

The influence of imperialism on the Canadians history essay



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On July 1st, 1867 Canada began its long journey from a Dominion of four provinces to the nation we see today. Canada, at the time of Confederation was a small bicultural country within the much stronger British Empire. Perhaps Edward Blake, an early premier of Ontario said it best when he stated “ The future of Canada depends...upon the cultivation of a national spirit.”[1]As Canada grew before the Great War, Canadians and politicians alike began to question their country’s place within this much larger British Empire. Was Canada destined to remain essentially a colony of Britain[2], or earn its independence and become one of the great nation-states of the world? What did the Canadian national experience mean for both English Canadians and French Canadians? Imperialism, or a connection to the British Empire, threads its way through Canada’s early history of growth towards true nationhood. The effect of imperialism had a profound effect on the national experience on three levels: firstly on a national level with events occurring within Canada; secondly, externally through events that occurred outside of Canada; and thirdly, as a movement differing from the nationalistic ideas put forth by Henri Bourassa.

The early concepts of Anglo-Saxon superiority in respect to immigration as well as MacDonal’s National Policy were the beginnings of this imperialist movement. Shortly after Confederation, the Canada First Movement was launched. Although this was not at the time known as imperialism, the ideas of a superior Anglo-Saxon race were being introduced and the line between English and French concepts of nationalism was beginning to be drawn.

[3]The immigration movement, led by Clifford Sifton, strongly favoured the British and American immigrants and discriminated against the non-white

racism, using the famous “ head tax” to discriminate against certain non-white immigrants.[4] Many English-Canadians wanted to assimilate the new foreigners and create one national school system, which would be taught in English only.[5] John A. MacDonalD’s bigger picture “ national policy” started to set the stage for imperialism in Canada through the three tiered approach of tariffs, railway construction, and settlement of the western portion of Canada.[6] There is much debate about whether or not the national policy truly helped to build the nation, but according to Donald Creighton, “...the national policy...was an essential component of Canada’s growth as an independent nation.”[7] In the election of 1891, a contentious issue was that of ‘ free’ trade with the United States, which was supported at some level by the Liberal party. MacDonalD opposed any type of free trade, fearing it would lead to some type of political union with the United States. His famous statement “ A British subject I was born, and a British subject I will die,” shows his commitment to Britain which helps to lead to the rise of the imperialist movement within Canada.[8]

As the imperialist movement took hold in the latter part of the 19th century, Canada was trying to establish its identity as a nation and the ideas of nationalism were forming. Within Canada, the economy was depressed, the United States threat was still present, and racism was taking hold.[9] The execution of Riel in 1885 also created a cultural crisis, splitting Canada’s English and French populations.[10] Canada needed some direction towards nationhood and as Carl Berger stated imperialism was “...one variety of Canadian nationalism.”[11] The imperialists of the time saw the “...empire as a vehicle within which Canada could achieve mature nationhood.”[12] British

Canadian Nationalism did allow Canada to become more independent within the empire, and to maintain its strong British ties.[13] Groups of imperialists were forming at the time, such as the Imperial Federation League (IFL) and Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE). They were advocating for closer ties with Britain and the overall Empire. This concept of imperial unity was so compelling to some leaders of the time that they believed that Canada "...could grow and survive only if [Canada] held fast to the imperial connection." [14] Other groups lent their support to imperialism, such as the descendants of the United Empire Loyalists and members of the Orange Order and the Equal Rights movement.[15]

The British connection in Canada was felt by ordinary citizens as well as well as the elite and the politicians, which was shown by the enthusiasm for the royal couple's visit in 1901 and the support of Empire day. The royal visit allowed Canadians to see the royal family in person and the enthusiasm for them was quite remarkable, showing Canadians support for the Empire as a whole.[16] The support for this visit was not only by the local populace, but also by the upper levels of parliament. The Prime Minister and his ministers were very present through the entire tour, also showing their support and advocating the continuation of close ties with Britain.[17] A similar effect and movement towards imperialism was caused by Queen Victoria's 60 year anniversary as ruling monarch. A year after this event, several provinces created Empire Day, showing patriotism at the public school level and the dedication to the monarchy.[18]

The second effect of imperialism on the national experience in Canada was due mainly to events that occurred outside of Canada. Canada's military <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-imperialism-on-the-canadians-history-essay/>

participation in the wars of the Empire added to the imperialist movement before the Great War. In the late 19th century, Britain became involved in the South African War known as the Boer War. According to Carl Berger “The Boer War was the decisive event in the history of Canadian imperialism.”[19]The war was not going well for Britain, so the British Empire sought out the help of their dominions to aid them.[20]Imperialists and other English Canadians saw this as Canada’s chance to help out the empire in its time of need.[21]Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier agreed that British values of justice and liberty were to be admired; yet he was not a supporter of imperialism.[22]Laurier was forced to send soldiers to the war, as a result of public interest, but neither the imperialist nor the French nationalist side thought that he did the right thing by sending a volunteer force.[23]Similarly, in the 1908 Naval Crisis, when Britain was feeling the threat from Germany in the oceans, Laurier did introduce the Naval Service Bill, but this did not meet the demands of the conservative imperialists or the nationalists of Quebec.[24]

Thirdly, not all people supported imperialism, and it is this counter-view of Nationalism by Henri Bourassa that also plays a role in establishing the imperialist movement. When the call came out for Canada to help out in the Boer war, English Canada was mainly in favour, but most of French Canada opposed the participation, calling it “ British aggression.”[25]This concept of imperialism in English Canada helped Henri Bourassa to oppose imperialism and create his own brand of Nationalism, which included both French and English. Bourassa did not want Canada to leave the British Empire, but he saw Canada’s destiny as one of an autonomous nation within the British

Empire.[26]Bourassa believed in liberal principles, and wanted Canada to form her own foreign policies.[27]Conceptually, the British Empire for Bourassa was “hateful” and he believed that the British Empire was being used to further all aspects of the Anglo-Saxon race, which did not leave any place for the French Canadians.[28]Bourassa opposed both Canada’s involvement in the Boer War in 1899 and the naval involvement of 1908. Bourassa went against Laurier and in fact, resigned his seat in the House as a protest measure, believing that sending any troops was “setting a precedent” for upcoming wars within the Empire.[29]

Imperialism played a key role in establishing Canada’s role as a nation early in its history. The Canada First Movement and the National Policy set the stage for Canada to assume its new identity as a new world power and helped lead the way to the imperialist movement in the 1880’s and 1890’s. Strong movements for an Anglo-Saxon dominated race led to Canada trying to recruit immigrants of a certain class and race. Strong ties still remained to the British Empire, as was shown by the people of Canada in their dedication to the monarchy as well as supporting Britain’s war efforts. Outside of Canada, the power of the British Empire was growing; in fact in 1899 the British Empire contained one-quarter of the earth’s people.[30]Imperialists of the time saw the value in being a part of this large Empire. The leaders within the Empire felt it was their duty to help spread both their Christian ideology as well as their own British virtues around the world.[31]Although not an imperialist, Henri Bourassa also saw Canada’s potential to be a strong power in the world. He saw that occurring through Canadian self-government within the massive British Empire and French and English Canada existing

together. As Canada moved forward into the Great War, imperialism was still a strong force in Canada, as she began to grow into a powerful nation-state of her own.

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