THE STUDY OF INTERNAL CONFLICT IN CANADA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

by

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The subject of Canadian internal conflict has generally been characterized by a profound lack of scholarly interest. Most experts in Canadian affairs do not consider civil conflict to be a subject that merits their attention. To a large extent this may be attributed to the so-called "myth of the peaceable kingdom", which has been one of the most durable themes of the Canadian political culture.[1] The assumption that underlies this myth is that Canadians have traditionally been, and remain, a thoroughly non-violent people. It has been noted by one prominent historian that practically all Canadian textbooks in history, political science, and sociology presume that Canada has always been a tranquil and pacific society.[2]

Unfortunately, the uncritical acceptance of this thesis has caused misjudgments about the degree of abnormality represented by conflict behaviour in this country and has posed serious obstacles to its understanding. Largely as a result, internal conflict has been neglected for some time as a subject worthy of serious research. The conscious and unconscious perpetuation of the peaceable kingdom myth also accounts, to a large extent, for the current tendency in private, political, and academic circles to react to contemporary expressions of conflict with a good deal of shock. It has also led to the acceptance of certain misplaced conclusions about the undercurrents present in our own society, as seen in the attempts of many politicians in the sixties to attribute the "contretemps" of that era to the fall-out of American violence or to various imaginary conspiracies.

While it is correct to assume that civil strife in this country has never reached the quantity or the intensity of American political violence, such a comparison is somewhat misleading. The fact that there has been appreciably less violence in Canadian history than has occurred in the United States should not be construed to mean that civil conflict has been unimportant in the development of Canadian society. The fact is that there has been significantly more internal conflict in the past than most of us are aware of. It may have been less dramatic and less well publicized than in the United States, but it has none the less been an integral part of the Canadian political process.[3] This brief article will examine the benefits to be derived from the study of internal conflict in Canada and suggest some directions for future research.

What is the purpose of studying civil violence in Canada? What is to be learned? The study of internal violence is important for a variety of reasons. From an academic standpoint, it gives us a better insight into the functioning of the political process and how it handles diverse and sometimes irreconcilable interests. It also provides us with a better insight into the political and social undercurrents that exist in our society. From a public policy perspective, the understanding of the nature of internal political violence is an essential element

in the development of rational and prudent responses to such incidents. The panic and over-reaction which frequently characterize governmental response to conflict are due largely to a misunderstanding of the goals and objectives which motivate it. Government over-reaction may well be a greater threat to political stability than that posed by civil violence itself.[4]

The two major impediments to our understanding of internal conflict in Canada are an inadequate conceptualization of the nature of political violence and a lack of empirical data. The prevailing conceptualization of violence in Canada has been strongly influenced by the myth of the peaceable kingdom. Politicians and academics alike tend to view civil violence as socially pathological and aberrant behaviour. Based on this perspective, violence is seen as essentially irrational and non-purposive. Its use is generally attributed to deviants or miscreants. Possibly a more useful and insightful approach is one that views violence as an inherently political phenomenon. H.L. Nieburg in his book, *Political Violence: The Behavioral Process*, may overstate the argument somewhat, but is none the less perceptive when he suggests:

> "Extreme and violent political behavior cannot be dismissed as erratic, exceptional, and meaningless. To set it apart from the processes that are characteristic of society is to ignore the continuum that exists between peaceable and disruptive behavior; it is to deny the role of violence in creating and testing political legitimacy and in conditioning the terms of all social bargaining and adjustment. Violence in all its forms, up to and including assassination, is a natural form of political behavior."[5]

Any modern industrialized society can expect a certain degree of social conflict and violence as a matter of course. Such violence, however, is not necessarily subversive nor is it necessarily de-stabilizing. Political violence on a significant scale could very well suggest that the more traditional means of acquiring political influence are blocked for a segment of the population. The political system simply may not be performing adequately for a portion of the citizenry and violence may be their only means of expression. If we are to believe Professor Gamson, the utilization of violence by a protest group can significantly improve the likelihood of achieving goals and objectives.[6] As social scientists such as Lewis Coser have suggested, conflict can under some circumstances be a creative force and can assist in the evolution of a political system.[7] The problem, of course, is to be able to contain conflict and prevent it from escalating into the sort of deadly confrontation that has characterized Lebanon and Northern Ireland.

An understanding of the nature of civil violence must begin with an appreciation that it is not necessarily an apolitical phenomenon. On the contrary, violence has been used by a variety of individuals and groups for distinctly political purposes.[8] The conception of violence as a political resource is commonly attributed to the work of Gamson, Oberschall, and Tilly.[9] The principal advantage of their approach is that it conceives of violence not as pathological or aberrant behaviour, but as part of the struggle for political

leverage in a society. The political resource model would seem to be conducive to broadly-based empirical research and to enlightened and objective policy analysis.

The second impediment to the study of Canadian political violence has been inadequate empirical data. While several comparative studies have generated domestic conflict data for Canada, the reliability of this data is highly questionable.[10] The limited data that does exist would seem to lend credence to the argument that Canadian internal conflict is worthy of serious study. Limiting our frame of reference to the last three decades, the evidence would suggest that Canada has experienced a level of conflict comparable to most industrialized democracies. Using data for 84 countries for the years from 1955 to 1965, one recent study found that Canada ranked near the median with respect to the incidence of collective violence.[11] Table 1 reveals Canada holding position 49 in this sample, although it is admittedly a world apart from the intense violence that characterized Indonesia and Hungary during the period. Using the same data set, somewhat more meaningful results can be found in Table 2, which is a sample of countries closest to Canada in terms of level of industrialization and political ethos. In this perhaps more comparable sample, Canada ranked seventh in the incidence and sixth in the rate of collective violence for the period. While the incidence of violence in Canada could certainly not be considered excessive, it was either at or slightly above the median for advanced industrialized countries.[13] Similar results have also been suggested by Gurr, Feierabend *et al.*, and Gurr and Bishop.[14] Figure 1 provides a time profile of the data used in Tables 1 and 2. In the period from 1955 to 1965, available data indicates that there were in Canada some 24 anti-government demonstrations, 19 riots, 1 political strike, 10 pro-government demonstrations, 92 armed attacks, and 8 conflict-related deaths.[15]

Unfortunately there is no reliable data set for the post-1965 era. There are, however, a few empirical studies which do provide some useful insights. Using *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto) as a data source, one recent study identified some 129 incidents of collective violence in Ontario for the period from 1965 to 1975.[16] A recent analysis of collective violence in Ontario and Quebec found some 281 incidents for the period from 1963 to 1975.[17] Furthermore, this study found that the pattern, objectives, and intensity of the violence differed markedly in these two provinces. This finding would suggest the importance of the political context in understanding the nature of civil strife. While the available data allows us to develop only a limited picture of the extent of civil strife in Canada, it does suggest that the occurrence of the phenomenon is not inconsequential.

The evidence cited above should, if anything, suggest that the "peaceable kingdom" myth is somewhat overstated. While one could certainly not say that violence has become a critical societal problem in Canada, it would be folly to ignore or dismiss this phenomenon, especially as much of the violence has been related to ethnic tension and industrial strife.

The potential for ethnic violence is a recurrent concern in Canada. While attention is focused on the situation in Quebec, some serious problems of ethnic and racial relations exist throughout the country.[18] Recent labour violence has

Table 1[12]

Incidence of Collective Conflict: 84-Country Sample, 1955-65

Indonesia	90621	Panama	209
Hungary	40200	Japan	203
Malaysia	10805	Afghanistan	199
Argentina	7325	United Kingdom	177
Cuba	5419	Ethiopia	159
China	5239	Turkey	156
India	5068	Canada	154
Dominican Republic	4799	Spain	153
Iraq	4543	West Germany	141
Colombia	4512	Chile	140
Taiwan	3382	Portugal	115
Laos	2808	Belgium	114
Pakistan	2578	Israel	108
Tunisia	2577	East Germany	97
Morocco	2276	Greece	93
Sudan	2262	Ghana	88
Venezuela	2230	Costa Rica	79
United States	2149	Egypt	75
Cyprus	1898	Thailand	64
Syria	1569	Libya	48
South Africa	1175	Rumania	44
Bolivia	1141	Czechoslovakia	41
Burma	1007	Ireland	37
France	962	Uruguay	36
Lebanon	844	Austria	33
Albania	785	Cambodia	32
Peru	766	Korea	26
Poland	727	El Salvador	18
USSR	538	Denmark	16
Iran	497	Finland	15
Mexico	462	Bulgaria	13
Haiti	458	Switzerland	10
Philippines	442	Australia	9
Sri Lanka	440	Netherlands	7
Nicaragua	375	Sweden	6
Italy	335	Norway	5
Paraquay	264	Yugoslavia	4
Ecuador	256	Liberia	3
Guatemala	252	Iceland	2
Jordan	234	Luxembourg	0
Honduras	211	New Zealand	0
Brazil	210	Saudi Arabia	0

Source: Robert J. Jackson, Micheal J. Kelly, and Thomas H. Mitchell, "Collective Conflict, Violence and the Media in Canada," Ontario Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry, *Report, Volume 5: Learning from the Media* (Toronto, 1977) p. 252.

Table 2

Incidence of Collective Conflict: 19-Nation Sample, 1955-1965

* All rates are for per million population (1965).

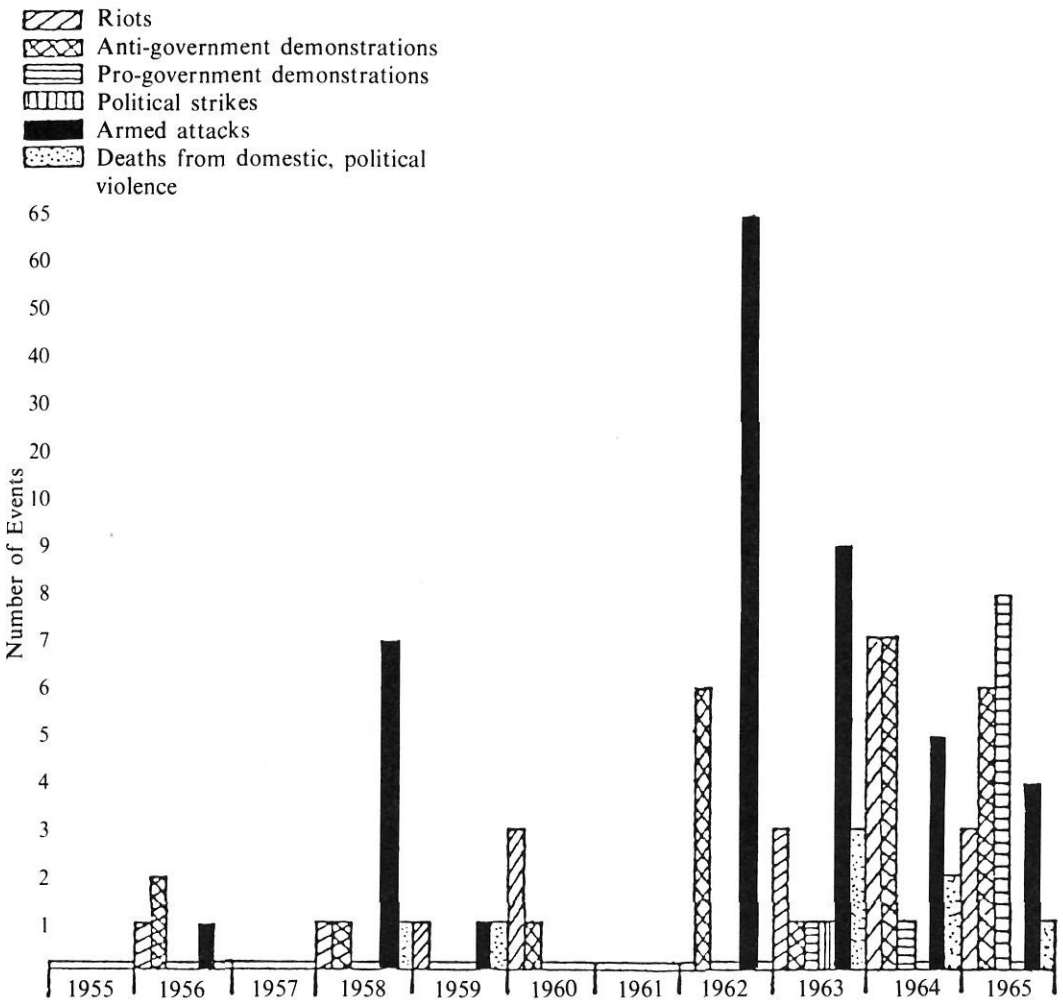
**For the purpose of comparison, the collective conflict total includes assassinations.

Nation	Collective Conflict Total**	Rate*	No. of Riots	Rate	No. of Anti-Govt. Demon-stra-tions	Rate	No. of Pro-Govt. Demon-stra-tions	Rate	No. of Poli-tical Strikes	Rate	No.of Armed Attacks	Rate	No. of Deaths	Rate
Venezuela	2230	247.8	157	17.4	34	3.8	25	2.8	15	1.7	448	49.8	1546	171.8
United States	2149	11.0	325	1.7	925	4.7	66	0.3	17	0.08	628	3.2	184	0.9
France	962	19.6	70	1.4	183	3.7	65	1.3	44	0.8	498	10.1	102	2.0
Italy	335	6.4	101	1.9	18	0.3	22	0.4	25	0.5	135	2.5	34	0.5
Japan	203	2.0	69	0.7	116	1.2	3	0.03	6	0.06	6	0.06	2	0.02
United Kingdom	177	3.2	60	1.0	94	1.7	3	0.05	2	0.03	115	2.1	3	0.05
Canada	154	7.7	19	1.0	24	1.2	10	0.5	1	0.05	92	4.6	8	0.4
West Germany	141	2.4	27	0.5	67	1.1	25	0.4	1	0.01	21	0.4	0	0
Belgium	114	12.7	40	4.4	40	4.4	7	0.8	9	1.0	12	1.3	6	0.7
Ireland	37	12.3	1	0.3	1	0.3	1	0.3	1	0.3	32	10.6	1	0.3
Austria	33	4.7	18	2.6	2	0.3	3	0.4	3	0.4	6	0.9	1	0.1
Denmark	16	3.2	0	0	15	3.0	0	0	0	0	1	0.2	0	0
Finland	15	3.0	4	0.8	1	0.2	6	1.2	0	0	1	0.2	3	0.6
Switzerland	10	1.7	3	0.5	0	0	1	0.2	1	0.2	5	0.8	0	0
Australia	9	0.8	1	0.09	2	0.2	0	0	0	0	6	0.5	0	0
Netherlands	7	0.6	1	0.08	2	0.2	3	0.3	0	0	1	0.08	0	0
Sweden	6	0.8	5	0.6	0	0	1	0.1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Norway	5	1.3	0	0	2	0.5	2	0.5	0	0	1	0.3	0	0
New Zealand	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Robert J. Jackson, Micheal J. Kelly, and Thomas H. Mitchell, "Collective Conflict, Violence and the Media in Canada," Ontario Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry, *Report, Volume 5: Learning from the Media* (Toronto, 1977) p. 251.

Figure 1

Time Profile of Canadian Collective Conflict, 1955-1965



Source: Robert J. Jackson, Michael J. Kelly, and Thomas H. Mitchell. "Collective Conflict, Violence and the Media in Canada," Ontario Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry, *Report, Volume 5: Learning from the Media* (Toronto, 1977) p. 250.

been particularly bitter and intense and certainly compares with similar incidents in other industrialized countries. The rampage of destruction at the James Bay Project in May 1974 resulting in one million dollars' damage, and the shooting of 8 strikers by security guards at the Robin Hood Flour Plant in Montreal in July 1977, is an indication of just how intense labour strife can be in Canada.[19]

While the few empirical studies examining collective violence in Canada have laid the foundation for further inquiry, there is little question that the serious investigation of the topic is hampered by the absence of a national data set sufficient to test and develop various theoretical models. The several civil violence data sets developed in the United States for broad cross-national analysis are simply not detailed enough to support theoretical investigation of the Canadian case. The development of a Canadian data set on civil violence would be an enormously tedious and time-consuming endeavour. The primary source of data would, of course, be the daily newspapers of the several regions of the country, although supplementary material might well be utilized. Ideally, the daily press of all ten provinces would be examined for a time frame sufficient to facilitate the utilization of sophisticated statistical techniques. A period of twenty-five years would seem to be the minimum necessary for serious empirical investigation of trends and short-term fluctuations. The construction of a national data set would require the efforts of many trained scholars for a considerable period. Undoubtedly, a project of this magnitude would require substantial governmental or foundation support. The absence of such data does not mean that research cannot take place. A limited number of recent studies have generated their own data archives for particular provinces. Such studies, however illuminating, are inevitably limited by the scope of the data on which they are based. Someday, hopefully, a body of data will exist comparable to that which currently facilitates voting research in Canada.

To understand the nature of internal conflict in Canada is to understand the undercurrents and antagonisms present in our social fabric. Thus, the study of internal conflict is important for both academic and practical policy reasons. It is unfortunate that a phenomenon which has such significant political implications is so misunderstood and poorly researched.

Footnotes

1. J.M.C. Torrance, "Cultural Factors and the Response of Government to Violence", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, York University, 1975.
2. Kenneth McNaught, "Collective Violence in Canadian History: Some Problems of Definition and Research", *Proceedings of the Workshop on Violence in Canadian Society* (Toronto, 1975), pp. 165-76.
3. See Kenneth McNaught, "Violence in Canadian History", in *Character and Circumstance: Essays in Honour of Donald G. Creighton*, ed. John S. Moir (Toronto, 1970), pp. 66-84. For an excellent survey of some of the major incidents of political violence in Canadian history see Brian A. Grosman, "Dissent and Disorder in Canada", *Report of the Task Force on Disorders and Terrorism* (Washington, 1976), pp. 479-96. Other notable studies include John Gellner, *Bayonets in the Streets: Urban Guerrillas at Home and Abroad* (Don Mills, Ontario, 1974);

Ron Haggart and Aubrey E. Golden, *Rumors of War* (Toronto, 1970); and Richard P. Bowles, *et al.*, *Protest, Violence, and Social Change* (Scarborough, Ontario, 1969). For a critical review of the available literature on the subject see Thomas H. Mitchell, "Violence and Politics in Canada: A Review Essay", forthcoming.

4. For a discussion of the dangers of government over-reaction see David Fromkin, "The Strategy of Terrorism", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 53 (1975), pp. 683-98.
5. H.L. Nieburg, *Political Violence: The Behavioral Process* (New York, 1968), p. 5.
6. See William A. Gamson, *The Strategy of Social Protest* (Homewood, Illinois, 1975).
7. See Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York, 1956).
8. See Joseph A. Frank and Micheal J. Kelly, "Street Politics in Canada: An Examination of Mediating Factors", *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 23 (1979), pp. 593-614.
9. See Gamson, *op. cit.*, and Anthony Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1973); and Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, Massachusetts, 1978).
10. One of the major problems that one encounters in using most cross-national data on conflict is that it generally under-reports intra-societal levels of conflict. This is due to the fact that most data is derived from such sources as the *New York Times Index, Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, and *Facts on File* — all of which have a tendency to concentrate only on major conflict events. For examples of some of the existing cross-national data sets see Ted Robert Gurr, "A Comparative Study of Civil Conflict", in *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Hugh D. Graham and Ted Robert Gurr (New York, 1969), pp. 572-632; Ivo K. Feierabend *et al.*, "Social Change and Political Violence: Cross National Patterns", in Graham and Gurr, *op. cit.*, pp. 632-90; and, Ted Robert Gurr and Vaughan F. Bishop, "Violent Nations, and Others", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 20 (1976), pp. 79-110.
11. Robert J. Jackson, Micheal J. Kelly, and Thomas H. Mitchell, "Collective Conflict, Violence and the Media in Canada", Ontario Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry, *Report. Volume 5: Learning from the Media* (Toronto, 1977), p. 251.
12. The data for this table is derived from Charles L. Taylor and Micheal Hudson, eds., *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, 1972); country totals are composite meaures and include the number of riots, armed attacks, assassinations, anti-government demonstrations, political strikes, pro-government demonstrations, and deaths.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
14. See Gurr, Feierabend *et al.*, and Gurr and Bishop, *op. cit.*
15. Jackson, Kelly, and Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 249.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 257-66.
17. Frank and Kelly, *op. cit.*, see also Joseph A. Frank and Micheal J. Kelly, "Etude preliminaire sur la violence collective en Ontario et au Quebec, 1963-1973", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 10 (1977), pp. 145-57.
18. For a discussion of the volatile Quebec situation see Micheal J. Kelly and Thomas H. Mitchell, "Post-Referendum Quebec — The Potential for Conflict", *Conflict Quarterly*, vol. 1 no. 1 (1980), pp. 15-19.
19. For an account of the James Bay destruction see *The Montreal Star*, 23 March 1974, p. 1; a description of the shootings at the Robin Hood Flour Plant can be found in *The Globe and Mail*, 22 July 1977.