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W. S. Fielding and the Repeal Elections of 1886 and 1887 in Nova Scotia

On 15 June 1886, after a number of unsuccessful attempts to redress Nova Scotia grievances through existing political channels, the Liberal Government of Premier William S. Fielding contested the provincial elections of 1886 on the issue of secession from Confederation, winning 29 of the province's 38 seats. In the federal elections held less than a year later, John A. Macdonald's Conservative party reversed this apparent repeal victory, winning 14 of 21 seats. Almost immediately the repeal campaign collapsed. Unfortunately, the important relationship of the secession question to the electoral *volte-face* of 1886 and 1887 in Nova Scotia has not yet received comprehensive analysis. Lacking the information provided by the Fielding papers, most historians have hitherto dealt with repeal only in passing, treating it either as a minor incident in federal-provincial relations,¹ or as one of those occasional outbursts of regional discontent that help make up Nova Scotia's protest tradition.² Not only has this resulted in a tendency to divorce the secession agitation from the socio-economic and political conditions out of which it emerged, but also it has left us with an incomplete understanding of Fielding's objectives and behaviour during the elections of 1886 and 1887.³

In July 1886, Fielding's contemporary, James W. Carmichael, described repeal in the narrowest way possible: it was simply "a lever to obtain better terms".⁴ But repeal was more than just a device to wring financial concessions out of the Federal Government. It was related to the decline of Nova Scotia's traditional sea-based and export-oriented economy in the post-Confederation period. Nova Scotian separatism developed logically out of a regional ideology that attempted both to explain and to remedy the area's declining economic

- 1 J. Murray Beck, *The Government of Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1957), pp. 159, 330; and *The History of Maritime Union. A Study in Frustration* (Fredericton, 1969); Donald Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain* (Toronto, 1955), p. 453; and Peter B. Waite, *Canada 1874-1896. Arduous Destiny* (Toronto, 1971), pp. 184-8.
- 2 Colin D. Howell, "Nova Scotia's Protest Tradition and the Search for a Meaningful Federalism", in David Jay Bercuson, ed., *Canada and the Burden of Unity* (Toronto, 1977), pp. 169-91; G.A. Rawlyk, "Nova Scotia Regional Protest, 1867-1967", *Queen's Quarterly*, LXXV (Spring 1968), pp. 105-23.
- 3 See Phyllis Blakeley, "The Repeal Election of 1886 in Nova Scotia", *Nova Scotia Historical Society Collections*, 26 (1945), pp. 131-53; Bruce Fergusson, *Hon. W.S. Fielding. The Mantle of Howe* (Windsor, N.S., 1970), vol. 1, ch. 4; and Colin Howell, "Repeal, Reciprocity, and Commercial Union in Nova Scotian Politics, 1886-1887" (MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 1967).
- 4 Carmichael to Edward Blake, 6 July 1886, J.W. Carmichael Papers, vol. 394, no. 411, Public Archives of Nova Scotia [hereafter PANS].

fortunes. This regional ideology, although never a coherent body of thought, was an amalgam of the following elements: a belief in a pre-Confederation Golden Age; a conviction that Confederation itself was responsible for the region's decline; a feeling that the financial terms of Confederation needed revision; a belief that prevailing national policies were detrimental to the region; a feeling that closer commercial ties with the United States were desirable; and a conviction that the Maritimes could prosper as independent states if left to their own devices. In coming to terms with political secessionism, therefore, it is important to keep in mind its relationship both to economic decline and fiscal disability, and to this broader and more comprehensive regional ideology.

The re-emergence of repeal as a political movement in 1886 reflected, among other things, a deep concern about the disintegration of a traditional maritime economy based upon the wooden sailing ship, the international carrying trade, and the export of staple products. As steam-powered shipping and the iron hull gradually supplanted the sailing ship in the international shipping trades, fewer and fewer vessels were being constructed in the once active building centers in the province. In 1864, the high point in Nova Scotia's shipbuilding activity before Confederation, ship construction amounted to 73,038 tons. Shipbuilding remained an important component of the regional economy after 1867, but in the mid-1870s the industry entered into a decline from which it would not recover. In 1886 and 1887, the years in which repeal was a public issue, ship tonnage constructed in Nova Scotia had declined to 21,193 and 14,266 tons respectively.⁵

Nova Scotia's economic difficulties also encouraged a significant out-migration from the province and a consequent decline in the rate of population growth after 1880. Although the population of Nova Scotia increased by 15% between 1861 and 1871 and grew another 12% between 1871 and 1881, between 1881 and 1891 the rate of growth slowed to a mere 2%.⁶ At the same time, with the National Policy of 1879, the post-Confederation expansion of coal production, the revolution in transportation that accompanied the railroad boom, and the related enterprises that developed in response to these changes, there was a significant movement of population from the countryside to the towns, and from rural counties to areas of industrial growth. The most rapidly industrializing county was Cumberland which experienced a 26.2% increase in population

5 S.A. Saunders, *The Economic History of the Maritime Provinces. A Study Prepared for the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations* (Ottawa, 1939), pp. 110-11. See also K. Matthews and G. Panting, eds., *Ships and Shipbuilding in the North Atlantic* (St. John's, 1977); and L. Fischer and E. Sager, eds., *The Enterprising Canadians: Entrepreneurs and Economic Development in Eastern Canada, 1820-1914* (St. John's, 1978); C.R. Fay and H.A. Innis, "The Economic Development of Canada, 1867-1921: The Maritime Provinces", *Cambridge History of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1930), VI, pp. 659-67.

6 Alan A. Brookes, "Out-Migration from the Maritime Provinces, 1860-1900: Some Preliminary Conclusions", *Acadiensis*, V (Spring 1976), pp. 30-1.

30 *Acadiensis*

between 1881 and 1891. Lunenburg, Halifax, Yarmouth, Colchester, Cape Breton, Queen's, Shelburne, and Digby also registered gains of between 0.9 and 5.1%, but in every case except Queen's the county's growth rate was substantially below that of the preceding decade. Moreover, all the other counties in the province suffered significant population declines from a high of -10.8% in Antigonish, -6.0% in Annapolis and -5.6% in Hants to a low of -0.3% in Victoria.⁷

The economic development of Nova Scotia during the 1880s proceeded unevenly. While the introduction of Macdonald's National Policy and the expansion of the coal industry spurred development in some parts of the province, especially in Cumberland and Cape Breton counties, a general economic downturn in Canada and the United States after 1882 led to shrinking markets for those parts of the province dependent upon the export of agricultural and fish products. In the five years between 1885 and 1889, the average annual value of fish exported from Nova Scotia was 9.9% less than that of the preceding five year period.⁸ This decline was largely the result of the termination of the fisheries clauses of the Treaty of Washington in July 1885, and the consequent restoration of the more restrictive provisions of the Convention of 1818. In August 1885 the United States Consul General at Halifax reported that these new regulations diminished dry fish and lobster exports from Halifax to the United States by over 75% and thereby encouraged "a general business depression in the Provinces".⁹ A temporary decline in fish sales to the West Indies between 1885 and 1889 further compounded Nova Scotia's difficulties.¹⁰

If the economic disabilities of declining areas provided the general context for the development of Nova Scotian separatism, it was the political subordination of the Maritimes within Confederation that prompted Fielding to make repeal an issue in 1886. To Fielding, the source of the province's difficulties was the inflexible financial settlement of 1867. Under the initial terms of Union, Nova Scotia had been granted an annual subsidy amounting to 80¢ per head of population, a further grant of \$60,000 per annum in support of the legislature, and a debt allowance of \$8,000,000. In 1869 the Howe-Macdonald better terms agreement increased the provincial debt allowance to \$9,186,000 and revised the annual subsidy upwards by \$82,698 for a ten-year period beginning 1 July 1867. During the 1870s the revised arrangement provided the province with more than enough revenue to undertake extensive road and bridge construction and to

7 Computed from population statistics published in *Census of Canada*, 1881, 1891.

8 Eric Sager, "The Shipping Fleet of Halifax, 1820-1903" (paper presented to the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, Fredericton, 1978), p. 18.

9 Consul General Phelan to Secretary of State Porter, 15 August 1885, United States Consulate (Halifax), Dispatches, vol. 14, n.p., Dalhousie University Library (microfilm).

10 Waite, *Arduous Destiny*, p. 185.

initiate railroad development.¹¹ But when the additional subsidy lapsed in 1877 and the Government of Nova Scotia faced serious financial difficulties, Ottawa offered no further assistance. Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie and his Finance Minister Richard Cartwright, and later John A. Macdonald as well, categorically refused an extension of the better terms annuity.¹²

One source of Nova Scotia's financial distress in these years was the absence of an effective system of municipal government which would have reduced the province's responsibility for financing essentially local services. In 1879 the Conservative Government of Simon Holmes took the first step to remedy this deficiency with the passage of the County Incorporation Act. This legislation made the incorporation of counties compulsory, and empowered municipal councils to make assessments in support of various local services.¹³ The primary object of the County Incorporation Act was to encourage counties to tax themselves directly in order to maintain roads and bridges, and thereby to relieve the pressure on the provincial treasury, but it was decidedly unpopular in most parts of the province.¹⁴ The Holmes Government's policy of retrenchment and its unsuccessful attempt to secure a subsidy increase from Ottawa further upset an already discontented electorate.¹⁵ In the provincial election of 1882 the Conservatives went down to defeat; the Liberals won twenty-four of thirty-eight seats in the province.

The Liberal Government that assumed power in 1882 faced serious difficulties of its own. While in opposition the Liberals had been a seriously divided party. Apart from their united opposition to the County Incorporation Act, Liberal MLAs had demonstrated a significant resistance to party discipline. The election victory of 1882 did little to improve matters. Although the party had operated earlier under the nominal leadership of Alfred Gayton of Yarmouth, a Liberal party convention in 1882 passed over Gayton and offered the Premiership to Fielding. When Fielding declined the offer in order to continue as editor of the Halifax *Morning Chronicle*, William T. Pipes, a New Glasgow lawyer and the youngest man in the legislature, assumed the post. But Pipes lacked both the political presence and experience to unite the party. Facing serious opposition from Gayton and Otto S. Weeks of Guysborough, Pipes resigned in 1884 and Fielding became Premier.¹⁶

11 James A. Maxwell, "Financial History of Nova Scotia, 1848-1899" (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1926), p. 110.

12 James A. Maxwell, *Federal Subsidies to the Provincial Governments in Canada* (Cambridge, 1937), pp. 68-70.

13 C. Bruce Fergusson, *Local Government in Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1961), p. 10.

14 J. Murray Beck, *The Evolution of Municipal Government in Nova Scotia 1749-1973* (Halifax, 1973), pp. 25-8.

15 James A. Fraser suggested that although the Holmes government pressed faithfully for better terms, when it went for re-election it failed to make the province aware of the reason for its financial distress. *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 26 February 1886.

16 Fergusson, *The Mantle of Howe*, pp. 22-55.

As Premier, Fielding seized upon the revenue crisis as the issue that would bring his divided party together. Better terms was an issue that enjoyed almost universal support. In 1884, for example, the Conservatives joined with the government in an address to the federal cabinet explaining that “an additional revenue has become an absolute necessity to this Province. . . as our people will not submit to direct taxation for local purposes”.¹⁷ In January, 1885 a delegation travelled to Ottawa to further argue the Province’s claim to an increased subsidy. But when the Provincial Legislature opened in February, the province had not yet received a reply to its request for better terms. In the meantime some members of the House, led by James Fraser of Guysborough, were beginning to demand repeal. If better terms were not offered, Fielding confided to Blake, “men who have hesitated to commit themselves to a repeal cry will no longer hesitate”.¹⁸

One should not assume, however, that Fielding had rejected repeal out of hand. Like many Liberals who initially refused to support secession, Fielding accepted the repealers’ explanation for the region’s decline. Fielding believed that the province had been dragooned into Confederation on terms that limited its future possibilities. Nowhere was this more evident than in politics, where a small province like Nova Scotia was denied sufficient power and means to command respect. “So long as the Province is financially embarrassed, as at present”, he wrote to Edward Blake, “the whole affair must tend downward and the best men who get into the political arena will be glad to get out of it again”.¹⁹ But in the summer of 1885 Fielding was not yet ready to call for independence. “I may say”, he explained to Blake, “that while I have not forgotten and cannot forget the wrong of ‘67 and am not satisfied that Nova Scotia can be as happy in the Union as she was before, I should shrink from . . . a repeal agitation if such could fairly be avoided”.²⁰ On the other hand, if the Federal Government continued to treat the province with apparent contempt, it would demonstrate the unworkability of Confederation, and independence would be the only option.

In July 1885 Fielding wrote a final time to Ottawa, reiterating “the absolute necessity of large grants from the Federal Treasury for the support of services assigned to the Local Government”,²¹ and urging Macdonald to reply to the memorial of 1884. It was six months before the province received a rejection of its claim. Macdonald denied the provincial petition, explaining lamely that

17 Nova Scotia, *Journals*, 1886, Appendix 12, p. 5.

18 Fielding to Blake, 6 July 1885, Fielding Papers, vol. 490, no. 635, PANS. Unless otherwise noted all subsequent references to the Fielding Papers are to volume 490 which contains the Fielding Letter Books from 1883-1888.

19 Fielding to Blake, 8 January 1886, Fielding Papers, no. 160, PANS.

20 Fielding to Blake, 6 May 1886, *ibid.*

21 Nova Scotia, *Journals*, 1886, Appendix 12, p. 6.

Nova Scotia had “withdrawn from the credit of the debt account large amounts which they had expended in Railway extension and other Public works”.²² The *Morning Chronicle*, whose editorial policy still displayed Fielding’s influence, considered this a turning point in the province’s relationship with Ottawa. “That announcement calls for a most important change of some sort in Nova Scotia politics. . . . Only two alternatives are open to us — direct taxation or repeal”.²³ Fielding was equally irate. In a letter to Edward Blake he wrote:

I am an Anti Confederate. I cannot forget the manner in which Nova Scotia was forced into the union. . . . At all events I do not conceal from anybody the fact that I regard Confederation as a *wrong* and a substantial *injury* to Nova Scotia and I would gladly join in any legitimate movement which would give promise of obtaining repeal.²⁴

Earlier, Fielding had been reluctant to move repeal resolutions in the House, because there seemed to be little prospect of success. Faced with the rejection of the provincial claim for increased subsidies and the prospect of having to impose direct taxation, however, Fielding became convinced that repeal would be “a ground on which we can unite nearly all our own party”.²⁵ On 5 May 1886 he rose in the legislature, outlined the declining fortunes and limited future of the province within Confederation, and proceeded to introduce resolutions calling for repeal of the British North America Act and the establishment of an independent Maritime Union.²⁶

Fielding’s strategy in the ensuing campaign was to unite advocates of independence, proponents of better terms, and supporters of reciprocity into a broad political coalition. To the extent that Fielding could encourage the repeal, reciprocity and better terms questions to dissolve into one another, he would provide the electorate with a romanticized explanation of its fiscal and economic disability, and direct provincial discontent away from his government. During the summer election campaign of 1886, however, the marriage of convenience between secessionists and advocates of better terms came unstuck. It was not just that secessionists and unionists had different things in mind when they talked repeal, but that many unionists doubted the propriety of raising the issue in the first place. The most vigorous opposition to repeal in Liberal party circles arose in the northern and eastern parts of the province which were most successfully industrializing under the National Policy. S.M. MacKenzie, Liberal editor of the New Glasgow *Eastern Chronicle*, announced that despite “great excuse

22 *Ibid.*, Appendix 6, p. 13.

23 *Morning Chronicle*, 26 February 1886.

24 Fielding to Blake, 8 January 1886, Fielding Papers, no. 151, PANS.

25 Fielding to J.V. Ellis, 6 March 1886, Fielding Papers, no. 218, PANS.

26 Nova Scotia, *Debates*, 5 May 1886, pp. 394-5.

34 *Acadiensis*

for the extreme measures adopted by Mr. Fielding and his followers, we cannot follow him to the full extent of his resolutions".²⁷ In Amherst, William Pipes criticized Fielding for dragging out the "putrid carcass of repeal".²⁸ Similarly, in Cape Breton County Liberal candidates George H. Murray and Ronald Gillis announced an independent stance on the repeal question.²⁹ Opposed to repeal because it threatened continued expansion of the coal industry, Murray and Gillis acknowledged the National Policy's importance to Cape Breton's economic well-being.³⁰ Not to have done so would have meant their certain defeat, for opposition to repeal on Cape Breton Island was overwhelming. At a public meeting at the Sydney court house on May 15, a resolution passed without opposition calling for separation of Cape Breton from Nova Scotia if repeal succeeded.³¹

Even in Guysborough County, itself a hotbed of repeal, the separatist issue caused difficulty. D. C. Fraser, a staunch unionist and opponent of repeal, threatened to run as an independent Liberal if the party nomination went to repealers Otto Weeks and James A. Fraser. Fearing that a split vote would endanger a safe Liberal riding, Fielding tried to bring the maverick Fraser into line. He wrote:

I am told that you do not fully agree with us on the repeal question, but I am sure there can be no substantial difference between us on the question. It can hardly be possible that you do not desire repeal. The most you could say I judge is that we are not likely to get it. That is not a reason why we should fail to declare our wishes.

In the end it was Fielding's offer of a seat on the Legislative Council that resulted in Fraser's acquiescence.³²

In Halifax County and along the eastern and southern shore, a traditionally Liberal part of the province, Liberal candidates made repeal a high-profile issue. Given the party's admirable record in the Assembly, the improvements in steamship service along this coastline, and the southerly orientation of Fielding's railway policy,³³ prospects for a Liberal victory were good. At the

27 *Eastern Chronicle* (New Glasgow), 13 May 1886.

28 *Colonial Standard* (Pictou), 18 May 1886. Fielding resented this outburst. In December 1886, he described repeal to Pipes as "a lively. . .corpse" which was "everyday bearing good fruit and will continue to bear such". Fielding to Pipes, 31 December 1886, Fielding Papers, nos. 18-9, PANS.

29 *Morning Herald* (Halifax), 9 June 1886.

30 Roselle Green, "The Public Life of Honorable George H. Murray" (MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 1962), pp. 7-10.

31 *Morning Chronicle*, 17 May 1886.

32 Fielding to D.C. Fraser, 17 May 1886, Fielding Papers, nos. 285-8, PANS.

33 Howell, "Repeal, Reciprocity, and Commercial Union in Nova Scotia Politics", pp. 19, 24, 29.

same time there was a close relationship here between the repeal and reciprocity issues. Some Liberals no doubt supported repeal in the hope that it might prompt the reopening of reciprocity negotiations with Washington. But this does not diminish the importance of the repeal question. The key to understanding the secession agitation is to recognize the way in which better terms, reciprocity, Maritime Union, and repeal blended together to appeal broadly to those concerned about the passing of the older commercial order.

In Halifax, the Liberal *Morning Chronicle* provided the most consistent expression of this regional ideology. The *Morning Chronicle's* campaign focused on the declining prosperity of the province after the "betrayal" of 1867. Confederation meant the loss of financial autonomy, excessive taxation in support of public works projects in the "barren west", little support for important provincial services in the east, and the closing of Nova Scotia's natural markets to the south. Added to this was the impact of the "diabolical tariff". Instead of opening markets in Ontario and Quebec for Nova Scotian products, the *Chronicle* argued, the National Policy turned the Maritimes into a "slaughter market" for Central Canadian suppliers.³⁴ The remedy was repeal:

If Nova Scotians were now free from the Union with a fair share of the public debt of the Dominion cast upon her, the taxes which are now collected within this province would furnish a revenue sufficient to provide more liberally for every public service in the province than they are at present provided for, and leave in addition an annual surplus of half a million dollars in the treasury of the province We thrived before we endured the exactions of Canucks, we shall thrive when we are once again free from those exactions.³⁵

On the other hand, a second Liberal newspaper in Halifax refused to support the repeal agitation. The *Acadian Recorder* stressed the legislative record of the Fielding government and made a strong case in favor of reciprocity. The editor, James Wilberforce Longley, was also the Liberal candidate for Annapolis County, and later Attorney-General in the Fielding government. Although Longley had "the gravest misgivings both as to the wisdom and propriety of the repeal agitation",³⁶ he had little faith in the future of Confederation. During the initial debate on the repeal resolution on May 8, Longley had declared Confederation a "failure, a total failure".³⁷ Not convinced that Confederation

34 *Morning Chronicle*, 10, 12, 15 June 1886.

35 *Ibid.*, 18 May 1886.

36 J.W. Longley to Edward Blake, 25 February 1887, Blake Papers, Provincial Archives of Ontario.

37 Nova Scotia, *Debates*, 8 May 1887.

itself explained Nova Scotia's disabilities, Longley blamed the "unnatural attempt to force inter-Provincial trade among Provinces which have no trade with each other",³⁸ and called for Commercial Union rather than repeal. "Secure unrestricted trade relations between this country and the United States", the *Recorder* suggested, "and the Repeal agitation in Nova Scotia will fade away".³⁹

Because repeal, reciprocity and better terms were not always kept separate during the campaign, it is not possible in every case to distinguish those candidates who desired repeal from those who simply wanted better terms or reciprocity. But if one takes the candidates at their word, it is possible to discern three shades of opinion within the Liberal party. There was a repeal faction, which argued consistently in favor of repeal during the campaign; a group of moderate repealers, who expressed support for repeal but chose not to make it the central issue of the campaign; and a group of Liberal unionists who stated clearly their opposition to independence. The repeal group, Weeks and Fraser of Guysborough, Fielding, William Roche and William Power of Halifax, Albert Gayton and William Law of Yarmouth, Jeffrey McColl of Pictou, William F. McCoy of Shelburne, John S. McNeil of Digby, and Leander Rand of Cornwallis, King's County, represented those parts of the province whose products sought markets in the United States or the United Kingdom. This was also the case for many of the moderate repealers, a group made up of Henry M. Robicheau of Digby, George Clarke and Frederick A. Laurence from Colchester, Allan Haley of Hants County, Thomas W. Johnson of Shelburne, Joseph Henry Cook of Queen's County, Charles Church and George A. Ross from Lunenburg, Angus MacGillivray and Colin F. McIsaac of Antigonish. The unionist group, which included Thomas R. Black and C. J. MacFarlane of Cumberland County, Murray and Gillis from Cape Breton, John MacKinnon and Daniel McNeill from Inverness and Longley from Annapolis, represented areas of industrial growth or agricultural counties whose produce was consumed locally.⁴⁰

The June 15 election added significantly to the strength of Fielding's government in the House. The 29 seats won by the Liberals represented an increase of five over the election of 1882, and four over the number of Liberals in the House at dissolution. The Liberals gained two seats in Colchester and Inverness counties, and one seat in Yarmouth, Antigonish, Halifax, Hants and Pictou. At the same time they lost two seats in Cape Breton county and one each in Richmond and Annapolis. In Cumberland, Thomas Black won a seat

38 *Acadian Recorder* (Halifax), 27 May 1886.

39 *Ibid.*, 14 May 1886.

40 In some cases there was insufficient evidence to indicate a candidate's attitude towards repeal. Included in this unknown category are Archibald Frame (Hants), Joseph Matheson (Richmond), and John A. Fraser (Victoria).

that had gone to the Conservatives in 1882, but this did not represent an increase in Liberal party strength since Black had been elected to the legislature in a by-election in 1884.⁴¹

As Table 1 reveals, the results of the election show a basic cleavage within the province. In the western counties and along the southern and eastern shore where prosperity was dependent upon access to international export markets and where repeal was a prominent issue, the Liberals won all the seats but two, an increase of six seats over 1882. More significantly, all eleven repealers and ten moderates in the province were elected, many of the former with commanding majorities. In Yarmouth County, repealers William Law and Alfred Gayton took 3388 of 4167 or 81.3% of the votes cast and in the process unseated the incumbent Thomas Corning. In Halifax, Liberal repealers Fielding, Michael Power and William Roche ran up majorities of 1061, 950, and 841 votes respectively, and in so doing defeated the incumbent Conservative W. D. Harrington who had led the poll in Halifax in 1882. In Pictou, repealer and annexationist Jeffrey McColl broke the Conservative hegemony in the county, running second to Tory leader Adam Bell. In Guysborough, James Fraser and Otto Weeks won by a significant majority polling 63% of the vote. The remaining repealers William McCoy, Daniel McNeil and Leander Rand each won their constituencies with comfortable majorities.

Conservative party strength was concentrated in the industrializing northeast. Cape Breton County, whose expanding coal output depended upon the maintenance of a 60¢ per ton duty on imported coal, elected two Conservatives, as did Pictou, while Cumberland and Richmond elected one each. In Victoria County Dr. J.L. Bethune ran as an independent Conservative and won with a majority of 316 votes. While Liberal candidates won election to two seats in Inverness, and one each in Pictou and Cumberland, they were often as hostile to repeal as their Conservative opponents. Daniel McNeil, a Liberal candidate in Inverness County, for example, pledged to resign if Fielding persisted in demanding secession after the election of 1886.⁴²

The split between export-oriented counties and those experiencing significant industrial growth is also revealed in the occupational pursuits of the various candidates. In areas where repeal and reciprocity were attractive issues, export merchants were particularly prominent. Moderate repealers Joseph Henry Cook of Queen's County, Charles Church and George Ross of Lunenburg, and Thomas Robertson of Shelburne were all merchants with an export orientation, while Allan Haley of Hants operated as secretary of the Shipowners Marine Insurance Company. The repeal group included William Law, owner of

41 *Canadian Parliamentary Guide*, 1883, pp. 276-7; *Nova Scotia, Journals*, 1887, Appendix 12, pp. 1-21.

42 *Morning Herald*, 17 January 1887.

38 *Acadiensis*

Table 1: Electoral Behaviour and Affiliation of Successful Candidates, 15 June 1886

County	Candidate	Affiliation	Election Majority		Majority as % of Votes Cast	
			1882	1886	1882	1886
Annapolis	J. W. Longley	(L) unionist	+79	+21	1.5	0.0
	Frank Andrews	(C) unionist	—	+5	—	0.0
Antigonish	Angus MacGillivray	(L) moderate	550	+434	19.6	10.8
	Colin F. McIsaac	(L) moderate	—	+369	—	9.1
Cape Breton	Colin Chisholm	(C) unionist	-401	+380	-7.2	7.3
	William McKay	(C) unionist	—	+309	—	6.0
Colchester	George Clarke	(L) moderate	—	+271	—	3.6
	Frederick A. Laurence	(L) moderate	—	+156	—	2.1
Cumberland	Thomas Black	(L) unionist	—	+144	—	1.7
	Richard Black	(C) unionist	—	+125	—	1.5
Digby	Henry Robicheau	(L) moderate	+296	+586	8.3	22.4
	John S. McNeil	(L) repealer	+234	+464	6.6	17.7
Guysborough	James A. Fraser	(L) repealer	+296	+471	10.9	15.3
	Otto Weeks	(L) repealer	+355	+366	13.1	11.9
Halifax	William S. Fielding	(L) repealer	+21	+1061	0.1	5.2
	William Roche	(L) repealer	—	+950	—	4.6
	Michael Power	(L) repealer	+48	+841	0.3	4.1
Hants	Allan Haley	(L) moderate	+25	+44	0.5	0.7
	Archibald Frame	(L) unknown	-32	+14	-0.6	0.2
Inverness	John McKinnon	(L) unionist	-97	+491	-2.1	8.3
	Daniel McNeill	(L) unionist	—	+401	—	6.7
King's	Leander Rand	(L) repealer	—	+100	—	1.6
	William Bill	(C) unionist	-78	+25	-1.4	0.4
Lunenburg	Charles Church	(L) moderate	+344	+449	6.6	9.0
	George Ross	(L) moderate	+291	+323	5.5	6.5
Pictou	Adam Bell	(C) unionist	+62	+279	0.4	1.8
	Jeffrey McColl	(L) repealer	-62	+41	-0.4	0.3
	C.H. Munroe	(C) unionist	+78	+13	0.5	0.1
Queen's	Jason Mack	(L) unknown	+139	+165	5.5	6.0
	Joseph Cook	(L) moderate	+134	+140	5.4	5.1
Richmond	Joseph Matheson	(L) unknown	-53	+161	-2.9	7.0
	David Hearn	(C) unionist	—	+79	—	3.4
Shelburne	Thomas Johnson	(L) moderate	+255	+328	8.1	10.5
	William F. McCoy	(L) repealer	+246	+203	7.9	6.5
Victoria	John L. Bethune	(IC) unionist	—	+316	—	10.8
	John A. Fraser	(L) unknown	—	+47	—	1.6
Yarmouth	William Law	(L) repealer	—	+966	—	23.2
	Albert Gayton	(L) repealer	+461	+864	14.2	20.7

Source: *Canadian Parliamentary Guide*, 1883, pp. 276-7; *Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly of the Province of Nova Scotia*, 1887, Appendix 12, pp. 1-21.

a successful Yarmouth shipping business, William Roche, a Halifax coal merchant and steamship agent, Leander Rand, a King's County farmer engaged in the export of potatoes and other vegetables to the United States, and merchants Albert Gayton of Yarmouth and William Power of Halifax. In the more industrialized counties, on the other hand, Liberal and Conservative candidates were drawn primarily from the professional classes. David Hearn, George Murray, Charles Munro, John Bethune, Daniel McNeill, Alexander Campbell, Angus McLennan, Colin Chisholm, and William McKay, were all either doctors or lawyers.⁴³

In a somewhat different way the business dealings of repealer Jeffrey McColl provide a clue to the curious election results in Pictou, where two unionists and a repealer won election to the legislature. In 1886 McColl was president of the Pictou Bank, which, during the early 1880s, had assisted in the industrialization of Pictou County by carrying a number of industrial accounts. At the time of Fielding's repeal resolutions in May 1886, however, the bank was on the verge of bankruptcy as a result of the failure in 1884 of its largest customer.⁴⁴ It would thus be incorrect to attribute McColl's repeal advocacy and election to the passing of an older commercial order based upon international commerce. More likely McColl's success in Pictou reflected the county's concern about the weakness of its infant industry in a period of extended business depression.

Despite the success of repealers and moderates at the polls, McColl included, it would be a mistake to regard the 1886 election as merely a repeal victory. Local issues and the record of the Fielding government were also important in the campaign. In February, Fielding had announced to the legislature that his government had "faithfully and justly managed the public affairs of the province. Unless something occurs . . . to mar that record, we can go to the country and claim and receive the confidence of those who placed us in the position we occupy".⁴⁵ During the campaign Liberal newspapers stressed the legislative accomplishments of the government. Included were amendments to the County Incorporation Act, an electoral bill extending the franchise by some 1,500 voters in Halifax alone, improvements to academic and agricultural education, increased support for road and bridge construction, and a railway policy directed at railway consolidation and the completion of the 18 mile "missing link" between Digby and Annapolis on the Halifax-Yarmouth railway line. Moreover, because the railway policy of the Fielding government had a

43 Biographical and occupational data was compiled from C.B. Fergusson, *A Directory of the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Nova Scotia, 1758-1958* (Halifax, 1958); *The Canadian Parliamentary Guide*, 1883, 1889; and the Vertical MSS files of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

44 James Frost, "Principles of Interest. The Bank of Nova Scotia and the Industrialization of the Maritimes 1880-1910" (MA thesis, Queen's University, 1978), pp. 63-5.

45 Nova Scotia, *Debates*, 26 February 1886, p. 15.

southwestward orientation, and because Fielding left railway development in the north and northeast to the Federal government, differences between the southern and northern parts of the province, evident in the case of repeal, were further magnified.⁴⁶

Notwithstanding the divisions in the Liberal party over the secession question, some observers were concerned that Fielding's victory would make a vigorous repeal agitation in 1887 more likely. "Possibly in some counties our opponents were not serious in this", wrote the Tory John F. Stairs. "Success will, I am afraid, make their party a united one . . . Many of them are talking as strongly now as the most rabid Irishman against Ireland's union with England".⁴⁷ Rather than uniting the party, however, the Liberal sweep increased the anxiety of Liberal unionists about Fielding's future course of action and threatened to divide the party even further. Fearing that Fielding and Alfred G. Jones of Halifax were planning to make repeal the issue of the upcoming federal campaign, the New Glasgow shipbuilder, industrialist, and erstwhile anti-Confederate J. W. Carmichael warned Edward Blake that "the overwhelming victory fairly dazed the Gov't. and our friends in Halifax. They are miscalculating the real value of the repeal movement".⁴⁸ In Carmichael's opinion the end of repeal should be better terms rather than secession. Carmichael had little faith that Nova Scotians wanted independence, since many of the same people who voted for repeal in 1867 voted in support of the National Policy in 1882. The province, Carmichael believed, had long since made its choice to remain in Confederation. If Fielding pushed secession, "with Halifax and certain Western Counties determinedly Repeal, Cumberland, Colchester and the whole of Cape Breton determinedly opposed", he would succeed only in "wrecking the party, but assuredly not in obtaining Repeal".⁴⁹

The problem, of course, was one of interpreting the results of the June election. Did they represent a victory for repeal, or simply a mandate for negotiating better terms? In Pictou, the Conservative *Colonial Standard* noted that the Liberals were divided on the secession question. "Two, at least, of their supporters from Cape Breton, one from Hants, one from Cumberland, and one from Digby", it observed, "are against repeal".⁵⁰ Charles Hibbert Tupper agreed:

That the election resulted in a victory for Mr. Fielding is true. It was, however, the result of a party fight, a party united solely by party ties, but

46 See *Acadian Recorder*, 14 May 1886; *Eastern Chronicle*, 27 May 1886; *The Advance* (Liverpool), 2 June 1886.

47 Stairs to Macdonald, 17 June 1886, Macdonald Papers, vol. 117, Public Archives of Canada.

48 Carmichael to Blake, 6 July 1886, Carmichael Papers, vol. 394, no. 411, PANS.

49 Carmichael to Blake, 6 July 1886, *ibid.*, vol. 394, no. 412.

50 *Colonial Standard*, 17 June 1886.

divided on this question of repeal. Many of Mr. Fielding's supporters refused to commit themselves upon this question, while another pronounced himself as strongly opposed to a repeal of the union of 1867.⁵¹

Jeffrey McColl, the successful repeal candidate in Pictou County, appreciated the potential hazards in proceeding towards independence with a divided party. In an open letter to his constituents in the fall of 1886 McColl pointed out that the Liberals had not won simply because of repeal, but because of a host of "side issues". Although McColl reiterated his personal support for repeal, he did not want it imposed if a sizeable minority in the province wished to remain within Confederation. The only real method of determining the extent of secessionist sentiment was to hold a referendum on the issue. If two-thirds of those voting wished to secede, then and only then should the government proceed towards independence.⁵²

But Fielding ignored this counsel of caution and between the elections of 1886 and 1887 vigorously promoted an independent Maritime Union apart from Canada. Although Maritime Union had been included in Fielding's repeal resolutions in the legislature, it had not been an important issue in the campaign. It made obvious sense to determine whether Nova Scotia wanted repeal before proceeding towards Maritime Union. At the same time Fielding recognized that the Mother Country would be unlikely to grant independence to Nova Scotia alone: "I believe that if the Maritime Provinces would take united action to that end, we could get out of the Union. But I hardly expect that any one province will be allowed to go".⁵³ Arguing that the election of 1886 revealed a desire to co-operate with "New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island in a movement for separation from Canada and the formation of a Union of the Maritime Provinces",⁵⁴ Fielding travelled to Charlottetown in July to confer with L.H. Davies and other influential figures in Prince Edward Island political circles. In addition, he corresponded with New Brunswick Premier A.G. Blair, Liberal Association President George McLeod of Saint John, and a number of New Brunswick assemblymen including John V. Ellis and C.W. Weldon of Saint John, and M.C. Atkinson of Bristol.⁵⁵ In a letter to James A. Fraser in August 1886, Fielding outlined the attitude of the other provinces, and his strategy for promoting Maritime Union:

51 C.H. Tupper to Editor, London *Standard*, 22 November 1886, C.H. Tupper Papers, PANS (microfilm).

52 Jeffrey McColl, "To the Electors of the County of Pictou, 1886", Vertical MSS File, PANS.

53 Fielding to J.V. Ellis, 6 March 1887, Fielding Papers, no. 218, PANS.

54 Fielding to James H. Crockett, E.H. Allen, and H.S. Bridges, 16 June 1886, Fielding Papers, PANS.

55 Fielding to Hon. A.G. Blair, 19 June 1886, Fielding Papers, PANS.

I know that if official action was taken now in the direction of Maritime Union we could get no aid from the Governments of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. The island Government is *Tory*, the New Brunswick Government is *timid*. If we make application to the Tory Government of England for release of Nova Scotia we shall as the case now stands almost certainly receive a flat refusal. I prefer to work up the movement among the public men and among the people too in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island and will go again and am contemplating a trip to New Brunswick in the same way. If we can get some public indication of sympathy from those Provinces we can secure the active cooperation of some parties in our own province who up to this time have fought shy of repeal.⁵⁶

From the other provinces Fielding asked for neutrality. "The repeal issue", he explained to Oliver Mowat, "goes beyond the question of better terms. . . [to] a separation which will be better for all concerned".⁵⁷ It was Fielding's hope that Ontario would not contemplate the prevention of secession by force of arms.

Given the opposition to repeal within Nova Scotia and the reluctance of the other Maritime governments to take up this issue, the Federal election of 1887 in Nova Scotia assumed a decisive importance, if independence were to be had. "If we could elect 21 men to stay away from Ottawa", Fielding wrote to Fraser, "it would be the most effective move".⁵⁸ Unfortunately for Fielding the only four repeal candidates contesting the elections of 1887 were J.A. Kirk of Guysborough, J.D. Eisenhauer of Lunenburg, H.H. Fuller of Halifax, and John Lovitt of Yarmouth. Fielding did what he could to improve matters. "I wish you or somebody else would come out squarely on the repeal issue", Fielding wrote to George Murray. "I am persuaded that if favorably presented that issue would prove a winning one in any part of C.B."⁵⁹ In the long run, however, he was fighting a losing battle. In addition to Murray, the unionist ranks included William Pipes in Cumberland, J.D. McLeod in Pictou, Adam Bell and Samuel McDonnell in Inverness, W.B. Vail in Digby, Michael Slattery in Cape Breton, Edward Flynn in Richmond, and William F. McCurdy in Victoria. Other candidates like W.H. Ray from Annapolis, Jason Mack from Queen's, Thomas Robertson from Shelburne, William Curry from Hants, F.W. Borden from King's, Angus McGillivray from Antigonish, Silas McLellan from Colchester, and Alfred Jones from Halifax stopped short of repudiating repeal but gave it little support.⁶⁰

56 Fielding to James A. Fraser, 25 August 1886, Fielding Papers, nos. 505-7, PANS.

57 Fielding to Oliver Mowat, 7 July 1886, Fielding Papers, PANS.

58 Fielding to James A. Fraser, 8 July 1886, Fielding Papers, nos. 422-3, PANS; and Fielding to J.A. Smith, 12 August 1886, Fielding Papers, no. 476, PANS.

59 Fielding to George H. Murray, 4 December 1886, Fielding Papers, nos. 728-9, PANS.

60 The *Morning Herald* noted on 15 February 1886 that "in Cape Breton there are no less than five

One reason for the limited support for secession in 1887 was the obvious incompatibility of repeal and the national platform of the Liberal party. It seemed inconsistent for Liberal candidates to demand secession in one breath and to support Edward Blake and the national party in the next. Liberal candidates now emphasized reciprocity rather than repeal. "If there is any one thing that the people of the province are more in earnest about than another following the defeat of the present administration", Alfred Jones remarked, "it is to have free commercial intercourse with the people of the United States, who are our natural customers".⁶¹ Even the Halifax *Morning Chronicle* took a more moderate position on repeal than it had in 1886. "It is only by repeal, or by a change of government at Ottawa", the *Chronicle* announced on 10 February, "that reciprocity may be obtained".⁶² Other Liberal newspapers, among them the *Acadian Recorder*, the *Liverpool Advance*, and the *Eastern Chronicle*, supported reciprocity and avoided repeal. The one exception was the *Yarmouth Herald* which still considered repeal essential: "One remedy alone remains. The electorate must demand a change of Government, a return to economy and lower taxation, and at the earliest moment a complete severance of the bonds of Union".⁶³

Another explanation for repeal's limited popularity in 1887 was the obvious opposition to Nova Scotian separatism in the Mother Country. This became a particularly important question with the publication of an apparently unfavorable comment about repeal in a letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Charles Hibbert Tupper. In response to Tupper's assurance that Nova Scotian Liberals were divided on the repeal question, Gladstone expressed his pleasure with "the very conclusive evidence which you have given. . . as to the solidarity of the. . . [Union], which has done so much for British North America and for the solidarity and harmony of the Empire".⁶⁴ Coming from an influential supporter of Irish Home Rule, Gladstone's remarks suggested that there would be vigorous Imperial opposition to any attempt to dismantle Confederation. Later Gladstone argued that his remarks were taken out of context, but his corrective, coming as it did only one week before the 1887 federal election, did not compensate for the damage already done to the repeal campaign.⁶⁵

unionists in the field. In the peninsula proper Messrs. Pipes, Curry, McLelan, and Vail have not expressed themselves in favor of repeal, while Messrs. McGillivray, McLeod, Ray, Borden, Mack, etc., are known to be using the repeal cry only in secluded districts as a political kite". In King's County, Frederick Borden's campaign manager, W.E. Roscoe, was a repealer, but there is little evidence of repeal in Borden's speeches. Carmen Miller, "The Public Life of Sir Frederick Borden" (MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 1964), pp. 33-5.

61 Speech of Alfred Jones at Halifax, 18 January 1887, quoted in *Morning Chronicle*, 20 January 1887.

62 *Ibid.*, 10 February 1887.

63 *The Herald* (Yarmouth), 16 February 1887.

64 Gladstone to C.H. Tupper, 31 December 1886, Charles H. Tupper Papers, PANS (microfilm).

65 Gladstone to William Annand, 15 February 1887, Fielding Papers, PANS.

Throughout the campaign the Conservatives ridiculed the vacillating attitude of the Liberals toward repeal. If repeal were really an issue, the *Halifax Morning Herald* asked, why were most Liberals supporting Blake? "Whatever his other weaknesses. . . [Blake] is not yet a secessionist".⁶⁶ The *Antigonish Casket* preached from a similar text, pointing out that if the Liberals "are earnest Repealers they are not supporters of Blake; if they are supporters of Blake, they are not earnest Repealers".⁶⁷ Furthermore, if the Liberals themselves were divided on the issue of repeal, was a successful separation of Nova Scotia from Canada likely? "To get . . . [repeal] our people must be unanimous", said Conservative candidate John F. Stairs. "We are not only not unanimous, but the party that have taken up the cry is itself divided upon this question".⁶⁸

The difficulties confronting the Liberal party were reflected in the election results of 1887. The Liberals captured but 7 of the 21 seats in the province, a figure unchanged from the previous federal election of 1882. Predictably, Liberal strength was concentrated along the province's eastern and southern shores, while the Conservatives controlled the industrializing northern districts and towns along the railroad line and through the Annapolis Valley. The Conservatives swept Cape Breton Island with the exception of Richmond, took both seats in Pictou, and won in Annapolis, Antigonish, Colchester, Cumberland, Digby and Hants. The largest Conservative majorities were run up in Colchester, Cumberland, and Pictou. A.W. McLellan, Finance Minister in Macdonald's government, defeated Silas McLellan by 627 votes in Colchester; in Cumberland Sir Charles Tupper led William Pipes by 668 votes; and in Pictou Charles Hibbert Tupper and John MacDougall defeated J.D. McLeod and Adam Bell by 6747 to 5662 votes. For the Liberals, three repealers, Lovitt in Yarmouth, Kirk in Guysborough and Eisenhauer in Lunenburg, won comfortable victories, with majorities of 683, 352 and 122 votes respectively. In addition, Liberal candidates won in Shelburne, Halifax, and King's counties, where repeal had not been a prominent issue and in Richmond where the candidate was a unionist.

The results of the election of 1887 constituted a vote of confidence in Confederation and a repudiation of repeal. For Fielding, who had been predicting 16 to 19 Liberal seats, the results were particularly disappointing.⁶⁹ With only three repealers winning election, he realized that repeal was all but dead. When the provincial legislature opened in March, Fielding found repeal a source of embarrassment. While most Liberals seemed inclined to accept J.W. Longley's

66 *Morning Herald*, 12 February 1887.

67 *The Casket* (Antigonish), 10 February 1887.

68 Speech of John F. Stairs at Dartmouth Reform Club Hall, 1 February 1887, quoted in *Morning Herald*, 3 February 1887.

69 Fielding to Blake, 5 October 1886, Fielding Papers, nos. 582-7, PANS.

advice to forget repeal and return to "honest government",⁷⁰ there was a diehard repeal faction in the provincial House, including James Fraser, Otto Weeks, William McCoy, William Roche and Jeffrey McColl. Fielding was boxed. To repudiate secession would anger the sincere repealers within the party; to support it would alienate the unionists. The Premier, the Halifax *Morning Herald* pointed out, was damned if he supported repeal, and damned if he rejected it.⁷¹

On 21 April 1887 Fielding rose in the House to recount his version of repeal's collapse and to urge its suspension. He observed that "in several counties in June last the repeal issue, though put to some extent before the people was not made the paramount issue. . . . The government was sustained. . . on the general record of their four years management of the affairs of the country". There were a few counties in 1886 where repeal was significant, but in 1887 even fewer candidates than before were ready to call for separation. "The policy was not followed throughout the whole province", Fielding continued, "and you cannot carry on a repeal movement without insisting on such a policy".⁷² Fielding then introduced a resolution which suspended the repeal agitation indefinitely. After considerable debate the resolution passed the House on April 27. The Halifax *Morning Herald* had the last word: "At midnight on the 27th of April, A.D. 1887, the legislature of Nova Scotia consigned the repeal jackass to the silent tomb. . . . Succeeded he will doubtless be by some other donkey with a different name, mayhap 'Commerical Union'."⁷³

With the suspension of the repeal campaign, Fielding and the Liberals followed the more orthodox policy of encouraging reciprocity with the United States, expanding the coal industry through the attraction of capital investment from outside the region, and involving the province in a broad movement for provincial rights. For those regions most closely tied to the old commercial economy, reciprocity or Commercial Union seemed an acceptable alternative to repeal. At the same time, the expansion of the coal industry promised to foster industrial development and to augment provincial revenues through increased royalty payments. And finally, the question of better terms could be pursued in the context of provincial rights rather than repeal. In October 1887, Fielding, Longley and Angus McGillivray represented the province at the Inter-provincial Conference at Quebec, to discuss such matters as disallowance, Senate reform, provincial boundaries, the protection of public works, and provincial finances. Although the recommendations of the Quebec Conference in the area of financial terms were subsequently ignored by the Federal Govern-

70 J.W. Longley to Edward Blake, 25 February 1887, Blake Papers, Provincial Archives of Ontario.

71 *Morning Herald*, 3 March 1887.

72 Nova Scotia, *Debates*, 21 April 1887, pp. 252-3.

73 *Morning Herald*, 29 April 1887.

ment, the significance of the Conference should not be overlooked. It facilitated the transformation of a separatist movement into a more orthodox movement for provincial rights.⁷⁴

In retrospect, Fielding's campaign for repeal seems to have been related to the erosion of a traditional economy based upon the international carrying trade. The depression of the 1870s and 1880s prompted those most affected by the passing of the older order to suggest a series of remedies, including better terms, Maritime Union, reciprocity, and repeal. In each case the objective was the same: restoration of a mythical pre-Confederation "Golden Age". Secession was simply the most dramatic expression of this desire to turn the clock back. But repeal alone was no real solution. Lacking a rational explanation for Nova Scotia's disabilities and devoid of a positive program for future economic development, the repealers were offering little more than the faint hope that what was now past might somehow be recovered. At the same time, as J. W. Carmichael suggested and the election of 1887 confirmed, many Nova Scotians were coming to accommodate themselves to the new industrial order. Under the umbrella of the protective tariff new manufacturing opportunities were opening in the textile industry, in coal and steel, in rope and cordage manufacture, in the confectionary industry, and in sugar refining.⁷⁵ For those who saw the National Policy as an appropriate and progressive development strategy for the region, repeal seemed reactionary and destructive by comparison. Only later would they realize that the industrial capitalist hope, symbolized in the "National Policy" of John A. Macdonald, would create as many problems as it solved.

74 For a fuller treatment of the alteration of Liberal party tactics after the suspension of repeal, see Howell, "Repeal, Reciprocity, and Commercial Union in Nova Scotian Politics", ch. IV.

75 T.W. Acheson, "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910", *Acadiensis*, I (Spring 1972), pp. 3-28.