

## Early Socialism in Canada: International and Regional Impulses

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International and regional impulses have shaped Canadian socialism from the movement's origins in the nineteenth century to the present. Many of Canada's early socialists arrived as ready-made socialists from abroad. From the British Isles, continental Europe, and the United States, these idealists and dissidents imported radical political ideals, which they subsequently adapted to meet the emerging conditions of an industrializing, urbanizing Canada. Directed at a broad cross-section of society, the early Canadian socialist rainbow featured many colours: Chartists, Christian socialists, cooperators, and, by the nineteenth century's end—communists, anarchists, and other adherents of European radical movements. This process of importation, adaptation, and change took different forms in the distinctive regional contexts of Canada's multi-ethnic federal state. Building on an interdisciplinary literature, the authors illuminate the ways in which international and regional impulses shaped Canada's socialist tradition, helping to explain persistent tensions and forces within contemporary Canadian politics.

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When the nineteenth century dawned, what became Canada was a largely unsettled, uncharted land devoid of labor organizations. Aboriginals outnumbered non-aboriginals in every part of Upper Canada. By the century's end, the country boasted numerous mining and logging camps, mills, factories, a rapidly growing number of cities, and significant concentrations of wage-laborers. Canada's economic, social, and political development—the construction of canals, a transcontinental telegraph and railroad, the creation of a national parliament, the colonization of the prairies, the makings of a nascent industrial society, and a flood of immigrants—contributed to a proliferation of labor and, later, socialist organizations. Industrialism brought with it a new, largely foreign-born industrial class. It provided the material base for socialist parties and their largely imported ideological superstructures. British institutions and American models influenced local, regionally concentrated socialist parties, some of which pursued trade unions and some of which denounced them.

Scholars of diverse disciplinary backgrounds, deploying diverse methodological and interpretive tools, have examined Canada's early socialist movement. Gad Horowitz explored formative foreign influences in applying Louis Hartz's theory of ideological fragmentation to Canada's ideological evolution (Horowitz 1966, 1968; Hartz 1964). Gene Howard Homel (1980) provided further insights on the movement's origins, with a focus on southern Ontario, while Craig Heron (1984) illuminated laborism and Peter

Campbell (2000) examined the Marxist current. More recently, Ian McKay's "reconnaissance" of early socialism in Canada sought to illuminate "the underlying patterns of politics" with reference to changing "political formations" on the left in the context of a liberal hegemonic order, which shaped social relations from the mid-nineteenth century (McKay 2008: 5, 2000–2005). However, as reviewers such as Gary Teeple (2009) have noted, McKay's method provides a constellation of vignettes rather than a coherent interpretive framework. His emphasis is on the distinct character of the Canadian left, downplaying overt ideological and material linkages with the socialist movement in other countries. Indeed, the existing literature focuses heavily on domestic matters, paying scant attention to the dynamic ways in which regional and international impulses shaped the character of Canadian socialism.

Similarly, international scholarship has paid negligible attention to Canada. G.D.H. Cole (1963) devoted a mere three paragraphs to Canada in his 500-page study of international socialism prior to the First World War. (By comparison, Cole devoted 46 pages to Austria, 44 pages to the US, 38 pages to Belgium, and 10 pages to Japan). "The question of Socialism," Cole averred, "hardly arose till after 1918, except in British Columbia under the influence of the American Labor Union [ALU] and the Industrial Workers of the World [IWW]" (821). Similarly, Canadian political scientist (and future civil servant) O.D. Skelton devoted a single paragraph to Canada in his 1911 work *Socialism: A Critical Analysis*. In his brief account, appearing at the very end of a 311-page book, Skelton provided a taste of the more dynamic ways in which international and regional impulses have interacted with political economy to shape Canadian socialism:

The power of the Catholic Church in Quebec erects a solid barrier in the path of socialism. The cabinet system inherited from Britain and the party machine adopted from the United States both make against group politics. Only in recent years, with growing immigration from continental Europe and with growing industrial complexity, has the movement gained any strength. Winnipeg has a strong socialist element in its motley foreign quarter, Toronto, Montreal, Cape Breton, and a few other industrial and mining centres have small coteries, but it is only in British Columbia that socialism has developed any political importance. In the Pacific province the comparative weakness of the farming class, the prevalence of mining and other industries requiring large-scale capitalist investment, the discontent of failure in the last and farthest-west, the influence of American and English socialism, combined with aggressive leadership, have given rise to a socialism of thoroughgoing Marxian orthodoxy, and have enabled the party to poll one-fifth of the provincial vote. Even in British Columbia, however, there seems little scope for further expansion, and elsewhere in Canada socialism is likely to remain sporadic and exotic. (309–310)

Both Cole and Skelton missed the more substantial and complex story of early socialism in Canada.

From the outset, international and regional impulses shaped Canadian socialism as the flow of immigrants and ideas was transplanted and adapted to meet Canadian conditions. Like representatives of socialist parties from a number of countries who had assembled in Paris on the centennial of Bastille Day in 1889, Canada's early socialists viewed themselves as the true inheritors of the revolution. They embraced the liberal principles of equality and freedom, but they repudiated liberalism's cardinal tenet: privileging the individual at the expense of the community. Unlike liberals, they identified with those compelled to sell their labor in the capitalist marketplace. Without labor, there would have been no laborism or socialism in Canada. Laborism however, like socialism, expressed itself in many forms. Socialism appeared later as the tip of the laborist iceberg. Some early

laborists and socialists sought moderate reforms; others preached wholesale changes to the wage labor system. Some cooperated, others fought amongst themselves (Heron 1984).

The relationship between organized labor and early socialism in Canada helped to shape the character, strategy, and prospects of social democracy in the century that followed. After a host of labor unions, local assemblies, and national and regional organizations arose in Canada, a series of ephemeral socialist groups and parties appeared in the 1890s, largely anchored by British immigrants. Socialists from the US spurred on some parties while immigrant Europeans—swayed by continental Marxism, French thinking, and developments in Russia—provided the core for others. Native-born Canadians, radicalized by the conditions of their emerging industrial society, provided the leadership for still others. Among the socialist groups that arose, shifting affiliations, schisms, and expulsions—occasioned by interminable, often acrimonious rows over doctrine and tactics—made for a confused, volatile, and wide spectrum of socialist thought. These parties however shared a socialist vision and often cooperated in that common cause to rally around the same issues.

In both Britain and Canada, laborism overshadowed socialism and both were heavily coloured by liberalism, which rendered them reformist and democratic in inclination. In contrast, socialism in France was revolutionary from its very beginning. The difference was that the French Revolution engendered and sustained the idea of seizing power. Revolutionary socialism appeared in the US too but as a fleeting surge. In Spain, in further contrast, the anarchist drive to diffuse power came to outshine both laborism and socialism. In Canada, as in Britain and unlike Germany, once socialism reared its head it did not exclusively define itself as a class movement of the industrial proletariat. Directed at a broader cross-section of society, Canada's socialist rainbow featured many colors.

### Pre-Confederation

In the 1830s, the decade in which “socialism” entered the lexicon of politics, revolutionary sentiments convulsed Europe. It was also the decade of the Upper and Lower Canadian rebellions, a period that Stanley Ryerson equated with “the birth of Canadian democracy” (Ryerson 1937). Generally not made, the connection between these developments an ocean apart reflected some similar ideological tides. Europe's stirrings, combining nationalism and democratic impulses in the context of rapidly changing economies, fed utopian and more militant socialist mutterings. No red flags flew in either Lower or Upper Canada as they did in the streets of Paris, but the grandson of one of the imprisoned rebels, the advanced reformer George Weston Wrigley, became the leader of the Ontario-based Canadian Socialist League (CSL) in the 1890s. It declared itself in favor of the “complete public ownership of all means of production and distribution” (Wrigley 1901).

Canada had no “1848 revolution” and no “Paris Commune” and it escaped Europe's destabilizing urban riots. Canada merely experienced institutional evolution in 1848—responsible government complemented representative government—so Canada's “1848” represented no challenge to the socio-economic order. Those that led and formed governments before then continued to lead them after. Europe's later nineteenth century labor and socialist movements were particularly alien to French Canada. Facing no significant liberal challenge from within, its agrarian, quasi-feudal values provided a rampart against Europe's unfolding radicalism.

Socialists identify with wage laborers, but British North America was largely bereft of them and French Canadians showed little inclination toward wage employment before the latter half of the nineteenth century. As Britain industrialized and urbanized, British North

America was in the throes of pioneer expansion in the frontiers of New Brunswick and Upper Canada, their forests cleared to produce lumber for export and land for cultivation. Agrarianism prevailed: In 1851, only 15 percent of those in each of the Canadas lived in communities that exceeded 1000 people (Canada 1855, appendix v). In the west, half were concentrated in five towns; in the east, three-quarters dwelled in Quebec City and Montreal where “*les anglais*” were the masters of what small manufacturing industries existed and “*les canadiens*” were its workers.

Britain’s reconfigured agricultural foundations generated surplus labor while the Canadas had a labor shortage. The most notable labor disruptions, the Shiners’ War of the 1830s in the Ottawa valley, were by imported peasant stock Irish timberers and raftsmen fighting for higher pay and the exclusion of French-Canadians from such work (Cross 1973). Posing discipline problems, the Irish Catholics were viewed by many Anglo-Scotch employers as uncultivated, feral outcasts. “Ignorant,” “belligerent,” and “indolent,” but loyal and sociable, the Irish “died like flies. But they worked like horses . . .” (Pentland 1959, 460; Bleasdale 1981). The spontaneous ineffectual protests of these desperately distressed individuals in the form of insubordination and absenteeism were not organized collective efforts.

British skilled artisans who followed the canoe men and lumbermen of the staples trades and the Irish who built the canals and early railroads enjoyed more stable work and residential circumstances, conditions more conducive to the development of class-consciousness (Palmer 1987; Pentland 1948). More seasoned in industrialism than the Irish, the British adjusted more easily to their New World environment but they were a conservative force; their relative high status discouraged radicalism. Ethnic and religious heterogeneity impeded the creation of a radical working class sub-culture as national, religious, and ethnically kindred bonds proved sturdier glues than economic class as a basis for organizing labor or political protest. To frustrate the rise of Irish Catholic artisans, for example, artisans from Ulster mobilized around the Orange Order.

The small trade unions that had formed by mid-century, composed largely of newly arriving Britons, were charitable mutual insurance organizations of skilled artisans such as printers and molders who aided members’ families victimized by the misfortunes of death, illness, and unemployment. Not generally confronted by the culture of the factory, artisans had little need to rebel against it and their unions did not serve as negotiating vehicles with employers. The diversity of their crafts and their experiences also meant that their organizations generated their own discrete histories and cultures.

### Post-Confederation

Access to a broadened franchise—achieved relatively quickly in Canada in contrast to much of Europe—reduced the salience of class-based politics (Lipset 1983, 2). Although early labor newspapers such as the *Ontario Workman* and the *Palladium of Labor* came to condemn “partyism,” labor leaders confronted a reality: Improved labor conditions required government legislation. That meant being a party to the machinery of government as organized labor was too weak to elect candidates on its own. As a result, the established party machines successfully co-opted many labor leaders through patronage and prospects of government employment.

As unionism expanded, its political weight grew correspondingly. Initially, Upper Canada’s Reformers identified as the party of the workingman and John A. Macdonald’s Conservatives opposed labor leaders’ calls for an extended franchise and the secret ballot. In 1872, however, the Conservatives shrewdly undercut the Reformers

(now known as Liberals) with a Trade Union Act artfully calculated to woo workers (Kealey 1991, 216). The passage of Britain's Trade Union Bill a year earlier by the Gladstone Liberals disarmed their Canadian counterparts, as did the actions of the most influential Liberal spokesman, George Brown, publisher of Toronto's *Globe*. He opposed both the nine-hour day (although he supported it in Britain) and the most notable labor action of the 1870s, the Toronto typographers' strike. The city's Conservative newspaper, the *Leader*, weighed in to support the typographers and the *Ontario Workman*, founded partly as an anti-Brown vehicle, endorsed the Conservatives in the 1872 federal election (Tucker 1991).

Donald Creighton, characterizing the laboring classes as "the chief centre of interest" in that contest, depicts the Conservatives as having succeeded in uniting and twinning the interests of labor and capital (Creighton 1943, 374). Large labor rallies and workingmen's candidates appeared for the first time on their behalf. Prosperity, the steady creep of industrialization, and Macdonald's cunning legislative initiative meant that in the early 1870s, in one labor historian's exaggerated assessment, unions became more muscular than in any decade for the next half century (Ostry 1960, 93). Conservative popularity with organized labor declined however as the Tories subsequently did little for it; Ontario's workers flocked back to the Liberals when Oliver Mowat flexed provincial powers in the late 1880s to introduce social and labor legislation (Bliss 1972).

The nine-hour day in Britain and Canada and the eight-hour day in the US became the cause célèbre that propelled consolidation of labor in all three states: Britain's Trade Union Congress in 1872, the Canadian Labor Union (CLU) in 1873, and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1886 (Battye 1979; Wau 1959). Canadian labor unity proved fleeting however, little more than titular; the onset of an economic depression in 1873 dampened union growth and activity and the CLU withered. A Canadian Labor Congress then formed in 1883 and, as the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC) in 1886, it reconsolidated national labor organization with the overwhelming majority of its affiliates in Ontario and Quebec. This organizational change took place against the backdrop of a fundamental questioning of the liberal order. "A pro-longed downward trend in economic conditions [and] the increasing pressure of the proletarian masses had shaken the edifice of liberal philosophy and middle-class complacency" (Helleiner 1942, 532; also Chambers 1964).

In the 1880s, Canadian capitalism matured as small enterprises gave way to larger firms and Ontario's factory system emerged (Canada 1889; Palmer 1979). By the 1890s, trade unionism became part of the larger fabric of economic and political life, reflecting Canada's steady industrial transformation. However, while real wages rose by an estimated 50 percent in industrialized countries between 1870 and 1900 – largely because of mechanization's productivity gains and the growth of world trade (Palmer and Colton 1991, 623) – Canada experienced an economic slump with agricultural debt ballooning amidst falling food prices. Agriculture accounted for about half the gainfully employed over the age of 14 in 1881 but, by 1901, it accounted for only a third (Urquhart and Buckley 1965, 59). Although the urban laboring class grew, its political weight lagged far behind that of the rural class. The idea that land was the sole source of wealth and the inexhaustible verity that rural life was virtuous and urban life was ethically and environmentally squalid, rationalized rural overrepresentation in legislatures.

For the first time, extensive organization of the unskilled began between the early 1880s and the turn of the century and, by the outbreak of the First World War, union ranks had swelled to about 100,000. What stands out about the Canadian labor movement before then, however, is that it produced no outstanding or charismatic leader and none of

its leaders “made any independent contribution to Socialist or Labour thought” (Cole 1963, 821). What differentiated Canadian from American trade unionism however, even among those Canadian locals affiliated with the AFL, was the insistent demand among many for independent political action through working-class representatives competing as Liberal-Labor (or Conservative-Labor) candidates or as an independent working-class party.

By the end of the nineteenth century, three forms of radical politics emerged among organized workers: laborism, syndicalism, and socialism. Laborism, the foremost tendency, represented unionists’ efforts to elect their representatives to political institutions (Heron 1984). Labor candidates usually contested municipal elections and lost badly, although some occasionally succeeded. D.J. O’Donoghue, the CLU’s first vice president, launched his political career as a “workingman” candidate. Elected as an Ontario MPP in 1874, he aligned himself with the Liberals and embraced the bumptious give-and-take politics of the established parties (Kealey 1991, 160–161; Babcock 1974, 55–56). Some Liberal and Conservative MPs endorsed by labor organizations had genuine input into their parties’ labor policies and served as “hybrid” partisans; they represented the party to labor and, in turn, communicated labor’s concerns to their party. This form of independent laborism proved stronger in Ontario and Manitoba than in British Columbia (Robin 1968, 62–80).

Some elections forged something of a link between laborism, liberalism, and socialism; a socialist elected in Slocan, BC, in 1898, for example, ran under a Liberal banner (Saywell 1951). Other examples include the elections to Parliament in 1900 of A.W. Puttee, editor of Winnipeg’s socialist-tinged *The Voice*, and Nanaimo’s Ralph Smith, although Smith fell prey to Liberal enticements and eventually joined them. TLC conventions, dominated by Ontarian Liberals, repeatedly adopted resolutions endorsing direct political action but not beyond the TLC’s philosophy of rewarding friends and punishing enemies in the major parties. This created a wedge in what there was of a new socialist movement. As an example: when AFL leader Samuel Gompers appeared in Toronto, where laborism was strong, he was “warmly received” and “vigorously applauded” but in Vancouver, where socialists made up two-thirds of the committee representing labor organizations, he faced vociferous attack (Gompers 1925, 425–426).

Syndicalism, a revolutionary form of industrial unionism committed to mobilizing workers beyond their individual crafts, subscribes to launching general rather than company-specific strikes and implies relatively loose, unstable organization. Less wedded to the established economic order than laborism, syndicalism eschews the conventional political arena. Dubious about building workers’ loyalty based on the use of collective bargaining to achieve limited gains, anarcho-syndicalists had fewer inhibitions about militant action than did the laborists. The syndicalist footprint in Canada appeared in the first decade of the twentieth century in the form of the IWW and by 1911 claimed 10,000 members, mainly in BC and Alberta (Leier 1990; McCormack 1975, 1985, 101–114). The Western Federation of Miners (formed in Montana in 1893) had helped lay the groundwork for the IWW. A synonym for violence to many and riven by sectarianism and sectionalism, as well as the impact of cyclical recessions on its core constituency of itinerant workers, only three IWW locals with 465 members remained by 1915 (Logan 1948, 299; Seager 1985). Syndicalism’s heyday came and ended dramatically in the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, as war-weary workers gravitated behind the idea of One Big Union (which was ironically led by Socialists) and the tactic of the general strike, paralyzing production from Victoria, BC, to Winnipeg to Amherst, Nova Scotia, only to find themselves arrayed against the brutal political might of an employer-oriented state. By the early 1930s, a small surviving rump of syndicalists remained among Finnish

loggers at the Lakehead and in a dwindling toehold on the Pacific coast (Isitt 2003; Beaulieu 2011; Leier 1990, 108).

Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* appears to have inspired the first socialist movement in London, Ontario, in the late 1880s where a Canadian Co-operative Federation published *The Searchlight* (McKay 2008, 86–95). By the mid-1890s, branches of both American Daniel De Leon's Marxist and revolutionary Socialist Labor Party (SLP) as well Wrigley's relatively moderate CSL were active. Members of both parties referred to fellow members as "comrades," but the parties often behaved in non-comradely ways. In the 1897 provincial election, two socialist candidates vied against each other in London, one labeled "Co-operative Commonwealth" and the other SLP. The parties had competing branches in many cities but while most of the SLP's disappeared by 1901, Wrigley's CSL had 17, stretching from Montreal to the Pacific coast. It succeeded in electing socialist aldermen in St. Thomas and Brantford with another socialist returned as a People's Union candidate (Wrigley 1901, 686–687).

Wrigley believed in an alliance of tillers of the soil and toilers of the factory, prefiguring later alignments on the Canadian Left (Cook 1984). Particularly keen on the initiative and referendum, he opposed militarism and the Boer War. His *Citizen and Country* (later renamed the *Canadian Socialist*) gave voice to advocates of land nationalization, female suffrage, the eight-hour day, and the single tax. The CSL distributed thousands of copies of Bellamy's "Parable of the Water-Tank," a satirical assault on the evils of capitalism that the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) reprinted during the Depression (Bellamy 1935). Referring to his outlook as Christian socialism, Wrigley judged the new industrial society as immoral and unjust and, borrowing perhaps from Jack London, he wrote of "the iron heel" of private monopolies (Cook 1994, 1111–1115; Wrigley 1901, 686). Margaret Haile, endorsed by the CSL in Ontario's 1902 election, became the first woman to contest political office in Canada, demonstrating the socialist movement's early engagement with the "Woman Question" (McKay 2008, 282; Newton 1995, 17; Campbell 2010). In Toronto, SLP and CSL candidates competed against each other and, in Ontario's 1908 election, Canadian Labor Party candidates also vied against them in the same constituencies (Robin 1968, 36, 92–103; also Naylor 1991).

The cradle of Canadian socialism was in Ontario, but its vanguard resided in the far West; both the *Canadian Socialist* and Ontario's socialist *Clarion* relocated to Vancouver, rechristened as the *Western Socialist* and the *Western Clarion* respectively. The shift was consistent with Canada's economic and demographic changes; BC, which accounted for 2 percent of Canadians in 1891 (when Ontario accounted for 44 percent), grew by 120 percent between 1901 and 1911 while Ontario grew by less than 16 percent, and, while about a fifth of Ontarians were foreign-born, more than half of British Columbians were born outside the country (Canada 1906). This made for a society less tethered to its past and more receptive to radical sorties. The most prominent local socialist parties to surface were in those BC cities and mining camps where the British-born were most concentrated. Some of these parties courted trade unions, others rebuffed them, and the differences among them were sometimes as deep and bitter as those between them and their capitalist antagonists. A breakaway of the BC SLP, the United Socialist Labor Party (USLP), for example, enjoyed a brief obscure life as did, somewhat later, the Nanaimo-based Revolutionary Socialist Party of Canada. Sometimes, however, the ill-organized socialist parties cooperated; in 1900, for example, the CSL and USLP jointly endorsed a federal candidate. The CSL, proposing many liberal causes identified with American Progressivism—direct legislation, proportional representation, extending municipal powers, abolishing property qualifications for voters, scientific management of industries

and government, and free secular, compulsory education for youth—backed some issues less dear to liberals including a minimum wage and free medical services. Drawing inspiration from the Methodist Church, Single Taxers, an Anti-Poverty Society, and others, the CSL appears as a forerunner of the CCF (Grantham 1942, 13–14).

Much of the time, socialists and laborists went their own way, but they also cooperated, extended mutual assistance, and embraced similar positions. The relatively didactic and disputatious *Western Clarion* and the more temperate *Voice*, for example, ran advertisements for each other and both joined in praise for Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. A measure of formal unity came with the creation of the Socialist Party of BC (SPBC) – an amalgam of that province's SLP, CLS, USLP, and another SLP splinter. With its nucleus consisting of the SPBC's 21 locals, the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) emerged in 1904, styling itself the avatar of Canadian socialism. The country's oldest continuous socialist party, its platform proclaimed "allegiance to and support for the principles and programme of the revolutionary working class," and termed the capitalist "master," the worker "slave." In 1910, it boasted locals stretching from Newfoundland to the West Coast, but its national executive was composed almost exclusively of British Columbians with Vancouver the location for all its biweekly meetings (Grantham 1942, appendices 2 and 3). SPC membership peaked in 1909 with 3000 in about 60 locals nationally, today's equivalent of over 15,000 Canadians in 300 organizations (Fox 1963, 92–94; Johnson 1975, 213).

Episodic doctrinal disputes, full of brio, accounted for repeated splintering among early socialists. A speech given at a reception for the BC Lieutenant Governor, for example, led to one SPC member's expulsion and the party read out James Simpson, the future socialist mayor of Toronto, for participating in a Royal Commission on technical education. It was denounced by the party as a device to improve capitalist efficiencies. Culture, geography, and history explain some of the political differences; Vancouver Island's coal miners came largely from northern England and Scotland and were familiar with the independent labor politics of home while the more radical hard-rock miners in the BC interior hailed disproportionately from the US and continental Europe. On Vancouver Island, the weak influence of a middle class strata and business groups in Nanaimo made for a more militant socialism and polarized politics than in Victoria where more Fabian intellectuals and more families resided (Belshaw 2002).

Principal protagonists in the labor-socialist story of the century's first decade were the SPC and the TLC, which never had more than a handful of socialist senior trade unionists in eastern Canada. To the SPC, which spurned membership in the Second International, reforming capitalism with palliative half-measures meant propping up a disintegrating order; only the wholesale destruction of the wage system would do. To assure doctrinal purity, some SPC locals required candidates for membership to sit for an exam in "scientific Marxist socialism," although the party also distributed books by non-socialists (Fox 1963, 95; Grantham 1942, appendix 4; Campbell 2000). The party's *Western Clarion* spewed vituperation at the mainstream labor movement and Liberal-Labour candidates. In turn, the TLC – in which socialists were an ever-shrinking minority – refused to recognize the SPC as the political arm of the BC and Alberta labor movements despite their support for the party (Robin 1968, 69).

British Labour luminaries Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald lamented the corrosive internecine battles during their Canadian tours between 1906 and 1908. Hardie thought the SPC self-righteous and that it peddled shibboleths. MacDonald sighed:

Out here there is the nucleus for a fine Labor Party . . . men who have hitherto been Liberal and Conservative are prepared to throw their lot with an independent party of labor. But the



Socialists do not understand the position. They are grinding away at their cold aggressive academic formula about “class war,” “economic determinism,” “a class conscious proletariat,” and everyone who does not agree with them is a fakir or a scoundrel of some degree or other. This barrenness of the present Socialist propaganda is particularly noticeable in British Columbia. . . . [U]nless there is a change, only a wild, seething strife will be kept up. (cited in Robin 1968, 97)

The SPC in turn denounced MacDonald as a traitor of the working class (Robin 1968, 100–101). Eventually, the party divided between those suspect of parliaments and unions, and those who favored ameliorating workers’ conditions through legislation.

Cultural heterogeneity produced an ethnic counterpart to the SPC, the Social Democratic Party, founded at Port Arthur in 1911 and headquartered in Berlin, Ontario, (Beaulieu 2011, 34; Johnson 1975, 292). A BC manifestation had been organized as a breakaway from the SPC by Ernest and Bertha Merrill Burns in 1907 (Campbell 2000, 36). Socialist ideas attracted diverse cultural groups but while ethnicity bonded the individual groups, their common cause was socialism. Where British Marxists dominated the SPC, the SDP grounded itself mainly among continental European immigrants. Winnipeg’s SDP organized itself along cordoned-off language lines with Jewish, German, Polish, Ukrainian, and English locals (Wiseman 1985, 85). When Germany’s socialists rallied to the Kaiser’s side in the First World War the SDP, dispirited and depleted, saw its party seriously weakened. In contrast, the SPC recovered from crisis at the outbreak of war to gain in strength as the conflict in Europe (and repression at home) dragged on (Friesen 1976; Johnson 1975; Campbell 1992).

Ethnicity also found voice in the SPC however; it had an affiliated Ukrainian Socialist Federation in Edmonton and Lettish and Finnish branches in Vancouver and Rossland, respectively (Grantham, appendix 3). A pan-Canadian network of Finnish socialist clubs joined the SPC en masse in 1906, but “an excessively liberal interpretation of Marxist ideology” in the eyes of the party leadership led in 1910 to the ouster of the Toronto local. Within a year, Finns constituted the majority of the SDP membership (Lindström 1999, 519).

Xenophobic native anti-socialists tried to counter the SDP by demanding the prohibition of its foreign-language publications unless English or French translations “are published alongside the foreign text” (Cahan 1918, 31). Socialist European immigrants, depicted as dangerous foreigners by large swaths of the media, officialdom, and public opinion, had to contend as well with the prejudiced leaders of the mainstream union movement which sought to fashion an ethnically privileged working-class identity based on the “Anglo-Saxon race” (Avery 1979). Constructing an elaborate hierarchy of races deemed suitable for immigration—those of British and northwestern European stock appeared atop an ethnic pecking order with a disposable reserve army of Asian laborers at the bottom—union leaders buttressed their economic case that immigrants undermined Canadian wage rates by arguing that non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants threatened Canadian values (Goutor 2007; McKay 2008, 345–415).

### **British politics, American unions, Canadian regionalism**

Britons heavily informed early English Canadian laborism and British thinking lighted the political path of Canadian socialism. Even before Confederation, locals of British unions, such as the British Amalgamated Society of Engineers (machinists) and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, had established themselves. Most of Ontario’s early labor leaders – well over half of Toronto’s most prominent ones between the 1860s and

1890s – were immigrant Britons (Kealey 1991, 323–329). Britain’s unions contributed directly to the influx by encouraging their members, many experienced in political activism, to go abroad to work. The Provincial Workmen’s Association served as an example of the late-nineteenth century British laborist mark in relatively long-settled Nova Scotia; its candidates for political office in the 1880s were most competitive precisely in the coal-mining districts where recently arrived Britons were concentrated (McKay 1986). British economist J.A. Hobson attributed socialism in BC more to its Britons than “to agitators who come up from Washington State” (Hobson 1906, 33). The demography of Nanaimo, “the spring from which the Socialist Party of Canada first drew its inspiration and life force” according to an account in the *Western Clarion*, underlined the British connection: as late as 1921, 43 percent of its residents were British-born, the highest percentage of any Canadian city (Anon. 1906a; Canada 1921, 244).

British ideas, including Chartism, provided more nourishment in Canada than in the US (Fox 1970, 39–40). Fabianism swayed some Canadian intellectuals and the British Social Gospel served as a model for its Canadian counterpart (Allen 1973). Many of the immigrants among the more than a million Britons among the 2.25 million immigrants that landed on Canadian shores between the late 1890s and the First World War sensed acutely their working-class status. As in Australia, many transported their politics (Ward 2003, 212–217). The SPC secretary, one of the party’s many dour old country Scots, had been a member of H.M. Hyndman’s Marxist-tinged British Social Democratic Federation (SDF) (Grantham, 18 and 28). Of two dozen socialist septuagenarians interviewed in the early 1960s, many attributed their conversion to socialism to having read, in Britain, Robert Blatchford’s widely circulated and proselytizing *Clarion* after which the Canadian *Clarion* titled itself (Fox 1963).

Not cut from a single piece of ideological cloth, Canada’s British legacy was more liberal than socialist and the Liberal-Labour label expressed it; some candidates wore the brand into the 1970s. The British inheritance also included a Tory touch. H.B. Witton—the self-educated artisan and factory foreman elected MP in 1872—spoke of deference to his “natural superiors” and preached a conservative vision of class harmony between workers and industrialists (Robin 1968, 8). The Ontario Bureau of Statistics noted the cautious, conformist, and non-threatening character of organized labor: “in its unity [it] has always been conservative in the broadest and best sense of that term” (Ontario 1890: 62). Talk of morally and socially elevating working men expressed that conservatism at the CLU’s 1873 inaugural assembly as did its debate on expanding the franchise: the argument, generally, was that unionists were sober, prudent, and stable forces in the community, evidenced by many of them being property owners (Robin 1968, 14). Issues of equality or natural right were secondary.

However conservative the outlook of organized labor in late-nineteenth century Ontario, the aim of labor’s agitation—laws in aid of labor interests—was considered radical at the time. So too were some of its British exemplars such as John Burns who began his political career in the SDF but ended it as a Liberal cabinet minister, a reminder that British institutions also played their part in the early socialist story. BC’s 1903 election, which returned two Socialist members of the legislative assembly from Vancouver Island coal-mining districts, as well as a Labor MLA in a hard-rock mining district, demonstrated the pressure a tiny group could exert in a Westminster parliament. The *Western Clarion* claimed socialist leader J.H. Hawthornthwaite had “got more legislation passed in the interests of the worker than any other man in the world with like opportunity.” (Anon. 1906b). Canada’s labor and socialist circles accorded rapt attention to successful labor and socialist candidacies in BC, as well as in Australia,

New Zealand, and particularly in Britain where a substantial number of Labour MPs were elected in 1906.

As in Britain, many of Canada's early socialists adopted the language of the Fabians. Like the Webbs, they subscribed to the superior efficacy and gradual implementation of collective instruments. The CCF came to express this restrained outlook and the party's British stamp unmistakably appeared in biographical sketches of 28 of its candidates in the 1933 BC election. Three-quarters were born in Britain (one self-described as "baptized a socialist in Aberdeen"), six in Canada, one in Holland, and nary one in the US (Grantham 1942, appendix 15). The British origins of so many imparted to Canadian socialism a polish of cultural legitimacy that helped the movement immunize itself against the charge that it was a foreign ideology. American socialism could make no such claim. Indeed, the BC CCF captured one-third of the popular vote, seven seats, and formed the official opposition in its inaugural electoral contest in 1933—a position social democracy would occupy in Canada's westernmost province with only one exception (and when it was not in government) until the present.

British North Americans, willing subjects of British cultural habit, were nevertheless geographically bound to the rising American republic to their south. As Innis and Lower observed of Canadian industries, even in the pre-Confederation period, "perhaps most received their initial requirements of technical skill from the United States" (1933, 301). Americans were second only to Britons as immigrants to Canada; their ideas infused the world of labor activism, and they fed progressive currents of thought in both Victorian Ontario and the West. The utopian Knights of Labor, contemplating a cooperative brotherhood of man, had spread their tentacles to Canada with 250 organizations in 83 Ontario locales and a reported membership of over 12,000 members at their peak in 1887 (Kealey and Palmer 1982; Kennedy 1956, 39; Cook 1994, 1111).

Simultaneously reformist and radical, the Knights favored the industrial organization of all workers regardless of trade and opposed the craft unionism of the AFL, but they were less willing to use the strike weapon. After backing some labor candidates in Ontario, they faded. Revived in the 1890s, they outlived their American parent partly because Quebec's ecclesiastical authorities lifted a ukase against them after being assured that they were untainted by socialism. The Knights failed to achieve their ideal of one big union, but the idea lived on in the IWW and, later, the Canadian One Big Union. As socialism slowly permeated Britain's craft unions, American unions became associated with leftwing radicalism. Association with American organizations proved for Canadian organizations to be both beneficial and detrimental, with some attributing the demise of the Canadian IWW locals to their dependence on their American parent (Rodney 1968, 9).

Books by radical American authors such as Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Upton Sinclair, and Jack London, were widely read in Canada and leading American labor reformers such as Terence Powderly, as well as single-tax advocate George lectured to receptive Canadian audiences. At one point, Canada's best-selling socialist publication, the Socialist Party of America's weekly *Appeal to Reason*, attracted 14,000 Canadian subscribers (Steeves 1977, 18). Eugene Debs, SPA leader and a founding member of the IWW, visited Canada on a number of occasions with his "Red Special" tour of BC being particularly notable. It helped wean socialists there from a short-lived moderate provincial party to form, as he argued was imperative, "a straight-cut class-conscious socialist party, and such a party is the Socialist Party of Canada" (Anon. 1902).

Canada's socialists hoped to replicate the British political model of direct parliamentary representation while Canada's trade unions generally tracked the American model. Propinquity proved more powerful than Empire in the labor world. "How could it be

otherwise?” asked Eugene Forsey (1959, 127). Underdeveloped Canada had escaped the influence of America’s urban reform movements of the 1830s and 1840s, which had launched assemblies of local trade unions and individual reformers; they did not spread north until the 1870s. Before then however, during and after the US Civil War, it was the expansion into Canada of the Iron Molders, Coopers, Cigar-Makers, and Locomotive Engineers, followed by the shoemakers in the Knights of St. Crispin (in Quebec: les Chevaliers de Saint-Crispin), and the Railroad Conductors that led these American unions to rename themselves “International.” The Canadian labor movement, read one assessment in the 1930s, “has been dominated by American example through its whole history, modified by British and Roman Catholic (Continental) influences and patterns” (Ware 1937, 13–14).

American unionism in Canada evidenced itself in its expansion: the 52 locals of international unions in 20 locations in 1880 grew to well over a thousand locals in over 200 locales by 1902 and all the growth was in American unions, most of which were AFL affiliates (Forsey 1982, 506–508). To rationalize the subordination of Canadian locals to the international American unions, AFL president Samuel Gompers argued that “Yankee” unions were essential to counter the “Yankee capitalist” (Anon. 1900). Gompers’s AFL held back its Canadian affiliates from direct political participation for his preferred route of business unionism: appointments and favorable legislation from the established political parties (“reward your friends and punish your enemies”). This addressed the individual worker’s self-interest while socialists sought to do so in a context of comradeship, concern, and a sense of obligations to others.

Divisions within labor and socialist circles reflected and contributed to Canada’s regionalism. As Forsey observed, “Solidarity Forever . . . has sometimes been more honoured in the breach than in the observance” (1958, 70–83). Never primarily an agricultural province, BC’s corporate resource frontier offered a fertile setting for radical socialists. Its smelters, sawmills, and canneries—with concentrations of young men, few families, high incidences of industrial accidents, and rough working and living conditions—dominated the economic landscape beyond Vancouver. Ramsay MacDonald described BC as “the first Canadian province to develop the economic and political state from which labour and socialist movements like ours grow up”; Wrigley depicted it as “honeycombed with our doctrines” while “the Eastern provinces have been the slowest to move”; and Eugene Debs opined that the far west would be where “the tide of social revolution will reach its flood and thence roll into other sections” (Babcock 1974, 170). As an example of location influencing behavior, Wrigley cheered Gompers in Toronto, but organized for the anti-Gompers ALU after he moved to BC (Cook 1994, 1111–1115; Anon. 1900).

Socialists faced challenges in building a viable national political movement in a vast far-flung country where geography abetted localism. Pockets of socialists, espousing varied doctrines, largely pursued isolated courses, but so too did the commercial and industrial classes. From Australia, MacDonald observed the obstacle that sectionalism posed for a pan-Canadian labor–socialist party:

Canada could not be treated as a whole. There are three different sections in the Dominion. First there was French Canada. . . . Here the workers were organized, but on a national basis. They would have nothing to do with other parts of the Colony where the Labour movement was governed by the United States. [In] Ontario and the great western agricultural districts with its centre at Winnipeg . . . there was a strong trades union feeling but, strange to say, the governing power was situated in Washington . . . the western side of the Rocky Mountains [offered] the best prospects for the Labour party . . . for the trades union movement there was

mainly political, and British Columbia could be captured at once if the matter was gone about in the proper way. (Hopkins 1906, 304)

West coast socialism, particularly its strength and radicalism on the BC mining frontier, suggests that metropolitanism—the thesis that the spread of political ideas in Canada paralleled economic development and expanded from the eastern metropolitan centers into the country’s periphery—does not easily apply to the early socialist story (Creighton 1956). Many of Canada’s early socialists arrived as ready-made socialists from abroad. Perhaps the self-confident, self-assertive frontier mentality somewhat scornful of eastern Canada’s older society also contributed to BC socialism’s vitality.

Many Quebec and BC unions found the Ontario-anchored TLC unacceptable but for quite different reasons: French Canadians feared American influence at the expense of the church while many in BC dismissed the TLC as a timid subaltern, little more than a state federation within the AFL. Religious differences also divided BC socialists, many of whom were atheists, from Quebecers. To the SPC treasurer, “a life and death struggle between the forces of clericalism and Socialism is inevitable” and the Catholic priesthood was parasitic: “a privileged class living in luxury and ease, and giving no useful equivalent to society for the wealth they consume” (Burns 1904). Such sentiments reinforced French Canadian suspicions of socialism.

Despite the steady growth of a French Canadian wage-labor class—by 1911 less than a third of Quebecers were engaged in agriculture—papal encyclicals helped to ensure that socialism could not gain a foothold among French-Canadians. “[T]he main tenet of socialism, community of goods,” pronounced *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, “must be utterly rejected, since it only injures those whom it would seem meant to benefit” (Pope Leo XII 1891). The chasm between Quebec and the rest of the country only widened when the TLC expelled 17 bodies containing the bulk of Quebec unionists in 1902. This laid the basis for the growth of the province’s own separate Catholic Francophone union organization and its paternalistic, rarely militant locals. Launched by Church leaders in 1911, the *École sociale populaire* spread the gospel of confessional unionism and the following year, citing a recent encyclical, they established an omnibus Catholic union in Montreal (Babcock 1973, 47).

In English Canada, as in the US, the absence of an institutionalized class system and little sense of an aristocratic past militated against a sense of shared corporate identity. In Quebec, the Church perceived laissez-faire capitalism as excessively abusive but it deemed socialism as unacceptably materialist and condemned its theories of class conflict. Favoring a corporatist approach, the Church embraced Quebec’s *caisse populaires* as a moral as well as financial institution. Quebec’s *nationalistes*, according to Henri Bourassa, were “equally opposed to monopolism and socialism,” but they certainly did not fathom extending the pooling of Quebecers’ financial resources to public ownership (Bourassa 1907, 57). As for the Maritime provinces, their decelerating economies, low levels of urbanization, and conservative political culture were barriers to socialism’s growth there, notwithstanding pockets of strength among Cape Breton coal miners, industrial workers in Saint John, and Newfoundland fishers (who would join Canada later in the twentieth century) (Frank and Reilly 1979). In a flippant assessment of the region’s quiescence, Frank Underhill—his doctoral dissertation having been written on the BC labor movement—asserted that, “nothing, of course, ever happens down there,” a hyperbolically accurate, if disdainful, comparative appraisal of the early socialist story in the region (Underhill 1964, 63; also Green 1967).

## Conclusion

From its foggy origins to about 1920, Canadian socialism suffered a lack of consensus among its adherents and a dearth of indigenous ideas. Nevertheless, like a child learning to walk, it crawled, tumbled, and eventually got on its feet, unlike socialism in the US. British institutions extensively shaped early Canadian socialism and American models guided Canadian laborism. The tumultuous era of industrial transformation and expansion of resource frontiers in the last decades of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth century created a new economic order in Canada. Combined with the radical makeover of its society—population grew from fewer than five to more than eight million between 1894 and 1916—it appeared plausible to socialists that a no less radical political system, socialism, could triumph. It did not, but Canada's early socialists had laid the ground for the blossoming of more stable and national challenges to the country's liberal order.

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