

(November 14)

The Depopulation and Impoverishment of Rural Ontario.

BY MR. GORDON WALDRON.*

ADDRESSING the Canadian Club on the subject, "The Depopulation and Impoverishment of Rural Ontario," Mr. Gordon Waldron said:

*Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Canadian Club,—*I have noted from time to time the almost unbroken procession of distinguished foreigners who have been diverting your attention from the problems of Canada to those of Europe and Asia, and I have been fearful that I might not in this forum say the things to which your ears have been by long practice attuned. But as you are doubtless good Canadians, I may, I hope, entreat your indulgent attention while for a few minutes I discuss the very pressing home problem which I call the depopulation and impoverishment of rural Ontario.

That rural Ontario is now undergoing an experience which may without misuse of language be called depopulation and impoverishment, I have no doubt. For fifty years, we have been familiar with the drain of the exodus, which twenty years ago we did not hesitate to avow was sapping our national life and threatening our very existence. The magnitude of the exodus was never fully disclosed by the United States census returns, from which we learn that in 1860 the number of Canadians in that country, acknowledging their origin, was 249,970, in 1880, 717,157, and in 1900, 1,183,225. These figures do not include the emigration of those who had entered Canada as immigrants. In 1890, Mr. John Charlton, a careful authority, stated in the House of Commons that more than half the immigrants arriving in Canada ultimately found their way to the United States. It may be noted that the whole immigration into Canada from 1820 to 1890 has been authoritatively estimated at fully 3,000,000.

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Our own census returns tell us that for thirty years population has made relatively little progress. From 1891 to 1901, Prince Edward Island lost 6,000, New Brunswick gained 10,000, Nova Scotia gained 9,000, and Ontario, the banner Province, the garden of Canada, the keystone of Confederation, as we vainly boast, gained only 68,000, and that notwithstanding all our efforts to promote immigration. At this moment we are discussing a proposal to turn the three Maritime Provinces into one. Why? Is it not a confession of depopulation and impoverishment—a confession that, in the restraints of Confederation, these provinces have bled their life away?

That exodus went largely from Ontario and in the main from the land. It was in the main an exodus of farmers.

Now there is a change. We no longer talk of the exodus. It is, we say, Canada's growing time, Canada's century. We are, we boast, annexing the United States. Yet, painful as it is to disturb a pleasant delusion, it must be said that there is still an exodus so large that without a compensating immigration into the Northwest, we could not possibly long survive. On turning to the public reports, I find that notwithstanding all our confidence and buoyancy, seventy thousand persons left Canada last year to make their home in the United States. That is very disquieting, notwithstanding the compensating inflow into the Northwest. Seventy thousand is for us a good number. It is one in every hundred of our population, taking that at the very liberal estimate of seven millions.

These people went, it may be assumed, from the old Provinces east of Lake Superior. I do not know if the Maritime Provinces are still able to contribute to an exodus. We do know that the superintendent of colonization for Quebec lately reported that 10,000 persons left sixty rural parishes in that Province last year to reside in the United States. How greatly Ontario contributed it is impossible to say.

Wherever that exodus went from, I may venture to say in the presence of manufacturers unable to fill their orders from the West for lack of labor, that it did not go from the cities and towns of Ontario. It was an exodus from the land—an exodus of farmers.

But let me confine myself to rural Ontario. There, the evidence of depopulation and impoverishment is so plain that I am sure that you have all noted it. Unrepaired buildings and fences, neglected orchards, ill-cultivated land, land turned to pasture and in effect abandoned, the disappearance of the farm laborers and their dwellings, the fall in land values and the very

significant fact that farm production has not appreciably responded to an extended period of high prices.

Should opinion differ as to these evidences of depopulation and impoverishment, no one can deny the force of the evidence furnished by the official reports of the Province. There is first the birthrate. Excluding from the population of the Province the eighteen cities and fifteen towns having a population of more than 5,000, I find that the birthrate in the rural districts and villages and towns under 5,000 is under twenty-two per thousand. Although I have not been able to abstract the birthrate of the purely rural population, we may learn the facts pretty accurately by noting the figures in such counties as have no considerable manufacturing industries and no towns over 5,000. In the year 1907, the birthrate in the county of Frontenac was 18.4, in Haldimand 18.7, in Huron 18.5, in Lambton 18.5, in Lanark 18.4, in Northumberland and Durham 18.4, in Prince Edward 17.6, in Peel 17.4, in Lennox and Addington 17, and in Dufferin 15.8. In most of these counties there is one town or more. If we could exclude these and the incorporated villages, we should find, I am sure, extended rural areas where the birthrate has fallen to 14 or lower, and scarcely exceeds the death rate. That, on the other hand, the birthrate in our eighteen cities should be 27.9, and in the fifteen towns over 5,000 25.3 per thousand is in itself a demonstration of depopulation and impoverishment which by its mere assertion confounds and humiliates our bragging complacency.

There are the schools, which thirty years ago had fifty to seventy-five pupils, and now have but a mere handful. It is important to observe that the young men will not teach and that the schools are falling into the hands of young girls. The Bowmanville Statesman says that within a radius of twenty miles of that town, in the old banner county of Durham, there are thirty-four schools which have for teaching this term young girls, who are teaching on permits or what are now called temporary certificates. The Draconian bureaucracy of the Education Department, blind to the conditions with which it has to deal, finds or will soon find its well-intended efforts to sustain a high level of rural education fail.

But more startling, perhaps, are the official statements as to the movement of the rural population in this Province. Often, in the older counties, at least, the rural population has fallen to the level of what it was in 1865, thirty to forty years after settlement, or lower. During the past eight years, the rural population of the whole Province, despite immigration which has been considerable, despite the new settlements to the north

which have been considerable, and despite the natural increase or difference between births and deaths, which is doubtless appreciable, has fallen off 63,000. In 1872, the rural population of Perth was 31,000; it is now 26,000. In the same year, the rural population of Norfolk was 25,000; it is now 19,000. In 1872, the rural population of Huron was 50,387, it is now 36,567, a loss of nearly 14,000. In 1881, rural Middlesex numbered 53,000; it is now less than 40,000.

In our cities and towns, we have a gratifying natural increase of roughly ten in the thousand. Had Huron kept all its population to this day, while increasing at a similar rate, its rural population would now be not 36,000 but 70,000.

There remain the figures as to the comparative movement of rural and urban population. Mr. C. C. James is my authority. From 1888 to 1908 the rural population fell off 86,000, while during the same period the urban population increased 450,000. From 1898 to 1908, the rural population decreased nearly 64,000, while the urban population increased 306,818. This enormous exodus of farmers went in the main not to the cities, but beyond the limits of the Province. Rural Ontario has not, as I have no doubt most of you assume, been depopulated by the attractions of our own cities. If the whole rural decrease had gone to the cities, and not largely as we know out of the Province, there would still be an urban increase of 365,000 for which, excluding natural increase, immigration is the only explanation. Immigration is replacing the exiles in large measure with Russian Jews, Macedonians, Greeks and Italians. It is neither a pleasant prospect nor a laudable exchange.

These facts—and they are not all the facts, some of which are so pitiful that I shrink from publishing them—I think, justify me in speaking of the depopulation and impoverishment of rural Ontario. Their significance is unmistakable. The gravity of the farmer's ills is proved by the mere assertion of the extent of his movement of exile. With a net loss of 86,000 in twenty years, do we need to marvel that farm production falls off or fails to respond to the stimulus of high prices? Especially significant is the rural birthrate. That indicates, not a buoyant and adventurous people migrating with a light heart, but a disheartened, dejected and embittered people migrating away from its wrongs and oppressions.

Steadily, one might say ignominiously, the original stock which settled this Province is passing into exile. It was the best that the British Isles ever gave to America, a Julian *gens* from which the proudest nation might boast its descent. The best, not merely for its intelligent power to produce wealth, but

for its morals and its training in democracy and English civilization. It matters not whether its exodus be to the United States or to the Canadian Northwest, Ontario cannot afford to lose this stock, nor can Canada endure its removal from this Province. And we mouth the language of patriotism and loyalty, who barter this stock for the putrescent scum of eastern and southern Europe.

For its appropriateness in this connection, I beg to read part of a letter which appeared in a weekly paper signed "Retired Farmer." He says, speaking of what he calls a splendid farming district a hundred miles from Toronto:

The other day, I took note of the exodus there. In a stretch of six miles between X and Y, I knew the names of the original settlers who came in between 1832 and 1840. In these six miles, there were forty-eight of them. To-day, there are to be found there only eight of the family names of those who occupied the land as late as 1865. They are scattered from Dan to Beersheba, mostly beyond the limits of the Province. I recalled, and took note of sixteen cottages and houses other than the dwellings of the farmers themselves, which in my youth used to teem with the workers and their children, who lived happily by their labor in the neighboring fields. There is not one of those dwellings standing to-day, and their occupants have gone with the ebbing tide. Of one of them, thoughtful nature shows a perennial memorial in a bed of mint growing by the wayside. The places of the others, nature after thirty years mindful of the cherished hearth, still marks by a clump of green, high above the surrounding waste. Such scenes mark, surely, a national danger; one might say, while under their spell, a national calamity.

Economic science would qualify the facts which I have stated by saying that, during all these years, capital and labor have been deserting the land, and economic science would say with its eyes shut that the causes are economic. Economic, in the main, if not wholly, they are. There have been, in history, small migrations in quest of religious or political liberty. But, this like most migrations has been for economic relief,—a migration to more favored places, where the rewards of labor are larger and more certain. To most of you that seems heretical. You are eager to tell me that the farmers of this Province were never more prosperous, and that you know that there is no place more favored by nature and man than rural Ontario. You press to tell me of the bank deposits and the high prices. I

answer, you may be right. But you have against you the 86,000 and the natural increase however small and the immigrants from the Old Land who have left rural Ontario in the past twenty years. One hundred thousand people by their action contradict you. Besides, it must be admitted that rural Ontario has not been favored like the cities, for these have not lost population, but have increased enormously, and in so far as they have been recruited from the land, they condemn your estimate of rural Ontario.

What are the economic causes? The principal are protection and the exclusion of the farmers from the markets of the United States. To these I shall confine myself in the few minutes remaining at my disposal.

The farmer, the miner, the fisherman and the lumberman are our producers of crude wealth. Most important of all is the farmer. In 1878, Canada deliberately imposed high protection to build up and foster cities at the expense of the producers of crude wealth. The plan succeeded, as it must. When the west opened up, it produced wealth quickly, and having no factories, sent its orders to the factories of Ontario and Quebec, which were enormously stimulated. Capital and labor were drawn from the land and when the native stock of labor was exhausted, the demand went out to the four corners of Europe. So, our urban population grows and will grow as long as conditions remain unchanged. I was lately informed by a leading public man of the west that in ten years they will produce six hundred millions of bushels of wheat. If so, and if existing conditions of price and market and tariff continue, Toronto will become in that time a great city far above the half million mark. Those who plan permanent investments in lands and houses or factory plants would wisely inquire whether these conditions will remain unchanged. For if they change, if Russia and South America in wheat production outrun the Northwest, burdened as it is by a high tariff, a market limiting products to a few and heavy freight charges to the sea, if the farmer, realizing the extent to which he is unjustly exploited, uses his political power to crush protection, there will be disaster. Haman will be hanged on the gallows fifty cubits high which he built for Mordecai. And the farther investment has gone on the faith of these artificial and unjust conditions, the greater will be the disaster. Nor are we all agreed that when the legislative props and supports have been removed Toronto will be found to be situated where it may in a wider competition maintain its greatness.

The Ontario farmer is excluded from the markets of the United States, not by our acts but by theirs. Opinions may differ as to the motives of the United States in their dealings with Canada, whether their object was to be unfriendly to Britain, to force Canada into union or to satisfy their own selfish interests. Nothing could have been more ungenerous or more unwise. The old Provinces, commercially and politically isolated from each other, have been commercially isolated from the natural market at their doors. There have been mutterings from time to time, but Canada has remained faithful to her allegiance. Who has borne the burdens of exclusion? Not the dwellers in the cities who have been taught to believe that exclusion was their advantage, but the farmer, whose cause I plead here to-day. He is the patriot without fear and without reproach, who daily through bitter suffering and disappointment has kept the flag flying and the cities comfortable.

Those who make light of the benefits which may result to agriculture from admission to the markets of the United States tell us that the farm products which would be admitted are not important. They think only of wheat which is produced by a minimum of labor and has not materially increased in price for years. Wheat is to-day 88 cents. At that price it is not largely grown in Ontario, but the farmer devotes himself to products which require more labor, which is not to be had. Are we quite sure that the competition of Russia and South America may not reduce the price of wheat to such a point that it may not be profitably grown even in the Northwest? The importance of a wider market is in this, that the farmer will be stimulated by the hope of gain to the most varied production and be thereby enabled to draw labor again to the land, to be followed by capital, when there is a surplus, over the maintenance of the farmer and his help, with which to reward capital.

The farmer has no misgivings. Ever since 1866, he has dreamed of re-entering his natural market. At this moment, negotiations are pending which may, if the plenipotentiaries on this side are not discouraged or intimidated, achieve his desires. Yet in the face of his needs and his distress the cities, Grit, Tory and Imperialist, have risen with one voice to frustrate his salvation. It would not be surprising if the farmer, roused to resentment by this selfish action, should tear away the privileges which the urban population enjoys.

Relief is to be found in tariff reform, in admission to the markets of the United States and in a reduction of the federal expenditure.

There is another remedy offered by our friends who call themselves Imperialists. It is preference in the British market. Of that I do not venture to speak, lest I lose my reputation for temperate and cautious speech. Suffice it to say that I regard the tariff reform movement in England as at heart a movement for agricultural protection, and I am convinced that agricultural protection, once enthroned in England, will prove itself quite as destructive to Ontario or Canadian agriculture as the industrial protection of the United States or Toronto.

Let me conclude. A rural decrease of 86,000 in twenty years after an exhausting drain during the thirty years previous, a rural birthrate scarcely exceeding the death rate, an urban increase of 450,000. That is a condition for which every consideration of patriotism and sound national life demands an immediate remedy from which we ought not to be deterred because the only remedies suggested involve sacrifice of privilege and conjure up vain fears of political consequences.