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In Retrospect

In 1950, when J. R. Kidd succeeded E. A. Corbett as the Association's Director, the CAAE was in the midst of yet another period of introspection and re-assessment. Kidd's first Director's Report to the Annual Meeting was characteristically frank. He recalled that the 1943 Manifesto was "a bold manifesto calling for a new social order", and concluded that the Association had definitely not achieved a "radically re-structured society". Indeed, he questioned whether such an objective could be expected of a body with membership from a "multitude of organizations and great diversity of backgrounds".¹

Paradoxically, the disparate nature of the CAAE's membership, its lack of clear purpose and absence of a distinct image were sources of the Association's strength as well as of its weakness. The CAAE's nebulous character and goals provided not only the conditions under which social activist and traditional voluntary association leaders could mingle, but also the freedom of action which enabled its Director to initiate a number of new and controversial ventures.

The Association's ambiguity of purpose also created concomitant weaknesses. Because of its uncertain goals the CAAE failed to develop either a wide base of committed members such as is found in a successful social movement, or to hold members interested in gaining the esteem engendered by membership in a voluntary association of the elites. Thus the CAAE attracted neither the dedicated membership base necessary for a social movement, nor the elite leadership which successful traditional voluntary associations garnered.

Why did some leaders of traditional voluntary associations and of rural social movements participate in the CAAE? If one compares the Association with other Canadian organizations in the period 1935 to 1952 in terms of size

and status of membership, source and amount of financial support, the CAAE would rank in the lowest order of magnitude among the constellation of associations. However, despite its relatively low status it served as a meeting ground for elite leaders of traditional voluntary associations bent on public expression of their personal views. Further, it served as a bridge between such leaders and those social activists of the rural social movements who shared some common concerns. The social movement activists, in turn, gained a measure of prestige and legitimacy for their social action projects by developing them in conjunction with a national educational body whose Director openly welcomed them.

Knowledge of Corbett's contribution to the Association and its radio forums is crucial to understanding their development. In part, he played a role similar to that of a mediaeval minstrel-jester who travelled far and wide not only to entertain the elites but also to inform them of distant happenings. The peripatetic Corbett used his gifts of word and wit to win financial support for the Association and its forums while acting as an informant regarding the activities of mutual friends and myriad voluntary associations.

Indeed, Corbett was one of the few full-time officials of a Canadian national educational body during most of his directorship and apparently the only such officer to gain the confidence of leaders of both the social movements and the traditional voluntary associations. He served, therefore, in a unique way to bridge the philosophical as well as the regional differences in English-speaking Canada. Unfortunately, despite his concern for adult education in French-speaking Canada, his inability to speak French was a factor which prevented him from significantly influencing the growth of adult education in Quebec.

A list of Corbett's weaknesses would pale beside his strengths. Yet throughout his directorship he was ambivalent toward the social movement-traditional voluntary association tension within the Association. His social gospel and rural background inspired a concern for the quality of rural life akin to that of the rural social activists. He wittingly encouraged young social activists to engage in adult education ventures, recommending men such as Harry Avison, David Smith, Watson Thomson, Neil Morrison and Alex Sim for a variety of positions. However Corbett was aware that even the social movement activists were not philosophically united; some espoused rural populist views, others expressed Christian socialist ideals, and yet others promoted extreme left-wing interests more attuned to an urban intellectual movement. Corbett shared little sympathy with the latter. He preferred the more tolerant and less doctrinaire approach of social and liberal democrats. Throughout his fifteen years as Director he maintained cordial relations with most of the traditional voluntary association leaders who participated in or supported the Association.

At no stage of the Association's development did the social movement elements gain ascendancy. What Corbett's behaviour would have been had they

succeeded is uncertain; however, it is clear that during the period of their greatest influence—in the period of the 1943 Manifesto, the formation of “Citizens’ Forum”, and the height of “Farm Forum” growth—Corbett initiated and encouraged a coalition of liberal, traditional voluntary association and social movement leaders to defend the existence of a “Citizens’ Forum” series, contrary to the wishes of powerful political leaders. It is also certain that E. A. Corbett was instrumental in promoting those concerns which the CAAE was able roughly to define: the development of rural education, citizenship education, and a communication network of voluntary associations. His personal experience, commitment, and leadership skills were largely responsible for the degree of success that the Association enjoyed in each field.

The CAAE’s development coincides with three historic phases: prewar Depression, wartime, and postwar recovery. In all three periods powerful political and social-economic forces influenced the Association’s activities. In the field of broadcasting these forces, together with the changing role of the Association’s radio partners, proved to be powerful formative factors.

In the prewar period, 1935 to 1939, the CAAE and its future broadcasting partners, the CBC and the forebears of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, were struggling to win public support. These three bodies, engaged in the common task of searching for a purpose during an economic depression, developed mutually beneficial relations when they experimented with radio for rural education.

With the outbreak of war the three organizations operated in an entirely new context. As a clear national purpose developed in the execution of the war effort, national goals transcended the organizational goals of these bodies. Discussion of war and peace aims was conducted in a rhetoric charged with connotations of social action; even traditional voluntary association leaders used terms such as “postwar planning” and “social reconstruction” to describe their general aims. It was an exhilarating atmosphere which proved illusory and short-lived.

With the federal government’s acceptance of the once-militant CFA in a multitude of advisory committee roles and the Federation’s subsequent mollification, the CAAE’s chief broadcasting partner provided little support for social activist programming. Other than including some social activists interested in adult education, the CFA and its associated bodies served chiefly as an interest group ally in defence of the CBC and the maintenance of the “Farm Forum”. The necessity of co-operating with the CBC, and of recognizing its control of programme content, acted as a constant constraint upon the growth of any potentially radical programming. Under a succession of Ministers such as C. D. Howe and General LaFlèche, and General Managers who, with one exception, were political confidants of their Ministers, the CBC truly became a “wartime arm of government”.

At the end of the Second World War, Canadian institutions faced the task

of redefining their roles. The CBC had become established as Canada's national voice. The success of the CFA in ameliorating rural hardships, and in becoming an effective interest group during the war years, removed much of the sense of injustice and isolation which had sustained its relatively modest social movement nature. The growing self-sufficiency of the CBC ended whatever hopes the Association's social activists had of influencing it. The general decline of social movement forces in Canadian society was reflected in the CFA and no hope remained of gaining its support for broadcasting with a social action character. Even more, both the CBC and the Federation gave remarkably little financial assistance and surprisingly ineffective organizational support to a radio series which they ostensibly sponsored.

By the end of Corbett's directorship, few social activists remained in the CAAE. Only token rural representation was found on its executive and the "Farm Forum" organization had become a virtually autonomous body. The "Citizens' Forum" had never developed any significant local support for social action and was, in fact, a CBC public affairs program in which the CAAE played a purely advisory role. Those traditional voluntary association leaders who viewed the CAAE as a body to promote personal enlightenment through adult education would find few members who quarrelled with their desire to work within a society whose values they generally accepted. Most of the social movement activists of the 1930's and 1940's had lost and left. Only the slowly dying forums remained as reminders of their work.