

# Robert Baldwin Louis LaFontaine

## The Fathers of Responsible Government

*“- t - - Responsible Government” effectively marked Canada’s declaration of independence from colonial rule by Britain. Through “responsible government,” the “ministers of the crown” were made answerable to the elected representatives of the people, and not a British-appointed governor. The fathers of responsible government are generally acknowledged to be MPs Robert Baldwin and Louis LaFontaine; less well known is the role of the Children of Peace in bringing this democratic reform about.*

After the Rebellion of 1837, Charles Poulett Thomson, 1st Baron Sydenham, was appointed governor, and instructed to re-unify Ontario and Quebec in an attempt to swamp the French within an English majority. The British had blamed the rebellion in Quebec on the “deadly animosity” between French and English speakers rather than their own misrule.

Robert Baldwin, a Toronto lawyer, and Louis LaFontaine, a Montreal lawyer, sought to form a democratic reform alliance across the dividing issues of culture, religion and language.

Both men sought election in 1841; LaFontaine lost in the riding of Terrebonne, outside Montreal, due to government sponsored electoral violence and fraud. Baldwin was forced to seek election outside of Toronto for the same reasons: he chose to run in the reform dominated ridings of Hastings, and 4th York, whose population was centered in Whitchurch and East Gwillimbury townships. As the story is usually told, Baldwin won in both ridings, and so “invited” LaFontaine to run in 4th York. LaFontaine’s win in Ontario helped solidify the alliance of French and English reformers. The full story, however, is far more interesting.

With the support of David Willson, leader of the Children of Peace, Baldwin ran in 4th York over the objections of its reform incumbent John McIntosh, who had served the riding for nearly a decade. When Baldwin decided to sit for Hastings, it created deep resentment in 4th York among McIntosh’s supporters.

The Tories exploited this division, and threw their support behind McIntosh in the by-election. Faced with this painful division, David Willson single-handedly created a “Union Society” to galvanize public support behind local riding’s right to nominate

their own candidates. In a masterstroke of electioneering, this riding association met in Sharon on the 5th of June, after the feast and Illumination of the Temple, to nominate Dr William Baldwin, Robert Baldwin’s father, who also had strong ties with Willson.

Dr Baldwin’s wife objected to his re-entering politics because of the violence which had occurred at a political meeting chaired by him, on Yonge St. in 1839, that had ended with the murder of a member of the Children of Peace by the Tories, led by no other than Sheriff Jarvis. To prevent this kind of violence, Robert Baldwin had introduced a bill for “freedom of elections” which passed on the 27th of August, 1841.

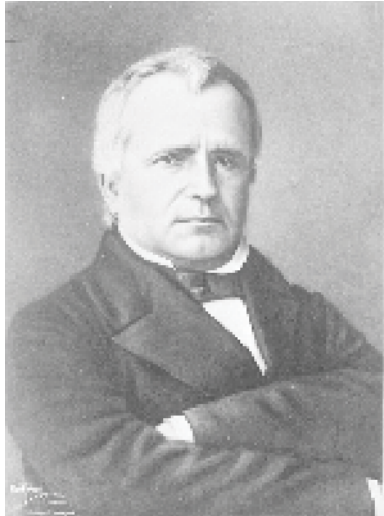
When LaFontaine’s appeal of the unjust election in Terrebonne was rejected in early August, 1841, Robert Baldwin wrote his father to suggest that the 4th riding of York nominate him, rather than the reluctant Dr Baldwin. Dr Baldwin forwarded the suggestion to the Union Society, which reported back that “Mr David Willson said that justice had been refused to the Lower Canadians [and] he will support Mr. L.” Willson called a large meeting of the Union Society in Sharon, who, after a tense meeting, adopted Willson’s nomination of LaFontaine.

Willson warned Dr Baldwin that there was powerful local opposition to LaFontaine. Jacob Irving, a Newmarket reformer, said he would spend £1,000 to keep LaFontaine out. The Tories threw their support behind McIntosh as well. Party feelings ran high, and Irving threatened that violence was inevitable.

To garner support for LaFontaine, Willson invited him to the fall Illumination, with a series of political gatherings following. However, Robert Baldwin’s bill for free elections had just passed; since the writ for the by-election was issued before this bill passed, the by-election

# Robert Baldwin Louis LaFontaine

## The Fathers of Responsible Government



*Top to Bottom:*  
Robert Baldwin  
Louis LaFontaine

... would be invalid. Baldwin's only recourse was to add a rider to another bill to ironically exclude the by-election from his own freedom of election bill; the threat of violence became all the more real. Unfortunately, this second bill did not pass through the Legislative Council in time and never became law.

When election day finally arrived on the 20th of Sept. Orange Order violence had been threatened and no one knew whether the result would be valid. The tense scene at the hustings did not divert LaFontaine's supporters, and by the second day he was leading 186 votes to McIntosh's 52; McIntosh then resigned.

The jubilant LaFontaine "accompanied by Mr Baldwin, proceeded to Sharon, where they dined. From thence, after dinner, they were escorted by the Sharon Band, and a numerous body of Reformers in wagons and on horseback, and displaying appropriate banners, round by the Red Mills [no doubt to annoy William B. Robinson], down Yonge Street, and back to Newmarket."

The writ for LaFontaine's election remained in doubt, however, due to the self-inflicted wound of Baldwin's "Freedom of Election" bill. Catastrophe was averted only when Lord Sydenham, no democrat, reserved Baldwin's bill for royal assent, leaving all election laws untouched. Sydenham died the next day of lockjaw; any earlier, and LaFontaine would not have been elected.

The voters of Terrebonne officially addressed the voters of the 4th riding with their thanks, and "for having no view but one aim, the confraternity of both populations." The 4th riding responded that they hoped "to break down the partition wall of prejudice" in pursuit of responsible government. Both ridings reminded their representatives of who they were responsible to; voters had not faced repeated violence so that they could now be ignored.

A new governor was appointed in Sydenham's stead, who sought to break the reform alliance by offering LaFontaine a cabinet post; a move he rejected unless Baldwin was also appointed. The alliance which was forged in Sharon now came to fruition; in the next session, Baldwin's Freedom of Elections bill was reintroduced, and finally passed.

Robert Baldwin  
Louis LaFontaine