



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 47, No. 1

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, JANUARY 1966

The Centenary of Confederation

ONLY ONCE IN A HUNDRED YEARS is one invited to the celebration of a centenary. A year is not too far ahead to start learning about what is expected of us as participants.

The occasion of our centenary is not only a time to refurbish old monuments, create new amenities, and bolster existing cultural activities. It gives us an opportunity to pay attention to what is significant in the social and political and intellectual development of our country and in its present environment.

We wish to know by what road our ancestors travelled to make it possible for Canada to celebrate a hundred years as a nation. The object is not to gossip about people along the way who committed errors in driving or who behaved extravagantly in office, but to learn by what path Canada emerged from the wilderness on to the relatively bright uplands she enjoys today.

Our past was not drab. It was exciting in its happening and diversified enough to suit the most exacting storyteller. It was full of sharp contrasts, both in motive of exploration and method of settlement. Study of that past concerns us as children of our fathers; what we do at the time of our centenary concerns us as fathers of our children.

Our ancestors

We must not be seduced by our bravery of tall office buildings and our abundance of suburban villas into forgetting the old decaying log cabins from which our forefathers sallied forth to build our society and our economy.

It is true that we cannot drive into the future looking in a rear-vision mirror, but, as the revolutionary writer Edmund Burke said: "People will not look forward to posterity who never look back to their ancestors."

Who are our ancestors? Not only the people on our individual family trees, but all who have preceded us in building this nation, whether they came with Champlain's first settlers or among this century's immigrants; whether they spoke English, French, Italian,

German, Ukrainian or some other language; whether they were Jewish, Catholic or Protestant; whether they were black, brown, yellow or white in colour of their skin; whether they were free-traders or protectionists; whether they were grand seigniors lording it over hundreds of acres or hard-working crofters wresting their precarious living from a patch of stony hillside; whether they were skilful craftsmen felling trees or splitting them and working the wood into chairs and pulpits and farm wagons, or proprietors of water-mills which were the first touch of industrialization brought to the wilderness. All these are our ancestors.

It was no disgrace in their day to have work-hardened hands, and it was not reckoned a disgrace to have enjoyed undisturbed slumber on a bed of straw and to have heaped the hay as a pillow under one's head.

The men and women we recall on this centenary paid the price of what we are. Amid the flags and martial music and speeches we should bear in memory the dust-gray wagons with screeching axles, and the gees and haws of their drivers, and the graves along the way westward; the bateaux carrying the explorers and fur traders along thousands of miles through unknown land; the men and women of daring and enterprise and energy and vision.

This is not to say that we must indulge in nostalgia to the point where it becomes romanticizing. Some European countries began a half century ago to do over their history into fairy-tales and heroic poetry, thus contributing to the evils of romantic nationalism. But we, who have reached a future which the cleverest of their era did not imagine, should give credit to the men and women of the tufted furniture and gas-mantle age for their advanced thinking, their tolerance, and their skill in statesmanship.

Causes of confederation

When we look back upon our history we see things fixed and frozen as they happened, but everything that happened was the product of fluid circumstances.

The events, both internal and world-wide, which

preceded confederation, are important to our thinking because they help us to understand why Canada embarked upon this unique effort to weld two nationalities into one nation.

The Canada preceding 1867 would be a strange world to us. It had none of the features we take for granted, such as great factories, large cities, highways, automobiles, airplanes, television sets, electricity. There were only a few miles of railway along the St. Lawrence.

The people numbered about 3½ million, eighty per cent of whom lived in the two provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, now Ontario and Quebec. Four-fifths of the population was rural; Montreal had about 100,000 people, and it was by far the largest city.

Cultivation of the soil and the extraction of raw products from the forest and from the sea supported a small group of manufacturing, handicraft and service industries scattered through the settled areas. These industries were sheltered from foreign competition as much by isolation, the advantage of cheap local raw material and the lack of transportation as they were by the incidental protection of a tariff primarily intended for revenue.

The time was marked, too, by the self-sufficiency of separate families, a needful part of the frontier nature of the economy. Material income was largely limited to the basic requirements: food, clothing and shelter. The worker could retreat at will to the farm, where he became self-reliant. This, naturally, gave the economy great capacity for adjustment to fluctuations, and tended toward insularity in people's ideas.

However, pressures of population and the desire for a more abundant life gradually made themselves felt.

Western expansion had been disappointing to the two Canadas. As to other parts of the country, the historical summary of the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations in 1940 remarked: "The Maritimes, tied to a dying industry, [building wooden ships] were in even greater, if less conscious need. The tiny Red River Settlement was beginning to find its feet, but was toddling into the arms of the United States in the process. The Pacific Coast gold rush had fostered some basically sound development, but its recession had left a small population stranded with a large debt."

Between 1848 and 1854 Canadian affairs sank to such a low level that the continued existence of Canada became a matter of considerable doubt. The adoption of free-trade by Britain, with consequent abolition of Canada's preference in British markets, gave strength to advocates of union with the United States. Internally, Canada was fretting over dozens of irritating questions which seemed incapable of solution within the governmental set-up of the time.

By 1864 the country was ripe for federation. The American War of Secession, which started in 1861, had created difficulties with the northern states.

American filibusters were harassing the Canadian border.

The fear of invasion was not a figment of the imagination. James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* made this crystal clear in January 1861, when it forecast that the southern cotton states would "in Mexico and the tropical countries bordering the Gulf find the area which they deem necessary to provide for the rapid increase of their slave population. The Northern confederacy will seek a counterpoise to these acquisitions by absorbing Canada". Eight months later the *Herald* was threatening Canada with four hundred thousand disciplined troops "who will ask no better occupation than to destroy the last vestiges of British rule on the American continent and annex Canada to the United States".

As late as 1866, just a year before confederation, the *Chicago Tribune* threatened that when the opportunity came Britain's "American colonies will be snatched up by this Republic as quickly as a hawk would gobble a quail". Then, it forecast, the United States would have a satisfactory northern boundary, along the Arctic Ocean.

While the fulminations of these newspapers cannot be regarded as representing the opinions of the mass of thinking people in the United States, they do have to be considered as a constant irritant to Canadians of the time, breeding distrust and apprehension.

Confederation meant the rejection of political and economic annexation by the United States. Standing alone, even though part of an empire, each province was too small to be an effective unit either in maintaining a position of economic stability or of withstanding armed pressure from the powerful nation to the south.

What was there to do but try to work out some arrangement whereby not a group of sparsely populated isolated provinces but a consolidated organization faced this threat? Writing about these years in his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (Dodd, Mead & Co. Inc. and Bantam Books, Volume IV) Churchill said: "How indeed could Canada remain separate from America and yet stay alive?"

The answer was confederation. This was designed to establish a new nation to meet the changed conditions of British policy; to unite the scattered provinces against possible aggression; to build an east-west national economy instead of a north-south continental one; to broaden the source of livelihood so as to avert the financial and living upsets caused by reliance upon a narrow base; to preserve cultural and local loyalties and to reconcile them with political strength and solidarity.

Impossible though it seemed to draw these diverse and sometimes conflicting interests together, events conspired to bring it about. Each of the separate colonies arrived at a crisis in its affairs at the same time, and confederation held out hope of relieving many worries.

Launching Confederation

Canada was launched in burning hope by people who believed that they had accomplished something great. As Frank H. Underhill said in one of the Massey Lectures in 1963: "In 1867, our Fathers created something new, 'a new nationality'."

The men who took part in the conferences preceding confederation were constrained to work together in a manner in which few of them had to work before. They were compelled to admit the necessity of compromise, of tolerance, and of simply agreeing to disagree in a pleasant fashion.

Ever since the Act of Union in 1841, Upper and Lower Canada had been living in uneasy political association, constantly bickering over unequal incidence of taxation and a host of other issues. The Maritimes wanted union, but only among themselves. Representatives from Canada were sent to the Maritime conference at Charlottetown in 1864 to invite the delegates to discuss a larger union. In October the conference reconvened in Quebec, under the chairmanship of the French Premier of Upper and Lower Canada. Its 72 resolutions embodied the main lines on which confederation was finally accomplished.

There was, of course, much work to be done. The financial relations between the provinces, the equitable distribution of public funds, the commercial policy, the constitution of the two houses of parliament: these and scores of other weighty matters had to be settled.

It was 1866 before all was in readiness for presentation to the British Government, which received the proposal for confederation with enthusiasm. A conference, sitting in London, hammered out 69 resolutions based on those of the Quebec conference; the terms of union were approved by the British Parliament, and the formal act of union, known as the British North America Act, was passed in 1867.

An outstanding feature of the united Canada was that it combined the advantages of central government with those of local autonomy. An apparatus of governmental machinery was created with headquarters in Ottawa, but at the same time the individual provinces retained their identity and their control of local affairs. The province of Quebec, for example, was enabled to preserve its institutions, its language, its religion, its customs, its civil laws, and its schools, while it received the backing of the other provinces in matters of general concern such as military and naval defence, the building of railways, postal facilities, and so forth. Confederation gave Canada unity, but it was a unity of diversity.

The new nation

The new nation was hailed in most of Upper and Lower Canada, lukewarmly accepted in New Brunswick, and reluctantly acceded to in Nova Scotia. Prince Edward Island preferred to remain on the outside, but came in six years later, while Newfoundland did not

join the union until 1949. In 1869 Canada acquired the vast extent of the Hudson's Bay Company's territories, out of which have been carved the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta; in 1871 British Columbia came into confederation. The first transcontinental railway opened in 1885, tying Canada together from East to West.

There were conflicting views in the United States. The *New York Times* predicted that the new confederation would become a "populous, rich and powerful independent nation" that would be one of the "most reliable and useful allies of the United States." The *New York Tribune* still yearned to seize Canada: "When the experiment of the 'dominion' shall have failed, as fail it must, a process of peaceful absorption will give Canada her proper place in the great North American Republic."

In Ottawa, July first 1867 was greeted by the firing of a 101-gun salute, while all the church bells pealed; High Mass was sung in the cathedral at Trois Rivières; in Saint John, 21 guns were fired as a salute "in honour of this greatest of all modern marriages." There were some hold-outs who draped their houses in black crepe or flew their flags at half mast, but most Canadians walked that day under banners inscribed "Success to the Confederacy" or "Bienvenue à la nouvelle puissance".

The British North America Act welcomed that day has not yet been beatified as has the Constitution of the United States. It is still in progress, a lively thing, not worshipped but found useful.

That an agreement worked out a hundred years ago does not necessarily meet all the needs of the space age is not surprising, and we are severe judges if we reproach the Fathers for not foreseeing all that we were going to do in and to the country.

If we criticize the BNA Act for establishing conditions which in recent years have come to seem worthy of change, we must also credit it with a hundred years of progress as a united nation made up of two cultures, each with its hallowed attitudes and way of life. The outcome is a more stable and sensible and enduring philosophy of life for the joint inheritors of this great land than that pictured in one of his plays by a Greek writer, in which

". . . two brothers
With internecine conflict at a blow
Wrought out by fratricide their mutual doom."

Canada's attractiveness

To all the millions of people who have come to Canada from other lands in the years since 1867, this has been a new land, new in liberty, in opportunity and in promise.

Exiles crossing the Atlantic seeking sanctuary from social, political or economic distress found here not merely a refuge but a home.

At heart, most Canadians share the same values. This is one country where many temples may be raised

to the same God. Canada tries to be what Rebecca West described as an ideal nation: A shelter where all talents are generously recognized, all forgivable oddities forgiven, all viciousness quietly frustrated, and those who lack talent honoured for equivalent contributions of graciousness.

Canadian life, enfolding not only people of the founding cultures but people of many other cultures, is the art of the possible. It demands flexibility. Our world is changing every year in the grip of expanding science, expanding population, expanding expectations. To cope with change we need education, not only for our children but for adults. If adults were to keep closer to the vanguard of advancing society there would be little occasion for the protest marches of young people dismayed by the uncertainty of their future.

The freedom of which we boast is not lost in shattered Dunkirks and blazing Pearl Harbours . . . such events call forth the utmost resistance. Freedom is lost little by little in noiseless theft, a fragment of concession to expediency here, a morsel of "what does it matter?" there. Then, shockingly, we find that freedom has disappeared in the regimentation of not only our daily doings but our eternal ambitions.

Into the future

The ancient philosophers recognized, and modern history has proved, that a nation survives according to its unity and power, according to the ability of its members to co-operate for common ends. This co-operation requires that we relinquish, to some extent, things and acts which might be in our individual interest. Otherwise the great forward movement will be complicated by petty wishes and blurred by sectional ambitions.

We must, in fact, act as if we were a little better than ourselves. Our ideal, facing the uncertainty of the years following 1967 as our ancestors did those of 1867, might be to build a Canadianism that has full meaning.

Confederation saw the coming together of three or four racial and political groups, some of whom had been bitter enemies of the others. They reached the conclusion that they had to live together, and that they needed a frame into which they would fit. They realized that we are all part of the whole, that no man, no municipality, no county, no province, can contribute effectively to Canada's well-being by working compulsively as an individual at parochial problems.

That was the grandeur of the past: what of the future?

We can see more light than darkness in Canada's future, but intelligent effort is needed now in order to make sure of its brightness. When an administrator in Africa rode out to inspect land that had been devastated by a storm he came to a place where giant cedars had been uprooted and destroyed. He said to his official in charge of forestry: "You will have to plant

some cedars here." The official replied: "It takes two thousand years to grow cedars of the size these were. They don't even bear cones until they are fifty years old." "Then," said the administrator, "we must plant them *at once*."

Not, indeed, that we can expect to write a script in 1967 to which no postscripts need be added. Changing our ways has been a process going on in human affairs ever since the beginning of history. The object now is to move beyond old errors, not to perpetuate the memory of them; to build a good present and prepare for a better future.

Plutarch tells us in his *Lives* about the argument as to whether the ship in which Theseus and the youths of Athens sailed home from Crete was the same ship as that in which they set out, "for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place".

Replacing old planks with new is a job for every Canadian, because everyone has an interest in seeing Canada endure. We shall gather in centennial year not merely to extol our ancestors but to take up their work and continue it as valiant men, writing our individual biographies into the history of Canada.

A good time to live

We cannot look back, on our hundredth national birthday, on the past as nothing more than a pageant which calls for applause and gratification. As the procession of the years passes in review, each year decked with its crown of laurel leaves for achievement and its chaplet of rosemary for memories, we must not forget that 1967 will take its place in the cavalcade.

History is not going to begin a new chapter: it never does: history runs on. The old principles will remain, and by acceptance of what is best in our democracy, and by education in public affairs and by co-operation, we can continue to evolve a system of government that will provide Canadians with the best kind of life and happiness.

Next year is a new year with no mistakes in it yet. Like the birth of every new day, it is a reprieve granted by the governor of time to his subjects who may have squandered a legacy of early moments.

If we face it with assurance, resolved to bear turns of fortune with manful spirit and to add what good we can to the great goodness we inherited, future generations may remember us and say: "These people saw a vision in dark and troubled days, and though tyranny raged in many parts of the earth they built a shining nation out of the dust."

Some people will meet this challenge by saying "We're not doing too badly," but that is a cry-baby excuse for poor success. What we should do is try to add orchids to the bouquets wrought from wild flowers by our ancestors. Engaged in that task, we may say with the Roman poet: "Let ancient times delight other folk; I rejoice that I was not born till now."