

Parliamentary Bookshelf: Reviews

Le Canada français et la Confédération: Fondements et bilan critique. Jean-François Caron and Marcel Martel, eds, University of Laval Press, Québec, 2016, 174 p.

With the 150th anniversary of Confederation fast approaching, a wave of scholarship is encouraging us to reflect on this formative period of Canada's history, and the evolution of the country over the past century and a half. In *Le Canada français et la Confédération*, edited by historian Marcel Martel and political scientist Jean-François Caron, a group of

six scholars interrogate what the original Confederation deal was supposed to mean in terms of linguistic and cultural duality, and how this dynamic has evolved since the 1860s. While in many respects this collection represents a synthesis of existing scholarship, it provides a useful primer on French-speaking Canadians' relationship to Confederation, and their varied experiences of the system of federalism. At the same time, it inadvertently exposes the ongoing gap between Canada's English and French scholarly communities, as many of the findings discussed here echo those of historian Arthur Silver's excellent 1982 book, *The French-Canadian Idea of Confederation*.

The first three essays in the collection treat the Acadian, Québécois and French-Canadian minority communities' roles in the process leading to Confederation and their expectations of this agreement. Legal scholar Gaétan Migneault attempts to determine the perceptions held by Acadians of Confederation, given that none were part of the negotiations, and no newspapers or archives existed to record their views. Migneault attempts to challenge the perception that Acadians were ignorant of the entire process. His argument hinges on



the results of the Acadian counties in the 1865 and 1866 New Brunswick elections, both of which returned anti-Confederation candidates. For Migneault, these results were not necessarily the result of other, local issues, but rather may have reflected concerns about the rights of Acadians under the Confederation deal. He bases his arguments on other petitions and speeches from the periods right before, and right after, the Confederation negotiations, which suggest that education and language rights were among the Acadians' concerns.

Caron and Martel's chapters in this section largely reflect efforts to communicate existing scholarly knowledge (from English-language scholars) to a francophone audience. Caron's chapter argues that although John A. Macdonald's preference for a unitary system ended up shaping the federal government's approach to federalism in the decades immediately following 1867, there were many key supporters of a two-nations, or at least decentralized, federation in the formative stages of Confederation. Proponents of this approach included all key parties in Quebec, but also, as Paul Romney has argued, Reform leader George Brown, and most of the Maritime delegates. However, as Marcel Martel's chapter demonstrates, a desire for a *deux-nations* approach did not mean that Quebec's representatives were strongly concerned with Ontario's francophone minorities (who were absent from the negotiations). Indeed, as Silver's work proved, Quebec politicians prioritized provincial rights and autonomy, and sought to guard against the possibility of federal intervention to protect linguistic and religious rights. It was only much later after Confederation that French-Canadian nationalist thought began to shift and to promote the idea of two founding nations and francophone rights elsewhere in the country.

The second section of the collection considers the long-term ramifications of federalism for francophones in Canada. Stéphanie Chouinard provides a detailed overview of how the rights of Acadians have evolved, and demonstrates that, unlike in other provinces, federalism has served to reinforce the rights of this substantial minority. The demographic weight of Acadians made them key players in the politics of the province. Political will, rather than judicial compulsion, explains the rapid growth of Acadian rights since the 1960s. While economic slowdowns do jeopardize the scope of language rights, they remain far beyond all other francophone minorities in the country.

Réjean Pelletier and Jean-François Caron disagree on the impacts of Confederation on Quebec. Pelletier largely plays the role of pessimist, repeating the standard arguments of alarmists (and separatists) that Confederation and the system of federalism has failed to protect Quebec's language rights. To make this case, he both cites Supreme Court decisions that struck down parts of Bill 101 (and subsequent language legislation) and employs a selective reading of statistical data on language use in the home (by percentage of the entire population) to claim that French is still in great peril. He ignores the fact, and Caron points out, that the use of English has also declined over the decades, and it is other languages that have risen. In contrast, Caron argues that, overall, Canadian federalism has allowed a great deal of autonomy for independent action by the government of Quebec, and has permitted asymmetry within the federation. Quebec's governments, he notes, could have invoked the notwithstanding clause more than they have, if there was a political will for more draconian language laws. Indeed, the courts have invoked *Quebec's* Charter of Rights as much as the Canadian one in striking down sections of the language laws. Perhaps the status of English in North America, and the world more broadly, he suggests, is more to blame for the decisions made by Quebecers (both francophones and recent immigrants) regarding language use than the provisions of the Constitution. Philip Resnick concludes the volume with some reflections about the challenges posed by forces such as globalization, immigration, and the shift of Canada's economic centre away from Quebec to the future of dualism and the French fact in Canada.

Overall, while many of the arguments in this volume are familiar ones (at least, for scholars of Confederation and federalism), this relatively thin volume provides a very good overview of francophone perceptions of the objectives and impacts of the Confederation pact. It will be a useful primer for those not already familiar with the literature, and a good overview of contemporary debates about Canadian federalism and cultural and linguistic rights. The essays are well-written and accessible, and include a good mix of detailed overviews and provocative arguments, which hopefully will spur additional scholarship in this area.

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