

Protestant Advocacy for Political Virtue in Pre-Confederation Canada

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During the years following the Rebellion of 1837 waves of sentiments were expressed within and beyond the Canadian church regarding the political virtue of the country. Uneasiness in the leadership of Canadian politicians, fears regarding world conflicts, and concerns over Parliamentary reforms sent the Protestant community into a flurry of activity. Many within Protestant churches held firm that if countries were to avoid conflict and nations were to reach a state of healthy prosperity, the foundational principles for governance must be built on Scriptural principles. Protestant religious bodies and societies wished to voice these opinions regarding the need for a virtuous state of governance and newspapers provided the easiest and quickest opportunity to target a large number of Canadians. Many newspaper articles written on the political state of the world and the Canadas gave readers opportunities to explore political and patriotic ideologies from the perspective of the church. The newspaper became an important vehicle in which the Protestant community sought to engage readers and writers in serious debate related to politically virtuous authority, accountability and process.

From the outset of this exploration into political advocacy by the church, it must be noted that although many within Protestant denominations felt a strong call to intervene in the politics of the nation, especially when the health of the nation was perceived to be at risk, some church clergy, church members, politicians and community members did not agree that this was the principal role of their faith. Debates regarding the

place of the church in the political arena can be found within the nineteenth-century press. For example, in the *Wesleyan Repository* an argument for church intervention claimed that it was right to become politically active as it was interpreted that political authorities were beginning to neglect an integration of past religious responsibility and duties in favour of a belief that the country could be run on purely secular practices. The newspaper urged politicians and the church to acknowledge that both had a religious duty and responsibility to conduct their practices in manners that would guarantee the “well-being and happiness of man in time and eternity.”¹ Those Protestants that decided to embark on a process of political reform through the press used a number of methods of emphasizing their beliefs including arguments from Scripture, the inclusion of Canadian examples, and the quoting of influential international authorities on aspects of governance, patriotism, and individual conduct.

A nineteenth-century newspaper definition of political virtue serves as a beginning point from which to embark on this study. Following the turbulence of the Rebellions, in 1839 in Niagara, Upper Canada, the Canadian *Christian Examiner* published an essay entitled “Some Reflections on Public Affairs.” Critical to this essay was the notion that the study of the government could not be attempted without first acknowledging that “the Supreme ruler, not only holds each individual responsible for his own acts, and deals with him accordingly as a moral being, but that he also regards men collectively, as they are grouped together, by his own ordinance, into families, societies and nations, and deals with them thus grouped, as if they constituted one responsible body.” The writer went on to emphasize that it was this very notion of the “law of moral retribution” in the context of the “attachment to ones [sic] native land” which emphasized the need for “political virtue” stating that “it is impossible for any man to separate himself from these connections, or fail in the duties resulting from them, without incurring quilt, and endangering, not merely his own, but the public well-being.”²

In attempting to understand this notion of “political virtue,” a number of Upper Canadian newspapers were analyzed to determine the key elements that were being expounded on the topic of political virtue from the perspective of Protestant churches. After a review of these newspaper articles, it could be concluded that four elements of political virtue could be identified. First, the election of virtuous representatives was mandated. Second, the church instructed that the nation must fear

God. Third, the nation must be faithful in maintaining various forms of sound Scriptural instruction. Finally, a conviction of endurance and perseverance in the form of virtuous conduct by the constituent was highlighted as a necessity, especially in times of political unrest. Before examining each of these four aspects of political virtue, the use of the press by Protestants will be explored.

The Protestant community's expertise in nineteenth-century spiritual revival naturally seemed to echo in the manner in which the church advocated for a revival of political virtue. This concept can be illustrated through an analysis of Canadian Methodist revivals in Upper Canada. Methodists used the distribution of printed religious tracts, delivery of inspiring words at camp meetings, and the publication of inspiring books and newspaper articles to move isolated settlers toward a relationship with God and the church. After mastering the art of religious revival, some of these same Methodist circuit riders ventured to apply these same skills in expanding their call to service within the government.

One such example can be found in the life's work of Dr. Egerton Ryerson who used his circuit rider revival expertise to set the direction and lead the Department of Education for Upper Canada. Ryerson began his political journey during the protests in 1836 through 1838 regarding the implementation of fifty-seven rectories that were established with the help of Anglican Archdeacon John Strachan.³ Egerton Ryerson, through the *Guardian* and the Upper Canadian Baptists through the *Register* urged their members to take action. Action was taken in September 1838 when a Montreal rally passed seven resolutions. Rally attendees resolved to: reject the establishment of a state church; pursue independence from England if a state church was implemented; appeal to the public for support; demand the use of the proceeds of the sale of the Clergy reserves to be used for the universal good, suggesting that these funds be used for education; and to resist through legal means the establishment of rectories. This action may have been a contributing factor which led Lord Durham to consider that the questions regarding ecclesiastical conflicts might best be solved through responsible government. When Upper and Lower Canada united in 1841, the first Common School Act for the United Provinces of Canada sparked intense public outcry. The public petitioned parliament on a number of issues including separate schools and Bibles in the classrooms. In 1843, a second Common School Act was passed that included the first provision for the Office of Chief Superintendent of Schools. In 1844 this office was filled by Ryerson.

Public objection to different aspects of education law, teacher education, teacher conduct and student conduct can be found throughout the Education Department correspondence and newspapers of the nineteenth century. Ryerson decided to use local superintendents to deliver inspiring public lectures on diverse topics including political virtue which mirrored the camp meetings of which he was so familiar. He created education circulars that could be compared to religious tracts and, most importantly for this discussion, just as he had begun his political career, Ryerson used print to influence political change. Ryerson created his own mass printed journal to explore varied topics in education and nineteenth-century life and he also contributed regularly within the Upper Canadian press. Ryerson was one churchman who exemplified using the press to advocate for and achieve political change and virtuous governance.

Ryerson's *Journal of Education* can be used to exemplify the advocacy for political reform established during Ryerson's Department of Education years. Articles covered a wide range of topics including educational law, methods and curriculum, evangelism, childcare and health, parenting, science, libraries, school architecture, corporal punishment, temperance, and citizenship. In 1848 Ryerson's address before the students of Victoria College was printed in two parts in the *Journal of Education*.⁴ The melding of spiritual principles and obligations into the political arena, specifically within the Department of Education, was well articulated. Ryerson urged readers of their obligations to self and country to ensure that all citizens had access to a system of education that provided for both spiritual and intellectual growth. Ryerson exemplified nineteenth-century Protestant advocacy for legislative reform.

Educational legislation was not the only issue touched by Protestant advocacy. For example, the press included Protestant objection to the lack of Sabbath observance, inappropriate treatment of those in need, and unethical conduct within Parliament. In 1852, the postal and canal system legislation was altered to respect the Sabbath after Protestants voiced their opinions in the press and petitions to Parliament.⁵ In 1865, Daguerrian retailers also found themselves the subject of church opposition if they wished to draw their customers into their establishments on the day of rest.⁶ The system of dealing with those incarcerated for insanity or criminal activity was reformed in 1836 to include Christian principles of rehabilitation and humane treatment.⁷ Finally, the legislative process was critiqued when God's name was perceived to have been deceptively used during the commencement of session in 1859.⁸

The four areas in which Upper Canadians were urged to pay most heed included the consideration of the characteristics of those elected, the establishment of political governance founded upon the fear of God, an ongoing support for the establishment of God's Word, and the importance of the responsibilities of the electorate. Analysis of newspaper articles that dealt with each of these four elements did not provide any clear evidence that the principles being expounded were purely Canadian in origin; on the contrary, there is evidence that many of the Protestant writers were either well travelled and or quite familiar with international opinion. For example, Egerton Ryerson was proud of the fact that he formed his educational reform plan of action only after extensive travel, observation, and analysis of education in Canada and other parts of the world. He was very familiar with other writers on the topic of education and governance and was not hesitant to quote at length many different writers on the subject. His personal Protestant views were often expressed, and his dedication to God and his service to Upper Canada was evident in his writings. His life's work in the area of education resulted in educational reforms that are still evident today.

In analyzing newspaper articles written prior to Confederation, the people of Upper Canada were informed by the press of a number of local and global conflicts, hardships, and concerns. The ability of the press to emphasize crisis and fear can be easily gleaned within nineteenth-century newspapers. This emphasis on the ills of the world helped set the stage for political revival and discussion regarding political virtue. For example, a writer for the 1861 *Canadian Independent* eloquently illustrated a political horizon filled with storm, bringing forth fears of impending world war, and noting that political crisis from places as far away as Italy, Austria, Hungary and Poland had a profound impact upon Canadians.⁹ After painting a picture of impending doom, the writer presented the shared duty and sentiments he wished to engrain upon all readers' hearts. He urged all of the citizens to watch, pray, and act in a virtuous manner in order to preserve democracy throughout the world. In much the same manner, other newspaper articles were written to set the environment of anticipation and excitement that provided for the fertile ground from which came calls for social justice, institutional reform, and political virtue.

Analysis of Upper Canadian newspapers showed that the first element and most simply explained centred around the importance of electing virtuous men. An article in the *Christian Guardian* on 13 February 1830 related the story of King Solomon who realized that a man

of authority had no right to be a drunkard because of his responsibility to his followers.¹⁰ The article stated that temperance would enable the man of position with “a quiet, peaceable and sober life, to magnify their office and make it honourable – to be ministers of God for good – to be a terror to evil doers and a praise to them that do well.” The *Wesleyan Repository and Literary Record* in 1861 declared that only politically competent men with strong religious convictions who were able to respect themselves and gain the respect of the people should be entrusted to lead the country.¹¹ This was commonly echoed in other newspapers throughout the Pre-Confederation years.

The need to fear God was a constant theme within the Upper Canadian Protestant press. In 1838 the *Christian Examiner and Presbyterian Review* urged that men who conduct themselves wrongfully in the administration of their political duties would be subject to God’s judgment. The writer believed that this fear of God’s wrath would urge politicians to conduct themselves with “moral dignity.”¹²

The third element of political virtue included the notion that the nation be faithful in maintaining various forms of sound Scriptural instruction. This concept was slightly more complex in that it required the committed actions of the individual, family, church and the country’s institutions in order to establish and maintain a strong Scriptural foundation. The *Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine* declared in 1859 that God’s word should be consulted in every political endeavour.¹³ Likewise, the *Canadian Presbyterian* insisted that there was a “necessity for a more rigorous use of the pulpit, the press and the school” in the formation of a politically virtuous nation.¹⁴ An article in the *Niagara Chronicle* in 1853 gives some insight into the public culture in which schools operated.¹⁵ Many people, possibly the majority in Upper Canada, were not sending their children to school or placing any attention toward the system of education in the province. Inhabitants were apathetic and indifferent when it came to education. It was reported that even prominent men and women failed to visit the local school to provide encouragement for the learning that was taking place there. The newspaper urged all citizens to become active and aware of the education that was taking place in the community.

The home was also considered an important institution for the cultivation of political virtue. The *Canadian Christian Examiner and Presbyterian Review* in 1838 argued that Canadian parents had an obligation toward the political health of the Commonwealth and, therefore, needed to provide good instruction and a righteous example to their

children who would fulfill future public duties.¹⁶ An article written in the *Canadian Independent* in 1867 instructed citizens that in order to cultivate the seeds of political virtue needed to build a nation filled with industriousness, frugality, honesty, truth, brotherly kindness, and charity, the church needed to ensure that the nation be built on a faith in Christ.¹⁷

The final element identified within the Upper Canadian Protestant press placed the emphasis on the electorate. Political virtue required the conviction of endurance and perseverance in the form of virtuous conduct by the constituent, especially during times of political unrest. Following the turmoil of the Rebellion, the *Literary Garland* asked readers who withdrew from the political arena because of political violence to remember their duties as citizens.¹⁸ Similarly, *The Wesleyan* urged readers to become involved while maintaining a spirit of peace.¹⁹ The *Journal of Education for Upper Canada* in 1850 noted that political virtue required a politically active virtuous constituent stating that the “virtues and vices of rulers must flourish or wither with those of the people.”²⁰ Likewise, the *Christian Banner* expounded on the necessity for every Christian to never cease to strive for a sincerity and truth within the political arena.²¹ The nation’s constituents were encouraged in 1867 by the *Canadian Independent* to prayerfully call upon the providence of God to grant wisdom to their leaders.²² Both respect and support for the virtuous politician by the people was deemed necessary in the *Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine*.²³ Constituents were discouraged from labelling politicians as self-interested and easily bought for a price, in order to fend off a self-fulfilling prophecy of national disrespect, political disrepute, and, most importantly, the avoidance of public life by those who may have otherwise held political aspirations. And, finally, Protestant Canadians were urged to advocate their religious viewpoints to government without promoting denominational strife. In the words of one writer in *The Presbyterian*, “for when those who profess to believe that the world should be governed according to the will of God can neither agree nor trust one another, what other resource is left than to select those who without any regard to the will of God, will promise to do their best to please all men.”²⁴

The acceptance of responsibility by some within the Protestant church to voice concerns and offer guidance in matters concerning political virtue appears to have been very strong if the examples within the press and petitions to government are considered. It is clear that Protestants used the press to impact the greatest number of people in the quickest and most efficient manner, capturing their readership’s interests with a

revival-like zeal and using revivalist methods in order to achieve change. Within the press, Protestants would emphasize the failings of government and follow up with promises of a healthy and stable nation if only the public and politicians would remember Scriptural guidelines for virtuous governance. Canadians were encouraged to elect officials who exemplified morally sound personal and professional lives, who feared God, and advocate for securing Scriptural foundations within the population through sound education. In addition, the Canadian electorate were warned to establish and maintain a virtuous manner of conduct in all political matters, especially in times of political strife. The role of individual Protestants and religious bodies in contributing to the political process is a study which can only add to our understanding of the decades leading to Confederation.

Endnotes

1. Wesleyan Repository and Literary Record 1 (August 1861): 401-2, CIHM no. 80487811.
2. *The Canadian Christian Examiner and Presbyterian Magazine* 3, no. 1 (January 1839): 1-2, CIHM no. 80499823.
3. Theo. T. Gibson, *Robert Alexander Fyfe* (Burlington, ON: Welch Publishing, 1988), 101-2.
4. *The Journal of Education for Upper Canada* 7 (July 1848): 193-8, CIHM no. 8062421; and *The Journal of Education for Upper Canada* 6 (June 1848): 161-6, CIHM no. 8062421.
5. See Appendix DDDD, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, vol. 11 (1852-3): 350-54; CHIM no. 900955118.
6. Oliver Warren, *On the Bible: A Textbook in School* (Montreal: J. Lovell, 1865). This paper was read at the at the Association of Teachers in connection with the McGill Normal School.
7. *Journal of the House of Assembly of Upper Canada* (1836) Appendix no. 71, CIHM no. 90094212.
8. *The Canadian Presbyter* 2, no. 9 (September 1858): 259, CIHM no. 80407721.
9. *The Canadian Independent* 7, no. 11 (May 1861): 330, CIHM: 80494673.
10. *Christian Guardian* (13 February 1830).

11. *Wesleyan Repository and Literary Record* 1 (August 1861): 404, CIHM no. 80487811.
12. *The Canadian Christian Examiner and Presbyterian Review* 2, no. 4 (April 1838): 119, CIHM no. 80499814.
13. *The Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine* 6, no. 9 (1 September 1859): 261-2, CIHM no. 80498069.
14. *The Canadian Presbyterian* 2, no. 1 (January 1858): 11, CIHM no. 80407713.
15. *Niagara Chronicle* (26 August 1853).
16. *The Canadian Christian Examiner and Presbyterian Review* 2, no. 11 (November 1838): 329, CIHM no. 80499821.
17. *The Canadian Independent* 13, no. 9 (March 1867): 357, CIHM no. 804946153.
18. *The Literary Garland* 2, no. 1 (December 1839): 41, CIHM no. 80617813.
19. *The Wesleyan* 1, no. 8 (12 November 1840): 64, CIHM no. 8046449.
20. *Journal of Education for Upper Canada* 3, no. 6 (June 1850): 84, CIHM no. 80624230.
21. *The Christian Banner* 7, no. 2 (February 1853): 51, CIHM no. 80434414.
22. *The Canadian Independent* 13, no. 9 (March 1867): 356, CIHM no. 804946153.
23. *The Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine* 3, no. 12 (1 December 1856): 377, CIHM no. 80498036.
24. *The Presbyterian* 2, no. 12 (December 1849): 83, CIHM no. 80496924.

