

# Halifax Too War Conscious to Play the Genial Host

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Halifax, May 21.—If you want to understand the causes of the VE-Day riots in Halifax, and of the inordinate bitterness they have released, think back to the zoot-suit riots in Montreal last year.

Both outbreaks are symptoms of the same fundamental condition—Canadian sectionalism, aggravated by wartime shifting of the population.

Haligonians and "Upper Canadians" have been getting on each other's nerves for almost six years. The riots have driven another wedge between Halifax and the rest of Canada.

In any consideration of the quality of Canadian unity, the situation here should be scrutinized. Halifax's visiting population during the war has been a miniature of Canada's population. Halifax has been quivering with tensions great and small. Halifax's experience suggests that the provincialism of many sections of the Canadian people is so deep-rooted as to make it impossible for them to live comfortably together under unfamiliar conditions.

Everybody is arguing about the identity of those who rioted and looted. Too much has already been published in an effort to pin the responsibility on this individual or that. But the real causes should also have a thorough airing. Regardless of who cast the first stone, the furore has been made a thousand times worse by the long accumulation of petty hostilities and mutual irritations.

## Roots of Dissatisfaction

Halifax is, of course, dissatisfied with Confederation, and this seems to be at the bottom of the distinctions drawn by Haligonians between themselves and "Upper Canadians." On the other hand, Halifax's "uninvited guests" (to quote a term much used in the local papers) had in the main never been far from home until they joined the services; and, being much more aware of the differences than of the similarities between themselves and their Maritime brothers, they have blamed almost every disadvantage of their strange new life on some alleged inferiority or fancied cupidity of Haligonians.

This resentment, more childish than reasonable, has been reciprocated by Halifax, which has blamed wartime overcrowding for anything that anybody didn't like. Halifax has felt very virtuous about the overcrowding, and the tactlessness of many visitors in their criticism has deepened Halifax's sense of injury.

## Second Thoughts

It is now beginning to be admitted that it is no fairer to condemn all uniformed personnel for the sins of a few than it is to condemn, for example, all Halifax landlords for the attitude of those who advertised "No women, no children, no servicemen." Nevertheless, Haligonians are talking bitterly among themselves as if service personnel were somehow all to blame; and this angle is not lost sight of by those who hope that the Federal Government will make restitution for property damage.

In some East Coast communities where service personnel have congregated, a *modus vivendi* has emerged; and in many of them the atmosphere has become friendly, though in truth it must be admitted that the services are seldom an unmixed blessing to any town.

Every such community has had to cope with the minority who are incapable of civilized behavior.

But Halifax has been a different kettle of fish. Along with the overcrowding there has been for Halifax a sharp sense of the danger of attack by air or sea, and Haligonians have seen more of the bodies of the drowned, the blasted hulls of torpedoed ships and the shattered limbs of the wounded passing through. Halifax has been too genuinely preoccupied with war to play the genial host.

## Causes of Friction

"Upper Canadians" have freely indulged in rude and unnecessary remarks about Halifax, and Haligonians have taken the remarks too much to heart. For example, a Montreal woman was riding in a street car. At a main intersection all the passengers alighted with the exception of herself and another woman. The operator announced: "This car goes to the barn." The Montreal woman asked the operator, doubtless not without displaying some annoyance, how she was expected to get home if routes were altered according to the whims of individual drivers.

"All the other people got off," he pointed out.

"But I'm from Montreal," the lady protested. "How am I to know?"

"Well, we can't change everything just to suit a bunch of Upper Canadians," the operator replied.

"Well, the least you can do," the Montreal girl exclaimed, "is stop this bird cage and let me off!"

"That goes for me, too," cried the other passenger, getting up. "I'm from Hamilton!"

This story has been widely circulated, partly for the pleasure it gives many "Upper Canadians" to hear the local cars described as bird cages, and partly because it has become habitual with a lot of them to criticize.

Halifax has suffered a severe attack of "split personality" as a result of the overcrowding. Retail merchants and residential property owners have, of course, profited from the influx of population. In one issue of the Halifax Mail there appeared on the front page an editorial protesting the criticisms of "uninvited guests," and on an inside page a news story reported a protest lodged with Federal authorities against the plan of the RCAF to move "Y" Depot away from Halifax, on the ground that it would be a blow to Halifax's business community. To a reasonable observer there is no real paradox here; but to a lot of naive young Canadians, tired of camping in single rooms, tired of standing in queues at restaurants, tired of being far from home, tired of being resented, it has looked like hypocrisy.

## Restaurants Closed

It is not to condone the rioting to point out that service people were left pretty much to their own devices on VE-Day. It is difficult to suggest what arrangements could have been organized to guide pent-up emotions into harmless channels. It is stupid to say (though many are saying it) that the city should have organized street dances, band concerts, sing-songs and marshmallow roasts on a scale to provide good clean fun for all. It is equally stupid to say that the services should have maintained iron control over their entire personnel. The point is that the celebrants were left to their own devices, movies and restaurants closed. It was a real problem to get a meal. Business places were placarded, "Closed to enable our staff to join in the celebrations."

But it was a mystery what celebrations were referred to. True, there were fireworks, but in the main there was nothing for any non-resident to do who was not satisfied with the glorious relief of having the war over. In the minds of touchy youngsters, Halifax was running true to type and was giving them the old cold shoulder. Add to this the inflammation of liquor, and you begin to understand how it all started.

It is relatively unimportant that the liquor stores were shut. To have kept them open would probably have changed nothing. It is well

known that men who are determined to have liquor will get it, especially if they have already had some. But the closing of the liquor stores unquestionably added to the serviceman's conviction that the civilian was not interested in whether or not the troops had a chance to celebrate.

In New Waterford a liquor store was raided by a civilian crowd whose leaders cried: "You wouldn't let us buy a drink, now we'll help ourselves." This was probably just an echo of Halifax's troubles; but it is noteworthy that New Waterford's mayor went on the radio and asserted that the disturbance had been "organized outside of town to bring the fair name of this community into disrepute."

So it is confined to no particular locality, this shifting of blame to the outsider, this quick suspicion of the stranger.

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