will."

No such spirit animated some of those who journeyed to the federal capital. These went pre-determined on non-cooperation, their minds already closed up by intolerance. Why? Why, at a time when all democracy stands on the edge of the abyss, when it is challenged as it never has been challenged, did certain Canadian leaders bluntly refuse to deal with some of the more pressing problems of Canadian democracy? The reasons given were various. Perhaps not all the reasons were given. Such as were, fell into two groups: (1) those based on local self-interest, and (2) those based on prejudice.

Using a reason of the first category, the highways minister of Ontario stated in effect that the adoption of the *Sirois Report* would involve so heavy a loss of revenue to his province that education and public health must suffer gravely. The premier of Ontario brought forward another argument that falls into the same classification: "We shall be left in the hands of a bureaucracy to be established in Ottawa."* He then appealed to prejudice by adding: "I will not sell my province down the river for all time to come, and allow our social services to remain a victim of the dictatorial methods of a bureaucracy to be set up at Ottawa."

Unquestionably any scheme that placed an unfair burden on a single province would constitute an injustice. But a cry of this sort out of Ontario somehow fails to arouse pity. Geography and high tariffs have unquestionably benefitted this province at the expense of some of the rest. One therefore cannot avoid the feeling that if the agricultural provinces of Canada have made sacrifices to build up the manufacturing industries of Ontario, a similar sacrifice might be made by that province in order that Canadian democracy may solve so grave a menace as unemployment. One wonders, furthermore,

*This and the following quotations are taken from the *Halifax Chronicle* reports.

how well the gloomy picture painted by the Ontario highways minister regarding his province's finances would have stood up under the scrutiny the Conference could have put upon it. Surely the framers of the *Sirois Report* had wit enough to realize that, of all provinces, their shoe must not pinch the foot of Ontario.

The wisdom of increasing federal at the expense of provincial power may be open to argument, since any increase in federal power will enable those provinces with the largest voting lists to exert the greatest influence at Ottawa. At the present time Ontario-Quebec has more members in the federal House of Commons than all the other provinces combined. Since finance and industry happen to be largely centred in these provinces, any increase in federal power would tend to augment the mastery of finance and industry over the agriculture of the other provinces. But if, despite that danger, increased federal power strengthened our cohesion as a people, wouldn't the risk be worth taking?

Unhappily there are several factors working against cohesion in Canada, forces that are definitely centrifugal. Of these, perhaps geography is the most serious. We are strung out north of the American border along a painfully thin line: we have length without breadth. There is the narrow bottle-neck between the Maritimes and Quebec; the vast barrens of Western Ontario separating that province from the Middle West, and the Rockies that tower between British Columbia and the rest. It is difficult to keep the hands joined over such grave barriers. Ontario and Quebec, though their economic interests are similar and they sit cheek by jowl, are separated by language, religion, culture and prejudice. Finally, there are the conflicting economic interests of the four geographic groups, British Columbia, the Middle West, the Maritimes and Ontario-Quebec. The first three must sell the bulk of their agricultural products outside Canada, but must buy the bulk of their manufactured goods from Ontario-Quebec.

To cure ills that have already arisen out of the economic situation, some pretty desperate remedies have had to be adopted. For instance, we are being forced as a Dominion to buy and store the enormous surplus grain production of the West. We hope that, with the end of the war, we will be able to export this surplus to Europe. Of course a victorious Germany might refuse to take our wheat under any conditions, or might do so only if we accepted manufactured goods in return. But when Germany is

defeated, will an impoverished Europe be able to import our surpluses on any other basis than barter—an exchange of goods for grain? In either event the rest of Canada, or at least the Middle West of Canada, will find itself *vis-a-vis* Ontario-Quebec in a very much more serious state of tension than at present. The agriculture-exporting provinces will clamor—must clamor—for the necessary abolition of the tariff to make barter possible.

All these factors—racial, geographic and economic—are centrifugal and antiohesive. The very refusal of certain of our provinces even to discuss the *Sirois Report* shows that these factors are already dangerously at work. Isn't it therefore urgent that, if we wish to remain a Dominion, we explore every unifying possibility? If increasing federal power will—despite its dangers—knit us closer together and give us greater flexibility of action, should we hesitate to increase it?

The really depressing aspect of the Ottawa Conference was the fact that so many of the reasons brought against consideration of the Report were an appeal to prejudice. Let us examine them.

(1) The Ontario highways minister stated: "We leave it to the rest of the members to continue their efforts to do what we are bound to say would result in wrecking Confederation as we understand it." The expression "wrecking Confederation" is an appeal to fear, a bogey-phrase to frighten the unthinking; it is therefore an appeal to prejudice. How much water does the argument of which it forms a part hold? Would there have been danger to Confederation in the mere considering of this report? Even an Ontario highways minister must know that, though all the other provinces of Canada agreed on a policy, the mere refusal of his province to accept it would cause it to be dropped like a hot brick. The very fact that consideration of the report was so dropped—largely at Ontario's insistence—surely proves that. The premier of Nova Scotia did not seem to contemplate the wreckage of Confederation when he stated so sensibly: "I am not in a position to say that we would accept the principles of the financial set-up in that report, but I am willing, and I think everyone here should be willing, to sit down and discuss together the report, as I believe we should do. I think that is what my people expect of me, and I am sure it is what the majority of the people all over Canada expect you to do." Perhaps we grow stouter hearts in the Maritimes.

(2) The statement of the premier of Ontario: "Let us set aside this *Sirois Report*, the product of the minds of a few college

professors and a Winnipeg newspaperman who has had his knife in Ontario ever since he was able to write editorials appearing in that newspaper." Here is a sheer appeal to prejudice. College professors have always been the butts of the so-called realists of this continent, and the envious and unthinking can always be appealed to through such a jibe. Hundreds of North American demagogues have made cheap and easy scores at the expense of university teachers, but it comes in bad taste from a premier of Ontario. It was a college professor working in Ontario who discovered one of humanity's greatest boons—insulin. It was college professors working in Ontario who produced the toxoid with which all over the world we are wiping out diphtheria. It was college professors working in Ontario who made the Connaught Laboratory one of Canada's greatest contributions to civilization. But as though that were not enough, the premier of Ontario went on to impugn the moral integrity of a great Canadian editor by inferring that this editor hated Ontario more than he loved Canada.

(3) Part of a statement by the same statesman: ". . . There is no alternative open to my colleagues and myself but to withdraw and leave these wreckers of Confederation, under the guise of patriotism, to continue to carry on their nefarious work." Here again is an impugning of motives. If you, my fellow-premiers, remain to consider this report, you will be nefariously wrecking Confederation under the guise of patriotism. Nefarious means, according to Webster, wicked in the extreme, heinous, sinful, vile . . . patriotism, the last refuge of scoundrels . . . wreckers—destroyers. If the premier of Ontario did not imply this, what did he imply? If he was not appealing to prejudice, what was he appealing to?

There was another argument brought against considering the report which was very widely held. It ran something like this: "We are at war. The situation is so serious that we should allow nothing to distract us. Consideration of this report would distract us. Therefore, let us set it aside and get on with the war." If the report had dealt with matters of no urgency, that could have been attended to as well after the war, this was a valid argument. But since the report dealt—in part—with means whereby unemployment could be dealt with rationally by fixing responsibility for it and so avoiding the sort of "buck-passing" that characterized its handling during the late depression, there is an urgency. If we leave this grave problem—perhaps the gravest that will confront us—until the war is over, and all

our returned soldiers are clamoring for work, we shall have to solve it in an atmosphere of crisis. There will be no time then to lay out a long-term plan, and whatever plan is evolved will bear the marks of hurry and slapdash.

In refusing to consider this report and work out some scheme to make Canadian democracy more flexible, aren't we stating in effect: "We, the citizens of Canada, have neither the wit nor the capacity to wage a war and at the same time make plans to meet the problems that will inevitably arise out of it. We are therefore not as efficient as German totalitarianism, which is not only waging a war, but laying long-term plans for the new order it intends to introduce into Europe, Africa and South America if it wins. And so we make credible the oft-repeated jibe of the dictators that the democracies are moribund, and incapable of making the sacrifices necessary to a better way of life."

This is a tragic confession, the most tragic we could make. It is a symptom of the grave moral illness that has overtaken all democracies. For a long time books will be written on why England slept, why France collapsed, why Norway quailed, and why the League of Nations acted like a conference of horse traders. The writers of such books will search a thousand avenues of causation—economic, political and social—but in the end all these will converge on this simple tragic fact, that all these things happened because the nations concerned, and the individuals making up those nations, were unwilling to sacrifice themselves for an ideal. For twenty years they stood aside while faiths to which they gave lip service were flouted in Russia, in Manchuria, in Abyssinia, in Spain, in China, in Czechoslovakia and in Germany. Pledged to the ideal of liberty, they permitted men to be made slaves; pledged to the ideal of justice, they allowed a recrudescence of the vilest tyranny; pledged to Christian principles, they were silent while the new barbarism denied Christ. They did nothing, because to do something meant to make sacrifices.

They failed even to evince the saving grace of moral indignation, that righteous anger in the face of evil which proclaims a healthy conscience. Our grandfathers had it, and did not fail to show it over such iniquities as Armenian massacres, Congo atrocities and Dreyfus trials. But our grandfathers, we say, were great fellows for plucking motes from other eyes and neglecting beams in their own; therefore our grandfathers' moral indignation was compounded with hypocrisy. In saying

that, we try to justify our own lack of indignation over Jewish persecutions, concentration camps, Guernica bombings and lying diplomacies—to say nothing of our unwillingness—our cruel, stupid and tragic unwillingness—to give haven to the victims of Nazi brutality. Indignation, we argue, implies passion, and to be completely civilized, men must rise above these emotional outbursts. It is more civilized to contend, with the serenity of an Anne Lindbergh, that these obscenities are mere scum on the wave of the future.

They argued like that in Athens and Rome before the Dark Ages, and to argue that way is dangerous. As animals, we have developed through the ages certain self-guarding reflexes. In the face of physical danger we become reflexly caught up in spasms of awareness and action that save our lives every day. Without such safeguarding reflexes, we would have perished long ago. Moral indignation is a spiritual reflex of similar purpose. Only through its exercise in the face of such spiritual dangers as injustice, indecency and brutality can we preserve the life of the spirit. To achieve serenity at its expense is therefore as perilous as for a Nova Scotian moose to achieve a similar serenity at the sight of a hunter in the November woods. To lose this reflex is not to become civilized, but to become spiritually dead.

In the end we had to fight. For what? For the ideals inherent in the democratic way of life which would be destroyed if Germany wins? For the love of God? No—in self defence—in self defence only. Self-defence is not enough. The man or the nation fighting for life requires more than that. Requires a faith. Requires to believe that it is better to die than suffer injustice. Requires to believe that those who so die find resurrection eternally in the hearts of men seeking righteousness.

Is there no ideal latent in the democratic way of life, out of which we can crystallize such a faith? Can we not inspire our fighting youth with something nobler than this pagan Nazi *credo* of blood and soil that has put such steam into German youth? Can we give them no promise of a better life to steel their arms?

Up to now, we have given our fighting youth nothing but empty phrases. It is time we crystallized something out of those phrases. Youth wants—and needs—something more finite and immediate. It wants to know in what way democracy will solve those problems that have brought recurrent wars to Europe, that have prevented full social and economic justice

to the common man, that have perpetuated want in the midst of plenty. Youth wants to know with what exact therapy we will proceed to cure our moral sickness. And on all these points we remain desperately silent. Is it because we do not know how to cure our ills, or because we do not want to cure them?

As a result, although our young men have gone willingly to fight the pagan bestiality, they say to themselves a little bitterly: "For what high purpose are we pouring out the rich wine of life? What have we to gain for those for whom we die? Show us how, by winning this war, we can achieve an order in which not only war will be abolished, but justice and decency really triumph, and we will fight with the fury of faith and hope. Create this new wave of the future in our spirits, and nothing can defeat us."

The *Sirois Report* now gathers dust in a pigeon-hole at Ottawa. We have laid it aside, we have let it slip through our faltering hands. In doing that, have we laid aside the wave of the future? It may have been a poor thing, a child of professorial minds shot through with imperfections, but it presented us with an opportunity to put new life into Canadian democracy, to make it a finer instrument for the future. It presented us with a challenge to create a better Canada. So it does not really lie in a pigeon-hole: it hovers like an ominous cloud over Ottawa—a constant reminder that we have neither the faith nor the skill to mould our ideals into a nobler way of life.