There’s much to celebrate in Sir John A. Macdonald’s legacy

Macdonald ended Canada’s colonial status and was the benign and democratically elevated patriarch of the country he chiefly founded, including all of its races and ethnicities

by Conrad Black

The heroes of the month among Canada’s elected officials must be the councillors of Prince Edward County, Ont., who voted last week to retain the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald on the main street of Picton. There was the now customary agitation to remove the statue because of Macdonald’s allegedly oppressive conduct toward the Native people. Coun. Philip St. Jean led the retention argument, stating that the statue in such a prominent location fosters education and curiosity

about the history of the country. One of the interveners at the public hearing that determined the issue has two Cree daughters and said that the statue is “a symbol of colonialism, patriarchy and white supremacy. Taking down a statue because we are recognizing the truth of the impact this man and his policies had, and has on Indigenous people, has a feeling of reconciliation to me. But to be clear, it is only a baby step towards true reconciliation; it is a gesture.”

This encapsulates the current self-induced national moral weakness: nativist advocates think that removing an effigy of the founder of our country and someone who was regarded by his peers in the time of Lincoln, Palmerston, Disraeli, Gladstone and Bismarck as a great statesman is required because of largely unspecified offences in one policy area of his 28 years as head of Canada’s government (the so-called United Province of Canada, and then the Dominion of Canada), and even that would be a mere “gesture.” “Reconciliation” evidently consists of abject self-humiliation by the 95 per cent of Canadians who are not descended from the Indigenous peoples, and we have become so quaveringly enfeebled, we are expected to submit to this.

This entire debate is illustrative of the dangers of the atomization of society that is incited by many current politicians including by the present federal government. The claim that Macdonald’s Native policy effectively obliterates his other achievements is nonsense for two reasons. First, his Native policy was not particularly odious, and second, it was vastly transcended by his genuine achievements. Macdonald had close allies in the Native community including the distinguished tribal leaders, Poundmaker and Crowfoot. He granted the right to vote to Native people and was not personally much involved with the residential schools, which for all their failings offered a promising life for many young Natives.

Macdonald, with George-Etienne Cartier and George Brown, were

the principal Fathers of Confederation. Macdonald understood that if the jurisdictions scattered along the northern border of the United States were not linked together as an autonomous country, they would eventually be snaffled up by the great United States of America, which at the time of Confederation in 1867 had just resolved the issue of secession by suppressing the Southern insurrection in a terrible war that killed 750,000 Americans out of a population of 31 million. They had the greatest army and the greatest generals in the world (Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman), and Cartier, as Canada's defence minister, had 50,000 soldiers and militia on full alert – as great a force as the present Canadian army with about eight per cent of the present population.

Macdonald saw that there were substantial English or French minorities in three (Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick) of the four original provinces, (Nova Scotia was the other). He saw that the only way to forge a country out of such a population was to have two official languages and agree in advance that in important matters the approval of the majority both of the English and of the French-speaking Canadians was required. To this end, he was the chief architect of what has always been the only transcontinental, bicultural, parliamentary Confederation in the history of the world. Whatever our frequent complaints with it, it has endured for 153 years, and no country as populous as Canada has had essentially the same political institutions for a longer time except the United Kingdom and the United States. At the time of Confederation, France was an empire governed by the Bonapartes, Italy and Germany had not been unified, Japan was still an island hermit kingdom with minimal contact with the outside world, Russia, China and Turkey were absolute monarchies, and Ireland was part of Great Britain.

Macdonald added Manitoba, British Columbia, and Prince Edward Island as provinces, and achieved one of the engineering and

financial wonders of the world with the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. It was not laid down on the gentle ground of the Midwest and Great Plains as its American competitors were; its rail-ties had largely to be bolted into the resistant rock of the Canadian Shield, and the whole immense project had to be financed largely by Canada, which had no real capital market, and in the New York and London financial markets greedily occupied by competing American railway projects. Macdonald used the railway to transport to the West the troops necessary to suppress the annexationist Métis Rebellion of 1885, and employed that incident to obtain parliamentary approval of the financing necessary to complete what was then almost a bankrupt railway. At the 1871 Washington Conference to resolve all outstanding issues between Great Britain the United States and Canada, especially those arising from British provocations of the Americans during the U.S. Civil War, Macdonald was only one of only six British Empire conferees. In the light of Germany's emergence as Europe's greatest power after winning the Franco-Prussian War and Bismarck's founding of the German Empire, the British sought amicable relations with all other great powers, starting with the U.S. Macdonald negotiated with consummate skill opposite all the other delegates from both senior countries, and the Americans who began by affecting to regard Canada as a British province, accepted it as an independent neighbour. All Canada's claims were settled generously.

The Prince Edward County intervener's claim that Macdonald represented "colonialism patriarchy, and white supremacy" was an outrage. Macdonald ended Canada's colonial status and was the benign and democratically elevated patriarch of the country he chiefly founded, including all of its races and ethnicities. Whites were 98 per cent of Canadians at that time but in the intervening years Canada has welcomed others with open arms and in great numbers. The Natives of Canada have many legitimate grievances that have to be addressed generously and without condescension. But they might

occasionally remember the many advances the colonists brought with them, to what was essentially a stone age society, and the great, peaceful country that has evolved since. My friend Prof. Joe Martin (Rotman School of Business, U of T), and I spoke at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ont., two years ago opposing the removal of Sir John A. Macdonald’s name from the law faculty of that university. Macdonald represented Kingston as a legislator for 47 years. It has now been removed and the cowards responsible should be ashamed of themselves and not of the greatly distinguished founder of our country.

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