

THE CRADLE OF CONFEDERATION: SOME REFLECTIONS

By HEATH N. MacQUARRIE

I suppose nearly every visitor to the beautiful little province of Prince Edward Island goes to see the Provincial Building in the capital City of Charlottetown. This quaint gray structure, as well as being the very nerve centre of the Island's government is rich in history and tradition. Of all the links with the storied past the most famous is a room on the second floor which the visitor is sure to be shown. Here, in what is known as the Confederation Chamber, there are many memorials of the Island's role in the great movement for federal union of the British American Colonies.

Around the great table sat John A. Macdonald, Cartier, Brown, McGee and others from Canada who had invited themselves to the gathering of Maritime politicians who were getting together to talk only of the smaller union of the Atlantic colonies. This fateful conference took place over ninety-two years ago in the late summer of 1864, but the Confederation Chamber contains many mementos of the auspicious occasion. Prominent among these is a replica of Robert Harris' famous painting of the Fathers assembled on the steps of the Island Governor's residence. Then there is that bronze plaque which shows John A. Macdonald and some of his colleagues in the garb of the men of ancient Rome. At first glance these Canadian heroes look a bit strange in the flowing togas of the ancient republic but the intention, of course, was to honour the wisdom and statesmanship of the modern Ciceros. Not far away are special plaques dedicated to memory of some of the Island Fathers, Whalen, Pope, Grey and others. And of course the guide is sure to draw the visitor's attention to the signature of John A. Macdonald which is of somewhat later vintage. On a visit to Charlottetown the Canadian Prime Minister signed the visitor's book and listed his occupation as "cabinet-maker." Yes, the Island is very proud of its role in Canadian history and its special status as the "Cradle of Confederation."

But if from all of this the visitors assume that Prince Edward Island was a major booster of Confederation or a major factor in bringing about the union he would be greatly mistaken. The truth is that the Island, although host to the initial meeting, had no intention of losing its separate identity by merging in the larger whole, and, in fact, remained coolly aloof for seven years

after the BNA Act went into effect. In this attitude, of course, the Island was not unlike its mainland neighbors. In New Brunswick the friends of Union had been soundly trounced in an election. In Nova Scotia only the clever political footwork of Charles Tupper kept his province from vetoing the plan. But as soon as the new Dominion was formed Nova Scotians expressed themselves in no uncertain terms. Of 18 men elected to the House of Commons in Ottawa all but one, Tupper himself, were pledged to break away from what Joseph Howe called the "Botheration" Scheme. In a provincial election 35 of 37 elected members were anti-Confederationist. So the Island reaction was not unique.

But Prince Edward Island was stoutly opposed even to the plan for uniting the three maritime colonies which was pushed from time to time and supposed to be the topic of the Charlottetown Conference of 1864. Islanders did not look kindly on the prospect of losing their status as a province and declared that the project of legislative union couldn't even be considered unless Charlottetown should become the capital of the united colony. In view of transportation conditions at the time this was highly unlikely. In fact in its early days as a struggling tiny crown colony the Island's greatest fear was absorption by one of its neighbors, a dark eventuality which was rumoured from time to time. Possibly the Island was saved by the fact that both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia had what might be called expansionist ambitions and these conflicting designs countered one another.

But in 1864 the Islanders did take part in the Conference although it was generally regarded as a courtesy to the Nova Scotia governor who had called the meeting. Then, of course, the fact that the Island capital was chosen as the site gave the Island politicians the added responsibility of playing host to the visitors.

Yet the Conference didn't really make a very great impact on Charlottetown. When the Nova Scotians arrived there was no one to meet them and they had to make their way to a hotel as best they could. Island authorities later explained this seeming discourtesy by saying that the Nova Scotia boat had arrived sooner than expected. Newspapers favoring the opposition, however, declared that the members of the government were attending the circus which had just come to town. When the boat carrying the Canadian delegates arrived in the harbor only The Hon. W. H. Pope, Provincial Secretary, met them, "rowing out to the ship with all the dignity he could," as the chronicler

relates. Some of the Canadians were unable to get hotel accommodation and slept on the boat. Once again the circus made its dent on history in giving the lodging houses of Charlottetown a rushing business.

The story of that far-off meeting in the Confederation Chamber is now well known. The men from Canada pretty well carried the Conference off its original course and the plan for maritime union was given scant attention. As the delegates moved about through the other maritime provinces the idea of the smaller union was tacitly shelved with little regret on the part of the Islanders.

A few weeks later the famous Quebec Conference met with an Island delegation in attendance. At this gathering which laid the groundwork for the British North America Act, the men from the Cradle of Confederation were decidedly out of step. They found the terms of union quite unsatisfactory and on half the recorded votes they stood alone against all the others. Thus isolated and outvoted, the Island delegation practically withdrew before the conference ended and indeed during the last few days of this historic gathering only one Islander was in attendance.

Prince Edward Island continued to show indifference or hostility to any idea of Confederation and not until 1873 did it become a province of the six-year old Dominion. And then it was not super-nationalist considerations but hard cold economic realities that prompted the Island decision. A costly fiasco in railway building had put the province in a desperate financial condition and the Dominion's willingness to take over this white elephant was most welcome. And so Prince Edward Island came into Confederation, not with shouting or jubilation but from practical necessity or at least from expediency.

From the interesting and involved story of Prince Edward Island's approach to Confederation three significant elements emerge. There was first, a feeling of reluctance about the prospect of merging with the larger entity and perhaps losing their individuality thereby. Then there was a consciousness that although the Island's political and social structure was like that of other colonies, there was yet a subtle difference, greater perhaps than the narrow separating waters might lead one to expect. And finally there was the cold hand of economic necessity which shattered any dreams of a separate existence for the residents of the lovely little island.

Prince Edward Island has now been a Canadian province for 84 years and it has made its contribution to the larger Canadian development. Indeed its contribution has been far from insignificant; yet the old sentiment is not altogether dead. On occasion the feeling of reluctance is given voice. It is often said that Maritimers talk of Confederation as if it had taken place the day before yesterday. And perhaps the Islanders are more inclined than any to slip into that unrealistic attitude. A few years ago the writer sat in the gallery of the Prince Edward Island Legislature and heard the law makers express indignation and resentment at the communication tie up which the strike-bound car ferry had created. From M.L.A.'s who had not been born until long after Confederation came the expression "We were far better off when we were a Crown Colony," and more of the same.

And while secession never found such an organized voice as in Nova Scotia where elections were won on it, it is still a word which one hears in political circles in P.E.I. Speaking on the Throne Speech Debate during the 1956 session, the Leader of the Opposition, R. R. Bell, raised the old cry. He denounced the Hon. Mr. Pickersgill for having said in Newfoundland that that province could not secede. Said Mr. Bell, "Let him come here and say that and we will give him that famous answer of his senior colleague, Mr. Howe. 'If we want to; who's going to stop us?' Mr. Bell asked if the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration would send the Canadian Army or Airforce against the Island in such an eventuality.

Apart from any constitutional bar to secession it is of course a move which will never be taken. But such sentiments as those of Mr. Bell come up once in a while as a consequence of deep disappointment over treatment of Island claims. Communication with the mainland has always been a thorny question and from press and platform the Dominion is often lambasted for not living up to Confederation commitments. Then the financial agreements are frequently considered niggardly and unjust, and such things as the reduction in representation in the Canadian parliament has rankled and hurt. Once the province had six M.P.'s now it barely holds on to four.

All in all the impartial and detached observer would be inclined to agree that the Island province has not been too generously treated by the Dominion authorities.

But in spite of the long tradition of dissatisfaction with its share of federal funds the Island province has been noted for its eagerness to keep in line politically with the Government at

Ottawa. Ever since Confederation the Island has nearly always voted for the party in power federally. Indeed for a long time P.E.I. used to hold its elections about as soon as possible after the Dominion contest.

Prince Edward Island as a Canadian province has a governmental structure like the sister provinces but there are slight differences as there were in 1864. One sees some of these in the day to day workings of the legislature. This 30 member house is marked by a little more intimacy or informality than is usual in some others. Of course the size is a factor here. The Island legislature uses no mace, the traditional symbol in British type assemblies. The Speaker has a gavel, a somewhat unusual implement in legislatures.

Quite interesting too is the seating of members. In the Island house the government sits not on the right as is traditional but on the left of Mr. Speaker. The origins of this custom now seem to be lost in obscurity. A former speaker once told the writer that the left gave easier access to a nearby tavern so the government of long ago usurped this advantageous position. Once in a while, too, there are some things done which probably give quite a strain to constitutional propriety, as when a minister remained for years in a cabinet without troubling to become a member of the legislature.

Twenty-two years ago the Island made political history in another way. The 1935 election saw the Liberals under Walter M. Lea of Victoria win all thirty seats. For the next four years there was no opposition in the house. This was surely a unique situation in Canadian or British practice.

For many years Prince Edward Island was the one province in Canada with a prohibition law as far as alcoholic liquors were concerned. The liquid could be bought as a medicine but not as a beverage, and illness requiring this treatment seemed to become fairly widespread in the province. But eventually the Island voted out Prohibition in favor of government control. Liquor may be bought only on a permit which limits amounts. However for the year ending March 31, 1955, the Island government realized a tidy net profit of \$914,000 on the operations of what is officially known as the Prince Edward Island Temperance Commission.

Different too is the Island's Election Act which provides for the election of two types of members, Councillors and Assembléymen. This designation recalls the days before 1893 when the province had two houses, a Legislative Council and a Legislative Assembly. The only purpose now served by the dis-

inction is on election day where a property qualification is required of Councillor electors. Multiple voting is permitted and anyone owning \$325 worth of property in any of the 15 electoral districts may go there and vote for the Councillor candidate and this entitles him to vote for an assemblyman candidate too.

Although it is hard to find much reason for retaining such an antiquated election act, most of the aspects of the Island's individuality are worth cherishing and add greatly to its charm. In these days of mass conformity it is to be hoped the Island's loveliness will always be spiced by a little uniqueness.

One of the best of Canadian historians is W.M. Whitelaw and in his brilliant book *The Maritimes and Canada Before Confederation* he has shown a sensitive understanding of the maritime psychology and especially that of Prince Edward Island. Of the little province he writes: "Diminutive and proud, dour and lovable, Prince Edward Island still remains among the provinces unique and a paradox." One hopes it will aye continue so.