

PERSPECTIVE ON CHANGE IN NEW BRUNSWICK *

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THE fact that the Maritime economy has been chronically depressed for well over half a century has had some peculiar social results in New Brunswick. The population which had been growing rapidly until 1861 suddenly tapered off and immigration to the province practically ceased about the same time. Thus the population of New Brunswick is made up overwhelmingly of the descendants of the early French Acadians and of the British settlers who came prior to 1861. Consequently we notice an extremely large percentage of persons of British and French extraction and a very low percentage of people descended from immigrants from other areas.

In effect the waves of immigration that peopled the prairies and swelled the population of Ontario and British Columbia almost completely by-passed New Brunswick, and the Maritimes in general. Thus New Brunswick along with her other Maritime neighbours has not benefited from the social leavening of recent immigration from areas with a different cultural background, with the inevitable result that she has become set in her ways, static in her social system, and forced to look back upon her own traditions due to a situation of relative isolation. Moreover she has not benefited from the economic stimulus that immigration brings by increasing the demand for food and consumers' durables.

Her depressed economy has not encouraged Canadians from other provinces to come (89.152 percent of the New Brunswick population was born in New Brunswick in the 1951 census, as compared with 72.595 percent for Ontario) and her geographical situation on the eastern extremity of the nation, cut off by an expanse of rough country from the St. Lawrence valley, and with a French-speaking province dividing her English-speaking population from their cousins in Ontario and the West, has left her alone with her Maritime neighbours. Even her pre-confederation connections with the New England States have become less close due to economic protectionism in both countries drying up the streams of trade.

The fact of a continually growing population in New Brunswick in no way refutes this argument. New Brunswick has the

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148 PERSPECTIVE ON CHANGE IN NEW BRUNSWICK

highest birth rate of any province in Canada (Newfoundland excepted) and, despite a fairly high mortality rate, her rate of natural increase leads the nation (again Newfoundland excepted). This explains her population increase despite the fact that so many New Brunswickers leave their native province to settle elsewhere. The census of 1951 reports that 90,229 persons born in New Brunswick are living in other provinces (over one-third of these in Ontario). Thus we find 16.405% of the New Brunswick-born population living outside New Brunswick, which is over twice the percentage of the Ontario-born population living outside Ontario.

II

Now we must ask the question: "How has this general economic situation affected the relationship between the two ethnic groups in the province, the Acadians and the English-speaking New Brunswickers?" The Acadians settled in isolated knots in the more inaccessible reaches of the province after they had been expelled from their original settlements in Nova Scotia and southern New Brunswick. Naturally it took them some considerable time to reform their communities and build up their stock of capital to the point where life beyond a bare subsistence was possible. Thus we find a full century passes after 1755 before the Acadians appear in any significant role in the life of the colony. They were isolated, poor and largely illiterate and were economically and politically ineffective. Thus the prosperity of New Brunswick based on the forests and the sea did little for the Acadians. It was, in effect, a period of prosperity that the English-speaking population experienced virtually alone.

However, the Acadians, living on a bare subsistence for the most part, were gradually making progress. They built up their priesthood from a small nucleus from Canada. Churches, schools and seminaries began to appear, and the clergy acted as community leaders in the task of rebuilding Acadian society.

Naturally these long years of adversity did much to shape the goals and attitudes of the Acadians. A feeling of persecution has been a rather natural outgrowth of their situation. The expulsion of 1755 looms very large in their thoughts, and serves as a unifying symbol for them. A feeling of self-consciousness has arisen and has been spreading since their economic situation has improved and the growth of literacy has accompanied the teaching of Acadian distinctiveness. They have

relied heavily upon organization to help them achieve their goals. The importance of education has been realized and great efforts have gone into the building up of educational institutions. These have done much to qualify Acadian youth for positions of leadership in their community, and to gain for them their share of posts in the business and professional life of the province. Also they are coming to occupy an ever larger share of the posts in the Civil Service, on the bench and in the legislatures, both provincial and federal.

Their newspapers serve to keep their consciousness of their mission alive by documenting their growing importance, and urging greater efforts. Their fraternal mutual insurance organization, La Societe l'Assomption, has given them protection, united them in one coherent body, and helped many of their youth to an education by generous scholarship aid. However the institution which dwarfs all others among them is the Church. It is the central organization that unites and co-ordinates Acadian activity, and is looked to for the initiative in protecting Acadian interests.

However perhaps the greatest factor in advancing the Acadian cause is their high rate of natural increase. Rameau¹ states that in 1765 the total Acadian population in the Maritimes only numbered about 4,000. By 1871 the French-speaking population of New Brunswick alone had reached 44,907 and made up 15.7% of the population of the province. Since then their numbers have been increasing steadily and at every census since 1871 their ratio to the English-speaking population has risen. For example in 1901 their numbers had more than doubled since 1871, and from 15% of the population their ratio had increased to 28%. In 1931 they comprised over one third of the population of the province. By 1951 they numbered 197,631 or 38.3% of the population.

If we examine their percentage increase compared to that of the English-speaking population, the contrast stands out even more clearly. From 1871 to 1951 the French-speaking population of New Brunswick has increased by 340% whereas the English-speaking population has increased by 30%. Thus the rate of increase of the French-speaking population is over eleven times that of the English-speaking population. Thus if present trends continue, the majority of the population of the province should be French-speaking by about 1981.

This great preponderance of increase on the part of the French-speaking over the English-speaking New Brunswickers

(1) Edouard Richard, *Acadia-Missing Links of a Lost Chapter in American History* (Montreal, 1895), page 341.

is not too easy to account for. We all know that the rate of natural increase of rural populations is greater than that of urban populations. If we look at the population of New Brunswick we find that only 49.5% of the population whose mother tongue is English are rural, whereas 73.3% of those whose mother tongue is French are rural. Also we know that the Acadian culture places a very high premium on a large family, and that the Church is strongly opposed to birth control.

Then there is the factor in migration. We know that there is a considerable migration from New Brunswick both to the other provinces of Canada and to the United States. It would appear that the group most prone to leave the province is the English-speaking New Brunswickers. They would assimilate more easily into an English-speaking community, and being, on the whole, wealthier would be able to afford to migrate. Also since they are, on the whole, better educated, more opportunities exist for them away from their native province. The 1951 census shows 90,229 people born in New Brunswick are living in other provinces, and 70% of these are living in the predominantly English-speaking provinces. Also the population shifts within New Brunswick would tend to support the argument that it is the English-speaking who are more prone to leave the province. The percentage of the French-speaking population has been increasing steadily in the predominantly English-speaking counties. In fact in the four censuses 1921, 1931, 1941, and 1951 there has been a continuous growth in the percentage of French-speaking people in every predominantly English-speaking county without exception. The growth has varied from Sunbury, whose French-speaking population has grown from 5.2% in 1921 to 21.7% in 1951 to little Albert which has only experienced a change from 1.0% to 1.9% in those four censuses. The evidence, therefore seems to indicate that the Acadians are gradually displacing the English-speaking population not only in the north but throughout the province. Let us now examine the probable political effects of this change which we are even now experiencing.

III

Politically New Brunswick is relatively complex. We noticed that immigration to the province practically ceased about the time of Confederation. Therefore the population is well rooted in the province, and one notices that each locality in the

province has a few old families that are prominent in each of the old political parties. One is impressed to see the same name recurring on the ballot from generation to generation in some counties of the province.

Also there seems to be a tendency for families to become known as supporters of a particular political party. Thus one can be fairly certain that any member of that family one meets will support that party too. This is of course the result of a fairly static society, but it does stand out in contrast to, let us say, Western Canada.

This loyalty to family tradition gives short shrift to the third parties. It is interesting to note that no candidate of the C.C.F., Social Credit or Reconstruction parties has ever been elected either to the House of Commons or to the Legislature in New Brunswick. This is particularly impressive when one considers that New Brunswick is one of the poorest provinces of Canada and thus might be considered the one most likely to protest.

There is another factor also that tends to keep the population of New Brunswick loyal to the two old parties. I refer to the political effect of the protective tariff policy of the Dominion government since 1879 which has injured the economy of the Maritimes and built up central Canada. Since this policy has discriminated against the Maritimes and yet has not been within the power of the Maritimes to change due to their small population which entitles them to only 27 members in a House of Commons of 265, the Maritime M. P. has been cast in the role of supplicant. He must keep going hat in hand to the government to obtain concessions for his constituency. In the words of the Sackville Tribune of June 4, 1945, "the qualification of a Maritime M.P. is the ability to work effectively for his constituency, to get things for his county. If he has the ear of the Premier and his Ministers, then he is in a position to keep before the government the claims of his riding for public works and services, for recognition in various lines of governmental activity." This applies to the Maritime member especially, because he must seek for consideration that compensates his constituency for injury done by the government's policy, whereas the central Canadian members gain their ends by dominating the government itself by their large numbers. Also the large corporations that contribute so generously to the war chest of the two old parties are the interests that benefit from the protectionist policy. Therefore they exert a strong influence

152 PERSPECTIVE ON CHANGE IN NEW BRUNSWICK

over both parties, and this influence favours the protection of industry which is mainly located in central Canada. This makes the Maritimes pay a high price for manufactured goods while they have to sell their staples on the world market.

At first one would think that this would inspire a reaction against the two old parties in the Maritimes. However, a moment's reflection will show that the opposite is the case and for a very good reason. If the Maritimes are to get the concessions they want, their all-too-few M.P.'s must have the ear of the powers-that-be. Consequently they must belong to either of the old parties. Moreover since the Liberals have maintained their winning streak, we find the area of the country that supports them most loyally is the Maritimes.

This also gives politics in the Maritimes a distinct flavour. The fact that the Maritime member must constantly lobby for local interests makes the whole patronage issue more important here than elsewhere in Canada. There is a stronger feeling here that the local M.P. should go to bat for local businesses and find jobs for his constituents.

In the provincial sphere this manifests itself in a heavy reliance on political appointments to government jobs, with the consequent large scale turnover of public servants when an election produces a change of government. Also the tendency to employ hordes of men on the roads just prior to provincial elections is indicative of the political methods employed.

IV

The fact that New Brunswick is made up of two distinct ethnic groups is having a profound effect on political life in the province. The English-speaking inhabitants still make up over sixty percent of the population, but they tend to divide their vote between the two great political parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives. The French Acadians on the other hand comprise slightly less than forty percent of the population, but throw their support overwhelmingly in favour of one party, the Liberal party. Since their proportion of the population is increasing and the English-speaking proportion is consequently decreasing, it would appear that the province is tending more and more to have a Liberal voting majority. Indeed this appears to be already the case as in every general election, both provincial and federal, held since 1930 the Liberal vote has been larger than the Conservative. (This includes the provincial election of 1952 when the Conservatives got more seats than the

Liberals. The total Liberal vote was greater than the total Conservative vote by 2,221 in a total vote of 759,483.)

Thus we appear to have a situation where the majority group, the English-speaking New Brunswickers, is split and the minority group, the Acadians, supports one party, the Liberals. In fact it would appear that the Liberals would not be a majority without this Acadian support—and thus the Acadians are essential to Liberal success. Naturally this means the Liberals must be responsive to Acadian demands or take the chance of losing their support. This means that the insistence of the Acadians on receiving their share of Members of Parliament, Senators, M.L.A.'s, judges, teachers and civil servants generally cannot be resisted for long. The Acadians are articulate now through their press, Assumption Society and Church. They have leaders who are devoted to advancing their position. Moreover the old excuse that they are not qualified to fill certain government jobs is no longer acceptable due to the educational advances effected by their universities. Anyway it is not politically feasible, because to deny these demands is to risk losing the Acadian vote, and this vote is not only desirable—it is essential to success.

Now this analysis may be a bit too ingenuous. To begin with, the Acadians are not permanently committed to the Liberals. In fact before 1917 one could not discern any voting pattern among them—they split their vote between the two old parties just as the English-speaking New Brunswickers do now. However as their self-consciousness grew and as a disciplined political party system emerged in the province, we notice that they have swung their support to one party, the Liberals.

Now this tendency to vote en bloc is the typical behaviour of a minority with a sense of grievance. However, once the grievances have been attended to (as they are being attended to at present) and once the minority loses its feeling of insecurity as its numbers keep increasing, it is reasonable to expect that they will become less orthodox and consequently will tend to split their vote.

However, just when the Acadians will be feeling secure as they approach the position of becoming a majority in the province, the English-speaking New Brunswickers will be the ones to feel themselves threatened and insecure. This could drive them either to coalesce behind the Liberal party in order to

secure control of it, or they could react against a party dominated by their rivals and rally around the Conservatives.

On the other hand the province might return to a two party system where ethnic origin plays only a very subordinate role. This will be possible only if the legitimate demands of the Acadians are met, and if the English-speaking population continues to divide its vote so as to reassure the Acadians while they are still a minority. Then perhaps the Acadians will feel secure enough to abandon their tendency to vote en bloc.

Obviously since the English-speaking population is likely to be a minority in the province in the future, it is essential for its well being to establish good relations with the Acadians. It should try to get all New Brunswickers to see themselves not as Acadians or English but as New Brunswickers, Maritimers, and Canadians. Thus bloc voting would end and there would be no danger of either group being placed in a position of permanent political impotence. This can be achieved only by the present majority group, treating the minority with scrupulous fairness and even generosity, so that sufficient confidence can be established to permit ethnic, religious and cultural differences to recede into the background and allow real political issues to dominate the political scene.