

CAPTAIN PAPINEAU TO BOURASSA

Captain Talbot M. Papineau Writes Henry Bourassa on Canada's Position in the Great War; and the Duty of the French-Canadian Race.

The following letter from Captain Talbot M. Papineau, a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in France, is addressed to his cousin, Henri Bourassa, Leader of the Nationalist Party in the Province of Quebec.

In the Field,
France, March 21st, 1916.

To Monsieur Henri Bourassa, Editor of "Le Devoir,"
Montreal:

My dear Cousin Henri,—I was sorry before leaving Quebec in 1914 not to have had an opportunity of discussing with you the momentous issues which were raised in Canada by the outbreak of this war.

You and I have had some discussion in the past, and although we have not agreed upon all points, yet I am happy to think that our pleasant friendship, which indeed dates from the time of my birth, has hitherto continued uninjured by our differences in opinion. Nor would I be the first to make it otherwise, for however I may deplore the character of your views, I have always considered that you held them honestly and sincerely and that you were singularly free from purely selfish or personal ambitions.

Very possibly nothing that I could have said in August, 1914, would have caused you to change your opinions; but I did hope that as events developed and as the great national opportunity of Canada became clearer to all her citizens, you would have been influenced to modify your views and to adopt a different attitude. In that hope I have been disappointed. Deeply involved as the honor and the very national existence of Canada has become, beautiful but terrible as her sacrifices have been, you and you alone of the leaders of Canadian thought appear to have remained unmoved, and your unhappy views unchanged.

Too occupied by immediate events in this country to formulate a protest or to frame a reasoned argument, I have nevertheless followed with intense feeling and deep regret the course of action which you have pursued. Consolation, of course, I have had in the fact that far from sharing in your views, the vast majority of Canadians, and even many of those who had formerly agreed with you, were now strongly and bitterly opposed to you. With this fact in mind I would not take the time from my duties here to write you this letter did I not fear that the influence to which your talent, energy and sincerity of purpose formerly entitled you might still be exercised upon a small minority of your fellow countrymen, and that your attitude might still be considered by some as representative of the race to which we belong.

Nor can I altogether abandon the hope — presumptuous, no doubt, but friendly and well-intentioned — that I may so express myself here as to give you a new outlook and a different purpose, and perhaps even win you to the support of a principle which has been proved to be dearer to many Canadians than life itself.

I shall consider the grounds upon which you base your opposition to Canadian participation in this more than European — in this World War. Rather I wish to begin by pointing out some reasons why, on the contrary, your whole-hearted support might have been expected.

And the first reason is this. By the declaration of war by Great Britain upon Germany, Canada became ipso facto a belligerent, subject to invasion and conquest, her property at sea subject to capture, her coasts subject to bombardment or attack, her citizens in enemy territory subject to imprisonment or detention. This is not a matter of opinion — it is a matter of fact — a question of international law. No argument of yours at least could have persuaded the Kaiser to the contrary. Whatever your views or theories may be as to the future constitutional development of Canada, and in those views I believe I coincide to a large extent, the fact remains that at the time of the outbreak of war Canada was a possession of the British Empire, and as

such as much involved in the war as any county in England, and from the German point of view and the point of view of International Law equally subject to all its pains and penalties. Indeed, proof may no doubt be made that one of the very purposes of German aggression and German military preparedness was the ambition to secure a part, if not the whole, of the English possessions in North America.

That being so, surely it was idle and pernicious to continue an academic discussion as to whether the situation was a just one or not, as to whether Canada should or should not have had a voice in ante bellum English diplomacy or in the actual declaration of war. Such a discussion may very properly arise upon a successful conclusion of the war, but so long as national issues are being decided in Prussian fashion, that is, by an appeal to the power of might, the liberties of discussion which you enjoyed by virtue of British citizenship were necessarily curtailed and any resulting decisions utterly valueless. If ever there was a time for action and not for theories it was to be found in Canada upon the outbreak of war.

Let us presume, for the sake of argument, that your attitude had also been adopted by the Government and people of Canada and that we had declared our intention to abstain from active participation in the war until Canada herself was actually attacked. What would have resulted? One of two things. Either the Allies would have been defeated or they would not have been defeated. In the former case Canada would have been called upon either to surrender unconditionally to German domination or to have attempted a resistance against German arms.

You, I feel sure, would have preferred resistance; but as a proper corrective to such a preference I would prescribe a moderate dose of trench bombardment. I have known my own dogmas to be seriously disturbed in the midst of a German artillery concentration. I can assure you that the further you travel from Canada and the nearer you approach the great military power of Germany, the less do you value the unaided strength of Canada. By the time you are fifteen yards off a German army and know yourself to be holding about one yard of a line of five hundred miles or more, you are liable to be inquiring very anxiously about the presence and power of British and French forces. Your ideas about charging to Berlin or of ending the war would also have undergone some slight moderation.

No, my dear cousin, I think you would shortly after the defeat of the Allies have been more worried over the mastery of the German consonants than you are even now over a conflict with the Ontario anti-linguists. Or I can imagine you an unhappy exile in Tierra del Fuego, eloquently comparing the wrongs of Quebec and Alsace.

But you will doubtless say we would have had the assistance of the great American republic! It is quite possible. I will admit that by the time the American fleet had been sunk and the principal buildings in New York destroyed, the United States would have declared war upon Europe, but in the meantime Canada might very well have been paying tribute and learning to decline German verbs, probably the only thing in German she could have declined.

I am, as you know, by descent even more American than I am French, and I am a sincere believer in the future of that magnificent republic. I cannot forget that more than any other nation in the world's history — England not excepted — she has suffered war solely for the sake of some fine principle of nationality: in 1776 for the principle of national existence; in 1812 for the principle of the inviolability of American citizenship; in 1861 for the preservation of national unity and the suppression of slavery; in 1896 for the protection of her national pride and in sympathy for the wrongs of a neighboring people.

Nor disappointed as I am at the present inactivity of the States, will I ever waver in my loyal belief that in time to come, perhaps less distant than we realize, her actions will correspond with the lofty expression of her national and international ideals.

I shall continue to anticipate the day when with a clear understanding and a mutual trust we shall by virtue of our united strength and our common purpose be prepared to defend the rights of humanity not only upon the American continent, but throughout the civilized world.

Nevertheless, we are not dealing with what may occur in the future, but with the actual facts of yesterday and to-day, and I would fain know if you still think that a power which without protest witnesses the ruthless spoliation of Belgium and Serbia, and without effective action the murder of her own citizens would have interfered to protect the property or the liberties of Canadians. Surely you must at least admit an element of doubt, and even if such interference had been attempted, have we not the admission of the Americans themselves that it could not have been successful against the great naval and military organizations of the central powers.

May I be permitted to conclude that had the Allies been defeated Canada must afterwards necessarily have suffered a similar fate.

But there was the other alternative, namely, that the Allies, even without the assistance of Canada, would not have been defeated. What then? Presumably French and English would still have been the official languages in Canada. You might still have edited untrammelled your version of duty, and Colonel Lavergne might still, publicly and without the restraining fear of death or imprisonment, have spoken seditiously (I mean from the Prussian point of view, of course). In fact, Canada might still have retained her liberties, and might, with the same freedom from external influences, have continued her progress to material and political strength.

But would you have been satisfied — you who have arrogated to yourself the high term of Nationalist? What of the soul of Canada? Can a nation's pride or patriotism be built upon the blood and suffering of others, or upon the wealth garnered from the coffers of those who in anguish and with blood-sweat are fighting the battles of freedom? If we accept our liberties, our national life, from the hands of the English soldiers, if without sacrifices of our own we profit by the sacrifices of the English citizens, can we hope to ever become a nation ourselves? How could we ever acquire that soul or create that pride without which a nation is a dead thing and doomed to speedy decay and disappearance?

If you were truly a Nationalist — if you loved our great country and without smallness, longed to see her become the home of a good and united people, surely you would have recognized this as her moment of travail and tribulation. You would have felt that in the agony of her losses in Belgium and France, Canada was suffering the birth pains of her national life. There, even more than in Canada herself, her citizens are being knit together into a new existence because when men stand side by side and endure a soldier's life and face together a soldier's death, they are united in bonds almost as strong as the closest of blood-ties.

There was the great opportunity of the true Nationalist. There was the great issue, the great sacrifice, which should have appealed equally to all true citizens of Canada, and should have served to cement them with indissoluble strength. Canada was at war. Canada was attacked. What mattered then internal dissensions and questions of home importance? What mattered the why and wherefore of the war, whether we owed anything to England or not, whether we were Imperialists or not, or whether we were French or English? The one simple commanding fact to govern our conduct was that Canada was at war and Canada and Canadian liberties had to be protected.

To you as a "Nationalist" this fact should have appealed more than to any others. Englishmen, as was natural, returned to fight for England, just as Germans and Austrians and Belgians and Italians returned to fight for their native lands.

But we Canadians had we no call just as insistent, just as compelling, to fight for Canada? Did not the Leipsic and the Gneissau possibly menace Victoria and Vancouver, and did you not feel the patriotism to make sacrifices for the protection of British Columbia? How could you otherwise call yourself Canadian? It is true that Canada did not hear the roar of German guns nor were we visited at night by the murderous Zeppelins; but every shot that was fired in Belgium or France was aimed as much at the heart of Canada as at the bodies of our brave Allies. Could we then wait within the temporary safety of our distant shores until either the central powers flushed with victory should come to settle their account or until by the glorious death of millions of our fellowmen in Europe Canada should remain in inglorious security and a shameful liberty?

I give thanks that that question has been answered.