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The Psychology of Western Canada

BY ROBERT C. WALLACE.

CHAIRMAN NORMAN CAUDWELL:—Dr. Wallace, honoured guests and gentlemen of the Canadian Club. The club is very honoured in having as guest speaker today Dr. Wallace, the recently appointed Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University. In view of the fact that recent events have focussed public opinion on Western Canada it is most appropriate that the subject matter chosen by Mr. Wallace should be what it is. He has held many important positions in Western Canada, more recently that of Principal of the University of Alberta. It is obvious therefore that he speaks with authority on his subject, and it gives me very great pleasure to call on him to address you.

DR. WALLACE:—Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen: I appreciate greatly the honour of addressing the Canadian Club, and have chosen a subject which may have interest and value to the members of this club mainly because of a fairly long residence in Western Canada, and my interest in the movements that have taken place in that part of the country.

I have used as the title of my address "The Psychology of Western Canada". By inference that means that there is a different psychology in different parts of Canada, and that while we speak of the Canadian Spirit and the Canadian Culture we cannot fail to realize that there is no central spirit or culture in this country. That this is so is from geographical reasons. In such a widely spread country as ours people have widely differing backgrounds, but in time one will develop from the natural culture of the different parts of the country, and the various strands of many colours will bind themselves into one rope that will be a true Canadian culture eventually.

I have not had the pleasure of living in the Maritimes,

but I have known as personal friends many people from the Maritime Provinces, and I have no hesitation in saying—as one who himself lived by the sea—that people who have lived by the sea are different from those who have not so lived in their younger days. There is an insidious something that comes from relationship to the Ocean that leaves a sense of the Eternal throughout one's life. All the Maritimers I have known have felt that experience in their lives.

When one gets to know the province of Ontario one finds that something has grown because pioneering days are over and an established system has been built up. There is a relative conservatism—not in a political sense—which is characteristic of this part of the country.

Any of you who know the North know that there has been built up in those vast spaces something that is of extraordinary value to Canada, something very fine in a whitebound nature that makes no concessions, which visits every mistake on its maker immediately and in the direct way, and yet which somehow brings out the best in human nature, making men sincere and honest. Those of us who know the North well are eternally grateful for the experience. The East is much milder, but its people in sincerity and outspokenness are not behind their brothers of the vast north country.

When we turn to the west coast we find that something has grown up amongst the people who look out over the Pacific, something quite different from what has arisen on the Atlantic seaboard. It is a sense of great distances that is missing in the East, and the people of British Columbia find they have an interest in the Orient, whose problems are daily coming nearer to Canada.

The difficulties and problems of the prairies are fairly close to us and it is of them that I should like to speak. There is something quite distinctive that grows on one in the West, something that comes in part from the fact, that from May or June on to the middle of September, the gaze is focussed tensely, and with troubled eye, on the harvest fields and what may come of them at the time of reaping—a tense feeling that grows on one summer by summer—something that focusses the view close at hand rather than on long distances. I have never seen such a feeling of de-

pression as that that comes on the prairies, and I speak on this matter with a certain amount of feeling. There is as well on the prairies a feeling of inability to control the elements which are so important to these people from an economic standpoint. It is because they are faced with so much that is beyond their control, so much that happens entirely independently of them that there has grown up among them a sort of sense of futility and inability. And yet with it all they come up with an enthusiasm and freshness year by year and spring by spring that one cannot account for, except that they are a pioneer people, accustomed to facing difficulties with hope and courage. That in the type of people about whom you have heard so much in recent months.

I am not going to speak of recent happenings. I think those things will work themselves out sanely and wisely, and there is no advantage to be gained by discussing them here today. What I want to do rather is to try to give you some kind of a background which is so much more important than particular occurrences of the moment.

I read a couple of years ago a book which I think all of us ought to read. It is called "*The Populace Movement*" and is written by a member of the staff of the University of Minnesota. It describes movements which have taken place in the middle West since the "seventies". It goes back half a century, and I found nothing in it that has not been repeated in Western Canada in the last twenty-five years. We must not forget that the farming difficulties, which western Canada has passed through, have been gone through over a longer period of time by the people of the United States, ever since the time when Britain realized that, with the development of these plains, she was no longer a grower but a buyer of wheat for her own people.

Through it all there has always been a feeling in the West that the rest of the country did not understand—or wish to understand—that here was a group of pioneers with the cards stacked against them, who, unless they could persuade the State that certain things should be done, such as the lowering of freight rates and the provision of better elevator facilities, they could not go on. But they have gone on, though always with a sense of having their backs

to the wall, particularly in such times of depression as in the "seventies", the "nineties", before the war, again to some extent in 1920, and more recently during the past six years.

But what we have seen in Canada has simply been a repetition of events that have taken place in the western states, and men went there from countries where those same battles had all been staged before, and similar fights had been won and lost. Something that we must not fail to remember is that the developments of the middle West of the United States have given us much that is of help; have shown us things to avoid, and things to take advantage of.

It is quite clear from the history of a continent such as ours and a country such as Canada—if history means anything at all—that there will be periods of depression following on periods of prosperity; and that when in periods of depression people are forced with their backs to the wall, it will not be the voice of reason that will prevail, but rather the voices of feeling, emotion and prejudice. And we must realize that we shall never be able to train ourselves always to be rational, because there are things in our lives that are not rational things—that are things of faith rather than things of reason and we shall be impelled from time to time by forces that are not the forces of our mental development at all. In the main we may hope that a balanced mind would be the guide, but I for one would feel rather hopeless, if that were all we had. If we were entirely rational human beings, there would be a great deal that is beautiful and fine that would disappear from our lives.

I don't think that any of you would want to place everything primarily on a basis of human reason. Certainly I would not. And I would like to point out that in times of difficulty and stress and despondency reason is not likely to prevail, nor need utilitarians expect it to do so. If you wish people to be in the main reasonable, you have to provide that they are not pushed with their backs to the wall too frequently. There is no other way.

New difficulties that arose in Western Canada in the last period were caused mainly by the fact that at the time of the depression that particular commodity, that holds up western Canada, was affected more deeply and more rapidly than anything else, and by something entirely beyond the control of the people themselves. But throughout it all a

great deal of optimism was shared by East and West alike. A great deal was done to ease the situation that might not have been done in other times. Much money was spent, with the good will of all Canada. We were all in it together, no one more guilty than another, and we all looked for real returns.

The disaster came almost overnight, and, lasting over a period of years, made many people feel there was no hope in the future. They could not see that there was any chance in the world of getting out of the load of indebtedness. It was that belief, and an inability to see a way through, that possessed the West, and more particularly the Western part of the West. That was the situation. Nobody could blame anyone else for it. It is true that the farmers lost a great deal of money in the crash of '29, but they were no more to blame than others who lost money on the stock market.

But when they were faced with real difficulties they saw no way out, and political parties that said the only thing to do, was to hold on, naturally met no response from their hearts. It seems to me that, when we have cleared up the difficulties of the present, we should look forward to the future to see if there is no way out, when these recurring depressions come—for they will recur again, as they have in the past. There must be constructive policies because we cannot permit any one part of the country to go down.

There have been very great efforts made to meet individual cases of need, and also, on the part of the government, to bring relief to cases of the farmer creditor income type, and where individuals were dealt with—with good will on both sides—satisfactory arrangements have been made. That was excellent. Unfortunately there were so many cases and so few powers that it was not given quick enough to avoid other types of legislation, that would not have come about, had the situation been overcome sufficiently quickly.

With reference to the future, now that we are beginning to climb out. What will help Western Canada as well as the rest of the country? How shall we direct our steps so that twenty-five years from now, when a depression takes place again, we may be better able to meet it? That is a problem that should make us all think.

Some say it cannot be done except through another

social system. I don't know whether that is right or not, but I think that ways and means will be tried under our present system.

I am suggesting, very diffidently, because I am not a financial man, that the present form of long term investments in Western Canada is too static and inelastic for that country. A twenty or twenty-five year period of definite agreement, with a set interest rate, does not meet the needs of the country. If it were possible to arrange, I would like to see agreements made whereby a percentage of the value of a crop could be taken as rental, or as part payment of a debt. I wonder if it would be possible to arrange long term loans on that basis so that the good could be taken with the bad—both creditor and debtor benefitting in the good times and suffering together in the bad. It may not be easy to arrange, but the idea seems sound, for after all we are all partners together, and partners should share alike both in good times and evil. I am told there are other ways such as long term loans of the callable type. I do not really care about the details of how the thing can be done, but we shall be very lax indeed if we go into a period of prosperity without making sure that, when the next depression comes, we shall be better able to meet it than we were last time.

I have just been reading a book—"Life is an Adventure"—by the Hon. R. J. Manion. In it he faces up to the problem and says that he would like to see a percentage of the national income set aside each year to serve when depression years come.

I am not sufficiently sanguine to think that any government would go so far as to budget to set aside income as resources, and then face an election on the policy. It would be a very sound policy, but they can only go so far as you and I will permit them; and we have not yet been convinced that such a course is necessary.

But something must be done to ensure that never again will any part of the country find itself with such a load of debt that the people see no future for themselves or their children. We must regard Canada as a whole and realize that the welfare of one part is dependent on the welfare of the other parts, and see to it, that we use times that are good to help us over times that are bad.

It should be possible for our governments to arrange that public works could be organized so that when times are again so bad, that private business does not feel happy about embarking on projects of construction, they can step into the picture and stimulate public welfare by supplementing the things that private industry would ordinarily carry out.

State services, because of their collective quality, can do things that private business cannot do, and in times of depression there are things that only the state should direct and control.

I have said very little about the practical side of the situation because I consider the background so much more important. But whatever you may think or I may think, there has been a great amount of lack of understanding shown in newspaper writing about it all. Only practical results have been discussed and not backgrounds.

For everything that happens there is a cause, and it is causes that we have to seek. There is no point in recriminations. The thing to do is to use the knowledge and experience we have gained in order that we may go forward into the future with a full knowledge of what may happen, and use our full experience to develop measures for the general good.

One thing that has hurt me somewhat has been the criticism of the amount of money spent on education in the West. I do not think that pioneer people should be placed in a position where their educational facilities are not at least reasonably as good as those in the older parts of the country, and I think that such criticisms was ill-timed and ill-judged.

In the long run we will come out of our troubles for our younger people will realize the difficulties of the situation, because their minds are trained to look at facts clearly, viewing things without emotion but with that deeper feeling that should guide us as a Canadian people.

CHAIRMAN CAUDWELL:—Mr. Wallace, we are deeply indebted to you for this instructive address, and now I wish to congratulate you on being appointed head of Queen's University, and our congratulations to Queen's University on having such a man at its head.