

A FATHER OF CONFEDERATION.

INTERESTING REMINISCENCES OF THE HON. PETER MITCHELL. HE TELLS HOW A NATION WAS FORMED. (Montreal Gazette.)

Pericles, on his deathbed, reproached the Athenians with ingratitude; and the Hon. Peter Mitchell (if the momentary association be allowed), after a long life of public service, finds that the reward of the patriot is—to be forgotten! 'Sharper than a serpent's tooth, as Shakespeare has it, 'is a thankless child,' and it is possible that the supreme bitterness to a public man in the consciousness that the stage can be set and the drama of life enacted without him.'

A new generation jostles greatness and knows it not. The harvest is carelessly gathered while the sower is forgotten. The name, the personality, diminishes—recedes from the view, although it made history; the new generation is superbly indifferent to ancient claims.

To feel that a hungry generation treads on the memory of past service, and that he who was once a commanding force now lingers superfluous on the stage—this expresses, perhaps, the utmost poignancy of human experience.

Not that the Hon. Peter would for a moment acknowledge that he is embittered by the consciousness that the great work of his life—the making of a confederation possible—has not received that appreciative regard from his countrymen that it deserved. 'Sir Peter,' as those who know him intimately love to call him, is a bit of a cynic; but through his cynicism there runs a healthy sound of laughter. At seventy-five he is genial, lively, apt, while his characterizations—the verisimilitude of which is striking in the extreme—never exclude a certain large tolerance which sympathizes with limitation.

Sir Peter is pleased to think that a certain remembrance of his work is being stirred up in the public mind. At the same time the Father of Confederation has no illusions. The public has a short memory, and one of the most eloquent arguments in the world is a bank account.

After all, what is a monument—though it be of enduring brass—when you are dead? He who neglects his own interests to serve the public may be a patriot; will patriotism keep one warm and comfortable in his old age?

Sir Peter is apt, in his cynical way, which he purposely exaggerates, to strike a note like this; but he immediately says, 'After all, I have the consciousness that I served my country, and the public are beginning to recognize what it meant to bring about confederation.'

Sir Peter comes of a wholesome Scotch ancestry. He himself was born, in the year 1824, at Newcastle, Miramichi, New Brunswick. He early discovered a love for the legal profession, and went as a law clerk to Mr. George Kerr, then a prominent lawyer, in which capacity he served four years. After this he studied law for five years, and was called to the bar in due course as a barrister. Other interests, however, engaged his attention, and he gave attention to the lumbering and ship-building industries. Chiefly politics claimed the regard of the ardent and independent young man, and although in New Brunswick the people had only known the rule of the political oligarchies here and there a spirit of independence was springing up, to which young Mr. Mitchell gave daring expression. He was asked to stand for the county of Northumberland, while a very young man. He made his maiden speech in 1841; he entered the Legislature, which then knew no regular parties, and which was nominated by the family compact system. There was not much chance for distinction; there were no large questions at issue; the country was undeveloped; and, in the words of Mr. Mitchell, 'we just drifted along until the question of confederation came up.'

Mr. Mitchell became in due course Legislative Councillor, and in 1858 he entered the government of Mr. (afterwards Sir Leonard) Tilley. 'Who is responsible for the confederation idea? Who claimed original authorship?' 'I don't know that any man ever claimed to be the originator of the idea,' the Hon. Peter will tell you, as he allows his mind to dwell upon the past. 'It had been in the air for a great while. In the Lower Provinces there had been the thought that New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia should unite in one province. That was a good idea. It should have been carried out. The then governor, the Hon. Hamilton Gordon, uncle of the present Earl of Aberdeen, was in favor of this move. I do not impute motives, but it would have been natural had the governor seen in such a union the chance of a great distinction, as the first Governor-General. Be that as it may, he supported the union of the three provinces, and representatives of these provinces had agreed to meet at Charlottetown to discuss the proposal, and it is curious that just as we were about to open the conference, Sir John Macdonald, Sir George Cartier, the Hon. Mr. McDougall, the Hon. Mr. Langevin, and the Hon. Mr. Chapais, landed in the government steamer, came to our meeting, and made the suggestion that we should consider first the larger

question of confederation of all parts of Canada. This proposal was made in an off-hand way, and it is curious to reflect what trifling circumstances are instrumental in bringing about large results. We consented to adjourn our conference and meet in Quebec.

The Quebec conference was held, and the larger idea mooted. We did not reach details; we dealt with general principles. The question was how stood public opinion? Neither Sir John Macdonald, for Ontario; Cartier, for Quebec; nor Tupper, for Nova Scotia, dare bring the issue before the public. They were all afraid of defeat. I then boldly said that I was not afraid to go to the people of New Brunswick upon the confederation issue. The test was to be made in my province. It was made, and although the people, as a whole, were favorable to the idea, still, through local circumstances, the question was defeated. The Tilley Government retired from power, and Albert J. Smith became premier.

'Well, that was a slap in the face, or looked like it. I still remained a member of the Legislature. The governor and I were great friends. I had often given him advice, and helped him all in my power. He was about to leave for England to get married, and before he left he said to me, 'Well, Mr. Mitchell, I suppose it will be a long time before we see you again among us,' meaning that I would not be a member of any government for a good while. 'Oh, I don't know that, I replied, 'I believe confederation can still be carried.' 'Are you in earnest?' 'I certainly am,' I answered, 'and the last has not been heard of the question.' 'Well, that alters the complexion of the question,' was the governor's reply.'

When the governor returned he sent for Mr. Mitchell, and reverted to the confederation question. The latter was strongly of opinion that confederation could be carried—if a chance were given.

'Suppose I give you a chance,' said the governor, significantly.

'Well, the man to carry it is Mr. Tilley. I will work under him and do all in my power, but he must lead.'

'Do you wish for the opportunity?' asked the governor.

'Certainly.'

'See Mr. Tilley, make your arrangements, let me know, and I will find a way.'

Mr. Tilley had been defeated upon the question by a majority of three to one. He said to Mr. Mitchell: 'You can try it again, if you like; you don't care what the people think of you.'

'Not two straws.'

'Very well; go ahead; I will support you; but I could not lead, or the people would say I was a fool.'

In the end, Mr. Mitchell undertook to lead the campaign. The governor was communicated with; an occasion of disagreement with the ministry was found—'You know these things are simple when you understand,' said Mr. Mitchell significantly.—Mr. Mitchell was sent for to form a ministry, which he did, and the new administration went to the people with the cry of confederation for the whole of Canada.

Mr. Mitchell was Premier, of course; Tilley was made Secretary; Fisher, Attorney-General; Johnston, Solicitor-General; R. D. Wilmont, minister without portfolio. Mr. Mitchell held five of the seats in the Cabinet vacant, putting a proper regard upon the temptations of office to influence the doubting.

Well, Mr. Mitchell was a young man; he was full of courage and daring; he made speeches all day and all night; he aroused the country; and he was returned by an overwhelming majority—a majority of four to one—completely reversing, in four months, the popular decision.

'The sole issue was confederation. Mr. Tilley gave me the warmest support, but it was my own personality. It was not politics, it was a person. I thus made confederation possible, for, as I tell you not one of the men concerned dare go before the other provinces with the question. New Brunswick came up to the test, and the vote made confederation a reality.'

The Quebec conference met a second time, when the plan was elaborated, and the New Federal Cabinet formed.

Curiously enough, Mr. Mitchell's name was left out—or, rather, before Mr. Mitchell was thought of, Sir John Macdonald had given all the Cabinet seats away.

'I am sorry, Mr. Mitchell,' he said, 'but I had to promise the fellows all the positions; but I have created two new positions—the Ministry of Marine and Fisheries and the Secretary of state for the provinces. I offer you the latter.'

'I would rather have marine and fisheries,' Mr. Mitchell said.

'But I tell you there is nothing to do in it; take the secretaryship,' Sir John urged.

'No, I prefer the other.'

'Do you insist upon it?'

'I do.'

'Very well, you shall have it.'

'Now, why was I rather neglected by Sir John?' Mr. Mitchell asks, musingly.

'Because I was not so plastic as the other men in the first place, because, in the second, I had done something which Sir John, with all his prestige in Ontario, could not do. I had carried confederation

in the only province in the Dominion in which a test has been made. Sir John was jealous of me. He showed it then; he showed it afterwards. I did not wait till he died to say so, either.

The scheme was carried by the several legislatures; the Imperial act was passed, and the new Cabinet entered upon office in July, 1867.

Mr. Mitchell refers with pride to the fact that he made his portfolio useful and valuable, working hard and effectually, while he remained minister, and introducing the system of lights which make the navigation of our lakes and rivers safe. The C. P. R. scandal caused the downfall of the government.

'It was said that I had become a Tory to enter the coalition government. Nothing of the sort. I was a Liberal, an Independent Liberal—a radical, in short. But I remained Loyal to the coalition principle. At the same time, while I did not denounce Macdonald, in connection with the C. P. R. deal, I did not support him, and for this he never forgave me. I stood aloof from that scandal. No man can say I was besmirched then. Of course I made enemies, and while the titles were flying about I was forgotten, retaining simple Peter Mitchell. I never asked for favors, but Sir John knifed me because I had done what he could not do. By carrying Confederation I had proved myself to be the strongest man in the country.'

Mr. Mitchell remained a member of parliament during the Mackenzie regime. It was then that Widow Murphy's course to the dignity of an event, occupying Hansard, bulking monstrously before the afflicted vision of the ministers and threatening to wreck government.

The Widow Murphy had a little farm in the neighborhood of Barnaby River, in the Lower Provinces, close to the line of the Intercolonial. The latter was supposed to be fenced in so that cattle could not cross it, to destroy crops. The fence got pulled down, and stray cattle destroyed fifty dollars' worth of the Widow's produce.

It was really the cow and not the cow, but history knows the incident as Widow Murphy's cow. Mr. Mitchell had been asked to see justice done to the widow. He entered the office of the Premier, Mr. Mackenzie, who was also Minister of Public Works. The latter was sitting at his desk. He did not look up. Mr. Mitchell advanced and stated his business. Mr. Mackenzie, in a Scotch accent, which it would delight you to hear Mr. Mitchell mimic, said that it seemed to him everybody there was putting their cattle across the tracks that they might make claims against the government. He did not believe there was any foundation in half the claims. Mr. Mitchell insisted upon the justice of the case. The minister said he would not entertain it.

'You won't!' said Mr. Mitchell, doggedly.

'I won't,' said the Minister.

'Then I'll take it out of your hide. I'll show you that when Peter Mitchell takes up a case he never drops it till he wins his point.'

What happened? Mr. Mitchell blocked the business of the country. He made speeches by the hour. When it came to committee of supply he refused to allow the most trifling item to pass. The ministers were in despair. Then there came the million-dollar item for the militia. Mr. Mitchell made an hour speech against it. The minister of militia, the Hon. Mr. Vail, came over to the speaker and asked him, in the name of heaven, what he meant? Were they not good friends? Was he going to destroy the militia service? Was he going to make chaos of the public business? Don't you know what I'm doing?' Mr. Mitchell asked. Oh, no; he knew nothing about the case. Well, it was Widow Murphy's Cow. That cow must be paid for. The session would last till July but the cow would be paid for. He had promised to take it out of Mackenzie's hide, and he rather thought he was doing it. 'I'll fix that cow business,' said the minister desperately. There was a ministerial consultation. Mr. Vail returned. 'The cow will be paid for in the morning. Mr. Mitchell rose to a great height, announced the triumph to the House, and begged to apologize for the time he had taken up in the cause of justice. That ended the matter, but 'Hansard' has the record of Widow Murphy's cow.

Mr. Mitchell formed the Third Party in parliament, which was mockingly said to be contained under his own hat. It is the opinion of the old veteran that there is no room for a third party in our system. 'I tried it and it did not succeed. We can have only two parties. It is perhaps a pity, but there would be intolerable confusion with a third party. I never was plastic, you know; I had my own opinions and I suppose I suffered for them.'

'Is there not danger, through the impossibility of forming an independent party, of the slavery of the party machine? A man, whatever he feels, must vote with his party, or be lost.'

'That is the difficulty, no doubt; but he need not sacrifice his conscience; he can make protest; but he will not get place or power.'

Mr. Mitchell is inclined to think that the men nowadays are not quite so big (intellectually) as the men of the early Confederation times. The ability of Sir John Macdonald, Sir Charles Tupper, Sir

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Hector Langevin, Sir George Cartier, William Macdougall and George Brown and others reached a high point. Mackenzie, too, was an exceedingly able man. The men of to-day seemed to him to be of smaller calibre. Nor was parliamentary debating to-day equal to what it was in his younger days.

The Hon. Peter is alive to what is going on in the outside world, and he hastened, upon the arrival of General Agoncillo, to present him with a copy of the Canadian constitution—offering, at the same time, to act as intermediary between the Philippines and the American Government, in case there was possibility of an amicable settlement. This 'Sir Peter' strongly recommended, pointing out that the American people were the most progressive in the world, and that friendly relations with them would be in the best interests of the Philippines. He reminded General Agoncillo that while it might seem ridiculous for him to offer his good offices in the connection, he was sneered at thirty-three years ago when he took the stand he did in connection with Confederation—every one saying that he would never carry it; but those who sneered lived to confess that the work he then did built up the Dominion. 'Having, then, General, some experience in nation-building, you can command me in case I can ever be of service to your cause.' The Hon. Peter thinks this was rather neatly done, and stands ready to give the Filipinos pointers upon constitution-making when the propitious moment arrives.

The position he thinks, is perfectly congruous, seeing that whereas before Confederation we had an undeveloped country which had no markets, and which could not borrow, we have now, by the consummation of Confederation, which he brought about, a nation, with resources developed, the open markets of the world and the ability to borrow money upon the best terms. As all this was made possible by his act, in carrying Confederation in New Brunswick, the Hon. Peter thinks it would be quite in the nature of things that he should give wrinkles to the Filipinos.

'And now, Sir Peter, if you had your life to live over again, would you serve the public interest?' 'No, sir; I would serve my own interest. What does a man gain by serving his country?' 'Well, there is, first of all, the consciousness of having done his duty.'

'Bah.'

'And then it is something to be upon the public lip as a man who has done a great thing.'

'And what will that do for you? Will it keep you warm or comfortable?'

'But the patriot never expects reward.'

'No, but the best argument in the world, my friend, is a bank account. If I had devoted as much energy to my own private affairs as I have devoted to the public interests the material results would have been different.'

It was suggested that it might be a sweet thought to contemplate a monument after death.

'Look here, none of that stuff. What does a monument matter when you are dead? Does it do you any good? You are talking nonsense, you know. Still,' said Sir Peter, breaking into a smile, 'the people are remembering that I did a notable thing for the country when I carried Confederation.'

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