TOLERATION OF CATHOLICS IN QUEBEC AND BRITISH PUBLIC FINANCES, 1760 TO 1775

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Abstract

This paper tackles the issue of the institutional decisions made by the British when they conquered the French colony of Quebec in 1760 by examining why toleration was the chosen policy course. Past experiences and the dire state of British public finances pushed the British government to adopt toleration of Catholics and of French legal institution in the colony as a policy designed to preserve the empire financially and strategically.

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From 1760 to the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Murray’s mandate was to keep a lid on Canadien resentment, ensure the locals (and their Aboriginal neighbours) did not rise up, and be prepared in case a French fleet suddenly appeared on the St. Lawrence. And, of course, there was always the possibility that France would take back Canada at the treaty table. With all those things in mind and having been taught a lesson at Sainte-Foy, Murray looked for ways to stabilize his situation and that of Canada’s. Figure 7.3 Province of Quebec in 1774. Figure 7.4 British North America, showing the colonies from Maryland to Newfoundland, 1776. As enlightened and permissive as the Quebec Act appears to be toward Canadien-Catholic society and culture, there is an important caveat to note. Catholicism in the 1760s was illegal in Britain, and would remain so for decades more. Could the same laws be applied in Quebec, enforced by a small British colonial administration? Early on, in the Royal Proclamation on 1763, King George III indicated that the British persecution of Catholicism would not be the policy across the seas. More to the immediate point, toleration for Catholics in Quebec might make them less likely to join any revolution from the south. That, in fact, was the case, as Quebec declined to fight alongside the American revolutionaries, in large part because the Americans had listed the Quebec Act as one of the “intolerable acts” of George III, on the grounds that a good Protestant king should not be tolerating popery. In addition, British King George II had died in 1760, and his successor George III was more amenable to ending the war. Initial attempts at negotiating a peace settlement failed, and instead French and Spanish diplomats signed the Family Compact, a treaty that brought Spain into the war against Britain. Although British King George III and his ministers were in favor of the treaty, it was unpopular with the British public. However, the treaty contained enough concessions to war hawks that the British Parliament ratified the Treaty of Paris by a majority of 319 to 64, and the treaty went into effect on February 10, 1763. For Anglo-American colonists, the treaty was a theoretical success.