



True North in
Canadian public policy



SIR WILFRID LAURIER AT 175

Canada First, Canada Last, Canada Always: A Tribute to the Founder of Modern Canada

This speech was delivered at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute's Sir Wilfrid Laurier Dinner, on Feb. 24, 2016, which honoured the legacy of the celebrated Liberal Prime Minister. On Nov. 20, Canada will mark Laurier's 175 birthday.

Brian Lee Crowley

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's an honour to join you here tonight to pay tribute to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, a timeless Canadian symbol, a man who foresaw all that this country could become, and who devoted his life to shaping its future.

Who is this man, born in St-Lin 175 years ago, who brings us together tonight to celebrate him? Does he represent nothing more than the image printed on our five-dollar bill, a sort of ghost whose achievements are so far back in time that we don't quite remember how and why his life has touched Canada's history?

Well, no. If I'm here, and if other guests are here, and if you are here tonight, it is indeed to ensure that this unparalleled statesman's immense achievements in our young country's history are never forgotten and,

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instead, are celebrated appropriately and properly. Sir Wilfrid dwells among us through the wisdom and energy with which he shaped politics, institutions, and especially the ideas underlying modern Canada.

Wilfrid Laurier shares the record for winning the most federal elections in a row (four), and his 15-year tenure remains the longest unbroken term of office among prime ministers. His nearly 45 years of service in the Commons is a record, as is his near 32 years as leader of a major Canadian political party. But impressive as these proofs of affection in a bygone era are, they are not his greatest achievements.

When in 1904 Sir Wilfrid proclaimed that “the 20th century would be filled by Canada,” this was no mere boastfulness. We were one of the richest countries in the world, we enjoyed boundless natural resources, an energetic population, a privileged place in the great commercial empire established and defended by Britain, and reasonable access to American markets.

We had built a national railway across the vastness of the West, and immigrants were arriving on our shores in larger numbers (relative to our population) than anywhere else in the world. In the first 20 years of the 20th century, our population grew by an unprecedented two-thirds. Canada was a magnet to the world. Our future seemed assured.

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But greatness doesn't just happen. It requires courage and vision. And just as Wayne Gretzky was justly called hockey's Great One because he saw the whole game unfolding in his mind and knew what each player would do before he did it, Laurier was the one who saw and understood what had to happen for Canada to become a great nation. The whole plan was sketched out in his mind, and for almost 16 years he patiently coached all the players in Canada. Slowly, methodically, he shaped our institutions, our landscape, and our relations with Britain and America, to the end of making Canada the most prosperous, dynamic, and attractive country on Earth.

And that rise to full consciousness of Canada under his stewardship remains a tale of heroic exploits, still recounted in hushed and admiring tones by those who have not forgotten just how distinguished that period of our history was. For we were not merely *talking* about overtaking America as the world's awakening economic giant and the light unto the benighted masses of foreign lands – we were hard at work *creating* that future every day.

This was a marked change in comparison with the loss of energy and momentum that afflicted Canada, like the rest of the world, for a period of three decades starting in 1867. This new country, so full of promise, nevertheless had clearly lost its lustre, although the achievements of that time remain outstanding – the creation of three new provinces, the purchase of Rupert's Land, the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and the fact of having survived the fallout of the Riel rebellion. Having achieved the unprecedented feat of creating a country from scratch, the government and its people seemed rather exhausted and enervated.

Then, in 1896, came Laurier.

By 1910, half a million immigrants had entered Canada on Laurier's watch, many of them bound for the West, where the Liberals' expansionist settlement policies had made our "Last Best West" a magnet for the world's dispossessed. In the first two decades of the new century, our population grew by two-thirds. And nearly two-fifths of that growth came from immigration. Nothing like these numbers has been seen before or since. Not only did immigrants come in vast numbers, but out-migration to the more prosperous United States, the bane of the country's early years, slowed to a trickle.

The rush of newcomers was so great, and the attraction of the West so irresistible, that Laurier was obliged in 1905 to cut two new provinces out of the federally administered western territories. One of the new provinces, Saskatchewan, was seen to be such a land of opportunity that it quickly became the country's third largest province by population, and remained so for a number of years.

These trends were far from abstract. Rather, they were the sum of choices by hundreds of thousands of people, each of their lives woven into the tapestry of Canada's emerging future.

I am a perfect example. Both sets of my maternal great-grandparents were part of the great movement of people unleashed by the prosperity of the Laurier years. In 1891, Richard Lane and his wife, Mary Irving, were living in rural Ontario; my grandfather, Russell, and his twin brother, Richard, were born to them in Huron County that year. By 1906 they had left, headed for the promised land of Saskatchewan, so freshly carved by Sir Wilfrid from the prairie, where my mother was eventually born in North Battleford.

My other maternal great-grandparents, Henry and Edith Bierschied, came from the United States in search of the free homestead land that had been largely exhausted south of the border but was still relatively easily available in the great Dominion. When they crossed the border from North Dakota at North Portal, Saskatchewan in August 1911, they brought with them seven-year-old Grace, my grandmother. Henry was of German immigrant stock, and it was not unusual for the many ethnic immigrants — the Poles, the Russians, the Germans, the Ukrainians, the Galicians, the Swedes and others — who ended up in the Canadian West to have tried their luck in the U.S. first.

The whole country saw the promise of the West as a powerful theme in the growing symphony of Canadian prosperity and optimism.

The Lanes and the Bierschieds were but two of the tiny trickles that together added up to a mighty torrent of humanity sweeping into the West, changing the politics, the economics, and the population of Canada forever.

This was the time when the West began to flex its muscles. The whole country saw the promise of the West as a powerful theme in the growing symphony of Canadian prosperity and optimism.

But there was much more. Our country's natural resources, our minerals, our timber, and our agricultural products were flowing in ever-growing quantities to world markets. The country's North, as well as the

West, turned out to be sources of unheard-of prosperity, treasure troves of natural wealth and increasing population. Provinces such as Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec successfully claimed enlargement of their territories northward. The manufacturing sector experienced an unprecedented boom and manufactured goods were sold on international as much as on domestic markets. Foreign trade tripled during this golden era.

Canada's boom cannot, however, be ascribed solely to exports. The new country was hungry for investment; it was not enough to plunk people down in the wilderness and expect them to produce the New Jerusalem. They needed tools, homes, and institutions. They needed things like railways, factories, mills, ships, equipment, roads, bridges, houses, schools, courts, customs houses, and churches. The new country was sucking in capital, chiefly from Britain and the United States, at a dizzying pace. The new investments themselves drove the boom even more than the exports that they had made possible.

And while we were predominantly a rural people, our cities – home to much of our manufacturing – boomed with the countryside. Montreal, Toronto, and Ottawa more than doubled in population, while Vancouver and Winnipeg far outstripped them in their rate of growth, quintupling in the same period. Hitherto empty plains saw cities suddenly mushroom in their midst, as Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, and Saskatoon became centres of the new prosperity.

He gave eloquent voice to the values and philosophy that have, in my view, always marked the greatest periods of Canadian history.

So it is Laurier who brought us the rise of the West and the North, the burgeoning of a multicultural population, the welcoming of Saskatchewan and Alberta into Confederation, and the unleashing of an economic boom that was without precedent in Canadian history. He founded the Royal Canadian Navy and poured oil on the troubled waters of ethnic, religious, and linguistic conflict. He came within a hair's breadth of bringing us the free trade with the U.S. that he had defended throughout his political life. But beyond that impressive record, he did something I regard as even more important. He gave eloquent voice to the values and philosophy that have, in my view, always marked the greatest periods of Canadian history.

Laurier was convinced that the best people in the world would jostle one another at Canada's door, not just because they would enjoy a higher standard of living, but much more importantly, because in Canada they would be free: *"I think we can claim that it is Canada that shall fill the 20th century ... For the next 75 years, nay the next 100 years, Canada shall be the star towards which all men who love progress and freedom shall come."*

He thought it vital to preserve and protect the institutions that our forebears brought to Canada, the "British liberty" composed of the rule of law, free speech, freedom of conscience and religion, respect of minority rights, habeas corpus, parliamentary self-government, minimal state interference, low taxes,

and respect of property and of contract. That liberty and those institutions were, Laurier believed, the catalyst that released the energy and dynamism of those who lived under them, whatever their ethnic origin or religious convictions. When people were free to follow their own star, to determine what was important to them, to build their own relationships with family, friends, and colleagues, they built well and energetically. They had confidence in the future; they took risks and reaped the rewards.

As Graeme Thompson has written, Sir Wilfrid famously proclaimed that “Canada is free, and freedom is its nationality.” The principle of individual liberty, he believed, could unite the Dominion’s disparate provinces and peoples during an era of sectional and religious antagonism. Its defence and promotion were central to his idea of Canada. Laurier said:

“We are here a nation, or we want to be a nation, composed of the most heterogeneous elements – Protestants and Catholics, English, French, German, Irish, Scotch, every one, let it be remembered, with his traditions, with his prejudices. In each of these conflicting antagonistic elements, however, there is a common spot of patriotism and the only true policy is that which reaches that common patriotism and makes it vibrate in all, toward a common end and common aspirations.”

He grounded that common patriotism in the individual freedom and responsibility for oneself and one’s own that he thought were the only worthy foundation stones of a great nation. Our beloved country, as well as every one of us, bears the impress of this great man’s values and achievements. I summon you now to raise a glass in his honour so that his memory may never be forgotten wherever there is a Canadian to remember him.

Brian Lee Crowley is Managing Director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute



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The Macdonald-Laurier Institute exists not merely to burnish the splendid legacy of two towering figures in Canadian history – Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir Wilfrid Laurier – but to renew that legacy. A Tory and a Grit, an English speaker and a French speaker – these two men represent the very best of Canada’s fine political tradition. As prime minister, each championed the values that led to Canada assuming her place as one of the world’s leading democracies. We will continue to vigorously uphold these values, the cornerstones of our nation.



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THE RIGHT HONOURABLE STEPHEN HARPER,

The Macdonald-Laurier Institute is an important source of fact and opinion for so many, including me. Everything they tackle is accomplished in great depth and furthers the public policy debate in Canada. Happy Anniversary, this is but the beginning.

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE PAUL MARTIN

In its mere five years of existence, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, under the erudite Brian Lee Crowley's vibrant leadership, has, through its various publications and public events, forged a reputation for brilliance and originality in areas of vital concern to Canadians: from all aspects of the economy to health care reform, aboriginal affairs, justice, and national security.

BARBARA KAY, NATIONAL POST COLUMNIST

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JOHN MANLEY, CEO COUNCIL