

Sir John A. Macdonald made mistakes, but he wasn't a racist: Gwyn

Canada's first prime minister dealt with problems as they crossed his desk, but he never acted from fear or hatred of anyone.

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About John A. Macdonald two comments can be made with near certainty.

The first is that but for him no Canadians would be reading this article because no Canadians would exist to read it other than Americans who happened to live in the new state of that name.

To have created Canada as a confederation in 1867 was achievement enough. He did far more than that. His transcontinental railway stitched Canadians together. His invention of the North West Mounted Police, which governed the prairies by the rule of law rather than, as below the border, by the rule of the gun, gave Canadians their first experience in genuine national distinctiveness.

The other comment, one now being made by some critics, is that whatever his gifts Macdonald was also an unregenerate racist. This time, though, the source for certitude about this claim is shabby and self-destructive.

Beyond argument, Macdonald made mistakes. He made some bad choices. He had a bad temper that sometimes caused him to lose his judgment.

A racist, though, is someone who has an ideology, in this instance one derived from hatred or fear.

Macdonald instead was a pragmatist. He dealt with problems as they crossed his desk. Above all, he never acted from fear or hatred of anyone.

As well, Macdonald was possessed of a true wit, as in his response when asked what he thought of his great rival, Ontario premier Oliver Mowat, his reply being, "I have always been greatly impressed by his handwriting." Ideologues, racist or otherwise, with a sense of humour are rare.

He did say things he ought not to have said, such as that Chinese immigrants would threaten Canada's "Aryan" character, even though that word then had no special significance since Adolf Hitler had yet to be born.

But he said much that is quite impossible to suppose a racist could ever conceive of let alone ever utter.

About Aboriginal people, he knew more and understood more than any leader before him or after him until Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin. He described the worst event they had ever had to cope with as Columbus' "discovery" of the continent, a view that only took hold generally in the 1960s. He warned MPs that Aboriginal people were "deer," as free as the wind and in a sense always would be, while other Canadians were "oxen," plodding contentedly to their jobs.

He could be as far-sighted about other minorities. In that same 1885 parliamentary session, Macdonald said something and did something which for some utterly baffling reason no Canadian historian has yet thought was worthy of telling Canadians.

This was his declaration that women had been “oppressed for centuries” and that it was time overdue for the vote to be extended to them. He then tabled legislation to achieve this, the first democratic leader in the world to do so, withdrawing it once defeat was certain but telling MPs that Canada had missed its chance to be the first to do what would happen anyway sooner or later. Is this the way racists think?

Or, to continue following Macdonald’s cast of thought, why in that same 1885 session did he introduce legislation, this time successfully, to enable Aboriginal people to gain the vote without losing any of their particular rights under either the Indian Act or their treaties? Sadly, Macdonald’s initiative, the very essence of integration rather than assimilation or apartheid still being attempted today, was cancelled by his successor, Wilfrid Laurier.

All this said, not all the attacks on Macdonald are just opportunistic. The rule of law was his political lodestar. Thus, quite unlike the record in the U.S., he refused every request by speculators seeking to buy land on native reserves. He was as adamant in his refusal to allow runaway slaves to be returned to their former owners when those claimed they were seeking only to regain their stolen “property.”

Yet no excuse exists for his exclusion of “Chinese and Mongols” from the vote in his 1885 reforms. By discriminating specifically against a minority on the sole grounds of their race, he violated his own fierce attachment to the sanctity of the rule of law, at the very least, of its spirit. He denied himself, that is to say.

So Macdonald did have his flaws. Set against them are his achievements. Among these, one towers over all others. Sick and tired and with his house often more like a hospital than a home, he made certain that before he died, Canada had outpaced the challenge of survival and had begun to take the shape of a true country.

That has now happened. Beyond question, Canada is now one of the most successful countries among the nearly 200 in the world. That we’re lucky enough to be living here is his legacy and is the accomplishment for which he should be remembered.