Conquest and Rebellion: The Road to French Canada’s Participation in Canadian Confederation through the Lens of La Survivance

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CONQUEST AND REBELLION: THE ROAD TO FRENCH CANADA’S PARTICIPATION IN CANADIAN CONFEDERATION THROUGH THE LENS OF LA SURVIVANCE

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**ABSTRACT**

The decision by conservative French Canadian politicians to join Canadian Confederation and participate in the Confederation debates of 1864-1867 was made in an effort to preserve and protect a unique French Canadian nation and identity. This national identity grew in part as a reaction to British colonial rule after the Conquest of 1763. Continuous attempts by English governance at assimilating and anglicizing the French Canadian population strengthened the nationalist idea of “la survivance” - the cultural survival of French Canadian language, religion and institutions. Notions of national preservation and survival changed from a radical ideology by the rebellious Parti canadien/Patriotes against assimilation throughout the Rebellions of 1837-1838 and consequences of the Lord Durham Report, to one of a conservative protection of cultural and institutional rights in the entrance and acceptance of Canadian Confederation by the Parti bleu.

**KEYWORDS**

Conquest; La survivance; Patriotes; Rebellions; Lord Durham Report; Parti bleu; Parti rouge; Act of Union; Confederation
French Canadian political reactions to the proposal of Canadian Confederation in 1864 were mixed, with the debates surrounding it focused on cultural and political preservation and self-governance for the nation. The conservative Parti bleu led by George Etienne Cartier defended confederation for economic and defence reasons, and saw it as a solution to French Canadian self-governance. The more radical Parti rouge however, viewed it as joining the colonizing enemy and the complete assimilation of French Canada to the English. This discussion of cultural preservation and political sovereignty resulted from French Canada’s colonization in 1763 by the British and subsequent attempts at assimilation. One of the most significant instances of British imperialist assimilationist tactics towards French Canada was the production of the Lord Durham report of 1839. The creation of the province of Quebec and its participation in Confederation can be seen as a conservative attempt at preserving French Canadian culture and identity- a choice made within the colonized ideology of la survivance. This ideology of cultural subsistence and survival has been viewed in much of the canon in French Canadian historical writing as a direct result of British colonization and it coloured the decisions to join English Canada made by French Canadian political leaders.
This paper examines the colonial position of French Canada through a narrative of historical moments that exemplify its struggle for *la survivance* through the Conquest of 1763, Lord Durham Report in 1839, and finally the conservative grasp for protection and survival by joining Canadian Confederation in 1867.

**Conquest and Colonization**

The Conquest of 1763, the ceding of New France to Great Britain, has often been interpreted by many French Canadian historians as the beginning of their colonized, minority position within what is currently known as the nation-state of Canada.¹ After the Conquest, it became increasingly difficult for the French Canadian nation to survive culturally amongst the dominant English population. Quebec was left with two elements that could contribute to its nationalism, its own piece of territory as well as an officially recognized language. French Canadians believed that if they were able to exercise political control over their land and language, they would be able to survive as a distinct community within Canada.² As a result of this desire to survive and preserve their culture, French Canadians insisted on language rights and laws that would protect their religion. French Canada’s fierce determination to survive as a unique cultural entity

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² Ibid., 48.
within Canada is what propelled ideas of a dual nationality of French and English into the Confederation process.

An independent, distinctive French Canadian nationalism began to form in the decades following the Conquest, as a reaction to British colonial governance. During this time, the British crown’s Constitutional Act of 1791 removed territory that was previously considered part of the province of Quebec from the Quebec Act of 1774 and divided the land and created Upper Canada and Lower Canada in order to provide land for British Loyalists escaping from the American Revolution. In terms of governance, the Governor General of British North America represented the interests of the British Crown, and the Act of 1791 established a democratic House of Assembly of representatives in Lower Canada (Quebec). The House of Assembly’s decisions could be vetoed by an upper Legislative Council, whose members were expected to serve life-long terms and were undemocratically appointed by the British Crown. As well, British criminal law replaced the traditional French civil law system, although historians Dickinson and Young note that informally, the French civil law was still commonly used. The shift in power and implementation of British practices, institutions and taxation as well as the influx of British

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4 Allan Greer. *The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, 113
5 Dickinson and Young, 55
immigrants and Loyalists to both Upper and Lower Canada influenced retaliations to colonial rule by bourgeoning French Canadian nationalists.

**French Canadian Nationalism and Rebellion**

An offense to British governance was vocalized by politicians and journalists such as Pierre Bédard, who in the early 1800s helped found the French Canadian nationalist party, le Parti canadien, as well as the newspaper which espoused the party’s political rhetoric, *Le Canadien*. Historian Claude Bélanger states that *Le Canadien*’s slogan was “*Notre foi, notre langue, nos institutions* [our faith, our language, our institutions].” This slogan encapsulates the ideological thrust of the nationalist movement and eventual rebellion against English colonial rule. To avoid assimilation and keep their heritage and traditions alive, French Canadians must guard their Roman Catholic faith, French language and institutions. These “pillars of survival” were connected and supported the survival of the Catholic Church and the French language in the fundamental societal structure and institutions such as education, health care, politics, and the civil law system.

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7 Greer 122; Bélanger, 2000
8 Bélanger, 2000

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During the years of 1837 and 1838 the Parti patriote led a militant revolt in protest over unfair British governance and taxation. In the 1820s the Parti canadien had been renamed Parti Patriote and held considerable sway in the House of Assembly, with its leader Louis-Joseph Papineau as the speaker. The party was frustrated however, as its political position in the House of Assembly was not comparable to the power held by the English Legislative Council. Patriote Rebellion historian Allan Greer writes that one of the nationalists’ main goals was the political independence of Lower Canada, with those in power representing the interests of the province’s demographic majority of French Canadians over English settlers. In 1834, Papineau and the Parti patriote wrote 92 Resolutions to the British crown, contesting the abuses of English rule over the French. The Resolutions outlined the main grievances and causes of the later rebellions in 1837 and 1838. Resolution 52 of the 92 resolutions focused on the inequality of the English population as a powerful minority ruling through the Legislative Council the majority of French population. Resolution 52 states:

Que puisqu'un fait, qui n'a pas dépendu du choix de la majorité du peuple de cette province, son origine française et son usage de la langue française est devenu pour les autorités coloniales un prétexte

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9 Greer, 126
10 Ibid., 132
This resolution was created in the interests of recognizing French Canadians’ political rights and freedoms as a people, which were deemed inferior and disregarded by the English rule of the Legislative Council and the imposition of British laws. The Patriote’s ideas of rebellion were couched in la survivance rhetoric of not only surviving but thriving independently as a nation. The rebellions were unsuccessful due to lack of military power against the British militia. In November of 1838, Papineau fled across the border to the United States, while 850 Patriotes were arrested and sentenced to death or exile in Australia.\footnote{Jacques Lacoursière. Histoire Populaire du Québec de 1791 à 1841. Tome 2. Québec: Septentirion 1996, 285} A Special Council was selected to govern comprised mostly of elite English politicians and Lower Canada’s legislature was temporarily disabled.\footnote{Ibid, 167} The British crown then appointed a new governor to manage the political unrest in British North America.

The Lord Durham Report and Assimilation

The Lord Durham Report on the Affairs of British North America, completed in January 1839, further cooled relations between Lower and

\begin{thebibliography}{12}
\bibitem{2} Dickinson and Young 167
\bibitem{3} Ibid, 167
\end{thebibliography}
Upper Canadians, respectively from French and English descent. Lord Durham arrived in Quebec in late May 1838 and spent a total of six months in Upper and Lower Canada which he felt sufficient to draw conclusions and create possible solutions for the British colony.\textsuperscript{14} Prior to his trip, Durham studied the causes of the rebellions that had occurred in Lower Canada during 1837, which had been motivated by French Canadian frustrations for political reform.\textsuperscript{15} Durham made two central recommendations in his report, which he presented upon his return to Britain; the first being responsible government and the second proposal being the unification of Upper and Lower Canadas. Responsible government refers to a governmental system that is held accountable and is representative of the people, as those in power would be voted in by a majority of the population.\textsuperscript{16} The idea of responsible government, one that would fairly represent French Canadian politicians and interests, was a major factor in the debates and decisions by conservative French Canadian politicians to support the idea of Confederation.

The second recommendation of unification had a significant impact on the French Canadian nation. Durham concluded that all conflicts in Lower Canada were due to different racial French and English origins. In

\begin{footnotes}
\item[15] Greer, 127
\item[16] Dickinson and Young, 183
\end{footnotes}
his report he claimed the Rebellions were not about politics but races, as he observed “two nations warring in the bosom of a single state: I found a struggle, not of principles, but of races.”\textsuperscript{17} He believed that, unless something was done to absolve the conflicts of language, religion and culture between the French and English, there would be no peace between the two groups. Thus his solution was to completely assimilate the race of French Canada with British language, laws and culture, and he admonished previous governors for not completing this task under British colonial rule earlier.\textsuperscript{18} In his words:

Had the sounder policy of making the Province English, in all its institutions, been adopted from the first, and steadily preserved in, the French would probably have been speedily outnumbered, and the beneficial operation of the free institutions of England would never have been impeded by the animosities of origin.\textsuperscript{19}

Durham was biased in his assessment of French Canadians due to his British imperialist upbringing and political training. To him the British system was superior as it signified progress and modernity, while Lower Canada was stuck in the past using French civil law and the seigneurial

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\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 55.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 42
\end{flushright}

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Lower Canada, according to Lord Durham, was in need of assimilation in order to modernize and avoid future political and cultural conflicts.

The repercussions of the failure of the Rebellions and the Lord Durham Report were significant to the future of Lower Canada and French Canadian nationalism. In the Report, Durham stated that French Canadians were “a people with no history, and no literature” thereby erasing French Canadian traditions and culture and adding credence to the necessity of assimilation and unification with Upper Canada. To the proposal of a union with Upper Canada, historian Jacques Lacoursière cites Patriote Étienne Parent in Le canadien that French Canada had no choice but to “resigner avec la meilleure grace possible.” The Patriotes were defeated and Lower Canada became Canada East with the Act of Union in 1840. Historians Dickinson and Young argue that the conservative French Canadian bourgeoisie composed of members such as Étienne Cartier was a driving force behind collaboration between English and French elites in reconstructing the “new” Canada East in governance and laws to enable English-Protestant capitalism and urban growth.

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20 Mann, 79.
21 Durham, 149.
22 Lacoursière, 427
23 Dickinson and Young, 183
Assimilation or *La Survivance*? : Canadian Confederation

It is important to understand French Canadians reasons for supporting Confederation, mainly as a way to protect themselves from an English majority; to protect their nationality and guarantee their survival. Parti bleu politician George Étienne Cartier, a Father of Confederation, and leading representative of French Canada in the Confederation debates stated that Confederation would be a unity of diversity, with “the great majority of nations [having] been formed, not by people who desired intensely to live together, but rather by people who could not live separately.”

Cartier’s position was one of compromise with the English population and politicians, rather than independence from them. Independence was not a viable idea for Lower Canada at this point in time and with the annexation of French Canadians to the United States and fear of American invasion along the southern border, uniting with Upper Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia seemed a plausible solution to French Canadian conservative politicians.

Between 1840 and 1930, over 900,000 French Canadians immigrated to the United States. The highest numbers occurred between 1880 and 1890 when an estimated 150,000 French Canadians departed from Quebec

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towards the United States.\textsuperscript{26} This mass wave of departures was due to economic weakness marked by high job losses and low industrial development. Many French Canadians chose to depart in search for jobs elsewhere, primarily manufacturing jobs in New England. Some chose to leave in hopes of finding a way to make a living to support their families, while others left seeking higher wages, which could often be found quite easily outside of Quebec. By the late 1840’s Quebec’s most fertile farming lands had been occupied and gaining access could be quite expensive. Quebec nationalists frowned upon emigration, seeing it as weakening the nation, “even if emigrants managed to retain their language and religion abroad, their absence was a loss to Quebec.”\textsuperscript{27} By 1867, the year of Confederation, French Canadian press was appealing to outside investors to set up paper mills in the province in hopes of retaining some of the losses. They hoped to prevent emigration in order to retain and strengthen the French Canadian population and fight Anglicization and rise of British immigrants in the province.\textsuperscript{28}

Defence against a possible American invasion was a persuasive argument from the Parti bleu in favour of Confederation. On February 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1865 Cartier’s \textit{La Minerve} newspaper wrote positively regarding

\textsuperscript{26} Claude Bélanger “Immigration to the United States from Canada and Quebec 1840-1940.” \textit{Quebec History}. Marianpolis College, 2000.
\textsuperscript{27} A.I. Silver, \textit{The French-Canadian Idea of Confederation, 1864 – 1900}. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982, 112
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 112
Confederation, stating “it is to assure ourselves a force and sufficient means of defense that we desire a union of all the provinces destined to march under the same flag in case of war.”

Alone the provinces were weak defensively thus Britain was eager to centralize and join the provinces to lessen their dependence on British militia. There was fear of an American invasion following the American Civil War’s end in 1865, due to Confederates hiding across the border. Northern American states were suspicious of pro-Confederate sentiment in the Canadas due to incidents such as St. Alban’s raid in 1864 when a group of Confederate soldiers living in Montreal looted banks in Vermont. The raid evidenced the need for stronger border protection and highlighted the Confederationists’ fears of an American invasion. Incidents such as this encouraged a union between provinces for pragmatic military and defence reasons. From a conservative perspective, the decision to join Canada West protected the French Canadian population and thus ensured their survival.

This paper seeks to demonstrate why conservative French Canadians supported the notion of Canadian Confederation in order to protect their survival as a cultural group. It is important to note that the French Canadians “that played any direct part in making the original

29 Bonenfant, 13
31 “Outrage at St. Alban’s” *Montreal Gazette*, October 20, 1864.
32 Creighton, 195
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Confederation, between 1864 – 1867, was French Lower Canada” for they had strength in numbers as opposed to smaller French Canadian communities living in the Maritimes. Some notable conservative elites who supported the Confederation movement were politicians such as George Étienne Cartier. Cartier saw Confederation as the only favourable solution that would preserve the identity of the French Canadian. He took offense “to the charge made by his opponents that the much-talked about ‘new nationality’ (of the Canadian) would engulf the French-Canadian nationality.”

His opponents, typically in the Parti rouge (which was comprised of former Patriotes), attacked the scheme of Confederation as giving in to the English, more specifically to John A. MacDonald, who espoused the idea of a new nationalism that would respect the rights of minorities living in the newly federated Canada.

The Rouges feared that entering into this union would complete Lord Durham’s vision of assimilation, however Cartier held on firmly to his belief that the two groups could leave peacefully together. Political leaders in favour of Confederation agreed that the “concept of Canada was of a community based on political and juridical unity, but also on cultural and religious duality.”

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33 Silver, 14.
35 Ibid., 159
36 Ibid., 160
provinces is what convinced Cartier and his supporters that Canadian Confederation would benefit and protect French Canada. This protection of French Canadian rights included their cultural bedrock of the French language and Roman Catholic religion.

The Roman Catholic bishops in Canada East were uncertain on the issue of Confederation at first, given English Canada and Britain’s previous attempts through the Lord Durham Report at anglicising and assimilating French Canadians into Protestantism. Some Catholic clergy favoured the idea of Confederation however as a whole they “refused to commit themselves and even felt some fear of facing the unknown.”37 They were not entirely enthusiastic until they were given more details as to how it would affect the future of the Church. The Catholic Church was on better terms with the Bleus who supported Confederation as opposed to the Rouges who did not. In his pastoral letter published on June 18th, 1867, Catholic bishop Monseigneur Charles Larocque wrote that Confederation did not appear to present any danger to French Canadians. He argued that it would not be any better to become part of the American republic nor to have republic institutions in Canada for they would not serve them any better.38 It was through the protection of federalism and guarantee of a dual nationalism that Roman Catholicism in Quebec was preserved and survived, although not in the manner more ardent nationalists had hoped.

37 Bonenfant, 15
38 Ibid., 15
Ideas of *la survivance* surrounding the Confederation debates had changed from the rebellious independence envisioned by the Patriotes in the early 1800s. The survival of French Canada to the Bleus depended on federalism and protection under a constitution. To these politicians, Confederation it was viewed as “an ‘alliance’ or ‘association’ of nations, each in its own autonomous province, and co-operating for the common welfare.”

The Parti rouge disagreed with the Bleus, stating that Confederation would endanger French Canada’s national survival. When French Canadians “were called on to judge the proposed Confederation of the British North American provinces, the first thing they wanted to know was what effect it would have on their own nationality.”

Their nationality was vital to their survival as a people, making them a unique entity altogether, separating them from English Canadians. Parti rouge politician and supporter of Papineau during the rebellions, Antoine-Aimé Dorion, feared that living under a majority would threaten Quebec’s status, given that majorities are often aggressive when they are in positions of power.

Dorion was excluded from the talks regarding Confederation and his power to intervene was quite limited. His most prominent concern was the French assimilation by the English majority. Lord Durham’s Report from 1839 had suggested a federal system for the British North American

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39 Silver, 49.
40 Ibid., 33
41 Lacoursière 165.
colonies thus the suggestion of federalism was tinged for many with the
fear of English assimilation. Lord Durham had been in favour of erasing
the French nationality and this was Dorion’s greatest worry, as he feared
the English taking control of a central government under a federal
system.42 Dorion and other Parti rouge members who opposed the idea
hoped that French rights would be included and respected.

Joining Confederation, with the guarantee of cultural and political
rights under a federal system and responsible government with equal
representation by French Canadian politicians was the solution the Bleus
defended for French Canada’s cultural and political survival. On December
17th, 1864, the Parti bleu paper Le Journal de Quebec wrote “we want to be a
nation one day, and as that is our necessary destiny and the goal to which
we aspire, we prefer the political condition of which we will be a vital
element, and in which we will still be in existence.”43 This quotation
exemplifies the type of nationalism the Parti bleu was projecting- full
nationhood “one day,” but for that moment they could be content with
existence. Alliance with the colonizer was necessary as Canada East did not
have the means to survive alone economically and would be extremely
vulnerable to military invasion from the south.44 However, French
Canadian nationalists “feared that their minority position would be more

42 Lacoursière, 165
43 Bonenfant, 13.
44 Silver, 47.
vulnerable than ever in an arrangement that united the Canadas with the maritime colonies and looked forward to the addition of the Prairie West and the Pacific Coast territories in the near future.” As they looked towards their future they did not know what the outcome would be, if the addition of English-speaking provinces and influx of European immigrants would threaten the French presence in Canada. Through newspapers such as Le Journal de Quebec and La Minerve, the Bleus assured the public that their future as French Canadians was safe within the borders of Quebec. According to the Bleu propaganda with Confederation the French Canadian nation would have a limited type of sovereignty, with provincial control over religious and civil institutions, thus ensuring the existence of the nation.

The notion of la survivance as protective of the continued existence of French Canadians in Quebec through a constitutional union with English-dominated provinces is vastly different in comparison to the fervent declarations of independence and freedom by the Patriotes. Throughout the Rebellions of 1837-1838, the Patriotes demanded complete independence and self-governance to allow the French Canadian nation to thrive. Patriote ideas of French Canada’s survivance did not simply refer to a protected existence in alliance with English Canada, but an existence that

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45 Cook, Watching Quebec, 174.
46 Silver, 42-43
did not need the provisions of protection. The quotation from *La Journal de Quebec* “in which we will still be in existence,” although from an anglophile Bleu perspective, highlights a moment of colonized recognition and the positionality of the French Canadian nation at that time: the population was decreasing, their military defence was low and there was no popular will or support to attempt another rebellion. Canadian Confederation granted special cultural rights to Quebec, and the conservative nationalist ideology of *la survivance* continued and was used in the upcoming decades to promote and celebrate the nation’s history and French Canada’s continued existence of subsistence as a minority.
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