



Laurier: The Only Man

Wilfrid Laurier gave his body and soul to the reconciliation of Canadians, but his life seemed to end in failure. Only now can we measure his greatness, and give thanks that he lived in our midst . . .

□ The Old Chief was dead. "The place of Sir John Macdonald in this country was so large and so absorbing that it is almost impossible to conceive that the political life of this country — the fate of this country — could continue without him," Opposition Leader Wilfrid Laurier told a grieving House of Commons. On that June day in 1891, no one could have foreseen that the Liberal Laurier would go down in history as the true successor to the Conservative Macdonald.

Schoolchildren today learn of Macdonald and Laurier almost in the same breath, as if one had passed on the task of building a nation to the other. Time has blurred the differences in policy and approach between them, and the five-year extension of Tory rule after Macdonald's death figures only as a brief interlude in which the high hopes held for Confederation were cruelly dashed.

We can see in historical hindsight that Laurier was the only man present capable of holding the nation-in-the-making together almost in defiance of its own nature. Those with no belief in destiny may be given pause by the confluence of circumstances that gave Canada, more or less in a row, two leaders uniquely qualified to meet the crucial challenges of their times.

It has been said that nations get the leadership they deserve, but the all-male electorate of the fractious collection of former British colonies that made up Canada in the 1890s could not be said to have deserved a Laurier. He was everything most of them were not: tolerant while they were bigoted,

cosmopolitan while they were parochial, conciliatory while they were confrontationalist.

There was always something romantic and poetic about Laurier, qualities which he hardly shared with the majority of his rough-hewn contemporary countrymen. And indeed his career started out romantically enough as a fiery radical lawyer fresh out of the McGill Law School in Montreal. Born in 1841 in the Laurentian village of St.-Lin, he had been educated in both French and English. His first venture into public affairs was to join the *Rouges*, a libertarian movement which fed on mystical memories of the 1837 Papineau rebellion.

When, in the mid-1860s, the authoritarian Roman Catholic hierarchy in Quebec clashed with the *Rouges* on a question of intellectual freedom, Laurier was among the first to take to the political barricades. He addressed anti-clerical rallies, winning a reputation as a thrilling orator.

But, to complete the picture of the romantic Gallic poet, he was suspected of having tuberculosis. He repaired to the salubrious mountain air of the Eastern Townships. His *Rouge* colleagues gave him the job of editing their newspaper from there.

By that time they had taken up a new cause — opposing the federation of the present Maritime Provinces, Ontario and Quebec which was being negotiated. Towards the end of the anti-Confederation campaign, Laurier wrote an editorial containing a grim prediction: "From this moment



there will be strife, division, war, anarchy; the weakest element, that is to say the French and Catholic element, will be dragged along and swallowed up by the strongest."

Laurier was to spend most of the rest of his days trying to prevent his own dire prophecy from coming true. At first, however, he greeted the coming of Confederation with apathetic resignation. He was then placidly practising law in the pretty Eastern Townships centre of Arthabaska. In 1868 he married a pretty dark-eyed Montreal music teacher named Zoe Lafontaine.

But his genius for politics could not be denied for long. In 1871 the *Rouges* persuaded him to run successfully for a seat in the Quebec Legislature. Three years later he came to Ottawa as a Liberal Member of Parliament.

He persuaded Quebecers that voting Liberal was not a sin

By then his fear that French-Canadians interests would be sunk in the sea of the English-speaking majority seemed rapidly on its way to realization. That was what had driven him into federal politics. His English-Canadian parliamentary colleagues did not share his view of Confederation as a pact between the two language groups; on the contrary, many of them saw it as a stick with which to beat the French culture in Canada out of existence. The place to protect French interests was at the seat of federal power.

But Laurier was aware that any power he might personally exert on behalf of his people would have to emanate from his home province. He therefore set about building a solid base for the Liberal Party in a Quebec dominated by the Conservative *Bleus* with the active support of the Catholic Church. He confronted this mighty alliance head-on, insisting that churchmen had no right to intimidate their parishioners into voting against the Liberals. Huge crowds cheered him when he said that one could be a good Catholic and good Liberal at the same time.

Back in Ottawa, Laurier's analytic intelligence, personal magnetism and brilliance in debate brought him to be regarded as the strongest Quebec member in the Liberal Party. Recognizing

him as their deadliest adversary, the Conservatives resorted to bribes, physical violence and threats of hellfire from the pulpits to defeat him in his riding in 1877. Liberal Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie cleared a seat in Quebec East which Laurier won in a by-election. Mackenzie appointed him his Quebec lieutenant and Minister of Inland Revenue.

After Macdonald's Conservatives bounced back into power in 1878, he gave way to the languid indifference which had always formed part of his character. Throughout the story of Laurier we find an absence of ambition and a hesitancy to exercise his prodigious political gifts. It was with marked reluctance that he answered his party's call to its leadership in 1887. He argued that for the Liberals to choose a French Roman Catholic to carry their banner was a mistake.

So it appeared. The fact that the mainly-English Liberal caucus insisted that he was "the only man" is testimony to the greatness they detected in him. It was a singularly bold move for them to make. Simple arithmetic dictated that if they were ever to regain power, they must appeal to the English majority. And English-French relations had seldom been worse — the hanging of Louis Riel two years previously had the language groups glaring in outright hatred at each other.

"More British than the king, more Catholic than the pope"

Not the least of the many ironies in Laurier's career was that the issue which propelled him into the Prime Minister's office in 1896 was a manifestation of English hostility to the French presence in Canada. Manitoba had abolished French Catholic schools. When the federal Conservative government prepared legislation to reinstate French education, the provincial government refused to obey it. In the election that ensued, Laurier said he saw no hope of the Federal authority running the educational system in Manitoba.

He characteristically promised to deal with the dispute through conciliation. Though he was denounced as the anti-Christ by the Quebec

clergy, he carried the country with a handsome majority, including his native province. By making Liberalism respectable, he had broken the Church's stranglehold on politics in Quebec.

He set out to govern a country "part of whose people are more British than the king and part more Catholic than the pope," as the historian Arthur Lower put it. His first move was to devise a compromise whereby instruction in French and Catholicism was given in Manitoba public schools.

His long (15-year) tenure in office began with sunny portents. The late 1890s and early 1900s are often referred to as a golden era, and Laurier's first few years as Canada's leader were quite literally tinged with gold. The stampede to the Klondike was on, contributing to a strong recovery. Another golden-hued bonanza was being reaped in Western Canada in the form of wheat.

Grain-growing on the northern plains had always been plagued by the cold climate. Now farmers were planting a new strain of wheat which was not only frost-resistant but of the finest quality ever grown. The demand for the product on world markets doubled and redoubled; still, tens of millions of acres of potential productive Canadian soil went unoccupied. Laurier's Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, mounted an intensive campaign to populate the West.

It falls to few political leaders to bring about a fundamental change in their countries. But a completely different Canada did emerge from Laurier's regime. His government brought in millions of immigrants from the Slavic, Germanic and Scandinavian regions of Europe. As the Europeans poured into the West, the old French-British make-up of Canada was altered forever; Canadian multiculturalism was born.

The development was directly in line with Laurier's social vision. As a French-Canadian he was acutely aware that Canadians could never be a uniform nationality. There would be no melting pot on this side of the U.S. border. Instead there would be Laurier's image of a great cathedral constructed of diverse materials: "I want the

marble to remain the marble; the granite to remain the granite; the oak to remain the oak; and out of all these elements I would build a nation great among the nations of the world."

The new markets created by the filling-up of the West brought prosperity to Central Canada as manufacturing flourished under the protection of the tariff barriers earlier erected by the Conservatives. Laurier was a free trader at heart, but he saw no reason to interfere with a good thing. He did, however, pass legislation which had the effect of offering a trade preference to Great Britain. The measure brought him popularity in the mother country.

He accepted a knighthood and spoke feelingly about Canada's attachment to the empire. Yet when British ministers broached the idea of an Empire unified in foreign policy, defence and trade, he firmly turned them down.

His next task was to equip Canada to take advantage of its new-found riches. The single transcontinental railway line could not be expected to handle all the traffic in grain and other natural resources which was welling up in the West. Laurier presided over the building of two more transcontinental lines which spread their tentacles throughout the prairies and into Northern Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia. The detailed map of Canada, with all its dots, lines and squiggles, assumed its present shape.

The railways came to be known as Laurier's folly. Far too much trackage was built, and the two transcontinentals subsequently had to be rationalized into the Canadian National system at vast public expense. Laurier's excesses were usually excesses of hope, including his saying to the effect that the twentieth century would belong to Canada. In that, he overestimated his compatriots. Greatness comes only to mature societies, and Canadians were still acting like headstrong children.

Laurier found himself in the role of the wise and dignified paterfamilias intervening to put down flare-ups in a quarrelsome family. He had to use all his skills as a statesman to prevent the major linguistic groups from flying at each other's throats.

Assailed by ultra-nationalistic Quebecers on one side and ultra-imperialistic Anglophones on the other, he framed ingenious compromises on such issues as participation in the Boer war and imperial naval defence. These carried the bonus of giving Canada a greater degree of independence. But one issue proved beyond his formidable powers of conciliation: the language of instruction in provincial schools.

Even as Canada took a long step towards nationhood with the creation of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905, the old dispute reared up as ugly as ever. Laurier had to back down on a promise that the provinces would have separate Catholic schools when it became clear to him that it would only add to religious intolerance if the federal government tried to enforce its will on the majority of provincial voters. His former protégé, Henri Bourassa, spoke for many French-Canadians when he called this a betrayal of the right to their own language and religion.

*"Faith is better than doubt
and love is better than hate"*

Bourassa formed a bizarre alliance with the right-wing Quebec *Bleus* and the Ontario Tories to defeat Laurier in the 1911 election. The issues were whether Canada would build its own navy and whether it should negotiate a free trade agreement with the United States. Laurier was damned as a lackey to the British by the nationalists of Quebec and as a traitor to the empire by the ultra-imperialists of Ontario. A few years later he was accused of selling Canada's soul to French-Canadian interests when, as Opposition Leader, he honoured a pledge to oppose conscription during the First World War.

Many of his senior English-speaking colleagues deserted him over the conscription issue, joining the coalition Unionist government under Sir Robert Borden. The election results in 1917 placed him in a position which he had spent most of his life trying to avoid, as the leader of a party based almost wholly in French Quebec. Always a

frail man, he was both sick in body and sick at heart at his rejection by his English-speaking supporters. In his utter disillusionment he could well have abandoned his pan-Canadian ideals and become the nagging voice of Quebec disaffection.

But he continued to cling to his personal credo. In a speech in the closing days of his life, he enumerated all the problems of race, religion and conflicting loyalties that hung on the country. He added: "Let me tell you that for the solution of these problems you have a safe guide, an unfailing light if you remember that faith is better than doubt and love is better than hate."

He died at the age of 77 in February 1919, and the newspapers counted his achievements. It was an impressive list, but not nearly as impressive as it looks now. We can see that he set Canada on the road to full independence, that he filled in the map of the country, that he founded a political dynasty, that he put a multicultural stamp on our society. At the time, though, his life appeared to have ended in failure. He may have thought so himself at his last breath.

He had talked about his dying hour a few years earlier. "I cannot hope that I shall see much of the development which the future has in store for my country," he said, "but whenever my eyes shall close to the light it is my wish — nay my hope — that they shall close on a Canada united in its elements, united in every particular, every element cherishing the tradition of its past, and all united in cherishing still more hope for the future." That this was not to be was because Sir Wilfrid Laurier was so far ahead of his times.

He could not even now close his eyes on the united Canada of his dreams. But he could see a Canada in which the last thing that matters about a candidate is whether he is Protestant or Catholic; a Canada which takes orders from no other authority; a Canada which, for the most part, respects the cultural individuality of its racial constituents. So the torments and sorrows of this gentle and generous soul were not wasted. His hopes for future generations have been partially fulfilled, and, God willing, Canadians may live up to his leadership yet.