HENRI BOURASSA —
CATHOLIC CRITIC

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A Rising Young Politician

When Henri Bourassa entered Parliament in August 1896 as a Liberal member from the constituency of Labelle in western Quebec, he seemed destined for a promising political career. His family was one of the most prominent in the province—his father a well known painter—his grandfather, Louis Joseph Papineau, a celebrated folk hero of the 1837 rebellion. Bourassa had already been a model farmer, a mayor in his town, a luminary in his diocese and the publisher of a local paper. At a time when politicians debating on an open platform remained a traditional French-Canadian sport, his forcefulness and clarity as a speaker was an additional asset.

The obvious disapproval of his party by most of the Hierarchy of the Quebec Catholic Church did not hamper him from being a good Liberal. As an ardent Catholic he wished to see Catholic ideas triumph in the temporal sphere, but he was always ready to defend the prerogatives of the Church against the encroachments of the state and to submit to his bishop on theological questions. Yet he differed from an ultramontane figure like Bishop Lafleche in refusing to take advantage of religious faith for political ends. He also believed that a good Catholic had a right to make up his own mind on political questions. In the campaign he had seen the prestige of the Hierarchy lowered because of their intervention in politics. One conclusion he reached was that Catholic politicians were in a much better position than the clergy to devise the right political tactics to defend the Church. Ultimately both Catholicism and the clergy would be better off if good Catholics took their theology from Rome but their politics from home.

These principles enabled him to remain loyal to his Church while supporting the Liberal party. He had concluded that the Conservative government’s effort to impose separate schools on Manitoba could only fail. Like Laurier he had opposed the Remedial Bill, although it was clear that the Hierarchy wished it passed. However a new situation was created when the Hierarchy issued a Mandement obliging Catholics to vote only for those candidates pledged to pass such remedial legislation. By asking and receiving permission to disregard the Mandement from his bishop, Bourassa demonstrated that he accepted the right of the ecclesiastical authorities to decide if a political matter was of such religious consequence that all the faithful must obey. He would never disobey a direct order from a priest. But in the absence of any such directive he felt perfectly free to make up his own mind even to the point of criticizing the political actions of the clergy; immediately after the election he signed a petition to Rome that protested the Hierarchy’s intervention in politics and warned that the clergy making a sin “out of a political act” would harm the Church.

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Once elected, Bourassa was taken under the wing of Wilfrid Laurier, the newly elected Prime Minister, who, as their correspondence shows, took great pains to cultivate his talented protégé. Soon after the new Parliament convened, he sent Bourassa out West to begin the delicate negotiations with the Greenway government to find a compromise on the Manitoba school question; and then in 1898 he again furthered Bourassa’s career by naming his young colleague the French-speaking secretary of the Canadian delegation to the Joint High Commission set up to resolve Canadian-American differences.

Despite the opposition of most of the Bishops to the Liberal party, Bourassa evidently experienced no guilt in advancing in its ranks. Yet in the end his faith was to undermine his political career for quite a different reason; it hindered him from compromising and thus reaching a consensus with his colleagues. He acted as if he did not believe that a political act could be morally neutral; it either embodied God’s will or not. Everything in politics must be strenuously supported or equally strenuously opposed. He wrote admiringly about his friend and mentor, Jules Paul Tardivel, that “he was an irreducible enemy of compromise”. Without doubt Bourassa wished to be thought of in the same way.

Consequently Bourassa was to be often at odds with the caucus of his party. He believed that loyalty and financial help frequently led his colleagues to give up their principles and unquestioningly obey a few party leaders. Because of their control of the caucus these leaders spoke for the party. Unfortunately, in their policy making, they were motivated by the desire to increase its popularity rather than the benefits to their country. In his campaign of 1896, Bourassa had announced that he would refuse to accept party funds. Determined never to compromise for the good of the party, he was to be hopeless as a conventional politician. In time, he was to drift away from the Liberals and become a political independent.

The first quarrel between Bourassa and his party came with the outbreak of the Boer War in October 1899. That month he resigned his seat in the House to protest Laurier’s decision to send Canadian troops to aid the Mother Country without consulting Parliament. The government claimed that authorization for such a small sum would not be a precedent for the future. But Bourassa maintained that the sending of troops without the sanction of Parliament would itself become a precedent to justify Canada being compelled to participate automatically in imperial wars. (This prediction was never put to the test. The matter of compulsion did not come up in the next imperial war, in 1914, because public opinion, both English and French, was overwhelmingly on the side of Canadian participation on the British side).

By January 1900 Bourassa was back in the House, having won his by-election by acclamation. There, he moved a motion the effect of
which would have been to establish Parliament as the body which
decided if Canada was at war. Although Bourassa claimed to be
following "the true British spirit of self-government and liberty," his
motion was easily defeated.

Six months later, he opposed a joint Liberal-Conservative motion
congratulating the Queen on the approaching end of the war. In
response, the House, swept by an intense feeling of loyalty to the
Empire, gave three cheers and sang "God Save the Queen". Still
Bourassa continued to support Laurier on all questions except the war
and was re-elected as a Liberal in the federal election of 1900. In the
following March, he proposed that the House recommend peace terms
which would concede Boer independence. Such persistence made him
appear both disloyal and extreme to many Anglo-Canadians.

Yet Bourassa's stubborn courage began to make him something of
a hero among French-Canadian intellectuals and businessmen. After
visiting Great Britain in 1901, he warned that to fight their wars, British
imperialists would demand men and money from a colony such as
Canada. He advised Canadians to look at political questions (such as
imperial relations) from a Canadian viewpoint. More and more
Bourassa and his supporters began to call themselves Canadian
Nationalists.

The Nationalist Programme

With the ending of the Boer war, Bourassa's attention turned to the
social consequences of the coming of big industry to Canada. What
worried him was that this new economic development strengthened the
already wide-spread belief that the accumulation of wealth ought to be
humanity's great ideal. To a deeply committed Catholic like Bourassa,
such a materialist view was totally sinful: while making a living, men
ought not to sacrifice their religious values.

Although Bourassa accepted private property and the making of
profit, his dislike of possessive individualism led him to insist that in
economic matters the public good should prevail. He suggested that the
Grand Trunk Railway should be privately operated but state owned;
this arrangement would allow individual initiative and private capital
but protect the public interest. And while accepting the stock market
probably as a necessary evil, in 1903, he proposed measures in
Parliament to end speculation in stocks.

Bourassa also criticized the government for opening the West to all
kinds of immigrants. With an intolerance born of a nativist outlook he
sometimes claimed that these newcomers were little better than the
dregs of society. Believing that they had come to Canada "to make
money", he assumed that they had no real love for Canada. In a
depression they would turn to the United States and press for commercial union or even annexation. To guard against this danger French Canadians should be encouraged to settle on the prairies by the grant of full rights for their culture; their language and religion equipped them better than other Canadians to resist American materialist values. But none of Bourassa’s proposals, whether on the railway, the stock market or immigration, were acceptable to Laurier.

On another level, the Quebec government was permitting private capitalists to exploit the province’s immense natural resources wholly for their own private greed. So strongly did Bourassa feel that some of this new wealth should go to the common man, that he resigned from Parliament and in 1908 ran successfully for a provincial seat. In the Quebec Assembly, in opposition to the ruling Liberal party, he demanded that the big companies be compelled to set aside special tracts of land for settlement. The lumber on these lots ought to belong to the settler and not to the companies. From its sale would come the money to begin the new farms. Private speculation in timber lands should be eliminated. The government ought to compel companies to manufacture pulp in Quebec instead of exporting pulpwood to the United States. To protect hydraulic energy from “private exploitation”, municipalities should be allowed to organize their own cheap power. Bourassa also campaigned vigorously for a referendum in Montreal on whether a privately owned utility, the Montreal Tramway Company, should be granted a monopoly in the city.

Bourassa also reacted against the educational changes stimulated by the new economic activity. Some wished to prepare French Canadians better to cope with industrialism by introducing more science and mathematics in the school curriculum. Bourassa accepted these disciplines but insisted that the most important task of education was to shape the souls of youngsters according to God’s wishes. He opposed secularizing even a business college lest this be taken as the first step towards “godless” education in the province. He continually warned against the danger of the state increasing its role in the educational system at the expense of the Church.

Bourassa stayed only one four-year term in provincial politics. The reforms he proposed were not invented by him; they had been pushed by government critics for many years. What he did was to popularize them. To that extent he influenced the Quebec government to tighten up its laws on speculation, set up a public utilities commission to work out more satisfactory rules for the renting of hydro, and compel the manufacture of pulp within the province; but neither on colonization, a referendum on the Montreal Tramway monopoly, nor the secular nature of the business schools did he get his way. He was unable to win the necessary public support. Yet he was unwilling to work to strengthen the opposition Conservative party or to begin a reform party.
of his own. Moreover by 1910 he was becoming more reluctant to devote the time necessary to provincial politics because of his determination to fight Laurier’s bill to establish a Canadian navy.

Bourassa opposed the Naval bill because it permitted the Cabinet, in an emergency, to turn over the Canadian navy to the British Admiralty. Bourassa was not reassured by the provision that any such action would have to be ratified by Parliament within fifteen days. Once the British were involved in war anywhere in the world, the Cabinet would immediately put the proposed Canadian navy under British command. By the time the House met to discuss the matter, Canada would already be at war.

French-Canadian Conservatives agreed with Bourassa that any kind of naval aid would lead to automatic Canadian participation in imperial wars. However English-Canadian Conservatives wished Canada to take part in any imperial war effort in return for a voice in imperial foreign policy. They criticized the bill as inadequate and proposed a cash contribution to buy dreadnaughts for the British navy. So far apart were the two wings of the party that in 1910 their proposed national convention had to be cancelled. There were now virtually two Conservative parties, one French and the other English.

That summer French-Canadian Conservatives and Bourassa’s followers joined together in turning Quebec public opinion against the Naval bill. They organized protest meetings, featuring Bourassa, all over the province. The unexpected victory of their candidate over the Liberal in the by-election of Drummond-Arthabaska in November showed the considerable gain in public support for this joint movement led by Bourassa. This cooperation was now carried over to the federal election of September 1911.

As a matter of fact both wings of the Conservative party, each in its own way, worked with Bourassa. The Anglo-Conservatives ran on pro-imperialist policies in the fifteen English ridings in Quebec. But anxious at all costs to defeat Laurier, they contributed a great deal of money to quite a separate campaign in the remaining fifty French constituencies, a campaign in which the French-Canadian Conservative machine was put at the disposal of Bourassa. Although not standing for election himself, Bourassa completely controlled the French-Canadian candidates and dictated their policies. Under his leadership, these Autonomists, as they called themselves, denounced the naval policy of the Conservative leader, Robert Borden, as well as that of Laurier. Bourassa hoped to elect a bloc of independents, large enough to hold the balance of power and thus prevent any naval aid to Great Britain. Taking money from the Conservatives may have been cynical but it was not dishonest in that Bourassa did not let up in his attack on Borden’s proposal to give naval aid to Great Britain. Whether Bourassa’s strategy
would have proved to be realistic is a matter of speculation. The possibility of it being tried was eliminated by the totally unexpected Conservative sweep in Ontario. The new Prime Minister, Robert Borden, had an absolute majority in the House; even if the sixteen Autonomists returned from Quebec voted for the Liberals, they were in no position to threaten him.

The great majority of the successful Autonomist candidates were former Conservatives. Although they had opposed naval aid to Great Britain, they remained friendly to their party. Their leader, Frederick Monk, proposed to find a seat for Bourassa to enter the Cabinet. Bourassa refused because he wished to remain independent of both political parties; yet by so doing he was avoiding any responsibility for the consequences of an election, the outcome of which he had certainly influenced. Without the firm direction that he might have provided, the Autonomists soon returned to the Conservative fold and many even began to support Borden’s naval policy. Moreover Bourassa is open to criticism for the unjustified fashion in which he repeatedly insinuated that Laurier was morally weak.

However Bourassa was now at the height of his influence. Earlier in 1910, after many months of effort, he had succeeded in beginning a daily newspaper, Le Devoir. Its inevitable early financial pains had been eased by an influx of Conservative money during the elections. Still Bourassa, now owning fifty-one percent of the stock, had fashioned a fine vehicle for his ideas. Although Le Devoir never had a mass circulation, it soon became one of the most prestigious dailies in Quebec. In part this was due to Bourassa’s own high standard of content and style. But in part it was because, although not an official Church paper, it soon came to be accepted as the authentic voice of Quebec Catholics. Moreover it spoke eloquently for those French Canadians who wished to resist naval aid to Great Britain and to defend the cultural rights of their people outside Quebec.

Bourassa had always maintained that the first loyalty of Canadians should be to Canada and not the Empire. But the whole matter of allegiance in Canada was complicated by the existence of two peoples, one of whom spoke a language different from that of the Britannic nation. Bourassa himself, to the end of his life was committed to the Canadian state and Canadian nationhood. At the same time he believed that French Canadians had been given a special vocation by God to act as a wellspring for Catholicism in North America. The greatest threat to this mission came from the enormously powerful materialist outlook of the United States. Canada must remain a bastion against this evil influence. For Canada to resist Americanization required that French Canadians remain French and Catholic and that they be encouraged to settle in the West. In this respect Bourassa argued as a Canadian nationalist. But in addition he loved his own people and their culture.
No doubt he wished a French and Catholic community to continue to exist because it was his own. Thus he always opposed the fusion of cultures; each should remain separate and each should have equal rights throughout the country.

In 1905 Bourassa became publicly identified with biculturalism as a result of his fight for the right of Catholics to their own schools in the new provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta. However Laurier, under pressure from Anglophone Liberals, finally assented to what was in effect a state system of education. Bourassa, bitterly disappointed, attacked this settlement, arguing that it would prevent the West from becoming an Anglo-French region. Moreover it was a breach of the bicultural compact agreed to by the Fathers of Confederation. He warned that equality of cultures was an absolute condition for French-Canadian acceptance of Canadian nationhood. And two years later, under the pressure of Armand Lavergne supported by Bourassa, Laurier did agree that the government-owned Intercolonial Railway as well as the Post Office would issue their forms in French as well as English.

Yet it was not until September 1910 that Bourassa achieved his special place in the hearts of educated French Canadians. At a meeting in Notre Dame Church in Montreal, held to celebrate the Eucharistic Congress, Archbishop Bourne attacked the use of French as a vehicle for propagating Catholicism. Bourassa in a magnificently lyrical extemporaneous speech, to the immense satisfaction of the French-Canadian audience, asserted that conserving the French language was the best way to protect the Catholic faith. In addition he movingly called upon French Canada to struggle to survive:

But it is said you are only a handful; you are fatally destined to disappear: why persevere in the struggle? We are only a handful, it is true: but in the school of Christ I did not learn to estimate right and moral forces by number and wealth. We are only a handful; but we count for what we are; and we have a right to live . . .

Still the French language was safe inside Quebec; unfortunately in English Canada, it was to come under direct attack. In 1912 the Ontario government issued Regulation 17, severely limiting the use of French as a language of instruction in its schools. That the new law permitted the learning of French one hour a day did not appease the anger of Bourassa. He wished French Canadians to compete with the English Canadians throughout Canada for their share of the country's wealth. But unless English Canada allowed French schools, French Canadians could take part in economic life outside Quebec only at the risk of their children becoming assimilated. Fiercely opposed to Regulation 17, Bourassa toured Ontario attacking the law before English audiences as well as French.
Thus in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, Bourassa replaced Laurier as the champion of the French-Canadian intellectual and business elite because of his fight against British imperialism, his adherence to Catholic principles and his defence of the French language. That year at forty-six, he was at the height of his influence and power; from now on, these would decline.

The Great War

Throughout the war the Hierarchy supported the Canadian effort. But Bourassa found it impossible to agree to Canadian participation. While approving initially of Canada’s entry into the war, he soon became an opponent of the government’s war policy. The sheer slaughter wounded his moral sensibilities. He was skeptical about the war aims; sinister financiers had organized it for profit. The war served British imperialists in their drive for imperial federation, membership in which would oblige Canada to fight in all British wars. Clearly he had come to hate the British Empire. It stood in the way of liberty and progress because it suppressed small nationalities. Moreover an Allied triumph would only mean the world supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon race: its ideas, its language, its political conceptions, its wealth. Such a victory would encourage Anglo-Canadians to destroy French and Catholic life in Canada. Held back from openly condemning the war through fear of censorship, by June 1917 Bourassa was writing that Canada had done enough. He wished both sides to stop fighting, accept the mediation of the Pope and negotiate a just peace.

During the war Bourassa led an energetic struggle for the withdrawal of Regulation 17. It was typical of his courage that when ordered to wave the Union Jack by a group of angry soldiers at an excited meeting in Ottawa in November 1914 he refused: “I am ready to wave the British flag in liberty but I will not do it under threats.” Only a lowering of the curtain prevented a serious incident. Yet Bourassa’s efforts came to naught: wartime Ontario swept by fierce feelings of loyalism and nationalism would simply not tolerate instruction in French. At the same time it was not very sensible to call the people of Ontario “Prussians” if he really wished them to change their mind. In September 1916 after the Pope had counselled moderation in the struggle for Franco-Ontarian rights, Bourassa called off his campaign. Although unsuccessful, it made him English Canada’s scapegoat for the failure of the government to recruit in Quebec.

Bourassa became more and more notorious outside his province because both major parties used him as a symbol of extreme French-Canadian nationalism. Laurier claimed in 1917 that he was unwilling to join a Borden coalition because he was afraid of handing Quebec over to Bourassa. During the election, Borden’s Union party tried to frighten
the electorate by pronouncing that if Laurier won, Bourassa would rule Canada. Bourassa himself voted for Laurier because the Liberal promise of a referendum on the conscription law passed in the previous June opened the possibility of its repeal.

This was to be Bourassa’s last political act during the war. Pledged to law and order, he publicly rebuked those in Quebec who on Easter 1918 rioted against conscription. That April, Ottawa outlawed any unfavorable publicity for the Allied side and Bourassa ceased writing for *Le Devoir* until the end of the war. His period of great political prestige was now passing. It had rested on his ability to undermine Laurier by calling for more Canadian autonomy than the Liberal leader was willing to claim. But post-war Liberals were to take up Bourassa’s idea that the Canadian Parliament must decide whether Canada should go to war, thus depriving Bourassa of his political leverage in Quebec.

*Towards a Catholic Order*

The Bolshevik Revolution abroad, the victory of female suffrage and the Winnipeg general strike at home explain much of Bourassa’s post-war concern for social stability. He feared that the individual was replacing God as the focus of the social order; that anarchy was displacing authority as the governing principle of society. Everywhere about him he perceived a complete breakdown of social duty. Intense materialism, individual selfishness and class jealousy ruled the day. Confronted by such chaos, Bourassa came to believe that his deepest duty was to help restore the authority of God and that of his spokesman on earth, the Pope.

The most important single step in the defence of Catholic values was the strengthening of the family. God wished the family to be the foundation of Catholic society; parents had been given the primary responsibility for teaching their children to accept a future commitment to Catholic social action. Bourassa pleaded with parents to ensure a proper Catholic upbringing for their children. But he also warned against the social forces which might attack the family as an institution.

Bourassa blamed the state for the growing rate of divorce. By performing marriages, the government had deprived the ceremony of its Christian content and transformed it into a mere civil contract. No wonder that couples wed under such circumstances sometimes contemplated divorce. Worse still the state was prepared to overlook the divine purpose of marriage—the production and education of children to serve God and society—and itself grant divorce on request.

Bourassa also feared that the state would weaken the family by offering it too much help. He disapproved of the action of the Quebec government in 1921 of increasing its grants to welfare organizations to
enable them to give more aid to indigents. This might weaken the family by permitting people to fob off the sick and the old on the state; keeping individuals at home, no matter at what sacrifice, increased the moral solidarity so crucial to the Catholic family. He also opposed in 1926 the proposed federal old age pension because it might encourage people to look to the government for help instead of the family.

The greatest danger to the family resulted from rapid urbanization, itself a consequence of the growth of industrialization. In the city, slums led to high infant mortality. New vices such as love of luxury and disdain for hard work appeared. Family life rapidly deteriorated; often the mother was away from home because she was forced to work. Finally the authority of the parents was steadily undermined by an unprincipled press and a lewd cinema.

To counter what he called the plague of urbanism, Bourassa urged the government to encourage rural life by constructing good roads and allowing settlers to sell wood which grew on their lots. He proposed the lowering of tariffs on city manufactures but the increasing of protection for the processing of lumber, nickel, wool and leather, all of which he expected would provide jobs away from the big urban centres. But of course he understood that large cities were here to stay. Within these, not government action but Catholic faith would help the family to survive. This conviction explains why Bourassa pleaded with people to accept the authority of God and why he kept this up for the rest of his life.

In 1920 Bourassa conceded that the Catholic order was unacceptable to the majority of Anglo-Canadians. Yet he continued to believe that Catholicism had a positive role to play outside Quebec. Precisely because of their religion as well as their language, French Canadians would be able to stem the tide of American materialism in the West. But the lack of Catholic French schools discouraged them from moving to the Prairies. Moreover such humiliation was undermining their enthusiasm for Confederation.

Still French-Canadian rights constituted only one aspect of Bourassa’s program for strengthening Canadian nationhood. The winning of complete Canadian autonomy within the Empire remained equally important to him. His belief that thousands of Canadians had fallen on the battlefields of France only for the greater glory of the British Empire explains his dread of a new imperial war: “No more imperial adventures. No more undertakings to send our sons to shed their blood on all the battlefields of the world.” He never forgave Arthur Meighen, the leader of the Conservative party, for being ready to respond to the British call for help during the Chanak crisis of 1922. On the other hand he regarded Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King more favorably because the latter affirmed that it was up to the
Canadian Parliament to decide on the sending of troops. Nevertheless he remained troubled because a vague moral obligation to the Empire haunted many Anglo-Canadians. To lay this ghost Bourassa proposed that Canada and Great Britain declare explicitly that only the Canadian Parliament could decide what part Canada would play in imperial diplomacy.

In part to increase public pressure on King to make such a statement, Bourassa ran in his old constituency of Labelle in the federal election of 1925. He concentrated his campaign on winning educational rights for the French minority and keeping Canada out of British wars. Elected as an independent, he soon found himself voting for the Liberals. So frightened was he that a Conservative government would drag Canada into a British war that during the Parliamentary crisis of June 1926, he voted to keep King in power, despite the Liberal government's responsibility for the Customs Service which had erupted into a public scandal. In the subsequent election, although again standing as an independent, he strongly supported King's position in the latter's constitutional dispute with Governor General Byng, thereby probably helping to hold Quebec's ultra-nationalist vote for the Liberals.

Towards the end of the 1920's Bourassa became rather optimistic for his nationalist programme. He saw that in Ontario the status of French had improved especially with the repeal of Regulation 17; he hoped that the West would follow this example of tolerance. In 1928 he noted with pleasure that King had made an important statement on foreign policy without once mentioning the British Empire. If he was happy with the Liberals, they in turn had no reason to be dissatisfied with such a ferocious enemy of the Conservative party. They did not oppose him in the election of 1930, and so great was Bourassa's standing in his own constituency that the Conservatives were unable to field an opponent.

During the twenties Bourassa was becoming less and less prominent because the Liberal party was agreeing with him more and more on imperial relations. At the same time his popularity among some of the French-Canadian elite fell because they believed him to be an opponent of French-Canadian nationalism. His commitment to Canada arose from the conviction that an Anglo-French nation in the North that barred the expansion of the materialist civilization of the United States would be one of the "greatest contributions to humanity". Some younger French-Canadian intellectuals like abbé Groulx were not so sure. In 1922 the latter suggested a separate Laurentian state not as a practical proposal but merely as a desirable possibility. But Bourassa opposed even this vague ideal of a separate state; and his enormous prestige allowed him to deny respectability among nationalists to the new outlook about Quebec which Groulx and his colleagues were developing.

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No doubt Bourassa's anti-separatist convictions were strengthened by the Pope's encyclical of 1923 condemning the post-war nationalism which impelled nations to follow their own interests selfishly to the detriment of precepts of internationalism preached by His Holiness. Three years later Rome censured the nationalists of France, *L'Action Française*. In November of that year probably the most meaningful spiritual event in Bourassa's life took place: Pope Pius XI granted him a special audience. In it the Pope warned his worshipper that nationalism was the chief threat to the influence of the Church.

In 1929 Bourassa wrote some editorials to help an Irish New England bishop who was proposing to tax his French-Canadian parishioners for an English diocesan school. Many of the French community wished their money to go to a French school and a venomous quarrel ensued. The matter was referred to Rome which took the side of the bishop and in fact excommunicated his leading opponents. Nevertheless these remained defiant. At this point Bourassa intervened and in his articles called on the dissidents to submit to the ecclesiastical authority.

Because these editorials dealt only with the public challenge to Rome but completely ignored French educational rights, they infuriated Groulx and his colleagues who could not understand how a leader who had fought so hard for Franco-Ontarians could turn against Franco-Americans. They could not accept Bourassa's conviction that the rights of the the French language must always be subordinate to those of the Church. The conscription crisis of 1917 had made them sceptical of Ottawa's desire to protect French Canada and they had begun to see Quebec as their homeland. Now they were grievously disappointed that their former idol would not endorse this ideal of a separate Laurentian state.

As well, early in the 1930's Bourassa offended some of the elder clergy by complaining that a good deal of the wealth of the Church was invested in financial institutions which often broke both human and divine laws. Thus Bourassa had succeeded in antagonizing the most faithful readers of *Le Devoir*, both nationalist and Catholic. The consequent decline in circulation proved serious to the newspaper, already in difficulties because of the depression. Too Catholic for some nationalists and too moral for some clergy, Bourassa resigned as editor in August 1932 to save the paper.

Bourassa was greatly upset by the coming of the depression. Thousands and thousands of small entrepreneurs were losing their businesses. Hard times were threatening small private property, the material base of family life. Young married couples were unable to find lodging. The terrible economic conditions were leading them to practise contraception, thus frustrating the prime purpose of the family—the procreation of children who were both healthy and good.
Simplistic in his analysis, Bourassa believed that the economic crash had occurred because all were living beyond their means. Although still in debt for the war, the government was busily spending money for needless buildings and roads. Irresponsible companies continually expanded on credit and an orgy of gambling dominated the stock market. Some companies artificially stimulated consumers’ appetites without regard to the real needs of the population. This general malaise had spread to the common man who had acquired such a taste for foolish luxuries that he was prepared to go into debt. The possibility of instalment buying literally horrified Bourassa.

As he saw it, laissez-faire capitalism had concentrated great wealth in the hands of a few while pushing millions of people to the edge of starvation. Public utilities like those of transport, electricity or gas were owned by enormously powerful private monopolies. This plutocracy which dominated Canada was both corrupt and irresponsible; its sheer indecent display of wealth and selfishness might easily lead to revolution. Bourassa believed that a capitalist system dominated by big business and fueled by greed was as morally repugnant as Russian communism.

To the depression, Pope Pius XI had, in 1931, proposed Catholic solutions in his encyclical, Quadragesimo Anno. In that document the Pope, while denouncing socialism and communism, had called for social and economic reform and for the intervention of the state in the economy where necessary. Some might have interpreted the Pope as supporting welfare measures but not Bourassa. He continued to object to a measure like unemployment insurance which would, according to him, create a class of “loafers” who would expect the state to furnish them a living without doing any work. What he wished the state to do was to stop the quasi-illicit financial speculation. It should prevent stocks from being watered. It should eliminate wild gambling on the stock market by outlawing buying on credit. It should undertake public works in the countryside to re-establish a better balance between the rural and urban population. He also wished the state to distribute wealth more equitably, not by transfer payments to the poor but by favoring the growth of small industry outside the cities rather than big enterprises in the urban centres. One indication of the direction of his thought was his contention that Canadians had much to learn about the movement for domestic economy inaugurated by the greatest “genius of our time” Mahatma Ghandi.

In his economic views, Bourassa expressed the attitude of small French-Canadian businessmen of which he had been one. The profit of a large enterprise was immoral but that of a small firm, comprising some five or ten people, was legitimate. He always believed that these small property owners constituted that social class which by instinct
and interest was best prepared to conserve Catholic values. And his reforms were designed to protect them from the huge financial interests.

At the same time Bourassa reiterated that government action was not enough. The spirit of materialism, the product of a free-wheeling economic liberalism, by emphasizing acquisitiveness and extravagance had led to an enormous increase in public selfishness. Government laws could only constrain the actions of people but not motivate them to act towards each other with genuine Christian kindness and good will. Only by turning to God could man save himself from further economic catastrophe and moral decay.

Not many French Canadians took Bourassa's exhortations seriously. In 1935 Maurice Duplessis, very Catholic and very corrupt, became the premier of Quebec and set out to prop up the big capitalists of the province. As for Bourassa he lost a young independent Liberal in the federal election of that year. He had never been very good at attracting public works for Labelle or finding government jobs for his constituents. Yet the depression emphasized this side of a M.P.'s duties. And this seems to have been the main reason for his defeat.

Once out of Parliament, Bourassa's interest shifted to foreign affairs because of the growing danger of a new war. He continued to maintain that even if the British Empire became embroiled, Canada had a right to remain at peace; furthermore it should not risk Canadian lives to settle European quarrels. Still, his strong Christian feelings led him to take sides in the approaching conflict.

Ferociously anti-Soviet, Bourassa believed that Communist Russia threatened the family and private property and undermined belief in God, thereby constituting a fearful menace to Western Christian civilization. The U.S.S.R. would never approve the moral leadership of the Pope; yet without such acceptance by all great powers, a new world war was inevitable. He wished to keep Russia out of the concert of what he regarded as civilized nations and deeply regretted that Canada had voted for its admission to the League of Nations. Towards Nazi Germany he had mixed feelings. He saw that Nazism rested on a cult of race and deeply deplored the persecution of Jews. He also recognized that Germany, the most unstable element in Europe, constituted the greatest threat to peace. Yet he was not totally unsympathetic to the Germans. He regarded the Versailles treaty as unjust and criticized Britain and France for not being willing to revise it. He may not have liked Nazi Germany but he certainly preferred it to Soviet Russia.

As early as 1931 he had begun to speak of a positive role for the Nazis in stopping the spread of political, economic and military Bolshevism. He regretted the existence of the Franco-Russian alliance

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of 1934 because it barred Hitler’s expansion to the East. Germany, he explained, was the only force capable of bringing order to the Slav chaos. In the same series of articles he repeated his conviction that racism was the most bestial of social instincts. Nevertheless he was advocating German control of Russia on the pretext which Hitler always gave—that the Slavs were an inferior people and that it was both necessary and right for the Germans to impose order on them.

We may assume that Bourassa approved of the Munich pact of September 1938 though he made no public comment on it. Since 1935 he had done little in the way of public activity—only making a few speeches and writing his impressions of a trip to Europe in *Le Devoir*. By 1938 he was over seventy years old and, drawn more and more to the worship of God, he decided to withdraw completely from public life.

*The Last Campaigns*

But the second world war and the threat of conscription brought Bourassa out of his retreat. One reason he had retired was that not many were willing any longer to listen to him. By this time he had long been replaced by Groulx as the major intellectual influence over young nationalists. They simply regarded the former editor of *Le Devoir* as an old man who had once unaccountably attempted to undercut French-Canadian nationalism. Fewer and fewer people were interested in his interminable and repetitive lectures on Christian morality. But late in 1941 a group of French-Canadian nationalists decided to campaign to make sure that Prime Minister King kept his pledge of no conscription. They asked Bourassa to speak at their meetings. The issue of the independence of Quebec was now quiescent. Bourassa would certainly express much of what they felt about the war; and at seventy-five he was hardly likely to be interned. An eminently Christian figure, he would offset the uncritical support of the Hierarchy for the war. While Bourassa may have seemed to many something of a bore, he still commanded a great deal of respect from the older generation who had admired him in his great days. On his side Bourassa readily agreed because these nationalists could provide an audience. By now his failing eyesight prevented him from writing, but his ability to express his favorite ideas from a lecture platform clearly and forcefully remained unimpaired.

On the public platform he asked what Canada was doing in the war. No power threatened its territory, people or interests; no pact or treaty required its participation. Although he did not say so, probably he believed that Canada was at war only because of its British connection.

He was extremely sceptical about the war aims of the allies. Although he now hated the Nazis, the destroyers of the Catholic
Church, he was equally angry at what he believed to be the hypocrisy of the democrats in the West. Democracy is a lie, he exclaimed; it had never existed in any country. What he meant was that at election time people could choose only among those candidates nominated by small committees of the parties. In turn, these party officials, needing cash for the election, were now subservient to the big capitalist interests.

The real aim of the West, he complained, was to guard the financial supremacy of Canada and the United States, to preserve the system of economic liberalism now in force in “Anglo-Saxon” countries. Yet because man had forgotten God, His laws, His justice, His truth, these societies could not be called Christian. One of the Allies had even proclaimed atheism as its official creed. It was true that the Axis was dominated by Nazi Germany which subordinated the liberty of the family and the consciences of individuals to the needs of the state. Yet on the Axis side were also to be found Catholic nations such as the France of Pétain and the Italy of Mussolini. He deplored the latter’s attachment to Hitler but claimed that the Italian dictator had brought justice to the little man and restored the rights of the Church.

Not that Bourassa had become a fascist. While he was not a great believer in democracy and had little faith in the party system, unlike many of his compatriots, he never accepted the idea of dictatorship: “I am a believer in the British system of government as applied to Canada” he maintained truthfully. His ideal was representative government in which the elected M.P.’s were bound together by Catholic social doctrine and not party loyalty. In 1929 he had been enough of a libertarian to defend the rights of Canadian citizens to propound Communism. What attracted him to Italy and France was their appearance of being the types of the the corporate state endorsed by Catholic social thinkers. He did not wish to see such Catholic states crushed, especially if it meant the victory of the ideology of economic liberalism. At the same time he was, without doubt, embarrased by their links to Nazi Germany which he now detested. Distrustful of the major powers on either side, he wished Canada to withdraw from the war. Better still, the conflict ought to be ended not with a victory for one side or the other but through a negotiated peace.

He was now more active in Quebec politics than he had been since the early thirties. He spoke out against conscription in a meeting sponsored by the Ligue pour la défense du Canada. In September 1942 the Ligue organized itself into a new political party, the Bloc populaire. Although never a member, Bourassa came out four-square for the Bloc: a vote for the Bloc meant a vote to slow down the war effort. He favored its intention to protect the family and reconstitute the province on the basis of Christian principles. In 1943 and 1944 he readily agreed to speak at Bloc election rallies, both provincial and federal.
Bourassa also criticized the Hierarchy for its unconditional support of the war effort. In 1944, in a well-publicized speech, he called on the bishops to protect themselves from exploitation by cynical politicians. Cardinal Villeneuve was so provoked that he reproved Bourassa publicly. Whether this would have silenced Bourassa is impossible to say. In October 1944 he suffered a heart attack which finally ended his public activity. He lived on in a serene fashion, completely devoted to the worship of God until his death eight years later at the age of eighty-four. His last rites were administered by his son, François, a priest.

Some of the controversy over Bourassa in his lifetime has been taken over by historians. Most Anglophone writers charge him with destroying national unity; they argue that he took advantage of French-Canadian anger over Regulation 17 to discourage recruiting in Quebec and so bring on the fateful conscription crisis between English and French. But the major reason French Canadians stayed out of the army was because they could see no great Canadian stake in the war. Bourassa himself never abandoned Canadian nationalism. At the height of the storm over conscription in 1917 he continued to maintain that the only “patrie” for French Canadians was Canada.

In contrast most French-Canadian historians see Bourassa as a fervent Canadian nationalist. They unanimously praised him for his stand for Canadian autonomy when the question of Canadian participation in the South African war arose. What many of them question is the depth of his commitment to French-Canadian nationalism. This was a particularly agonizing problem for the Groulx school. They regarded Bourassa as the incomparable champion of French-Canadian culture, the most talented representative of their people—the one who more than any other had awakened the national pride of their people. Yet it was he who seemed to have led the attack on French-Canadian nationalism. One widespread explanation among them held that Bourassa became more religious in the twenties and consequently he took very seriously the Pope’s warning on the danger to the Church of extreme nationalism and turned on his followers. Yet how could he have been more religious in the twenties than he was in his famous oration at Notre Dame in 1910? Moreover he had always subordinated language to religion. It will be remembered that he stopped attacking Regulation 17 during the war when the Pope counselled moderation. What had changed was not Bourassa but the nature of the movement for French-Canadian nationalism; the Groulx wing was now considering separatism seriously. But because he believed that God had willed Confederation, Bourassa rejected a separate Laurentian state. Surely he would have done the same thing years before he was supposed to have become more religious, if separatism had then threatened.
Francophone historians, emerging from an era dominated by the reactionary clerico-nationalist regime of Maurice Duplessis into that of the Quiet Revolution, have been cool to Bourassa. Their favorite term for him is pan-Canadian. This is unfortunate because some reader might infer that Bourassa accepted a cultural homogeneity that implied the assimilation of French Canadians. They play down his struggle for a bicultural Canada. Yet it was the experience of these campaigns which inculcated three generations of French French Canadians with the nationalism which today is such a major influence in modern Quebec.

Along with some English writers, they call Bourassa an agriculturalist, a social conservative, a representative of the pre-Quiet Revolution French-Canadian nationalist elite who failed to recognize that the most important thing about modern Quebec was that it was going through an industrial revolution. It is true that Bourassa was anxious to strengthen small enterprise in the countryside, but he knew that the modern urban industrial society was here to stay. Although he dismissed economic equality as a good in itself, he encouraged government intervention to protect society against the greed of big, privately-owned enterprise. He deserves to be called a reformer if for no other reason than he tried to warn people against the dangers of an economy that was guided by market forces instead of ethical principles.

However Bourassa may be validly criticized for quite another matter. Increasing Canadian autonomy, winning minority rights, strengthening the family, all required government action. The reasonable step for Bourassa was to become a powerful politician, a possibility open to him because of both ability and opportunity. But by temperament and conviction he disdained the compromise and manoeuvre necessary to advance in a political party. Thus he failed to fashion a political vehicle to carry out his programme.

Bourassa may have been a poor politician but he was a superb educator and critic. Although not a profound thinker, he succeeded in making a cluster of a few ideas an important focal point of debate for over thirty years. The leading orator in the province, a most effective writer, he stripped complicated issues down to their principles and by the very vigor of his words forced his opinion into the minds and hearts of his audience. However his capacity to articulate ideas only partially explains his enormous moral authority in French Canada. Much of this influence derived from a sensitivity to the long-run crucial issues in Canadian society and a courage in persistently speaking out on them. And this ability to convince great numbers of French Canadians that he was raising questions on which their ultimate destiny as a people turned made him one of those rare personalities in Canadian history who inspire movements.

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A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Henri Bourassa wrote and spoke a great deal in his lifetime. The best way to understand him is to read what he said. His ideas are easily available in *Le Devoir* 1910-1932 and in the Parliamentary Debates from 1896-1907 and 1926-1935. A useful bibliographical aid, containing the titles of his many pamphlets, is A. Bergevin, C. Nish and A. Bourassa (eds.), *Henri Bourassa, index des écrits et index de la correspondance publique, 1895-1924*, (Montreal, 1966). A selection of his writings and speeches are to be found in J. Levitt (ed.), *Henri Bourassa on Imperialism and Biculturalism, 1900-1918*, (Toronto, 1970).


