

***D'Alton McCarthy  
and the Politics of  
the Later 'Eighties***

**Fred Landon**

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# D'ALTON McCARTHY AND THE POLITICS OF THE LATER 'EIGHTIES

BY FRED LANDON

In November, 1884, Sir John Macdonald celebrated the 40th anniversary of his entry into public life, and writing to Sir Charles Tupper after the demonstration in his honor at Toronto he could say: "There has never been anything of the kind in Canada approaching it in magnificence or insignificance." Two months later, on the occasion of his 70th birthday, Montreal rivalled Toronto in the warmth of its tribute to the leader of the Liberal-Conservative party. Neither the subject of these honors nor those who tendered them knew that this was to be the high water mark of the Macdonald administration and that even in those anniversary months the seeds of disintegration were being sown by the ill-balanced mind of a half-breed out on the banks of the Saskatchewan.

The administration did not lack warnings of the trouble brewing in the west. One even so close to Macdonald as Langevin wrote in November of 1884: "Riel is still at Prince Albert and is a permanent danger. However, we must take care not to make a martyr of him and thus increase his popularity. Some concessions to and good treatment of the half-breeds will go a long way to settle matters."<sup>[1]</sup>

The concessions to which Langevin referred involved at the most some forty or fifty thousand acres of land "in a wilderness of tens of millions of acres for which the government was crying for settlers." Land grants to meet half-breed claims had been authorized as early as 1879 but departmental red tape delayed action and only when trouble actually came were earlier pledges acted upon. As the *Toronto Mail* remarked: "Had they (the Metis) had votes like white men. . . without doubt the wheels of office would have revolved for them, but being only half-breeds they were put off with an eternal promise until patience ceased to be a virtue."<sup>[2]</sup>

By the end of the summer of 1885 departmental and ministerial blundering had caused an armed outbreak that cost the country the lives and wounding of many citizens, an expenditure of several million dollars and other losses of time and money that were yet to be estimated. Moreover, the government had upon its hands the prisoner Louis Riel upon whom sentence of death had been pronounced at Regina but whose fate must in the end be

decided at Ottawa. The ministry was tendered copious advice as to the disposition it should make of Riel. Perusal of the papers in the Macdonald collection bearing upon this question leaves one with a sense of depression. With a man's life in the balance, Macdonald's correspondents tended to discuss the case chiefly in its bearing upon the future of the party. That, in the opinion of well-informed contemporaries was the factor which chiefly affected the decision.<sup>[3]</sup>

During that summer of 1885 political currents in both Ontario and Quebec were deeply agitated. Macdonald and his colleagues were quite aware that whatever might be their decision in the Riel case, one of these provinces would turn upon them. Their choice plainly meant that Ontario was to be held even if Quebec were lost. In arriving at that decision the Quebec ministers, Langevin, Chapleau and Caron had to share responsibility, and their acquiescence in Riel's fate came only after a struggle which, in the case of Chapleau, led to what was virtually resignation of office.<sup>[4]</sup> At the crisis powerful influences led him to reconsider his stand but from that time may be traced the gradual falling away from party loyalties which, in the end, was to bring him near to the Liberal camp. There was a dignity, nevertheless, in both Chapleau's original decision and in his later reconsideration of that decision which contrasts with the frightened tone of Langevin when he found himself compelled to face his aroused fellow-countrymen.

As the sequel of Riel's execution there came a succession of race and creed issues which bedevilled Canadian politics for more than a decade, dividing and dissipating national energies at the very time when unity and energy were most needed. An air of bitterness, that at times approached despair, settled upon the country. The tone of public life seemed to be distinctly lowered. It was no mauve decade but a muddy gray decade.

Evidences of reaction against the Macdonald administration came quickly after 1885, though not all could be regarded as by-products of the Riel affair. Before the end of June W. S. Fielding had defeated the Conservative administration in Nova Scotia on a secession cry. "Never was there such a rout", wrote Macdonald to Tupper in England, and continued: "We are not in a flourishing state in the present state of public opinion—what with Riel, Home Rule, the Knights of Labour and the Scott Act. We have rocks ahead and great skill must be exercised in steering the ship".<sup>[5]</sup> In October came the provincial elections in Quebec, resulting in another Conservative ministry being overturned, and bringing into power the brilliant, audacious and fascinating Honore Mercier—"over the corpse of

Riel” as Macdonald explained it. To complete the series of defeats, Mowat suddenly dissolved the Ontario Legislature in November and won a decisive victory over Meredith. Tupper’s New Year’s Day letter to Macdonald concluded rather plaintively: “In sending you my New Year’s good wishes by cable today I could not help a feeling that it savoured somewhat of mockery”.

There was consolation, however, in the results of the general elections held on February 22, 1887, when Macdonald and his ministry were sustained by a considerable majority. Quebec was as yet only partly detached from the traditional party standard and the Franchise Act and a well-filled campaign chest were factors that contributed to victory. Every member of the government survived, although Langevin’s acclamation of 1882 in Three Rivers was reduced to a bare majority of 30 and Caron’s acclamation of 1882 in Quebec county dwindled to a majority of 259, the county going Liberal four years later by a majority of 340. Chapleau, alone of the three, held his own, increasing his 1882 majority of 757 in Terrebonne to 785 in 1887.

The Marquess of Lansdowne, governor-general, in sending congratulations to Macdonald on the day after his election, said that there were many reasons which could have led him to regret a change of government at the moment. Sir Donald Smith, in his turn, assured Sir John that “the great body of electors were alive to their own interests”, while W. H. Smith, Secretary for War in Lord Salisbury’s second administration, cabled from No. 10 Downing Street that he had regarded the issue as “of great importance to the unity and security of the Empire”.<sup>[6]</sup>

Macdonald might well feel that with the election won his worst troubles were over. “The present Parliament will probably last till 1892”, he assured one of his New Brunswick correspondents a little later, and commenting upon the expressed fears of “unrestricted reciprocity” he predicted that before 1892 it would be “as dead as Julius Caesar”. In his jaunty disregard of the rising trade issue Macdonald was to be justified, for it was his opponents who were to burn their fingers in dealing with that question. Unrestricted reciprocity or commercial union was to prove indeed a means whereby a party already too long in power was to snatch another victory at the polls. A part of the price of that victory, however, was the loss of Sir John who went quickly to his grave, worn out by the hardships of the winter campaign.

In the ten years prior to 1896 that mark the decline of the Liberal-Conservative party in federal affairs, the influence of D’Alton McCarthy

was continuously a factor of some importance. After his death the *Montreal Star* said of him that probably no other hand had had more to do with the breaking up of the Conservative party which preceded the defeat of 1896. Entering the House in the Cardwell by-election of 1876, at a time when Conservative party fortunes were at a low ebb, he had received hearty welcome from Macdonald and it was but a short time until he enjoyed to a high degree the confidence of his party leader. His organizing ability brought him to the chairmanship of the executive committee of the Liberal-Conservative Union of Ontario and had he desired it he could have had a place in the cabinet or on the bench. He had private reasons for declining office as he explained to Macdonald when tendered the post of Minister of Justice in 1884.

“I find that I cannot arrange my affairs so as to enable me to take office”, he wrote to Macdonald. “The amount that I still owe the bank is very large, so large that it would be simply madness in me to give up my profession and attempt to float through. I must work away as I am doing for three or four years when perhaps I may have relieved myself from the burden which has weighed down the best years of my life. As your offer of the position of Minister of Justice was informal, so is my answer. I need not say that I am very much obliged to you for thinking of me”.<sup>[7]</sup>

Macdonald needed new blood for the cabinet in 1884-5. Tupper was leaving for England as High Commissioner. Tilley was becoming Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia and Macpherson was retiring because of ill health. Chapleau and John Henry Pope had both been on the sick list during the session of 1884 and in consequence a heavy burden had been thrown upon Macdonald’s shoulders. What was particularly needed was a new Minister of Justice to replace Sir Alexander Campbell. When McCarthy declined the place, Macdonald sought out Justice Thompson of Halifax. Sir Alexander Campbell had almost to be driven out of his office to make way for Thompson and was finally relegated to the department of the post-office.

Thompson’s appointment and his subsequent rise to prominence in the party were undoubtedly factors influencing McCarthy’s future course. Between these two men there was never understanding and in time they came to be regarded as rivals for the succession to Macdonald. The advent of Thompson marks the beginning of McCarthy’s deviation from straight party allegiance and it has been suggested that differences in their religious views may have been responsible in some degree for their rivalry—McCarthy holding ultra-Protestant views while Thompson was a convert from Protestantism to the Roman Catholic faith.

McCarthy, like Macdonald, was not heard in the debate over Riel in 1886. His disapproval of proposals to commute Riel's sentence showed itself, however, in a certain coolness towards the Government in the Cardwell and East Durham by-elections which came while Riel's case was still under consideration. During the election campaign of 1887 he made a speech at Barrie which some of his contemporaries regarded as marking the beginning of his antagonism to the particular views of the French-Canadians. On this occasion he said:—

“My own conviction is that it is not religion which is at the bottom of the matter but that it is a race feeling. There is no feeling so strong—no feeling which all history proves so strong—as the feeling of race. Don't we find the French today in the province of Quebec more French than when they were conquered by Wolfe upon the plains of Abraham? Do they mix with us, assimilate with us, intermarry with us? Do they read our literature or learn our laws? No, everything with them is conducted on a French model; and while we may admire members of that race as individuals, yet as members of the body politic I say that they are the great danger to the Confederacy.”

What McCarthy said at Barrie might seem an extreme view but it was not more than other speakers and some Ontario newspapers were saying in a time when it seemed likely that Quebec was lost to the Conservative party. McCarthy himself thought that Quebec was gone when he wrote to Macdonald in October 1886:—

“It is evident that Quebec is gone—at least our majority—and that the chances of obtaining a majority depends on Ontario. Can this be counted on with the Catholic vote against us? Not unless we obtain a very considerable number of Protestant Reformers.”<sup>[8]</sup>

In addition to his regular party activities, McCarthy at this period and later was closely associated with the Imperial Federation movement, and it was under his leadership that the Imperial Federation League was inaugurated in Canada in 1885. In its first three years of life the movement made little headway but the rise of the agitation for closer trade relations with the United States gave it new reason for existence and the movement for commercial union within the Empire was launched at the annual meeting of the Imperial Federation League in Canada held in Toronto on March 24, 1888. Four days later at Ottawa McCarthy placed on the order paper a resolution declaring for preferential tariffs between Great Britain and Canada. Colonel Denison has described this as the beginning of the scheme of preferences within the Empire which has become so important a question in the years since.

Imperial Federation schemes got little support from Macdonald who regarded the movement as rather vague and impractical. Nor did it excite any enthusiasm in Quebec where there was suspicion of the emphasis placed on ties of blood. Moreover, it did not escape notice in Quebec that the leaders in the demand for disallowance of the Jesuits estates legislation of the provincial government were the high priests of the Imperial Federation cause, McCarthy, McNeill, O'Brien, Tyrwhitt and Wallace.<sup>[9]</sup>

It was over the question of the Jesuits estates legislation that McCarthy came for the first time into definite opposition to his leader. His speech in the famous debate of March 1889 did not show him at his best and it did not escape notice that when he sat down it was Thompson who rose to reply to him. Of Thompson's speech on this occasion *The Globe* remarked that it was "a combination of masterpieces. . . in part a masterpiece of reasoning, in part a masterpiece of casuistry, and on the whole a masterpiece of audacity". It was generally felt that in this encounter of the rivals McCarthy came out second best. Parliament disposed of the matter by a vote in which those favouring disallowance of the Quebec legislation numbered only thirteen but the issue was not allowed to rest. Within a few weeks the Equal Rights Association for the Province of Ontario was organized and functioning, with Principal Cavan of Knox College as the first chairman.

McCarthy's connection with the Jesuits estates agitation made it almost inevitable that he should sever his official relationship with the party. Although the motion for disallowance had been made by Colonel O'Brien it was generally recognized that McCarthy was the leader of the protesting group. Macdonald wrote to McCarthy in April discussing the situation, and though this letter is apparently lost its nature can be inferred from McCarthy's reply in which he says: "My future course may—nay must (if I continue in politics) be very objectionable to the 'French' wing of the party. In fact my view of the duty of the Conservative party is to hold by and lean on the English province, while, so far as I can understand, yours is rather to depend on Quebec."<sup>[10]</sup>

The rift between McCarthy and his former party associates was further widened by a speech which he made at an Orange gathering in Stayner on July 12, 1889. Here he announced that at the next session of Parliament he would move to abolish French as an official language in the North-west Territories. Wide publicity was given to this, as well as to the threat contained in his concluding remarks: "Now is the time when the ballot box will decide the great question before the people, and if that does not supply the remedy in this generation bayonets will supply it in the next."



This speech caused a sensation and brought instant protests to Macdonald. The *Globe* correspondent interviewed various members of the cabinet. Sir John Thompson said he had not read the speech nor had he any intention of doing so. The note of contempt in his comment was marked.<sup>[11]</sup>

Newspaper comment was also widespread, the *Manitoba Free Press* expressing the opinion that McCarthy was trying to oust Sir John. “There will be a breaking up of the old parties,” said the *Free Press*. “Already there are abundant signs of the great changes that are coming, and a Conservative party founded on aggressive Protestantism will take the place of the present one, of which Mr. McCarthy will be the leader. . . . He has raised the Protestant flag and sounded the Protestant war cry—Down with the French, if not with the ballot in this generation then with the bayonet in the next.”<sup>[12]</sup>

McCarthy’s public utterances during 1889 continued to pave the way for his resolution of February 1890 which went beyond the mere question of the use of the French language in the Territories, the preamble of the resolution declaring that “It is expedient in the interests of the national unity of the Dominion that there should be community of language among the people of Canada.” This extreme position made what was a not unreasonable proposal, as far as the west alone was concerned, an issue which was now debated with great bitterness. Sir John Willison in his *Reminiscences* speaks of this debate as marked by a greater degree of fervor and passion than any other to which he had ever listened. McCarthy, with a bare handful of support, was subjected for days to merciless criticism from both sides of the House, and again it was noticed that Thompson had a conspicuous place in the attack. Of McCarthy’s demeanor on this occasion Sir John Willison has written:—

“I cannot remember that he ever showed a symptom of feeling or interjected a word of protest until the attack languished and he was free to reply. Then he spoke for three or four hours with superb self-control, remarkable precision of statement and complete concentration upon fundamental facts and principles. If he did not convince, he commanded attention and respect, and the whole effect upon a hostile Parliament was singularly pervasive and profound. Those I have always thought were Mr. McCarthy’s great hours in the House of Commons.”<sup>[13]</sup>

In May 1890 the Ontario Legislature was dissolved. Growth in the use of the French language in certain sections of the province and in certain schools, coupled with what their opponents described as subserviency on the part of the Mowat ministry towards the Roman Catholic church, led to

considerable agitation along "equal rights" lines in which McCarthy took part. The next year brought the federal election with its trade issue, and while McCarthy was the official nominee of his party he did not stump widely for the Conservatives, although his connection with the imperial federation movement would naturally make him suspicious of and opposed to commercial union.

Events after 1891 do not fall properly within the announced scope of this paper and indeed it might be claimed that by that date the more important influence of McCarthy upon Canadian politics had already been exerted. The Manitoba school question, coming to the front after Macdonald's death, was the product of views which he had set forth in 1889 and 1890. There was little need for McCarthy's help after June of 1891 in speeding the Conservative party down the toboggan slide, although he continued to have a hand in it.

When Macdonald died there were some who suggested the possibility of McCarthy assuming the leadership, but the obstacles were too great. The French members could never have been brought together under his banner. Nor was it likely that he and Thompson could have pulled together. For five years there had been smouldering rivalry between them. There were reasons, too, why Thompson could not at this time take office and one of these reasons, one may suspect, was the power of McCarthy. Both men gave place to the stop-gap Abbott. A year later, when Thompson succeeded Abbott, his rival McCarthy was in practically an independent position. From that time until 1896 the alienation was complete. It was generally supposed in 1896 that McCarthy had combined with the Liberals, although his friendliness with the Patrons was also in evidence. He stumped actively and nominated 15 candidates, all but one or two of whom were defeated. In addition to his own seat, North Simcoe, he contested Brandon, which seat he later vacated in favor of Clifford Sifton. After 1896 he was scarcely heard during the three sessions that preceded his death.

What explanation can be given of the course which McCarthy followed after 1885. Race, ancestry and early influences might be suggested, but to estimate them would be difficult. That he was an exponent of extreme Orange views, which is probably the popular idea of McCarthy, is weakened by the fact that he was not at any time a member of the Orange order. In the years before 1886 he is said to have held the view that Macdonald paid too high a price for his traditional Quebec support, but there were others who took a like view and like McCarthy at that time stayed within the party lines. In 1886, however, he gave public expression to his belief that excessive

emphasis on French nationality was a threat to Confederation. This idea came to dominate his political thinking, leading him to the advocacy of measures which few of his associates could support and eventually bringing a complete separation from colleagues who did not share his views. In Macdonald's Quebec lieutenants he found tendencies that supported his opinions. "Is it not a pity," he wrote to Macdonald in 1889, "that Langevin and more especially Chapleau should be playing this narrow provincial game—from which Mercier is reaping all the glory—surely a broader nationality is what they should be cultivating."

Growing up within the Dominion he thought he could see a nationality within a nationality and against what he regarded as a dividing and weakening influence he undertook his crusade.

"During the last twelve or thirteen years," he told an Ontario audience in 1889, "I have witnessed the growth of the French national sentiment. I have witnessed the two races grow further and further apart, instead of coming nearer and nearer together. Sometimes I have despaired of the possibility of ever building up in Canada a great nationality so distinct and so antagonistic as the French and English appear to be".<sup>[14]</sup> Even earlier than this, during the election of 1887, he had protested against what he described as "a nationality which begins and ends with the French race, which begins and ends with those who profess the Roman Catholic faith and a nationality which now threatens the dismemberment of the fair Dominion of Canada".<sup>[15]</sup>

The late Sir John Willison has, I think, passed fair judgment when he says of McCarthy: "He was singularly courageous and incorruptible. But in his attitude towards Quebec and in his handling of questions which touched the passions and the prejudices of the French and Catholic people he was often rash, impolitic and unjust to the last degree".<sup>[16]</sup>

There seems reason to believe that in his last years his views were modified. *La Patrie*, in an editorial at the time of his death expressed the opinion that "during the last two or three years he had drifted towards those moderate and tolerant ideas which alone can conduce to a feeling of good fellowship among the different members of the Canadian family".

To his political independence tribute might well be paid. He lived in a time when party affiliations were thought of as being for life. "He was a Tory by nature", said the Montreal *Witness*, "and by upbringing possibly a narrow one. He was, therefore, in the Conservative party; but with the tricks of his party he had no sympathy; was restive when forced to condone them, and finally repudiated all fellowship with them".

“Had he been a self-seeking politician”, said the *Toronto News*, “he could easily have reached a place in Sir Wilfrid Laurier’s cabinet, and there is no more convincing proof of the sincerity of his course than the fact that he sought no honor at the hands of those whom he had assisted to victory”.

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The *Globe* made somewhat similar comment: “If he had been a more docile party follower he could have passed out . . . the leader of a great party, perhaps Prime Minister . . . . Clear, frank, resolute, able, Mr. McCarthy had something of the spirit of the old martyrs”.

And yet one may doubt the truth of the first of these statements, that McCarthy might have made a great party leader. The 'eighties did not place its confidence in a man with something in him of the spirit of the old martyrs. It preferred Macdonald who had warmth, sympathy, magnetism, not one of which qualities McCarthy displayed, that is outside of his own little exclusive set or circle. He was an aristocrat, not a democrat; he was more akin to his Irish ancestors than to his fellow-Canadians. He lacked that thrift which hard times elevated to a virtue. He loved broad acres of land, and blooded horses and dogs and good friends. He observed the niceties of life. He was a regular attendant at his church. He was beloved by his intimate friends. He belonged to a type that has its place in a country’s life but in Canada it is not the type that has, thus far in our history, given us great political leaders.

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[1] Macdonald Papers, Langevin to Macdonald, Nov. 4, 1884.

[2] Editorial in the *Toronto Mail*, July 8, 1885.

[3] “Riel’s fate turned almost entirely upon political considerations. Which was the less dangerous course—to reprieve him or let him hang. The issue was canvassed back and forth by a distracted ministry up to the day before that fixed for the execution when a decision was reached to let the law take its course”. J. W. Dafoe, Laurier, a study in Canadian politics, Toronto 1922, page 19.

[4] See Correspondence of Sir John Macdonald, edited by Sir Joseph Pope, for Chapleau’s letter of November 12. 1885,

to Macdonald reconsidering his decision of the previous evening. An interesting reference to this episode appeared in *Le Canada* of June 15, 1912, under the heading "Souvenirs de 1885".

- [5] Pope, Correspondence, page 386.
- [6] Pope, Correspondence, pages 393-4.
- [7] Macdonald Papers, McCarthy to Macdonald, June 25, 1884. (Written on board the *S.S. Germanic*.)
- [8] Macdonald Papers, McCarthy to Macdonald, October 16, 1884. In this letter McCarthy predicted that the Conservative party would lose the Catholic vote in Ontario in the coming election. In this view he was mistaken. The results showed that this group was but little influenced by the sentiment of the neighboring province. Moreover, former Quebec supporters of Macdonald who were elected in 1887 on opposition platforms soon dropped back into their former party relationships.
- [9] See O. D. Skelton, *Life and letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier*, Toronto, 1921, Vol. I, page 393.
- [10] Pope, Macdonald correspondence, pages 443-4.
- [11] *Toronto Globe*, July 16, 1889.
- [12] *Manitoba Free Press*, July 26, 1889.
- [13] John S. Willison, *Reminiscences*, Toronto 1919, page 175.
- [14] Speech at Stayner, July 12, 1889.
- [15] Speech at Barrie, quoted in the Stayner speech.
- [16] J. S. Willison, *Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the Liberal party*, Vol. II, page 56.

[17] *Toronto News*, May 12, 1898.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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