

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

GASPESIA ROCKED BY A TEMPEST OF CONTROVERSY

OVER

REPRESENTATION

SEPARATION

ANNEXATION

KEN ANNETT

GASPESIA ROCKED BY A TEMPEST OF CONTROVERSY

Lest the title above lead the reader to assume that this account concerns 1981, let me hasten to point out that the tempest of controversy alluded to was one that troubled the inhabitants of the District of Gaspé of one hundred and fifty years ago - in 1831-32.

There would appear to be few precedents for the passion and vehemence of the great debate that so aroused the people of Gaspesia, from the Bay of Gaspe to the Restigouche, those many years ago. Nor was this political and social storm confined to Gaspesia. The controversy spread outwards to involve the Legislature of the Province of Lower Canada, the Governor-in-Chief of Canada, the Principal Secretary of State for the Colonial Department of the British Government at 10 Downing Street in London, and, ultimately the King of England. Even from the distance and perspective of a century and a half after the event, the record of public meetings held and the tone of the Resolutions adopted is remarkable for the passions conveyed and the extravagance of its wording. The potential for open strife and bloodshed appear to have been very real indeed.

THE OPPOSING FACTIONS

At the centre of this partisan storm was Robert Christie, Esq., who had been elected as the Member of the Legislative Assembly of Lower Canada for the District of Gaspé in successive elections from 1828 and on. Following each election, Christie had been expelled from the House when he had gone to take his Seat. The anger and frustration of his Gaspesian electors had been steadily mounting with such continued rejection of their representative and by 1831 had reached a flash point. However, not all Gaspesians were Christie supporters and when controversy erupted the opposition had as leader and chief spokesman the Sheriff of the District of Gaspé, James Ferguson Winter, Esq.

The specific and underlying cause of the trouble is to be found in the following Resolution of the Legislative Assembly of Lower Canada, first adopted in 1828 and reconfirmed at the start of each subsequent session. It stated, as follows:

"THAT ROBERT CHRISTIE, ESQ., RETURNED TO SERVE IN THIS ASSEMBLY AS KNIGHT REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE COUNTY OF GASPE, WAS EXPELLED THIS HOUSE FOR HAVING, AS STIPENDIARY CHAIRMAN OF THE QUARTER SESSIONS FOR THE DISTRICT OF QUEBEC, CALLED INTO QUESTION AND COUNSELLED THE THEN ADMINISTRATION TO CALL INTO QUESTION THE FREEDOM OF DEBATE IN THIS HOUSE, AND OF WHOM IT WAS DECLARED THAT HE WAS UNDESERVING OF THE CONFIDENCE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND UNWORTHY TO BE A MEMBER OF THIS HOUSE, AND OUGHT NOT AND COULD NOT SIT AS A MEMBER THEREOF."

In 1831, after Christie had again been refused his Seat in the Legislative Assembly at Quebec, a public meeting was called at Percé at which the question of representation was discussed with some heat and a series of Resolutions adopted. As these Percé Resolutions set the tone for the subsequent partisan storm, it is of interest to recall, in part, the record of that meeting.

At a Meeting of the Freeholders and Electors of the County of Gaspé, Province of Lower Canada. held pursuant to Notice in the Court House at Percé, 29 June, 1831, to take into consideration the state of the Country, and the measures most proper to be adopted for maintaining the Elective Franchise, and the rights of the Freeholders of the County to be represented in the Legislature of the Province, against the unconstitutional vote of the Assembly, expelling at the last session, under pretext of a breach of the privileges of the late Assembly the Member representing the County, and thereby didfranchising it; and to take into consideration other grievances of the County.

John Beaker, Esq., called to the Chair.

The following Resolutions being moved, were unanimously adopted:-

Resolved That by Law and the Constitution of this Province, the

Freeholders of the County of Gaspé have the right of being represented in the Provincial Legislature, and of choosing freely and without restriction a person to represent them in the Assembly of the Province.

Resolved That it belongs solely and exclusively to the Freeholders and electors of this County to judge of the person most proper to represent them in the said Assembly and that it is their indubitable right to elect for this purpose any person not disqualified by Law, in whom they may place their confidence.

Resolved That the Assembly of the Province have violated the freedom of Election in this County and unconstitutionally attempted to restrict the Freeholders thereof in the free and constitutional choice of a Member to represent them in the said Assembly, by expelling, without cause, at two successive Sessions of the late and again at the last Session of the present Provincial Parliament, Robert Christie, Esq., the Representative of the County.

Resolved That the County of Gaspé has been since 1828, and for three successive Sessions of the Legislature, unrepresented owing to the vacation of the seat in the Assembly of their said Representative, whom the Electors of the County have now for the fifth time elected as such; and been Excluded from all participation in the Legislature and in the enactment of the Laws passed therein during that period ; and are by the said Assembly virtually disfranchised and deprived of their rights as British Subjects.

From the above five of the twenty-one Resolutions adopted at Percé in June, 1831, the reader can gain some feeling of the mood of Robert Christie and his supporters. The next step was to hold public meetings in other localities to seek general support for these Resolutions.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR PERCE RESOLUTIONS

No time was lost in seeking wider public support for the Resolutions adopted at Percé. Records of the time refer to meetings of the general public held at Douglastown, St. George's Cove (including Indian Cove, Little Gaspé and Grand Greve), Point St. Peter, Malbay and Cape Cove. The Chairmen of these meetings, respectively, were Isaac Kennedy, Nicholas Lenfesty, John Packwood, Charles Vardon and Josiah Cass, Sr.

SEPARATION AND ANNEXATION

At some point in the growing public debate talk began of separating Gaspesia from the Province of Lower Canada and seeking its annexation to the Province of New Brunswick. Edouard Thibaudeau, Advocate of New Carlisle, and Member of the Legislative Assembly of Lower Canada, testified under oath before a Special Committee of the Assembly in 1833 that he knew of a Petition for separation, circulated by two Justices of the Peace, intimate friends of Robert Christie, that it had been signed by persons in the employ of Messrs Charles Robin Co., by other citizens and even by boys at school. Spread of this word that Christie and his party were advocating separation and annexation introduced new dimensions into the controversy and served to inflame debate in every Gaspesian community from the Bay of Gaspé to Restigouche. The flames were fanned higher by the publication in the "Gleaner" of Miramichi, N.B. of the Percé Resolutions and an account of a meeting held at Restigouche by Robert Christie and his supporters.

THE PERCE RESOLUTIONS TO LONDON

In October, 1831, Christie decided to appeal directly to the Right Honourable Lord Gederich, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Colonial Department, at 10 Downing Street, London. His letter follows:

My Lord,

I have the honour, in compliance with the request of my Constituents, the Inhabitants of the County of Gaspé, to forward for Your Lordship's information

5.

the enclosed Resolutions passed at a Public Meeting convoked for the purpose of taking into consideration the course proper to be taken for relief from certain Grievances under which they labour, and against the unconstitutional proceedings of the Assembly excluding them from the Provincial Legislature.

Copies of these Resolutions have also, at their request, been furnished in August last to His Excellency the Governor in Chief, Lord Aylmer

(Signed) Robert Christie

STIRRING EVENTS IN GASPESIA IN 1832

The threat of the possible separation of Gaspesia from Lower Canada and its annexation to New Brunswick had the Counties of Gaspe and Bonaventure in political and social turmoil in 1832. Whenever and wherever people gathered it was the topic of heated discussion. With the onset of autumn the leaders of the faction in opposition to Christie and his Resolutions began to organize public meetings in their own cause. Prominent as leaders in this counter-attack were Sheriff John Ferguson Winter and Edouard Thibaudeau.

On August 27th., at a public meeting held in Douglastown, the opposition to Christie adopted a stinging series of Resolutions denouncing Christie and his supporters and castigating the Percé Resolutions of 1831 in such terms as - UNREASONABLE, UNJUST; RIDICULOUS; FALSE; IRRELEVANT; IGNORANT; PERNICIOUS; FATAL; SUBSERVISE; UNCONSTITUTIONAL; DEPLORABLE AND ENVENOMED; to mention but some of the colourful adjectives employed. These Douglastown Resolutions were then discussed and adopted at other public meetings, as follows:

August 28th at St. George's Cove; Sept. 3rd., at Percé and Sept. 6th., at Grand River.

CLOSE CALL FOR RIOT AT PERCE

In reaction to the above mentioned meetings of his opponents, Robert Christie had a notice issued for a meeting of the Freeholders and Electors of the County of Gaspé to be held at the Percé Court House at 5:00 P.M. on September 28th. The signers of the notice were James Rooney, Lawrence Lamb and Thomas Moriarty.

To this meeting, at the time appointed, came Sheriff Winters together with one hundred or more of his opposition party. When Robert Christie, accompanied by John Le Boutillier, arrived at the Court House and saw this congregation of the opposition they realized immediately the potential for trouble and possible riot if they proceeded with the meeting and wisely decided to wait things out. By 6:30 P.M., when Christie and his supporters had failed to appear, the party of Sheriff Winter proceeded to adopt a series of Resolutions declaring the circumstances, among other things, MYSTERIOUS; CLANDESTINE; UNWARRANTABLE AND A GROSS INSULT. Before dispersing they insisted that Sheriff Winters issue strict order forbidding any nocturnal meeting in the Court House after 7:00 P.M. and that the Gaoler and Guardian of the Court House be so instructed.

But after 7:00 P.M. Robert Christie and his supporters returned to the Court House and held their meeting there by candle light. It was later claimed by a furious opposition that at that evening meeting Christie had accused the Governor in Chief of not doing his duty towards the County and that he had heaped scorn of the Sheriff of Gaspé and defied the Law. However, in the perspective of time and the complete record of events it would appear that the Christie party had used great restraint and wisdom in avoiding a confrontation that might have resulted in riot and bloodshed.

STILL MORE RESOLUTIONS

In October, 1832, it was the turn of the County of Bonaventure to react. At a large public meeting held at the New Carlisle Court House on October 14th., under the Chairmanship of John Caldwell, no less than fourteen lengthy Resolutions, devastating to those of Christie and his party, were proposed and adopted. The Percé Resolutions of the previous year were branded with such words as: SLANDEROUS; LIBELLOUS; DEFAMATORY; EXTRAVAGANT; SENSELESS; UNJUST AND FALSE. These New Carlisle Resolutions are worthy of examination by the social historian of Gaspesia as a reflection of some public opinion on the influence of the Merchants and Traders, referred to as nefarious.

These New Carlisle Resolutions of Christie's opponents were subsequently discussed and adopted at other meetings in Bonaventure County, as follows:

At New Richmond on October 13th., with Azariah Pritchard, Chairman.

At Carleton on October 14th., with Hilary Michaud, Chairman.

At Megouasha on October 17th., with Peter Ellward, Chairman.

At Escoumenack on October 18th., with Charles Brown, Chairman.

Out of the Resolutions of Percé and New Carlisle a consolidated series of Resolutions were drafted, colourful in language, for submission to the Governor in Chief by Sheriff John Ferguson Winter, in person. A new and subtle aspect of these final Resolutions was the comparison of the alleged attempt to separate Gaspesia from Lower Canada and to annex it to New Brunswick with the American Revolution that had separated the American Colonies from Great Britain. For the Gaspesia District where so many Loyalists had settled and where the memories of dispossession were still fresh in the minds of many families, this was powerful argument.

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ESTABLISHED

The Legislative Assembly of Quebec, faced with a flood of Resolutions, Petitions, Despatches and Letters from the British Government, the Governor in Chief, and the opposing factions in

Gaspesia, could no longer ignore the storm of controversy that was sweeping that distant District. Accordingly, a Special Committee was appointed with the mandate of studying the charges and counter charges and with the power to examine witnesses. The members of this Committee, all members of the House, were Messrs. Thibaudeau, Power, Neilson, Bourdages and Girouard.

On two occasions this Committee called Sheriff John Ferguson Winter to testify. Stating that he had been resident in Gaspesia at Paspebiac for about eighteen years, the Sheriff felt that he was very well acquainted with the views of the Inhabitants of the Gaspé District. He considered that the majority of the people of Gaspesia were greatly opposed to prospects of separation and annexation to New Brunswick.

It is significant that the Committee does not appear to have called Robert Christie or any of his supporters to testify as to their position.

In due time a Report was made to the Assembly by this Special Committee, stating:

Your Committee, after having heard the Witnesses and examined the Various Documents in support of the allegations in the Petition referred to them by Your Honourable House, have come to the following Resolutions:

That it is the opinion of this Committee that the Inhabitants of the District of Gaspé ought, peacefully, and without any dispute whatsoever, enjoy the same rights and privileges which are guaranteed all His Majesty's Subjects in the Province by the Capitulation, by the Treaty of Paris of 1763, and by divers Acts of the Imperial Parliament; and have a right to the same protection on the part of the Mother Country.

That Robert Christie Esq., late Member of the Provincial Parliament and a Representative of the County of Gaspé, supported by a small number of individuals, induced some of the Inhabitants of the District of Gaspé to petition His Majesty under the pretext that he had been unjustly expelled from the House of Assembly of Lower Canada, for the purpose of procuring from the Imperial Parliament the separation of

the District of Gaspé from the Province of Lower Canada and its annexation to that of New Brunswick; and that the said Robert Christie, Esq., and his partisans made use of invidious means in order to fulfil that purpose.

That all the Inhabitants of the District of Gaspé are strongly attached to the Institutions and Laws of the Province of Lower Canada and would consider it as one of the greatest of misfortunes should the Imperial Parliament accede to the wishes of a few discontented individuals by dismembering the said District from the Province of Lower Canada in order to annex it to New Brunswick, the customs, manners and laws of which essentially differ from those that prevail in the District of Gaspé.

That the District of Gaspé by its geographical position, by the wealth derived from its fisheries, by the abundance of its growth of timber adapted for the Lumber Trade, by the fertility of its soil and by a population of 14,000 souls, is a portion of the country of very high value at the present period and destined by Nature to become in future one of the most important parts of the Province.

That the dismemberment of the District of Gaspé would be productive of an incalculable loss to the Province of Lower Canada and which could not but be looked upon with an evil eye, and with sorrow, by the whole Province, as being a measure the effects of which would be to deprive a considerable proportion of its inhabitants of their rights and privileges and to weaken the ties of attachment which bind them to the Mother Country.

That the House of Assembly ought formally to disavow all proceedings that may have had, or which in future may have, the slightest tendency towards separating the District of Gaspé from the Province of Lower Canada in order to annex it to that of New Brunswick, and solemnly to protest against the adoption of a measure as impolitic as it is unconstitutional.

The Committee recommended that its Resolutions be forwarded, together with Copies of Evidence and other Documents to His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies through the Governor in Chief.

RETROSPECT

The Government remained firm in its decision not to admit Robert Christie to his Seat in the House. In Gaspesia his party remained faithful to him, but it was not until the advent of a new political order under the Union Act that he succeeded in taking his seat in the Legislature in 1841.

The passions unleashed by the controversy of 1831-1833 in Gaspesia left social and political scars that were slow to heal. But the District of Gaspé remained firmly as an integral part of Lower Canada and, with the passing of time, the great debate on separation and annexation faded from the memory of the descendants of those who had been so involved with the political and social tempest.