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Ottawa *Watch* 2: Two nations, two schools, two premiers

By Lloyd Mackey

During a December 1, 2004 speech in Halifax, then-president of the United States, George W. Bush made reference to an unidentified Canadian politician who described Americans as “our best friends, whether we like it or not.” As it happened, your humble scribe, 37 years earlier, at the beginning of his journalistic career, had been in Long Beach, California and present when that unidentified Canadian – Robert N. Thompson – made that comment.

George W. Bush’s speechwriter must have been reading Peter C. Newman’s new book, *Here Be Dragons: Telling Tales of People, Passion and Power*, when he helped the United States president frame the words for his December 1 speech in Halifax.

Bush drew laughter when he made reference to an unidentified 1960s Canadian politician, who was known to have suggested that: “The Americans are our best friends, whether we like it or not.”

Bush did not attribute the comment but Newman identifies the politician as Robert Thompson, who, as leader of the national Social Credit party, helped to make up the “house of minorities” that held sway under John Diefenbaker and Lester Pearson during the 1960s.

Both Newman’s and Bush’s references brought back memories for me.

As a journalist at the beginning of my career, I had occasion to attend the joint conference of the Evangelical Free Churches of Canada and America in 1967, Canada’s centennial year. The event occurred in the Long Beach Municipal Auditorium in California, not so co-incidentally, the place where radio evangelist Charles E. Fuller used to pack them in for several decades in mid-20th century.

Thompson gave a humdinger of a speech to the conference, entitled *Canada at 100*. Almost four decades later, I could not remember much of what he said, of course.

So I called Sylvia Stopforth at Trinity Western University, where Thompson’s archives are kept.

“He had a reputation for keeping every scrap of paper,” I told Stopforth.

Ever the diligent archivist, she replied, “And God bless him for that.”

Three hours later, a faxed copy of the Long Beach speech was on my desk. God bless Sylvia for that.

Besides being a fairly significant Canadian politician, Thompson was an active lay leader in the Evangelical Free Church, a small denomination with Scandinavian roots, built in North America originally by immigrants from northern Europe to the American Midwest and Canadian prairies.

The EFrees, as they refer to themselves informally, are mainstream evangelical, pietistic, a touch charismatic around the edges, and proactive in the development of educational institutions. Like some of the Lutheran and Baptist groups, the Evangelical Missionary Church and various Mennonite clusters, their immigrant roots have helped them bond across the US-Canadian border in a way that was not always true with mainstream Protestants and Catholics. In more recent years, these groups have also built strong Asian-rooted churches, in part because they understood Christian outreach in the context of the sense of diaspora – or scattering – that many Asian people feel.

That 1967 evening in California, Thompson played a dual role. He was helping the Canadian EFrees celebrate their new autonomy from the American body, while endeavoring to explain Canada to the Americans in the crowd of 2,000.

In a light vein, he suggested that “Canada was not an easy nation to found or to develop. Certainly, it is not an easy nation to govern. Neither is it an easy nation to excite. Americans often find that it is not an easy nation to articulate or to understand.

“Let’s face it – Canada is not an easy nation.”

More seriously, he ventured that “perhaps we over-estimate our importance, but we feel that the world needs us – needs our experience, our advice and our example. Still today, we cherish the link that we have, not only with Mother Britain but also with Mother France. We are one of the first colonies freely to be given its sovereignty, even though we retain our status within the Commonwealth and proudly claim Elizabeth as Queen of Canada.”

Thompson had something to say about the strength of democracy and the way in which it protects the rights and freedoms of minorities. He spoke of the sense of tolerance shared across the border, and the generally-recognized right of the individual to speak, worship and live life as he or she wishes.

Then came the punch line.

“Have you ever really stopped to think why these things are so – in Canada and the USA. It did not happen by accident. It is my conviction that it all came to pass because in the minds and objectives of our founding fathers, there was a living faith in God, in the Bible and its precepts and concepts.

“...At the pre-confederation conference of Quebec City in the fall of 1864, one of the fathers of Canadian Confederation, during his morning devotions, was struck

with the truth recorded in Psalm 72:8. He told his fellow politicians about it as their morning session began. In unison, they promised that this truth should always be part of the Canadian scent – in fact they decided that it should be the motto of this forming nation. They had it inscribed in abbreviation across the new Canadian coat of arms. They were determined that Canada should be a nation where ‘He shall have dominion from sea to sea’.

“From that day to this, the Bible has played an important role in the shaping of Canadian history and in inspiring Canadian men and women in their respective lives and roles in their personal and national achievement. “

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When he retired from politics in 1972, Thompson worked behind the scenes in the development of Trinity Western University, which was then just 10 years old and was emerging from junior college status. It was – and remains – an EFree school. And it is a prime Canadian example of the evangelical penchant for developing credible educational institutions, as part of the process of growing toward spiritual and intellectual maturity.

This brings us to the “two schools” part of the above headline.

Trinity Western’s girls’ soccer team just won its first national championship, bringing the school a new sense of athletic maturity. The school they beat, on eastern establishment Montreal turf, was prestigious McGill University.

All that is good. But McGill, in the same time frame, was able to do something to shape the debate about marriage in Canada. It did so with the publication of *Divorcing Marriage: Unveiling the Dangers in Canada’s New Social Experiment*. (McGill-Queens University Press, 2004)

The book’s editors are Daniel Cere and Douglas Farrow. Cere is director of the McGill-linked Institute for the Study of Marriage, Law & Culture. Farrow is associate professor of Christian Thought at McGill.

The book explores, from a traditional marriage perspective, a number of the legal, ethical and cultural issues surround the current same sex marriage debate. The authors come from across the Christian, legal, political and academic spectrum and include such as Janet Epp Buckingham of the Evangelical Fellowship, Liberal MP and parliamentary secretary John McKay, McGill law professor Margaret Somerville and University of Calgary political science teacher Ted Morton.

It is likely to be a most significant document for Christians to keep at hand, during the months of adjustment as Canada comes to terms with the issues surrounding the definitions of marriage and religious freedom.

I carved this particular item into the “two schools” heading because, whether we like it or not, the long-established institutions – like McGill – can often help shape a nation’s issues in a way that newer ones – like Trinity Western – find more difficult, at least until they mark their centennials.

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So we have dealt with two schools, two nations and two books. The third book to touch on is Deb Grey’s *Never Retreat, Never Explain, Never Apologize: My Life in Politics* (Key Porter, 2004).

Grey made her way in politics through plain speaking, Christian warmth and, at times, tough love.

The “tough love” she showed toward Stockwell Day, during his tenure as Canadian Alliance leader, is plainly outlined in her tome.

But there is a significant passage near the end of the book, in which she writes with balance and insight about what she sees to be the strengths and weaknesses of the three people who have successively led the Reform/Alliance/Conservative parties.

Those insights, brief as they might be, are worth the price of the book. That is because, as a Christian herself, she offers the kind of leadership analysis that is helpful to fellow-believers Preston Manning, Stockwell Day and Stephen Harper.

All three have roles to play in the future of the Conservative movement. An understanding of the different strengths the three bring, coming out of both their faith and their political psyches, is helpful for their followers. To that extent, Grey has provided a good skeleton for fleshing out, as various kinds of conservatives try to shape the future of the party that takes that name.

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And now, the two premiers.

Tommy Douglas was named Canada’s Greatest Canadian in a much publicized recent television series provided us by the CBC.

As a Christian socialist, Douglas is best known for having pioneered medicare in Saskatchewan, the province where he was premier during the 1940s and 50s. He helped to bring attention to the issue when he became founding leader of the New Democratic Party, so much so that when medicare was introduced federally in the 60s, by Lester Pearson, it was inextricably linked to Douglas, who shared the balance of power in the Pearson’s minority parliament.

Often missed in the Douglas-Pearson saga, however, is the next-door premier in Alberta during Douglas Saskatchewan era – Ernest Manning.

As one of Manning’s biographers, I had reason to observe that Manning reshaped Douglas’ medicare concepts in a way that would make them work in a much more conservative venue, Alberta.

Douglas and Manning were both featured in *Canada: Portraits of Faith*, (our fourth book for today) a popular coffee table volume edited and published a few years ago by Michael Clarke, then a Fraser Valley Christian leader.

One of the points made about Manning in *Portraits* was that, in his 1967 book, *Political Realignment* (how about that: a fifth book!) the longtime Alberta premier coined the phrase “social conservative”, which he described as the marriage of private enterprise and social responsibility.

In my own conversations with Ernest Manning, as well as with his son, I heard periodic references to taking the concerns expressed through socialists – like Douglas – and finding conservative ways of addressing them. For both of them, individual initiative, free enterprise and conciliatory action were all part of the equation. Thus their definition of “social conservatism” was, in some respects, broader than that espoused by socons who pretty much limit their concerns to life and family issues.

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As readers will note, we have woven a number of themes, some only strenuously related, into today’s piece. One of the benefits of having learned journalism from a publisher who was a keen and educated historian, is an innate sense that looking back can help us to look forward.

I hope this essay will help readers – as well as myself – to discipline ourselves to do both.

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