



# John Robarts: True to his own vision of Canada

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Frequently dubbed the “chairman of the board,” John Robarts was a self-declared “management man.” But, to an extent that has not been fully appreciated, Robarts not only held his own views on the future of his country, but was prepared to act on them. Indeed, he persisted to voice his views even if they placed him outside the conventional wisdom. Unlike his successor as premier and minister of education, when it came to questions of national unity, Robarts had no inclination to defer to Ottawa’s claim to national leadership. Thus, even after his tenure as premier had ended, Robarts continued to chart a path for the country that was diametrically opposed to the views that had become, with Pierre Trudeau’s ascension to the prime ministership, the basis of a new federal orthodoxy.

## CONFEDERATION OF TOMORROW

John Robarts’s readiness to follow his own mind on matters of national unity was already in full evidence while he was still premier. After all, it was in 1967 that Robarts called the Confederation of Tomorrow conference, out of concern that the national unity debate then under way was serving to isolate Québec. With it, he gave centre stage to Daniel Johnson, Québec’s premier and Pierre Trudeau’s arch-enemy. In Robarts’s own words, “I remember speaking to Mr. [Daniel] Johnson who was a personal friend of mine and my phrase to him was ‘Danny: I’ll give you the biggest soapbox in Canada to tell the people of Canada what you really want for your province. And we’ll have a discussion about the country from everybody’s point of view, provincially’ ” (“Interview with John Robarts and Jean-Luc Pepin, 1997”).

In the process, Robarts transformed an interprovincial conference—essentially a social get-together among the premiers—into a far-reaching debate and dialogue about the future of the country. Nine premiers participated in the event, some of them armed with formal statements; only BC premier W.A.C. Bennett declined his invitation. For their part, federal officials did not bless the conference with their presence: Prime Minister Pearson declined an invitation, as did his justice minister, Pierre Trudeau. In their place, Marc Lalonde attended the proceedings—as observer.

## PEPIN-ROBARTS

In his opening address to the assembly, Robarts made a point of stressing that special arrangements for individual provinces were “as old as Confederation.” He even insisted that special status, a heretical notion in federal quarters, “does not alarm us”: “To us the concept should mean a profound awareness that Canada is a country of disparate parts, each with its own combination of preferences and needs” (Confederation of Tomorrow, 1967, p. 28).

Nine years later, in the midst of public consternation over Québec's election of a Parti Québécois government, John Robarts accepted the Trudeau government's invitation to be co-chair of a task force on national unity. The new entity even bore his name, becoming known as simply the Pepin-Robarts commission. While the group's deliberations have not yet been fully studied, and perhaps never will be, Robarts did indeed sign the final report, which was released in January 1979.

The report identified duality, along with regionalism, as a central feature of Canada's political life. However, the presentation of duality was very much centred on Québec, as opposed to the purely linguistic version of duality, which was the basic premise of Pierre Trudeau's vision of Canada and his strategy to defeat the Québec independence movement. In particular, the report insisted that "Quebec is distinctive and should, within a viable Canada, have the powers necessary to protect and develop its distinctive character; any political solution short of this would lead to the rupture of Canada" (Task Force on Canadian Unity, 1979, p. 87). Then, in the name of the equality of the provinces, it proposed that all provincial governments should be awarded these same powers; but it also called for constitutional provisions to facilitate the transfer of powers to the federal government.

### **PROVINCIAL ASYMMETRY**

Thus, in a novel and heretofore unique vision of Canadian federalism, the report laid the basis for a high degree of asymmetry. Still, the report clearly reflected the view that John Robarts had expressed back in 1967, at the Confederation of Tomorrow conference, that "special status" or arrangements for individual provinces were as old as Confederation itself, even if they should amount to a special status for a particular province, namely, Québec.

The final report carried this enhancement of provincial power one step further by declaring that all the provincial governments should be able to devise their own language policies and be freed from any constitutional requirements. For good measure, it declared solidarity with Québec's bills 22 and 101: "We support the efforts of the Quebec provincial government and of the people of Quebec to ensure the predominance of the French language and culture in that province" (Task Force on Canadian Unity, 1979, p. 51). The report even proposed to eliminate the constitutional provision (section 133) protecting the use of English, and of French, in the province's legislature and courts.

The departure from the Trudeau vision of the country could not be clearer. Indeed, after the report was released, Pierre Trudeau flatly declared that the commission's recommendations on language policy were "completely wrong." In fact, there is some question whether he even read the report as a whole (English, 2009, p. 189; McRoberts, 2021).

Much has changed in Canadian politics since John Robarts was premier. Ontario's premier is no longer seen to be part of Canada's senior political leadership. Indeed, the present incumbent does not see himself in these terms. Simply put, Ontario is no longer the dominant force in Canada's political economy that it once was; Canada-US free trade has taken care of that. Not only has Canadian public debate become more polarized, but, thanks to globalization and climate change, international issues have forced their way on to the Canadian political agenda. Most important to the debate over national unity, Québec's independence movement has lost much of its force.

Nonetheless, back when the national unity debate was still in full force, John Robarts stood for a different kind of Canadian federation, with strong provincial governments and a high degree of asymmetry, or special arrangements, among them. In effect, he repeatedly pointed to a path that was not taken. ■

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