Street Gospels: Political Cartoons and Their Role in

Canadian Democracy [1]

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By Ethan Georges Rabidoux

"Stop them damn pictures! I don't care so much what the papers write about me.

My constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures." [2]

Abstract

Before Photography became a critical player in the world of journalism, the visual arose in the early 19th century and held sway until the invention of celluloid film. Most of the journals which published visuals were weeklies and saw their roles as social critics or as enhancements to the daily press which did not develop the technology for publishing visuals until well into the 20th century. Like their daily counterparts, visual journalists played a key role in helping to construct democracy in North America and the world. This is just one of those tales.

William Magear Tweed understood the power of a cartoonist's pen. Tweed was a wealthy New York politician during the 1870s and a character in the 2002 movie *Gangs of New York*. He was also the target of vociferous attacks by Bavarian born cartoonist Thomas Nast when he made this statement.

WHO STOLE THE PEOPLE'S MONEY? — DO TELL. N.Y.TIMES.   'TWAS HIM
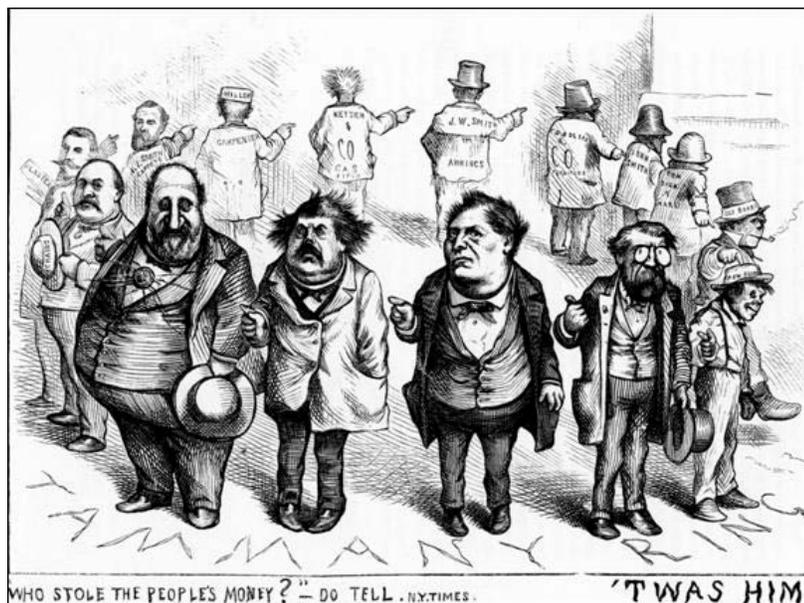
Tweed and his acolytes at Tammany Hall stole between $40 million and $200 million tax dollars in their day (between $1.5 billion and $8 billion today when adjusted for inflation). [3] The New York Times ran a story detailing their graft. The public never caught on until Thomas Nast's political cartoons brought the information to the commoners in a language they understood. Tweed was convicted of larceny and spent the rest of his days in prison. It could not have been done without Nast's work. The powerful were brought to their knees when their corruption was exposed through cartoons.

Canada's first original political cartoonist, John Wilson Bengough was heavily influenced by Nast. [4] In his day, Bengough savaged Canadian leaders with political drawings and started a tradition of satiric artistic commentary that continues to this day.

Political cartoons in Canada have served as the outlet for the working folk of our country to strike back at the elite and to extract a pound of flesh from the judges, politicians and industrialists who held the power. The nineteenth century French art critic Jules François Felix Fleury-Husson, under the pen name Champfleury, described caricature as "le cri des citoyens." [5] He was right. Canadian political cartoons gave and continue to give a voice to regular citizens against the powerful.

William Tweed's observation about the power of political cartoons is supported by Professor David Spencer at the University of Western Ontario. According to Spencer, good artists in Tweed's era were invaluable because they could "communicate messages to even the partially literate... that would be missed in the columns of wordy dialogue that shared the pages." [6]

This was especially important in early Victorian Canada when literacy rates were low. It was in this environment that Canadian cartooning developed its form. Four recurring themes emerged: Canada/US relations, French/English relations, federal/provincial relations and corruption among the powerful. Through it all, cartoonists provided scathing and relentless criticism of those involved at the highest levels of these disputes. While historians and academics wrote volumes of in-depth, erudite and often boring analysis of the issues, cartoonists portrayed, "the situation as it appeared to a gifted and irreverent man in the street." [7]

Spencer notes that "Victorians used their cartoons to synthesize otherwise complex issues into a visual interpretation." [8] This tradition continues in Canada today. Unique to Canada is the transcendent nature of the issues lampooned by our cartoonists. Usually, a political cartoon must either be viewed in the era to be understood or viewed by someone knowledgeable of that era. In Canada, the work of early cartoonists remains timely and important to understanding ongoing issues like Quebec nationalism and Canadian autonomy. For this reason, Canadian political cartoons have achieved a level of timelessness unequalled in the United States, Great Britain and elsewhere. They have also enriched our democratic heritage through the creation of an independent, non-partisan media.

John Henry Walker pioneered political cartooning in Canada in 1849 with his magazine *Punch in Canada*.

The magazine emerged at a time when newspapers were mere organs of the various

political parties. *Punch in Canada* refused to adopt any partisan allegiance and it

provided savage commentary on Canada/US relations. The magazine did not last long

but its legacy was huge:

> *"The eighteen-year-old Walker took the first of many steps by himself
> and others throughout the Victorian Age to separate journalism from the
> rabid political party partisanship that afflicted much of the press in
> nineteenth-century Canada. In effect, Canada's Victorian political
> cartoonists were the nation's first independent editorialists."* [9]

Walker was not a fan of the United States. His drawings reflect the early

fears amongst Victorian Canada of American annexation. Before *Punch in*

Canada, journalists were obligated to choose a political allegiance. Cartoonists

focused on Canada/US relations because it transcended partisan lines.

Walker was the first to depict the United States as Uncle Sam (otherwise known as Brother/Cousin Jonathan) in Canadian political cartoons. The portrayal was never flattering. Uncle Sam was drawn as a slippery, greedy, conniving egomaniac hell bent on deflowering (annexing) a young, virginal Miss Canada. Walker, as editor of *Diogenes*, published one such cartoon in 1869 showing Mrs. Britannia chastising Miss Canada for giving her cousin encouragement that they could ever be united. Miss Canada vehemently denies the charge while a shady Cousin Jonathan, leaning against a post behind her, picks his teeth with a knife. [10]

This portrayal of the United States lingers on. The history of Canadian political cartoons is littered with examples of the symbiotic relationship between the pure Miss Canada and the dirty Uncle Sam.

During the free trade debate in 1987, Aislin (Terry Mosher) published a cartoon in the Montreal Gazette. It had three panels. The first two showed Sir John A. Macdonald and John Diefenbaker standing protectively in front of two prim, proper young ladies each dressed immaculately for the different periods both men held office. Both Prime Ministers declared defiantly, "Canada is not for sale!" The third panel showed Brian Mulroney dressed like a pimp behind a young female prostitute ordering her to "get busy." The caption reads, "Two Great Canadians...Macdonald, Diefenbaker ... and Mulroney." [11]

Two cartoons, separated by 118 years, tackling the same issue with the same attitude. Canada was sweet and innocent while the USA was some kind

of dirty fornicator; the implication being that political or economic cooperation with America would defile Canada.

Neither cartoon provides a thorough examination of Canada/US relations or the merits and drawbacks of free trade. However, both provide a humourous, simple critique of the establishment that could be immediately understood by every citizen.

John Wilson Bengough is considered Canada's first distinctly Canadian political cartoonist. Bengough built his entire career by attacking Sir John A. Macdonald with his satirical magazine *Grip*. This established the master pattern of Canadian politics. Every Prime Minister since Macdonald has had a chief antagonist amongst the country's cartoonists.

Sir Wilfrid Laurier endured Henri Julien, Mackenzie King faced Arch Dale, John Diefenbaker contended with Duncan Macpherson, Pierre Trudeau with Jean-Pierre Girerd, Terry Mosher savaged Brian Mulroney, and Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin were the target of Serge Chapleau's wrath. [12]

One of Bengough's most famous political cartoons shows Macdonald standing on two horses moving in opposite directions. One has "French" written on it, the other, "English." Sitting on Macdonald's shoulders is a brooding Louis Riel. The caption reads, "A Riel Ugly Position." It is dated August 29th, 1885.

· GRIP ·   Saturday, 29th August, 1885.

A RIEL UGLY POSITION.
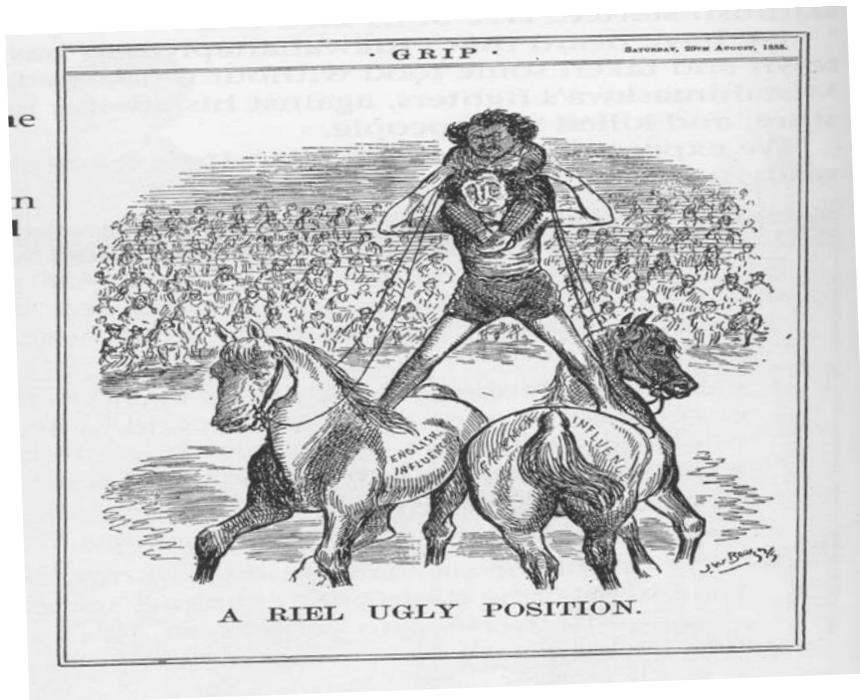
This cartoon has proven immortal in the annals of Canadian history. Every Prime Minister since Macdonald has had to keep the French and the English happy while simultaneously dealing with aboriginal issues. This cartoon captures the ongoing balancing act required of Canadian leaders. If any citizens today were to be shown this cartoon, they might not know all the details or even all the characters, but they would understand the message it conveys.

Attacking corruption in high places has endured as another recurring theme in Canadian political cartoons. Bengough was a relentless thorn in Macdonald's side over corruption. Macdonald's most extravagant scandal was the Pacific Railway scandal of 1873. He was caught lining the pockets of Tory supporters with lucrative contracts to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. Bengough published another famous cartoon of then Liberal leader Sir

Alexander Mackenzie in an aggressive, accusatory pose while the Prime

Minister shrugged with indifference. [13]

Some things never change. In 2004, the Martin government called an

inquiry into the sponsorship scandal after it was revealed the Chrétien

government lined the pockets of Liberal supporters with tax dollars; they then

donated money back to the Liberal Party of Canada. Same basic scandal,

different political party, separated by 130 years. The investigation cost

taxpayers another $80 million in addition to what was lost by the actual

scandal. [14] Graham Harrop's cartoon in the Vancouver Sun on February 24,

2005 depicted an inquiry into the Gomery Commission due to its hefty costs.[15]

When politicians showed apathy to revelations of corruption, cartoonists

attacked them. When they investigated revelations of corruption, cartoonists

attacked them. It was the corruption that mattered because regular citizens had

to pay for it all through their taxes.

After Macdonald's death and the rise of Laurier to power, Bengough lost his relevance. He printed flattering images of Laurier charming Brother Jonathan [16] and creating harmony between Catholics and Protestants. [17] Bengough's career suggests that cartoonists cannot do propaganda. They are antagonistic by nature. Cartoonists are attackers, not defenders. They thrive during chaos and crisis but they do not advance solutions. The cartoonist's role is to expose political differences and social conflicts, not to fix them. [18]

Federal/provincial relations represent the final perennial issue for Canadian cartoonists. This predates Confederation. Jean-Baptiste Coté depicted Confederation as a seven-headed snake in 1864 in Quebec's first comic journal *La Scie-The Saw*. [19] Duncan Macpherson mocked Pierre Elliott Trudeau 104 years later in the Toronto Star. He drew Trudeau playing the cello while ten orchestra conductors (the ten provincial Premiers) each tried to lead from their own music book. [20]

Macpherson, widely regarded as Canada's all-time finest political cartoonist, lampooned everything from Dalton Camp's insurrection against John Diefenbaker [21] to René Lévesque and the Parti Quebecois' economic policy. [22] He described his own role as that of a heckler:

> *"Macpherson's initial approach to a political event is instinctive rather than intellectual, and aggressively critical. "You're a heckler, basically," he has said. "It's the same as the old political meetings when you'd hire a couple of fellows to go into the hall and raise hell." [23]*

Raising hell is a good summary of the role Canadian cartoonists have played in our democracy. As Mark Twain has written, "a discriminating irreverence is the creator and protector of human liberty."[24] In that sense, political cartoonists have expanded the

boundaries of freedom by attacking orthodoxy, elitism and corruption in a way easily understood by the commoners of society. They satirized issues specific to Canadians like Canada/US relations, French/English relations and the ever acrimonious tensions between Ottawa and the provinces.

Cartoonists were also average citizens. William Murrell wrote that of all the artists, the cartoonist is closest to the people. They were drawn from ordinary levels of society, rarely highly educated and earning salaries that would possibly grant them entrance to the middle class. [25] They could draw their pictures on behalf of regular citizens because Canadian cartoonists were drawn from these ranks.

Perhaps there is another reason why political cartoons have prospered in Canada, and will continue to do so in the digital age. George Munro Grant was the Principal of Queen's University from 1877 until 1902. In 1886, Grant wrote the preface for J.W. Bengough's *Caricature History of Canadian Politics.* He wrote; "*Grip* (Bengough's magazine) not only hits the nail on the head but sometimes hits like a blacksmith – and we belong to a race that loves to see a blow well struck." [26]

We do love a blow well struck, especially when it is delivered by the little guy to his rulers. There have never been more than two dozen cartoonists employed in Canada at any given time.[27] This is already changing. The rise of the Internet and citizen journalism has empowered the rabble to circulate information beyond mainstream media conglomerates. Canadian political cartoons will continue to flourish as the doors open for greater involvement from the gifted and irreverent man in the street. Tomorrow's cartoonists will follow the example of their predecessors; they will

critique the establishment with simple yet brilliant pictures – but there will be more of

them.

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[1] My title was inspired by Bedouin Soundclash's 2007 album of the same name.

[2] Bruce Jackson, "Lazio's Finger," *Artvoice*. November 2nd, 2000.
http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~bjackson/lazio.html

[3] Excerpt from "Boss Tweed: The Rise and Fall of the Corrupt Pol who Conceived the Soul of Modern New York" by Kenneth Ackerman. An interview with the author was published in *The Gotham Gazette*. July 4th, 2005. http://www.gothamgazette.com/article//20050704/202/1467

[4] Peter Desbarats and Terry Mosher. *The Hecklers: A History of Canadian Political Cartooning and a Cartoonists' History of Canada.* (McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1979), 31.

[5] Jean-François Nadeau. "Les charges de la caricature, d'hier à aujourd'hui," *Le Devoir*, February 11-12, 2006. http://pages.usherbrooke.ca/sodrus/pdf/pdf_dossiers/Devoir%20caricatures%20Nadeau.pdf

[6] David R. Spencer. *The Yellow Journalism: The Press and America's Emergence As A World Power.* (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 206.

[7] Desbarats and Mosher, 17.

[8] David R. Spencer, "The "Art" of Politics: Victorian Canadian Political Cartoonists Look At Canada-U.S. Relations," (2003) http://facstaff.elon.edu/dcopeland/mhm/mhmjour6-1.pdf

[9] Spencer. "The "Art" of Politics," 5.

[10] Diogenes. June 18, 1869.

[11] J.L. Granatstein and Norman Hillmer. *Prime Ministers: Ranking Canada's Leaders.* (HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. 1999), 199.

[12] The Canadian Encyclopedia website:
http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=a1ARTA0001442

[13] J.W. Bengough/Library and Archives Canada/C-78604

[14] http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2005/02/20/gomery-budget050220.html

[15] Graham Harrop. *Vancouver Sun*. February 24, 2005. http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Cartoons?CartoonID=4461

[16] Bengough/National Archives of Canada C-17201

[17] Bengough/Globe/September 1st, 1897

[18] Desbarats and Mosher. *The Hecklers*, Pg 18.

[19] Jean-Baptiste Cote/La Scie/December 2, 1864.

[20] Duncan Macpherson. *The Toronto Star.* February 14th, 1978.

[21] Ibid. November 17th, 1966.

[22] Ibid. *The Toronto Star.* February 3, 1977.

[23] Desbarats and Mosher. *The Hecklers*, 149.

[24] http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1820144,00.html

[25] Ibid, 17.

[26] J.W. Bengough. *Caricature History of Canadian Politics*. (The Grip Printing and Publishing Co. 1886), 7. http://www.archive.org/stream/cihm_07442#page/n9/mode/2up (accessed February 28, 2010).

[27] The Canadian Encyclopedia Website:
http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=a1ARTA0001442

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In contrast with the political party systems of many nations, Canadian political parties at the federal level are often only loosely connected with parties at the provincial level, despite having similar names and policy positions. One exception is the New Democratic Party, which is organizationally integrated with most of its provincial counterparts including a shared membership. These are all of the political parties registered with Elections Canada as of May 2019. Power to the People. Democracy in political cartoons. A few lines is all it takes for cartoonists from around the world to illustrate the state of democracy in their countries. Even in places where the situation is serious, they prove they haven't lost their sense of humor. Political confusion. For German cartoonist Roger Schmidt, the world has turned upside-down. The Left Party wants to slash social benefits, the conservatives are in favor of an energy transition. Democracy in Canada. Have a question about Canadian democracy? This section will help you learn more about Canada's democratic institutions, how they function and why. The House of Commons plays an important role in Canada's system of government: it debates issues, votes on the passage of laws and ensures the Government is held accountable. Members of Parliament (MPs) sit in the House of Commons to represent their local communities, known as electoral districts, also commonly referred to as constituencies or ridings. Political parties help Canadians understand the views of local candidates and their elected MP by presenting voters with a set of priorities the political party will pursue, known as a "platform".