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**The Canadian National Identity “at a Crossroads”:**

**Ideological Disputes in the Last Third of the 19th Century**

**Abstract**

This article analyzes the state of social and political thought of the Dominion of Canada in the last third of the 19th century in the context of ideological debates between conservative British imperialism proponents and liberal pro-American continentalism supporters. The research reveals the positive role of both ideological trends in the process of consolidating the Canadian society through the national identity construction and its self-determination in the system of international relations by the beginning of the 20th century.

**Key words:** national identity, the Dominion of Canada, British imperialism, continentalism, Goldwin Smith.

In the last third of the 19th century dynamically developing Canada (British North America) became one of the most significant components of the British Empire. Such a situation was reached due to its huge economic capacity (especially in terms of natural resources and uncharted lands), temperate climate attracting new motivated immigrants from Britain and continental Europe and advantageous geopolitical position that enabled the Crown to steer and guard commercial transactions in the northern waters of both Pacific and Atlantic oceans. All these circumstances prepared the necessary preconditions for peaceful “importation” of the Westminster system institutional framework. But what could be the appropriate national ideology underlying the new political entity? This question was to be answered by the Canadian statesmen, social activists and publicists.

In this article the following objectives are set:

1. to identify the specificity of the mainstream ideological line (conservative British imperialism) and the opposite train of thought (liberal pro-American continentalism) that existed in the Canadian society of that time;
2. to estimate the effect of the ideological debate on the national identity formation by the beginning of the 20th century.

The relevance of this topic stems from the controversial character of the identity phenomenon in the political and intellectual history of Canada. The research carried out within the framework of historical approach supplemented with political textual analysis reveals the positive role of both ideological trends in the process of consolidating the Canadian society and its self-determination in the system of international relations.

The article consists of three parts:

1. the introductory part which outlines the general historical context;
2. the main part including:

* development of the Canadian model of British imperialism;
* development of the continentalist theory of G. Smith;

1. the final part which contains the conclusions about significance of two ideological projects in the Canadian national identity construction.

In 1867 Queen Victoria (1819–1901) signed the British North America Act, which declared the new legal status of Canada as the autonomous dominion remaining within the jurisdiction of the Empire. This reflected the centripetal forces triumph in the public opinion of the British North American colonies: Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and the Province of Canada (Ontario and Quebec). Twenty five years later the clerk-assistant of the Canadian Parliament House of Commons John G. Bourinot (1836–1902) in his article “The English Character of Canadian Institutions” highlighted that the creation of the Canadian Federal Union made all the conditions for future material and spiritual flourishing thanks to its English basic tenets and, moreover, finally eliminated the danger of secession [Bourinot, 1892]. Politicians and journalists on the other side of Atlantic were also committed to this positive view.

However, the evolutional way of Canada was not smooth and straightforward at all. The formation of the Dominion gave a higher profile to the complicated issue of the national identity. The Dominion political elites clearly understood the need for a new consolidating ideology, which could guarantee the sustainable progress of the country in new historical context [Nokhrin, 2012]. The Canadian authorities and society faced the identity dilemma, which solution laid in the choice between imperialism and continentalism.

The public discourse of that period was filled with enthusiasm and excitement about first demographic and economic success. Canada did manage to defend its territorial security exploring and settling north-western lands and prove its political validity as well. Against the background of these achievements the question of relations with the British Empire came to the fore on the political agenda. On the 20th of January, 1880, at the Third Ordinary General Meeting of the Royal Colonial Institute Session the Honorary Secretary Sir Frederick Young (1817–1913) read out the text “The National Development of Canada” written by J. G. Bourinot. This paper contained the following remarkable sentence: “For some years past, ever since the establishment of the Federal Union, the attention of the statesmen and the publicists of England has been directed to the development of her Premier Colony” [Bourinot, 1880: 91]. Its message showed that Canadians were flattered by the metropolis great attention and, realizing the increased importance of their Motherland, wanted the Dominion to become a prominent member of the British Empire. The first Prime Minister of Canada John A. Macdonald (1815–1891) was convinced that the Federal Union became the custodian of the British interests in North America; consequently, the Dominion administration should be involved in fashioning common imperial politics. Thus, this Canadian version of the “adapted” British imperialism served as the specific way of the national pride expression.

Meanwhile, despite the apparent weaknesses (absence of the rights to conclude contracts and naturalize immigrants, a probable military threat) hanging like the sword of Damocles over Canada, London did not seem to undertake any robust measures to reform the Empire organization. This provoked the wave of public discontent in the Federal Union. The member of the Canadian House of Commons G. Cunningham lamented that such relations could be suitable for a small colony but not for the vast dominion with the potential to become a great nation in the future [Cunningham, 1880]. The preservation of “outdated” imperial methods of governance coupled with loosening of bonds between the metropolis and the Dominion bore the risk of separatism. In order to prevent a possible declaration of Canadian independence the idea of Imperial Federation was suggested. This project implied the wise combination of political, customs and military alliances based on the mental unity of the Anglo-Saxon people. The aspirations of Canadians were connected with the opportunity of their interests representation on the state level: either some Canadian deputies would be allowed to sit in the British Parliament (which was unlikely) or a new imperial representative or at least deliberative body with empowered delegates from the United Kingdom and its settler colonies would be set up[Mathews, 1872]. With regard to economy, Canada was considered to specialize on forest and food export getting high-tech goods in return. The Canadian political circles perceived the commonality of economic and trade interests as the ground for political unity of all parts of Great Britain. In addition, they had a special stake in organizing the common army for imperial safety maintenance [Jarvis, 1880].

The described project started its implementation in 1884 when the Imperial Federation League was founded in London. Soon its branch comprising local politicians, businessmen and other public figures was set up in Canada. The first official opportunity for the Dominion to take a clear stance on the matter of imperial reformation appeared in 1887 because of the League’s intention to hold an ad hoc conference. The Executive Committee of the Canadian branch emphasized that all autonomies should assume the costs of the imperial defense and have a constitutional right to shape the external politics together with the United Kingdom. However, the Canadian delegation sent to London did not share the concern about the imperial defense issue because J. A. Macdonald’s government did not view the possibility of war against the USA as plausible. The representatives who reasonably did not believe that the Crown would agree to change the model of relations inside the Empire were more interested in economic cooperation with the metropolis (the transatlantic telegraph cable and intensified communication flows to the New World) aiming to restrict the U.S. influence in Canada. Furthermore, in April 1892 the Canadian Parliament offered the UK to impose some protectionist restrictions but the Westminster continued free trade policy.

In spite of the new failure in 1892 because of English political class unwillingness to establish any coordinative institution, Canadians did not refuse from the idea of political integration. The publicist Sir George R. Parkin (1846–1922) saw in the Imperial Federation the union of free related nations for harmonized actions for the common benefit. Besides, this federation could safeguard Canada from dependence on the powerful neighbour — the USA [Parkin, 1892].

However, there was another and totally different trend in the Canadian intellectual discourse of that time — *continentalism* which, on the contrary, advocated a close collaboration with the United States of America up to the full integration with this country. Though the long known design of the continental alliance was “frozen” due to the formation of the Dominion loyal to the British Empire, business elites still cherished a dream of mutual customs duties abolition between Canada and the USA. In turn, the American-Canadian Trade Commissioner of the U.S. Congress claimed that no economic agreements with Canada would be made until it remains under the British jurisdiction [Lindsey, 1872].

In such an atmosphere liberal thinker Goldwin Smith (1823–1910) who lived in Toronto since 1871 came up with his anti-mainstream ideas. Being a devoted Canadian nationalist, G. Smith in his work “The Political Destiny of Canada” denied the necessity of traditional imperial links conservation. In his opinion, there are four “great forces” which “make for the political separation of the New from the Old World”:

1. the geographical distance between the continents;
2. the divergence of political and economic interests;
3. the divergence of social and political institutions character;
4. the cultural closeness and attraction of “the great American community” bordering Canada.

The publicist thought that the blood, language and historical affinity does not depend on the political connection, therefore it would not weaken in the case of severance. In its turn, all speculations about the necessity of strong links with the UK benefited only certain selfish or misguided social groups such as aristocracy, clergy, officers, English immigrants, etc. Thus, the author supposed that complete independence (self-government) of Canada is the only positive option for the national prosperity [Smith, 1878].

In the middle of the 1880s G. Smith’s political views transformed into pure continentalism. The publicist became the proponent of the Canadian-American merger which would make the economy of North America soaring and amplify the continental security [Smith, 1891]. For his part, conservative J. A. Macdonald announced to discredit his opponent that the USA were plotting to annex the Federal Union. That ingenious political maneuver helped him to win the elections in 1891. Canadians voted for the Empire and against the “anti-patriotic” continental alliance. Afterwards the rhetoric of continentalists remained similar but could not find support among political elites anymore. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 20th century G. Smith expressed the hope that someday a mass migration of Americans to Canada will erase the meaningless frontiers dividing two nations of North America [Smith, 1904].

Thus, the Canadian arduous way towards its political existence as a nation was between pro-British imperialism and pro-American continentalism. It can be concluded that during the last third of the 19th century the Canadian political thought recognizing the uniqueness of the Dominion was striving to find the national identity in the inextricable link between Canada and the whole British Empire in the form of the Imperial Federation project. Such “imperialism” demonstrated the will of the Canadian Federal Union to act as the unalienable, original and self-worth part of Great Britain. On the other hand, the political theory of continentalism notwithstanding its historical failure had also played an important role in the formation of the Canadian identity. Being explicitly counter to the official ideological line the teaching of G. Smith urged the Canadian citizens, who were unwilling to integrate with the USA, to rally behind realizing the commonality of their destinies and incited the government to struggle against the U.S. expansion. In the end, despite frequent proposals of business elites and various continentalist projects oriented at either partial or complete integration with the USA, the Canadians in general were more concerned about equitable partnership with the UK stressing that their own national interests could not be reduced to the English ones anymore [Nokhrin, 2012].

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