

LIBERAL-CONSERVATISM AND FEUDALISM
IN CANADIAN POLITICS:
A RESPONSE TO CHRISTIAN

Rod Preece

I was somewhat surprised to discover that Professor Christian had interpreted the thesis of my piece on 'The Myth of the Red Tory' as the proposition that there are "no substantial differences between Liberals and Progressive Conservatives". In order to allay any further misunderstanding, given the gratifying interest the article has aroused, it would appear appropriate for me to state my conception in a rather more complete and perhaps more enlightening form.

Both Conservatives and Liberals are, in my view, born of the liberal tradition but whereas Conservatives remain legitimate heirs to a critical version of that tradition, Liberals have entirely suborned that tradition. That is, the classical liberal tradition of limited government and economic individualism, restricted by law (in the liberal version) and also by order, by prudence, by a critical approach to rationalism and by duties (in the conservative version), remains alive in the Progressive Conservative Party but was buried before the turn of the century by increasingly collectivist Liberals who followed the new welfarist liberalism advocated by T.H. Green, John Stuart Mill and L.T. Hobhouse. It is classical liberalism, not welfare liberalism, with which conservatism has much *philosophically* in common, although the centripetal forces of electioneering and brokerage politics do much to persuade Conservatives *in practice* to adopt a welfarist liberal stance which, in its present extreme form, militates against their traditions.

In classical liberal philosophy man was freed from the tutelage of the state, but as liberals were increasingly imbued with the idea of progress they came to recognize the state as an indispensable agent of that progress; and they now regard the state as the means whereby the individual frees himself from the economic fetters of the market place. The conservative, on the other hand, while rejecting feudalism almost as vehemently as the liberal, has been far more skeptical than the liberal about man's propensity for successful change. He saw that man was not born an isolated individual but as a member of a family and a nation in which he found a measure of his identity and to which he owed a measure of his duty (feudalism, we must remember, had little sense of nation),

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that increased use of the state involved the danger of diminishing man's responsibilities (hence the constant conservative appeal to self-help), and that an *extensive* welfare state would deprive man of his dignity (although welfare measures designed to enhance individual responsibility were never inimical to conservative doctrine). In short, the conservative recognized the merit in the liberal's claims but rejected their extreme versions as utopian panaceas, he attempted to restrict those claims by the need for societal equilibrium, and today he worries about the simplistic belief in the virtues of democracy rampant because he ignores the necessity of restricting all power — in whomsoever's hands — if we are not to suffer dictatorship. For Halifax, Bolingbroke and Burke the danger foreseen and rebuked was monarchical dictatorship. For the modern conservative the dictatorship of the democratic proletariat is the current danger.

Having made my perceptions more explicit, let me return to the claims of Professor Christian. He asserts that in 'The Myth of the Red Tory' I misrepresented his views. *If* that is so, I apologize. In order to ensure that the charge cannot be levelled again, I shall be careful to deal with Professor Christian's arguments entirely in his own terms.

Professor Christian informs us that "the antithesis between toryism and liberalism ought, on the Hartzian analysis, [to] have been able in its own right to generate an indigenous socialism; and we believe it was capable of so doing . . . This interaction and development, which we call the ideological conversation, never stopped . . ." Socialism, then, we are expected to believe, is the synthesis of the contradiction between tory and liberal values. Christian goes on to quote from his book with Colin Campbell (*Political Parties and Ideologies in Canada*) that "in the Maritimes the liberal fragments were much weaker, and a more tory attitude was implanted by the predominantly loyalist settlement. The settlement in the West was much later and of a much more strongly liberal bent."

Now it follows from Christian's statements that where liberalism and toryism are present the propensity to socialism is present and where either toryism or liberalism is absent the propensity to socialism is absent. Thus if there is any validity in the Hartzian thesis, as adopted by Christian and Campbell, then the Maritimes should be the Canadian breeding ground of socialism. It had, according to Christian, the necessary toryism, and we are further informed by Christian, following George Grant, that "liberalism had throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, become increasingly ascendant" in Canada as a whole. The Maritimes, therefore, had the necessary liberalism. Yet, as we all know, socialism failed to develop in the Maritimes. The lesson for the Hartzian model could not be clearer.

On the other hand, in the West, where, according to Christian, there was a "much more strongly liberal bent" — a point used by Christian to explain the

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individualism of Meighen — and hence the appropriate dialectical relationship was absent, socialism developed with greater strength than elsewhere in Canada. In other words, the facts are precisely the opposite of what they would have to be to support the Hartzian thesis!

Professor Christian goes on to tell us of “another important source of feudal-tory ideals”, namely French Canada. These ideals, he tells us, were more deeply rooted in French Canada than in English Canada, although “The military success of English arms in eighteenth century Canada injected an increasingly potent liberal virus into the French Canadian body politic, which subsequent Anglo-Scottish traders re-inforced”. One is bound to wonder why, if the warriors and the Anglo-Scottish traders had a partial but significant tory ideology themselves (which, to be consistent, Professor Christian must believe), the injected virus, on Christian’s own confession, was a liberal one. But that is only a minor point. The major point is that, if the Hartzian model is an appropriate one, French Canada must have been the province ripe for socialism *par excellence*. Yet socialism remained ineffective there (and waxed where the preconditions were absent!) until it arrived very late and in very dubious form with the Parti Québécois — whose success is to be attributed more to nationalist than socialist feeling, whatever the ideology of the party activists.

I find no difficulty in accepting the view that feudalism played a stronger role in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada, although I find the *philosophe* influence of the Marquis de la Galissonnière and his ilk is usually underestimated. But, however feudalist Quebec may be supposed to have been, if the Hartzian thesis were an adequate one — or even just a stimulating and instructive one — we would be entitled to expect socialism to have arisen earlier, more steadfastly and more purely in the “tory” Maritimes and “tory” Quebec (where liberalism is also present) than in the predominantly “liberal” West (where there is no toryism). The fact that the reverse is the case indicates that the Christian adaptation of the Hartzian model has absolutely nothing to recommend it.

What is, I think, even more significant to Professor Christian’s failure to understand the nature of Canadian Conservatism is his claim that “The Liberal-Conservative Party which Macdonald and Cartier created had its roots in both English and French Canada, and probably drew its original tory-feudal inspiration more from the *bleus* than from Canada West.” I am not persuaded of the influence of Cartier on the *philosophy* of the Liberal-Conservative creation. Moreover, I sometimes wonder whether the attempt of Canadian historiographers to discover a highly influential role for French Canadians in the history of our last two centuries reflects more a political state of mind than a concern with the realities of the past. More importantly, I am unable to discover adequate ground for considering the philosophy of Cartier (or of other important French-speaking Liberal-Conservatives) to reflect a “tory-feudal

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inspiration", While Cartier acknowledged that French Canadians were "issu de l'ancienne France. Nous sommes Francais d'origine, mais Francais du vieux régime"¹, he nonetheless made it clear that the contrast between Quebec and France was like that between Britain and the United States. He did not resurrect any feudal images but eulogized the new industrialized, capitalist Britain — "le seul gouvernement au monde . . . qui, tout en utilisant l'élément démocratique, a su le tenir dans les limites raisonnables. L'élément démocratique a une heureuse action dans la sphère politique lorsqu'il est balancé par une autre force. Nous avons cet avantage sur nos voisins les Américains qui ont la démocratie extrême."²

Along with the democratic element within constitutional monarchy Cartier espoused "le système de responsabilité pratiqué en Angleterre . . . Le président des Etats-Unis est un despote comparé à la reine d'Angleterre"³ He denounced reciprocity because he wanted Canada to become a modern industrialized nation. It was thus necessary to prevent that "la grande industrie manufacturière se concentrerait dans les principales cités des Etats-Unis."⁴ While the population of French Canada were "Englishmen speaking French"⁵ who shared the strength and equanimity of British power, by contrast "de l'autre côté de la frontière le pouvoir dominant c'est la volonté de la foule, de la populace enfin."⁶

Cartier was, as has oft been said before, no philosopher, but there can be little doubt that his espousal of responsible government, the democratic element within constitutional monarchy, moderation, and an industrialized Canada, all indicate that his influence on the Liberal-Conservative Party was anything but of a "tory-feudal inspiration."

As to Macdonald himself, his attitude to Quebec's feudalist heritage was resonant and unmistakable. He described seigneurial tenure as "the system of the dark ages" and as "ruinous to the interests of Lower Canada."⁷ Abolition of seigneurial tenure was "for the purpose of wiping out the obstruction to enterprise and advancement which the feudal tenure presented." It was "for the purpose of opening up one of the most beautiful countries under the sun to British enterprise and British skill."⁸ I have quoted Macdonald on this before but it bears repeating: "I have always been a Conservative Liberal", he proclaimed, "I could never have been called a Tory."⁹ Nothing could be clearer about the original Liberal-Conservative attitude to what Professor Christian mistakenly calls "its original tory-feudal inspiration". If Professor Christian is content, as he claims, "to accept the opinion of the Liberal-Conservative Party, or the Union Government or the Progressive Conservative Party that its leaders and senior party spokesmen represented something called Canadian Conservatism upon which they, by their position, were singularly qualified to pronounce", then Christian has no alternative but to confess his error.

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Let me take one short passage from Christian and Campbell's book in order to demonstrate how their analysis leads them astray. In discussing Bracken's renunciation of protection, Christian and Campbell assert that, "This was a tremendous step, because, as we have argued, time and again, Canadian Conservatism had affirmed the importance of state intervention and control over economic forces in the interests of the nation." (This is viewed by Christian and Campbell as an aspect of Conservative collectivism). "But now, Bracken was repudiating this position. A corollary of this new emphasis was the diminished importance of state initiatives. Previously, Conservatives had sought to harness the state's power in the national interest; Bracken, on the other hand, believed that "government must be decentralized."¹⁰ The passage is of importance because in it a number of the common misconceptions of the nature of Canadian Conservatism come together, and it also demonstrates the authors' failures to come to grips with both historical detail and political reality. First, in its inception, the National Policy (i.e. Conservative protectionism) was political and economic expedience, not Conservative principle. At the 1877 London-Norfolk Picnic Macdonald declared, "I am in favour of reciprocal free trade if it can be obtained, but so long as the policy of the United States closes the markets to our products we should have a policy of our own as well, and consult only our own interests."¹¹ Second, if the National Policy were seen as an aspect of Conservative collectivist principle *and* injurious to rural interests — as many politicians of the day suspected it in fact was — then Conservative collectivism would have to represent a view of the nation as a separate entity from the individuals who comprise it, whereas Conservative 'collectivism' in fact can only be understood with reference to the good of the individuals who comprise the nation. The difference between the strictly organic view of the state, as expressed by Plato, for example, and the view of the state as a unit of solidarity and identity, as expressed by Aquinas and Burke, is a significant one. Third, at the time of Bracken, state initiative received *increased* not *decreased* approval by the Conservatives — witness, for example, the Port Hope conference — and the party was roundly condemned therefor by Meighen and others. Indeed, state initiative is precisely what was needed to secure the removal of barriers to trade. Fourth, Bracken's belief that government must be decentralized was neither novel — Borden, at least, had espoused explicitly a similar principle — nor did it require any diminution of state initiative. The federation may use more of the powers it retains — which was precisely what Bracken proposed to do. It is, of course, impossible to provide the detailed historical evidence for these assertions in the space at my disposal. They are, nonetheless, provided in full in Rod Preece and Wolfgang Koerner, *The Conservative Tradition in Canada*, Carleton Library Series, forthcoming.

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It is unfortunate that much of what Professor Christian writes contains misleading inuendo. There is the assertion, for example, that Preece's "argument, if at all clear, would confound only those who believed Burke to be the authentic source of modern philosophical conservatism, as do some of the American writers whom Professor Preece cites." The implication from the words, and even more from the context, is that it is at least a little unusual for non-Americans to consider Burke the authentic source of modern philosophical conservatism. But in fact Burke is treated far more commonly than any other as that source. De Maistre (France), von Gentz (Austria) and Adam Müller (Germany) paid — in my view inappropriately — homage to Burke, and the historians Pinson,¹² Reinhardt¹³, Weiss¹⁴ and Artz¹⁵ accept Burke — quite mistakenly in my view — as the source of European Conservatism. I find it more convincing to treat Burke solely as the source of English-speaking conservatism. And I am unable to discover a single modern work on conservatism in the United Kingdom which does not accord Burke that prominence.

A sound case may be made that David Hume rather than Edmund Burke is the appropriate *pater familias* of mid to late twentieth century conservatism — though Christian does not, of course, attempt to make it — and it is refreshing that Ian Gilmour in his recent book *Inside Right*¹⁶ has found Hume a place alongside Burke in the conservative lexicon. (I tried something similar in *The Conservative Tradition in Canada*). But it should be clear to anyone acquainted with the works of Hume and Burke that the former is even less of a corporatist, an organicist and a collectivist than the latter. Be that as it may, William Christian's implication that regard for Burke as the fount of conservatism is slightly unusual or is reserved for certain American conservatives is, to put it in its best light, inaccurate.

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Notes

1. Joseph Tassé, *Discours de Sir Georges Cartier*, Montreal: 1893, p. 390.
2. *Op. cit.*, p. 515.
3. *Op. cit.*, p. 275.
4. *Op. cit.*, pp. 656-657.
5. See Jean-Charles Bonenfant, 'Les idées politiques de George-Etienne Cartier' in Marcel Hamelin, ed., *Les idées politiques des premiers ministres du Canada*, Ottawa: Les éditions de l'université d'Ottawa, 1969, p. 50.
6. *Discours*, p. 421.
7. *Public Archives of Canada*, Macdonald Papers, Vol. 158, 64069-64070.
8. *Op. cit.*, 64067.
9. *Op. cit.*, 64021.
10. *Political Parties and Ideologies in Canada*, p. 96.
11. Quoted in George R. Parkin, *The Makers of Canada: Vol. XVIII, Sir John A. Macdonald*, Toronto: Morang & Co., 1908, p. 223.
12. *Modern Germany: Its History and Civilization*, New York: Macmillan, 1954, pp. 45, 57.
13. *Germany: 2000 Years*, New York: Ungar, 1961, Vol. II, p. 498.
14. *Conservatism in Europe: 1770-1945*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1977, pp. 41-45.
15. *Reaction and Revolution: 1814-1832*, New York: Harper & Row, 1974, p. 67.
16. London: Hutchinson, 1977.