

Tracing Race and Power Through Canadian Prime Ministers Part One: English Exceptionalism

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Canada is falling behind. There continues to be no racial diversity in Canada's top political position, Prime Minister, despite being a nation known for embracing multiculturalism. Regardless of its reputation, Canada, from the very beginning, has thrived through the maintenance of racial hierarchies of power, and the Prime Minister's role is to maintain the interests of white, but mostly historical French and English Canadians. This first part of a two-part paper is a result of an inquisitive position directed at the lack of diversity in Canada's top electoral positions and asks how racial orders contribute to the persistent whiteness of Canadian Prime Ministers – and what are the pathways to power in Canada? The paper uses a simple historical narrative to present a straightforward argument which traces racial orders in Canada since the British's successful conquest of British North America in the eighteenth century and argues it was British, and then white ideas of superiority that drove mostly white men of British descent from Ontario, and more recently French men from Quebec, to ascend to Canada's most powerful political position.

Simply, British and Ontario exceptionalism, followed by white supremacy, layered atop each other, shifting forms through time. This shift in white exceptionalism is the unique contribution the paper makes in racial discussions of Canadian power and pushes back against the assumption that the lack of Prime Ministerial diversity is owed to the overwhelmingly white population Canada has enjoyed since the conquest of French Canada. White dominance of federal political leadership has its roots in racially charged ideas and institutions in pre-confederation Canada and has resulted in white Canadians entrusting nation stewardship to white males almost exclusively.

Using Thompson's (2020) *Race, the Canadian Census, and Interactive Political Development* as a guide, this essay takes a journey back in time to understand how race has

influenced the composition of Canadian Prime Ministers. Theoretically, this paper borrows the understanding of racial orders as the adoption and adaption of “racial concepts, commitments, and aims” to bind coalitions of institutions and actors and “structure governing institutions that express and serve the interests of their architects” (King and Smith 2005, 75). Using this approach, the paper executes a textual analysis of Canadian political science literature to uncover and extract mechanisms and causal links between race and Canadian Prime Ministers. The first section of the paper shows how racial orders structured political life in Canada and were underwritten by British racial exceptionalism. Then I argue British exceptionalism was layered atop of Ontario political dominance through the concentration of historical English and French in the regions of Ontario and Quebec, respectively, mass Anglo-based immigration, the Anglo-based unification of the Confederation project, and other economic-based forces. The third part of the argument shows how the unification of whiteness in Canada, the third layer of governing authority presented in this narrative, was largely a response to French Canadians’ racial position in the Canadian order being threatened by egalitarian and liberal values of equality – but only after a long period of discrimination and racism of French Canadians by the English. The paper concludes with some troubling thoughts on Canada’s racial order and the prospects of a racialized Canadian Prime Minister.

English Exceptionalism

Pre-Confederation leadership in Canada worked to maintain British superiority and keep their British counterpart content. Eighteenth century North America was a time of imperial prosperity, especially for the British. Despite having to deal with their American counterparts, Britain enjoyed political and economic success in Canada. Not only were communities rapidly expanding all throughout North America, but the staples industries, including the slave trade,

were lining colonial pockets well into the next century (Mackintosh 1993, 5). As one may infer from the loyalist moniker, Canada stayed British by being a valuable resource and “exporter of staples to a progressively industrialized mother country” (Innis 1993, 17). Race would not play a role in the selection of a colonial governor for example, but the level of racial domination in any one colony would presumably be a factor in one’s ability to maintain their political position. In addition to its revenues and military might, the successful view of a colony was partly maintained by how British the population was relative to their non-British counterparts (Thompson 2020, 53). Despite any claims to an unfulfilled conquest, British Canada, from the very beginning, has been about maintaining racial hierarchies where British Canadians sit atop of the structure (Banting and Thompson 2021, 877). Through these racial orders, Britain and other imperial states were able to not only extract wealth and resources, but also political and territorial might.

British superiority was in one sense solidified but also complicated after the Treaty of Paris 1763. The treaty and the subsequent Quebec Act 1774 served as the critical juncture that signaled an acquiescence to power-sharing with French Canadians, as it allowed the Catholic Church to continue its economic and political activities in Canada (Siegfried 2014, 20). This quasi-autonomy allowed the French in Canada to maintain and increase their political standing through the Church’s iron grip on the public and private life of French Canadians (Siegfried 2014, 35). In essence, by allowing the church to continue its activities, the British gave up the opportunity to rule French Canadians fully. There may have been a legal framework which gave Britain control of the land, but the Church controlled the French in Canada. And the French increased their political influence by simply reproducing at a higher rate than their English counterparts. Nevertheless, Canada was British North America, a colonial extension of the

British empire, and Canadian top political leaders, presumably all British, intended to keep Canada British (Porter 1965, 62). It should be no surprise, then, that the first Prime Minister of Canada was a British enthusiast and darling of Great Britain.

In a lot of ways, Canadian politics in the nineteenth century was driven by economic forces, and as such, political and economic elites were synonymous. The economic and spatial frustrations which defined Canada in the first half of nineteenth century (Mackintosh 1993, 11), are the same conditions which allowed for Canadian political elites to emerge. The need for a western expansion drove the concretization of Canada's railway, financial, and insurance industries, in addition to the introduction of responsible government (Mackintosh 1993, 11), and created the need for political leadership to bring all the components together. Canada was "passing out of the colonial stage" (Mackintosh 1993, 11), which allowed for the alignment of Canadian political, economic, and legal interests. From this perspective, one can easily see how a savvy lawyer like Macdonald (Library of Parliament n.d.), with investment ties in many blossoming Canadian industries (Stevenson 2009, 24), benefitted from the Canadian condition and rose to political prominence.

Balancing British superiority and power-sharing with the French carried right over into the pre-confederation decades and the Act of Union of 1840. Not only was this a union of the legal and political entities of what is now Ontario and Quebec, but it was also a political marriage of British and French Canadians (Vipond 2017, 85). The British concentrated in Ontario and the French in Quebec, but their destinies forever linked through this piece of legislation. Similar to 1774, French Canadians, represented via Quebec, retained their ability to practice civil law, in addition to the recognition of the French language for the first time (Stevenson 2009, 21). This is also the period when political power in Canada officially was

transferred from the colonial governors to Parliamentarians (Stevenson 2009, 25). Furthermore, political leadership was shared between the two provinces for a quarter of a century (Vipond 2017, 85 – 86), through a complex “double majority” which featured governments headed by two party leaders – one from Quebec and the other from Ontario – and an attorney general for each legal system (Stevenson 2009, 22). By this point, French Canadians enjoyed a 50-year period of political integration into British Canada and had solidified the French race in Canada as politically Canadian.

But British dominance was always lurking and refused to be outdone. Over the next 20 years, through mainly immigration, the British population grew dramatically and surpassed the French population significantly, providing the necessary conditions for constitutional reform (Vipond 2017, 86), setting up Ontario, hence British Canada, to take the principal position of power in Canada – a luxury Ontario has yet to concede. Though, it wasn't just the increased population which created this political shift. In many ways, the rising economic prominence of Toronto as a financial and manufacturing epicenter outgrew their demographic and political limitations by looking towards western expansion (Stevenson 2009, 26). Ultimately though, it still took a political coalition of the conservative party leaders in Ontario and Quebec, Macdonald, and Cartier, along with the George Brown Ontario Liberals, to break the political deadlock at the time and push toward Confederation (Vipond 2017, 88). Despite Brown's even deeper connection to Toronto business, it was Macdonald's lack of regional cleavages which precipitated his political success (Stevenson 2009, 26). For example, it was through Macdonald's political connection to Cartier and Galt, along with one of his closest friends and future Prime Minister, Charles Tupper's economic interests in the Nova Scotia coal industry, which created the personal connection it would take to steward Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick into

a union (Stevenson 2009, 27). And it is through his successful career and connections to London and other money players which allowed Macdonald to bring all these elements together and gave him the ability to fulfill all three requirements of Canadian leadership: make London happy, keep Quebecers happy, and most importantly be an Ontarian and of British decent.

Ontario Assumes Dominant Political Role

The race question and nation-building defined the next period in Canadian politics, but British leadership maintained their dominance over the First Ministership with the Laurier's election proving to be the next turning point. In the pre-confederation years, British dominance in the political arena, now fully participating in parliamentary-style and responsible government, transformed into Ontario dominance. Once confederation was crystalized in 1867 one could see both dynamics of British dominance and power-sharing with French Canadians on full display. The British were still dominant politically in the post confederation years largely because Macdonald and other English political elites shared a vision of Canada that would see Britain dominant Ottawa, and Ottawa dominant the provinces (Stevenson 2009, 30). From a power-sharing perspective, Quebec was already solidified as a founding race of Canada, which the BNA Act affirmed. From 1840 onwards, French Canadians' political prominence in Canada would not be questioned again for a long time.

Though, one can surmise the inclusion of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in the confederation deal and the massive amounts of British immigration into Canada around the same time, not to mention Macdonald's mission to open the west, was a conscious strategy to maintain British dominance in Canada through sheer numbers alone. As mentioned earlier, British colonial success was underlined by how British the population was. So, despite the British Canadian preference to control Canada alongside French Canadians, the legacy of racial orders

and hierarchies was still front and centre in Canadian politics. Specifically, though, it was Macdonald's relentless federal vision, riddled with motives for money and power, which allowed for the necessary and sufficient conditions for continued British, Ontario, and Ottawa dominance (see Stevenson 2009, 32 –36). This truth becomes evident when one notices that all Prime Ministers between Macdonald and Laurier were of British descent.

The casual Canadian politics reader would likely assume the monumental victory for Sir Wilfrid Laurier ushered in a renewed era of power sharing between the English Ontarians and the French Quebecers, but a closer look reveals a more complicated story. Laurier was a victory for French Canada, to be sure. His perceived Manitoba School victory was largely viewed as something only Laurier could have delivered for French Canadians (Siegfried 2014, 74). But it wasn't as if Laurier was a champion for French Canadians or even a French nationalist. Laurier's victory was carried by overwhelming support in Quebec and the rest of the Dominion (Siegfried 2014, 47). Additionally, Laurier's political values, such as taking up Canada's nation-building exercise, and position towards Britain was similar to Macdonald's. Political commenters have highlighted the "unwavering commitment" to Macdonald's National Policy in all Prime Ministers to come after him, including Laurier (Panitch 2019, 17). Even when Laurier rejected further British imperial political influence (Panitch 2019, 18), one can find no substantive difference in his position and the one Macdonald would have taken. The same can be said regarding business policy in that approximately 50-year span starting in the 1860s (Panitch 2019. 19 – 20). From this view, one can see how the French Catholic Laurier would be a leader representative of Quebec, but also how Laurier fit the mold of what the rest of Canada expected from their nation's leader.

The Rise of Quebecois

After Laurier died in office in 1911, it would be another 37 years before a French Canadian became Prime Minister again. The four Prime Ministers between them were either born in Ontario or in Atlantic Canada (Library of Parliament n.d.). So, in many ways, Laurier's government can be viewed as either a blip in British dominance or in alignment with it. It is, then, perhaps more appropriate to view Prime Minister St-Laurent, who served as PM for 8.5 years, as the turning point for power-sharing. After St-Laurent left office in 1957, it would take only 11 years and two Prime Ministers before Trudeau rose to the position. Since then, Quebec has produced some of the most prominent Prime Ministers in Canadian history, including both Trudeaus, Brian Mulroney, and Jean Chretien – not to mention Paul Martin ran in Quebec ridings despite being born in Windsor.

But what are the most salient causal explanations of why the French were kept from nation leadership? One of the first and most obvious reasons is based on the resistance of French Canada to be in political union with English Canada, along with a sense of jealousy between the French and British (Siegfried 2014, 113). The French jealousy was more of an outgrowth from the animosities that festered because of the conquest. Because they lost, there was always an underlying resistance to fully immerse themselves with British Canadians. From the English side, their jealousy is rooted in British exceptionalism and the desire to dominate the French. Actively resisting "French Domination," Ontario turned its back on Laurier because French Canadians did not prove to be pure enough (Siegfried 2014, 207). To be clear, French Canadians were not excluding themselves from politics or elections, but there was a clear desire to be their own nation – which manifested in the all-too-famous 1980 and 1995 Quebec referendums. So,

the absence of French Prime Ministers can be seen as Quebec's disinterest in federal politics as much as English Canada's dominance in it.

As I mentioned earlier, the post-confederation period was also defined by nation-building and identity formation exercises. Although strongly British, and French in Quebec, Canadian political elites were focused on creating new and separate identities for Canadians (Thompson 2020, 45). From the English Canada side, they welcomed French Canadians as a founding race, while suppressing all other races (Thompson 2020, 61). And from the French Canada side, they retreated inside their province focused on keeping the French nation inside of Canada powerful and French (Siegfried 2014, 14), including the manipulation of census questions (Thompson 2020, 67). Regardless of this difference, both sides viewed themselves as biologically white and superior to all other races, but also superior to their French and English counterparts. English Canadians showed their superiority through political leadership dominance and a strict commitment to building up the nation of Canada. French Canadians showed their superiority through the iron grip they displayed in Quebec and towards the social lives of French Canadians.

It can also be said that racism and discrimination played an important role in producing the composition of Prime Ministers before the end of World War Two. The early twentieth century saw the rise of biological racism, which unified many white races and placed them above all non-white races, but there was still a sense of British superiority and exceptionalism that made discrimination against French Canadians a prominent feature of Canadian society. One Quebec nationalist even went as far to describe French Canadians as the white negros of America (Thompson 2020, 59), because of the perceived mistreatment and political disenfranchisement of French Canadians in British Canada. Furthermore, during this time of whiteness amalgamation, French Canada maintained a strong position in maintaining their

interests through racial hierarchies. In 1946, debates about citizenship status and census measurements saw French Canadians riled up and passionate about not watering down their French identity by replacing it with a Canadian one – which would have invited significant changes to the Canadian racial order (Thompson 2020, 67). A 1959 French article claimed that, once again, the French are being led to sacrifice their interests for the sake of national unity. The citizenship and census question of the 1940s seemed to have woken up French Canadian political elites as the next year after the 1946 debates, St-Laurent was ushered in as Prime Minister. This unification of whiteness in Canada seems to have played a role in transforming British Ontarian dominance of Prime Ministerships into white dominance of Canada's top electoral position. But more than that. It seems as if the threat to French interests outside of the traditional British conqueror forced French Canada to participate in federal politics and the top political roles more seriously.

Conclusion

From then on, the Prime Minister's role in Canada has been to maintain the interests of white, but mostly French and English Canadians. White Canadians now view other white Canadians as the only race fit enough to serve the interests of white Canadians. From what started out as British racial supremacy expressed through militarism and hard power, emerged English dominance in daily parliamentary politics, followed by the solidification of whiteness and the rise of Quebecois national leadership. If one is to really believe that history matters, then it is surely the choices and conditions present since the conquest which predicated the pathways to national leadership in Canada. Ultimately, racial orders in the form of colonialism and based on extractivism and British exceptionalism provided the institutional foundation to keep white Canadians atop social and political structures. Resulting conditions emerging from the conquest

would have provided sufficient explanations for white Prime Ministers if none were French, which is clearly not the case. It is, in fact, the acquiescence to the Catholic Church in the 1770s and the post-war debates of identity formation in the 1940s which provided the sufficient conditions for governing authority to shift from purely English dominance to white English and French superiority. Perhaps, with deeper insight, the concretization of whiteness in Canada was a rejection to a counterfactual scenario leading to the dismantlement of Canada's racial order and French Canada's prominent place in it. The possibility is deepened when we consider that the "institutionalization of implicit racial bias" in Canada is self-perpetuating and "designed to advantage white populations and disadvantage non-white populations" (Banting and Thompson 2021, 875 – 876). The foundations of Confederation are laced with political and racial elitism and the unification of whiteness in Canada should not be seen as anything different.

In 2021, Leslyn Lewis, a Black woman and successful Scarborough lawyer, unsuccessfully ran in the Conservative Party of Canada leadership race for the second time in as many years. One obvious reaction to this story is: of course, she didn't win, she's Black and doesn't know French. But despite being Black and finishing a distant third, an argument, based on the logic of this essay, can be made she was only in the race because of her platform, which would have arguably benefited white Canadians more than any other race in Canada. Canadian racial orders are not simply structures of whiteness, it's the idea that whiteness is exceptional and white interests are economically, socially, and politically superior. In the end, despite her right-leaning populist platform, Lewis could not be trusted to secure white Conservative interests – a role generally reserved for white men. While Canada's racial order is in place, prospects for a racialized Prime Minister are virtually non-existent.

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