

Louis-Joseph Papineau: The Demi-God User's Guide

Audience: High school history classes
Running time: 26:56

Historical Context

Louis-Joseph Papineau was one of the most important figures in the half-century of political agitation that followed the Constitutional Act of 1791.

As a politician, he incarnated the demands of an entire people — the French Canadians of Lower Canada. As a speaker, he captivated his audiences with his words, his imposing figure, his dramatic gestures and his impassioned oratorical flights. As a patriot, he attacked the arbitrary and tyrannical actions of Canada's governors and their "creatures."

Papineau was at times a victim of his own uncompromising character. It was a failing he recognized in himself. In a letter written on January 9, 1828, he says, "The injustices committed in my country vex me to the point where I am not always guided by a clear-eyed patriotism, but instead by rage and hatred against the oppressors."

From the day in which Papineau first entered the legislature in 1812, he was unflinching in his demands that French Canadians have full access to all the liberties and privileges to which they were entitled as British subjects: "Wherever English power rules, English liberties must rule as well."

By 1830, after 18 years, Papineau had only empty promises, harassment from the ruling powers and many personal attacks to show. It is no surprise that he had become embittered and had lost confidence in the rulers' spirit of justice.

That same year, Lord Aylmer arrived in Quebec to take up the post of governor. He had a reputation as a fair man who believed firmly in justice and equality. But Papineau's natural defiance led him to doubt Aylmer's apparent benevolence and the sincerity of the proposals for reform put forth by one of his ministers, Lord Goderich.

During the 1831 election campaign, violence broke out in Montreal. Three people were killed, and the *Patriotes* held Lord Aylmer responsible for the bloodshed. He was also blamed for an outbreak of cholera that left many dead.

Meanwhile, a spirit of discontent reigned in Parliament and in the Executive Council. Aylmer was drawn in and, from 1832 on, he was in open battle with the Assembly.

In 1834, Papineau and his colleagues summed up their grievances in their "92 Resolutions." The manifesto was passed in the House, but Aylmer committed the blunder of concluding the session by claiming that the grievances put forth in the "Resolutions" were the result of ferment by a disgruntled minority, and that for most part, citizens were satisfied.

Papineau, who had accused Aylmer of turning over too much power to the unelected Legislative Council, was cut to the quick. He refused to participate in the 1835 parliamentary session as either a member or as Speaker of the House. In order to embarrass the governor, he attempted to lead his colleagues in what he called a "members' strike."

However, Aylmer's determination, coupled with the defection of Quebec mayor and Papineau lieutenant Louis-Elzéar Bédard, caused the tactic to fail. The members' strike never happened. The session opened as planned. And within two years, rebellion would break out.

Film Synopsis

This film concerns Papineau's attempts to halt Parliament by refusing to take his seat as Speaker of the Assembly. It captures the beginning of his swing from personal protest to outright rebellion against arbitrary government.

Research, Discussion and Writing Topics

- In the film, Henriette Maret Bédard paints a particular portrait of Papineau. Do you believe it is an honest assessment?
- Research the reasons for the discontent in Lower Canada, and compare them with the grievances of Upper Canada.
- Write a biographical sketch of Papineau.
- Discuss the proposition, "Papineau was the very personification of contradiction." Do you agree? Did the contradictions in Papineau's character and actions help or hinder his cause? How?
- Debate Mme. Bédard's statement that those who sound high and mighty believe they are in charge, while in truth those who are silent are really in charge. Debate the proposition from the points of view of Lord Aylmer, James Finley, Louis Elzéar Bédard and Louis-Joseph Papineau.
- Comment on the following statements: "Women have such influence in our country!" (Rodier) and "We suffer from an evil known as demagoguery." (Bédard)

Questions

- Would you consider Louis-Elzéar Bédard a moderate?
- For what does Papineau blame the government in his speech? What impression does the speech have on his listeners?
- How would Papineau have responded to Aylmer, who mocked the poverty of French Canadians, and to Finley, who laughed at their ignorance?
- What effect did Papineau's refusal to take his seat as Speaker have on the French Canadian majority and on the English Canadian minority?
- What was Papineau's concept of the best form of government? How did he justify his position?
- What did the English merchants think of Papineau's whole campaign?
- What was the significance of Papineau's failure in 1835?