

IN DEPTH: “THE DEFINITIVE ANALYSIS” OF CANADA’S 1911 RECIPROCITY ELECTION

Historian Jack Granatstein has called the election campaign in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* “the definitive analysis”¹³⁰ of Canada’s 1911 federal election. This election pitted Sir Wilfred Laurier’s Liberals against Robert Borden’s Conservatives. The Liberals had been in power for 15 years, and were seeking a fourth mandate. When the writ was dropped, the Liberals held 133 seats in the 221-seat House of Commons. The Conservatives held 85.

The major election issue in 1911 was an all-encompassing trade agreement the Liberal government negotiated with the United States. The agreement—known as Reciprocity—was to open up trade between Canada and the United States, largely at the expense of inter-Canadian trade and trade with the British Empire. Canadians initially embraced the deal. However, by the time the agreement was put to the House of Commons for debate and vote, public support for it was faltering. Because the Liberals had a majority in the House of Commons, the only way the Conservatives could stop the vote was by waging a filibuster. A filibuster is a method of stalling legislative procedures by indefinitely dragging on debate about it. Faced with a paralysed parliament, Laurier asked the Governor General for an early election. The Governor General agreed, and the writ was dropped. While several issues were at play in the campaign, the key question was the Reciprocity agreement. The agreement was framed as a question of whether Canada would remain part of the British Empire, or be pulled into the orbit of the United States.

The fictional election in *Sunshine Sketches* is much like the 1911 Reciprocity election. *Sketches’* election chapters open with the statement that:

It was a huge election and that on it turned issues of the most tremendous importance, such as whether or not Mariposa should become part of the United States, and whether the flag that had waved over the school house at Tecumseh Township for ten centuries should be trampled under the hoof of an alien invader, and whether Britons should be slaves, and whether the farming class would prove themselves Canadians” (155).

This opening is similar to the Conservative Party’s 1911 campaign manifesto. The manifesto included a statement from Robert Borden that said:

We pledge ourselves to a course of policy and administration which will maintain independent and unimpaired the control of our own affairs by the Parliament of Canada: a policy which, while affording no just cause of complaint to any foreign nation will find its highest ideal in the autonomous development of Canada as a nation within the British Empire.

In the past we have made a great sacrifice to further our national ideals; we are now face to face with a misguided attempt to throw away the result of these sacrifices.¹³¹

130 Granatstein, Jack. *Yankee Go Home? Canadians and Anti-Americanism*. HarperCollins, 1997, p. 43.

131 “Mr. Borden Issues a Manifesto to Canada.” *The Ottawa Journal*, 15 August 1911, p. 12.

Just as in *Sunshine Sketches*, the 1911 election was presented to voters as being about the preservation of Canada.

The rhetoric about Reciprocity and our national identity during the 1911 election was heated. The front page headline of the September 21 Toronto *World* blazed “Which will it be? Borden and King George or Laurier and President Taft?”¹³². Such headlines reflected the fears that Reciprocity was a path to annexation by the United States. These fears were inflamed by statements coming from American political leaders. Champ Clark, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, speculated that Reciprocity was the beginning of the end of Canada. In a speech that was well-received by American lawmakers, Clark said “I look forward to the time when the American flag will fly over every square foot of British North America up to the North Pole”¹³³. As well, US House of Representatives member William Bennett introduced a resolution that the United States should begin talks with Britain on how to annex Canada¹³⁴. Because Bennett was opposed to Reciprocity, people have speculated that he did this only to inflame Canadians. These actions from American lawmakers helped the Conservatives paint themselves as defending Canada and its British connection from hostile and invasive American forces.

In this battle, Canadian corporations and farmers tended to line up with whatever side best-suited their financial interests. The powerful railways and banks supported the Conservative Party. To them, Reciprocity would shift trade to a north-south pattern. This would break down the east-west trade routes that the government had created, the railways built up, and the banks financed. The same was true for Canadian meat packers who did not believe they could compete with American competitors. Grain millers also opposed Reciprocity because they feared that grain would be shipped south and milled in the United States. Canadian fruit growers, also at a distinct disadvantage to their American counterparts, opposed Reciprocity. On the other hand, the most notable proponents of Reciprocity were western grain farmers. Western grain farmers relied on central and eastern Canada to sell their grain. They believed that freer trade with the United States would open up new markets and reduce their transportation costs.

With all the talk of the changes in the trade of goods, people were wondering what would happen to the price of goods. Reciprocity’s proponents said that the agreement would drive up the prices of raw materials to the benefit of Canadian producers. However, they also argued that Reciprocity would drive down the price of consumer goods. There may be economic merit to this argument. However, the premise that the prices of raw goods would go up while the prices of end-product would go down defied the “common sense” of most voters. The complexities of this debate was not helped by each side flooding newspapers with statistics about the comparative prices of commodities on both sides of the border. A similar thing happened in Leacock’s Mariposa, satirically twisted by comparing unrelated goods. The *Mariposa Newspacket* “absolutely proved that the price of hogs in Mariposa was decimal six higher than the price of oranges in Southern California and the average decennial import of eggs into Missinaba County had increased four decimal six eight two in the last fifteen years more than the import of lemons in New Orleans”

132 qtd. in Macquarrie, Heath. “Robert Borden and the Election of 1911.” *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, vol. 25, no. 3, August 1959, p. 278.

133 qtd. in Allan, Chantal. *Bomb Canada: And Other Unkind Remarks in the American Media*. Athabasca UP, 2009, p. 17.

134 Allan, 18.

(172). In Canada and especially in Mariposa, everyone had an opinion but very few people actually knew what they were talking about.

While the Reciprocity agreement was the major focus of the 1911 campaign, it was not the only issue discussed. There was also a major anti-patronage theme to the campaign. At the time, virtually every government job and contract was given to supporters of the political party in power. Because the Liberals had been in power federally since 1886, by 1911 they had built up considerable leverage through their patronage. Just as John Henry Bagshaw says in *Sunshine Sketches*, “we gave out enough contracts to simply pervert the whole constituency... we poured the public money into this county in bucketsful and that we are bound to do it again” (165). It was independent candidate Edward Drone who took up the anti-patronage cause in *Sunshine Sketches*, but in the federal election it was the Conservatives who took up the cause. However, the Conservative stance against patronage was “a major irony” because provincial Conservative governments in Manitoba, Ontario, and BC were engaged in rampant patronage themselves. In fact, these provincial governments used their patronage appointees to come to the aid of their federal Conservative counterparts during the election campaign¹³⁵.

Especially in Quebec, another major issue was Imperial defence. The establishment of a Canadian navy through the *Naval Service Bill* was controversial throughout Canada. Quebec nationalists feared the creation of a Canadian Navy would allow too much British interference over Canadian affairs, as a Canadian Navy would be at the beck and call of Great Britain. Conversely, many Conservatives in the rest of Canada argued that an independent navy was a step away from the Imperial connection with Britain. As Laurier lamented, “I’m branded in Quebec as a traitor to the French. And in Ontario as a traitor to the English. In Quebec I’m attacked as an Imperialist, and in Ontario as an anti-Imperialist”¹³⁶. The issue of Imperial defence also appeared in Mariposa, and Josh Smith had no idea what to do about it. He simply defaulted to the position that “I’m fer it too” (171) upon learning that the Conservatives in Ottawa were in favour of it.

In the end, there were several issues at play in the 1911 election, but the focus was on Canada’s future as either a member of the British Commonwealth or a satellite of the United States. After the votes were counted, Robert Borden became Prime Minister as the Liberals and Conservatives switched positions in the House of Commons. The Liberals won 85 seats, the Conservatives 132. Four seats went to independent candidates. Despite the huge shift in seat counts and the heated rhetoric of the campaign, there was only a 6% swing in the popular vote from the Liberals to the Conservatives. Nevertheless, the 1911 election is still viewed as one of the most important in Canadian history. Many scholars believe that Reciprocity “played the decisive role”¹³⁷. The election entrenched Canada’s loyalty to the British Empire for years to come, and in many ways entrenched a view that Canada must remain independent of the United States. As Robert Borden said, “We must decide if the spirit of Canadianism or Continentalism shall prevail on the northern half of the continent”¹³⁸.

135 Johnston, Richard and Michael B. Percy. “Reciprocity, Imperial Sentiment, and Party Politics in the 1911 Election.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 13, no. 4, December 1980, p. 722.

136 qtd. in “The 1911 Federal Election.” *Telling Times*, CPAC, 2007. www.youtube.com/watch?v=az3sxlMvzpQ, 5:36

137 Macquarrie, 283.

138 Borden, Robert. *His Memoirs, Volume 1*, McClelland and Stewart, 1969, p. 157.



DISCUSS

1. In Mariposa, voters blindly repeated meaningless statistics instead of deeply-considering facts:

I suppose there was no place in the whole Dominion where the trade question—the Reciprocity question—was threshed out quite so thoroughly and in quite such a national patriotic spirit as in Mariposa. For a month, at least, people talked of nothing else. A man would stop another in the street and tell him that he had read last night that the average price of an egg in New York was decimal ought one more than the price of an egg in Mariposa, and the other man would stop the first one later in the day and tell him that the average price of a hog in Idaho was point six of a cent per pound less (or more, — he couldn't remember which for the moment) than the average price of beef in Mariposa.

People lived on figures of this sort, and the man who could remember most of them stood out as a born leader. (173)

The kind of behaviour—blindly repeating statistics with no broader context—is contrary to the idea of critical thinking. According to Robert Reich:

Critical thinking means not accepting what you are simply told or what you read or what you hear, but looking behind it. Asking whether it sounds real, whether it sounds logical and coherent. Critical thinking also means not to accept any conspiracy theory or plot you might hear, but actually look for evidence. Critical thinking means to look for facts and analysis and logic. And that is I think what all of us are obliged to do.¹³⁹

- a) Do we tend to parrot the claims of individuals we agree with, without looking into the facts they are presenting?
- b) How can we verify the information we consume?
- c) Can a democracy properly function if voters do not engage in critical thinking?

2. Mariposans often act in self-interest rather than broader public interest:

Here and there you might see Edward Drone, the Independent candidate, wandering round from farm to farm in the dust of the political buggies. To each of the farmers he explained that he pledged himself to give no bribes, to spend no money and to offer no jobs, and each one of them gripped him warmly by the hand and showed him the way to the next farm. (172-173)

- a) Do you think voters view their own personal gains as more important than the broader interests of society?
- b) What is the risk to society if people fail to consider interests outside their immediate sphere?
- c) Why must the common good be a central feature of democracy?

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“The Rise of the Anti-Establishment: Where do we go from Here?” *Ideas*. CBC Radio One. www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-rise-of-the-anti-establishment-where-do-we-go-from-here-1.4077287, 37:30