

“A Justifiable Obsession” Conservative Ontario's Relations with Ottawa, 1943-1985 by P.E. Bryden

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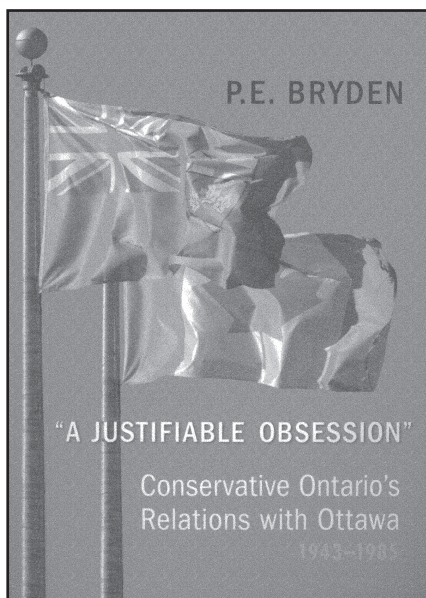
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"A Justifiable Obsession" Conservative Ontario's Relations with Ottawa, 1943- 1985

By P.E. Bryden

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 340 Pages.
\$34.95 paperback. ISBN 978-1-44261-406-2. (www.utp-publishing.com)

Although not a definitive account of the four-decade long Tory dynasty in the province, "A Justifiable Obsession" provides significant insights into how the Progressive Conservative premiers and their advisers conceived Ontario's place within Confederation. By focusing on the intergovernmental strategies adopted by the premiers,

University of Victoria historian P.E. Bryden reinterprets this period in Canadian political history to argue that Ontario played a central role in expressing a national vision and national objectives from the provincial level. The "justifiable obsession" in the book's title refers to Ontario's continuous and occasionally unwelcome interest with

the function of intergovernmental politics during the successive PC governments of George Drew (1943-1948), Leslie Frost (1949-1961), John Robarts (1961-1971) and Bill Davis (1971-1985). Bryden asserts that Canadian studies on intergovernmental relations and federalism have tended to focus on the more colourful characters who represented instances of conflict and potential disunity. In comparison to Ottawa's well-studied clashes with Quebec's René Lévesque or Alberta's Peter Lougheed, the relationship between the federal government and Ontario's Conservative premiers seemed rather benign and straightforward. Without the obvious fault lines of Francophone separatism or western alienation to drive the historical narrative, Bryden claims few scholars have devoted sufficient attention to Ontario's intricate relationship with Ottawa. Bryden's study places a greater emphasis on the important and overlooked influence of Ontario politicians and bureaucrats in reshaping the provincial-federal dialogue and strengthening Canadian federalism. Utilizing detailed primary source material, Bryden digs beneath the seemingly calm surface to reveal the contentious discussions and frustrated negotiations that characterized Ontario's foray into intergovernmental affairs and statecraft.

As Bryden's chronological analysis makes clear, the four successive Conservative governments built on the strategies and lessons of their predecessors. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ontario premiers such as Oliver Mowat successfully championed provincial-rights, while judicial rulings upheld provincial authority (4). However, by the 1940s, emergency wartime pressures, post-war centralization and the abolition of the Privy Council as the court of last resort, enabled the federal government to exercise

increasingly expansive powers in relation to the provinces. As Ottawa encroached on tax fields and social policy areas traditionally reserved for provincial governments, Ontario premiers were forced to develop new strategies in managing intergovernmental relations. Premier Drew's early antagonism with Ottawa demonstrated the futility of the confrontational approach adopted by past provincial leaders. In order to challenge federal centralization, Drew proposed alternatives to the reconstruction policies of the King government and sought alliances with the other provinces. Premier Frost continued his predecessor's strategy by positioning himself as the leader who could represent provincial-rights. Sensitive to the perception of selfish motives, Frost sought to reshape the national agenda in order to correspond with Ontario's interests (77). Despite the postwar attempts to reassert a balanced arrangement with the federal government, Ontario politicians achieved only limited successes concerning tax sharing, social welfare and health policies. Although Ontario introduced issues of intergovernmental contention on the national stage, federal initiatives often departed from the province's expectations. By the 1960s, the federal government further irritated Ontario leaders by participating in separate agreements with Quebec over pensions (128).

Recognizing the risk that Ottawa's bilateral approach with individual provinces could sideline Ontario, Premier Robarts began to shift away from the "nuts and bolts" policy issues to questions of mega-intergovernmental politics (152). Adapting the earlier strategies of Drew and Frost to involve the other provinces, Robarts assumed the role of a facilitator rather than a provincial-rights leader. Robarts' new approach focused greater attention on the constitution and concerns of national

unity. The Ontario-sponsored Confederation of Tomorrow Conference in 1967 exemplified the premier's managerial style as he attempted to stimulate a national conversation over constitutional issues that included the voice of Quebec and French Canada (161). While Robarts experienced mixed success in playing statesman, his efforts nevertheless influenced Premier Davis' role in the constitutional debates of the 1980s. As a supporter of Trudeau's proposed patriation of the Canadian Constitution, Davis also assumed the role of mediator and bridge-builder in the negotiations. Davis and his bureaucratic advisers sought to keep all sides engaged in an ongoing dialogue. Their diplomatic strategy set the groundwork for an agreement that would culminate in the 1982 Constitution Act (222).

Despite Ontario's "obsession" with mega-intergovernmental politics, by the end of the Tory dynasty the province had largely failed to advance its individual objectives. Federal inflexibility in negotiating the "nuts and bolts" issues such as tax sharing and social spending often frustrated the premiers' agenda. However, as Bryden convincingly argues, the successive provincial governments were often willing to concede the smaller issues in order to reform and secure Canadian federalism. Conservative leaders recognized that the continued economic strength of Ontario rested on a functional federal system within a united country. Furthermore, the premiers' role in articulating a Canadian national vision resonated with an Ontario political culture that had customarily assumed "responsibility for the idea of the nation" (8). Bryden's study indicates the importance for historians and political scientists to re-evaluate the criteria used in assessing a province's successful or unsuccessful negotiation of intergovernmental relations. Judged from

the perspective of provincial-rights, most readers would deem Ontario's postwar strategy as less successful than the confrontational tactics utilized in the prewar era. By contrast, when considering the wider implications of Ontario's contribution to the development of an inclusive intergovernmental dialogue, the province's understated achievements can be more clearly identified.

While Bryden provides excellent historical context, the book would have benefited from a more comprehensive analysis of the different interpretations and arguments that the author aims to reassess. Rather than engage specific authors, Bryden often uses the generic term "scholars" to represent alternative viewpoints. As a result, Bryden does not situate her re-interpretation of the Ontario-Ottawa relationship within the existing literature and methodologies. In spite of such shortcomings, "A Justifiable Obsession" is a valuable addition to our understanding of postwar Canadian federalism and Ontario political culture. Bryden carefully weaves the evolution of the provincial-federal relationship with the changing political, social and economic situation in Ontario and Canada. The persuasive arguments and widespread primary source investigation makes the book essential for researchers studying the "Big Blue Machine" or policy specialists examining the status of Ontario in the present era of intergovernmental relations. Written in a compelling style, Bryden's work succeeds in breaking the perception of "bland" Conservative governance by conveying the sense of excitement, anticipation and disappointment that so often characterized Ontario's dealings with Ottawa and the other provinces.

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