

Personalities and Problems

No. 19—Henri Bourassa

Who Between Intellectualism and Splendid Delirium is Always More or Less Misunderstood.

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

AT the conclusion of Premier Borden's \$35,000,000 address the House of Commons, Conservative, Liberal, Nationalist, Labour and Socialist, rose and sang "God Save the King!" It is not recorded who started the tune. Probably the Speaker. It is doubtful in what key.



Perhaps about F sharp. There may have been a slight discord. Quite likely the Cabinet took it a tone higher than the Opposition and Sir Wilfrid. Quite as likely at least four Nationalists mumbled it somewhere down about E.

It may have been bad music, but it was fine singing. It is conceivable that the Quebec members sang it in French—officially. Let's hope they did. Suppose any German members sang it in Deutsch? Or Scandinavians as a Norse saga? What matter? It would have been the polyglot, non-partisan, all-Canadian rendering of the anthem to which armies have walked over most of the known world; played by ships' bands on the seven seas; twanged on banjos and piffled on tin whistles and stuttered at by the B flat cornets of the village bands and prairie bands and bands of all creeds, colours and tongues, played by all orchestras from the rattletrap of the burlesque theatre to the sublimest epical outburst of a huge symphony orchestra in the Crystal Palace with a ten-foot big drum whacked by a two-hand bludgeon.

In all ways known to all sorts of music men of mostly every colour and language on earth have helped to save the King or the Queen by means of this national anthem. But it is not on record that it was ever performed with more meaning than when done by the House of Commons at Ottawa a few days ago. There was no doubt in any member's mind that the King should be sent victorious long to reign over us. The differences of opinion as to how this should best be accomplished began to come out when Hon. Frank Oliver declined to rise to the occasion; and on Thursday last when Sir Wilfrid Laurier opened the Naval debate.

I AM quite sure that if Henri Bourassa had been in the House on that occasion he would have joined just as heartily in singing "God Save the King" as Premier Borden or Sir Wilfrid Laurier. But when the House was listening to Mr. Borden on the \$35,000,000 method of saving the King, Mr. Bourassa was in the somewhat gloomy office of *Le Devoir* on lower St. James St., Montreal. He was in Toronto just a day or two before that; speaking at the University on the bilingual problem. He was at the Arts and Letters Club for luncheon in company with two college professors, one of French, the other of history. In the same company were two Englishmen, one a member of the House of Lords. One of them had read an article by Mr. Bourassa in *Le Devoir*, copied in the *Toronto Evening Telegram*, on the decadent British immigrant. They had some naive objections to his rather wholesale condemnation of the degenerate slummer immigrant who comes to Canada with "God Save the King" on his tongue and all sorts of physical and mental diseases in his make-up.

"Well, the man who wrote the article is over yonder," said a member of the Club, pointing to Mr. Bourassa.

"Really?" They looked him over.

It was their first glimpse of Henri Bourassa, who is the most openly mysterious character in Canadian public life. I first heard him years ago in Toronto, speaking on the historical evolution of the French in Canada; an able speech. That was after the Nationalist leader had seceded from the Liberal party on the question of the Boer War; when he ran as openly counter to the general trend of popular enthusiasm as ever did Goldwin Smith, whom intellectually without pessimism Mr. Bourassa rather resembles. But no man can understand Henri

Bourassa who reads only his articles or hears him in public speech. None doubts that he is one of the most effective impassioned orators in Canada; able to stir the superficial emotions of a French-Canadian Sunday-afternoon crowd to the top notch of frenzy. None disputes his thorough, practical scholarship. He is a keen student of history. He has mastered Guizot and Gibbon and Macaulay and Froude, and has probably some very drastic opinions about Parkman and Kingsford. And there is nobody outside of Col. Roosevelt better able to make dry history snap and crack with present-day meaning.

ORATOR and scholar as he is, that's only the tedious outline of the man who for more than ten years now, since Parliament first took a practical interest in the wars of an Empire present or future, has had courage, or nerve, or audacity, or fanaticism enough to think as differently as possible from as many other people as possible on as many subjects as he can. Mr. Bourassa goes the limit. Nice distinctions never hamper him. Yet he has a shrewd dialectic mind. He never hesitates as a matter of policy. He plunges. *In medias res!* is his motto. He must have an audience; a clientele; opposition. If Conservatives or Liberals decided to agree with him on any question of politics he would probably invent another difference. He has no ear to the ground. Sir John Macdonald was never an example for him. He is as radical as Roosevelt or Lloyd George. No compromise; no intellectual quarter; no hums and haws if you please; but consider the matter *in extenso*, up to the hilt and draw red-blood conclusions—when his eyes snap and dance and his face gleams with the light of one who thinks most of the world wrong, and could have told you long ago just why it was sure to be wrong. I believe that Mr. Bourassa's ancestors must have been duellists and chevaliers.

This again is begging the question. To Henri Bourassa there is always—a crisis and a phantom. Dilettantism; *laissez faire*; fat-headed cynicism; smug tolerance; bland lip-loyalty—bah! he will have none of them. A man must be enthusiastic. Goldwin Smith, as magnificently wrong by popular majority as Mr. Bourassa, never was enthusiastic. Moreover, he was a Pan-American. Bourassa is anything else. He is essentially a minority enthusiast, which carried to excess produces first a bigot and in the last analysis a martyr. He despises mere majorities. He bucked a popular majority when he opposed sending troops to the Boer War. He bucked a Liberal majority on the navy question and left Parliament to muster his forces in Quebec. That dramatic meeting at Montreal, in 1908, when, having quit Parliament and been twice elected to the Quebec Legislature, he kissed his wife on the platform; that stormy Sabbath at St. Hyacinthe, in 1911, when Nationalist enthusiasm nearly broke down the platform; his discipling of Armand Lavergne; his agreements with the Archbishop of

Montreal on the race question; his many lectures and political addresses to all sorts of audiences, intellectual and otherwise; his numerous pamphlets and editorships; his fuliginous attacks upon the Liberals; his recent alliance with the Conservative party affecting reciprocity; his subsequent defection when the Conservatives began to jilt him, more or less secretly at first, afterwards openly—

I remembered them all with a sort of timidity, waiting in the ante-room of his far-back office in the newspaper precincts of *Le Devoir*, which from its title would convince every French-Canadian of his duty to Canada. How would it be possible to talk to this man; as morose as Byron, as disgruntled as Carlyle, as revolutionary as Voltaire or Tom Paine? Seceded from the Liberals, out of joint with Conservatives, no particular alliance with Labourites or Socialists, flung back as a forlorn hope upon his Nationalist party which he had created—what was left for such a man but to tear his hair and crunch his teeth?

All very easy to imagine about Henri Bourassa; and all very wide of the truth.

As I listened, there came over the rumble of presses below and the click of linotypes behind, the sound of a tremendous clarion voice, dictating in English. The words I could not make out. He was beyond a tall, glass partition, in a long, gloomy room. He was tussling with some imaginary foe; for his voice cadenced up and down and lighted with a sort of exuberant ferocity upon some chimera of argument. Since he had last gone to sleep enough had happened in this world of headlong innovations to call for another blast from the trumpet of *Le Devoir*.

It was no place to go for the rest cure. Evidently *Le Devoir* was no paper for dilettanti; but a sheet born in strife and controversy, delighting in battle—a projection of Mr. Bourassa. Personal journalism is not dead. It survives in *Le Devoir*; even more than it does in *Le Pays*. Singular contrast these two—Bourassa and Langlois; both journalists and modern as microbes; yet they say all French-Canadians look alike!

AT last I got into the same room with the editor; a long, high partitioned place set down midst of a big building; one table long enough for a board of directors, and on the opposite side of that Mr. Bourassa rose, as cordial as the rising of a harvest moon.

"I'm glad to see you," said he, with a fine, temperamental grip.

"And I have heard and read much of you, Mr. Bourassa."

"Oh, yes?"

"You—are a Nationalist?"

"I am—a Nationalist!"

"Strange—but some of us up in Ontario consider Nationalists rather dangerous."

He laughed loudly, and with a sort of crackling, habitual glee.

"So I am led to believe."

"On close acquaintance, however——"

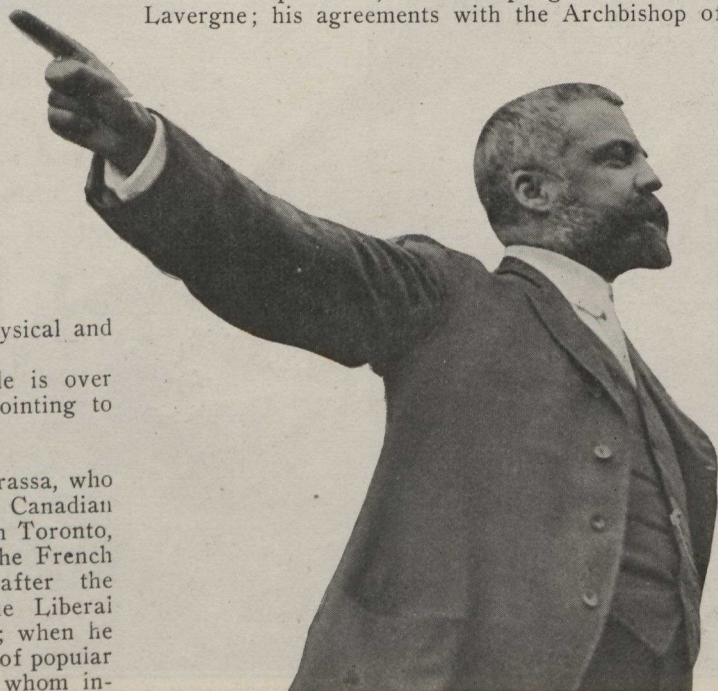
"We do not seem so unhuman, eh?" He laughed again; and he would not sit still, or loll in his chair, or look the least bit comfortable, but held himself ready to spring like a lynx or swoop like an eagle or run like a fox; a very resilient, dynamical man who does not require a crisis in Parliament or a St. Hyacinthe Sunday afternoon to make him volcanic.

I could see that he was ready for an argument with anybody—upon most anything.

"Well, my good friend the — (mentioning the name of a newspaper) has been helping to misinterpret me on the — (name of some problem on which Mr. Bourassa has been misunderstood; one of the many). And my friends (another paper) have been spreading the misrepresentation in French. Oh, it is a splendid conspiracy against me!"

He laughed again with hectic energy.

This little amenity settled, he sailed into exposition. Now, there is no excuse for a mortal man sitting at table with Mr. Bourassa and not being either entertained or instructed. His conversation—no, scarcely that, because it takes at least two to converse—was as brilliant as a Tiffany window. The subjects he illuminated in less than an hour included the navy, the bilingual problem, the French-Canadian status, the Empire, the Englishman, national



"Who thinks most of the world wrong."