

The End of an Era: Laurier and the Election of 1911

The Politics of a Turning Point in Canadian History

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HIS 1101A

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December 7, 2009

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On January 26, 1911, William S. Fielding, Liberal Minister of Finance, laid before the Canadian parliament a treaty of reciprocity with the United States which gave preference to Canadian natural products while giving America nothing more than the standard tariff rate applied to every other nation that traded with Canada. Manufacturers were not endangered, and farmers, who had long yearned for access to the richest market in the world, would finally get what they wanted. It was the treaty that both parties had sought for fifty years.

The Opposition was stunned. The bargain was better than they had imagined possible. It was strictly in harmony with their own traditions. Western Conservative members could not be restrained from applauding. Outside the House, Conservative newspapers like the Toronto 'News' and the Ottawa 'Journal' expressed approval. But suddenly the mood changed. Mild assent changed to question, question to criticism, and criticism to a storm of denunciation and fierce attack. Party spirit and party hopes had rallied, lines of attack had opened, a chance of victory had gleamed. What was more to the point, the industrial and financial and railway interests had taken alarm and determined to fight the agreement with every resource in their power.¹

Despite how 1911 seemed to begin, it would mark the end of Sir Wilfrid Laurier's fifteen year hold on power. The election was hotly contested and the issue over which the parties fought was of remarkable importance for the future of the nation. In theory, an historian could posit any number of possible reasons for Laurier's defeat, but anyone interested in determining the actual causes must begin with the most striking aspect of the election: the final distribution of seats. Outside Ontario the Liberals won 74 seats to the Conservatives' 61 – a slight majority; whereas Ontario elected 73 Conservatives and only 13 Liberals – an utter rout. These highly divergent results demand explanation.

In reading various accounts of the election, certain causes become apparent. The Liberal Party had weakened after fifteen years in power, and the issue of Reciprocity split the party's

¹ Skelton, O.D. *Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Vol. II*, pp. 369, 370

ranks; furthermore the Round Table Group and the Orange Order successfully exploited the imperialist and Anglo-Saxon prejudices of Ontarians; in addition, the railways and the major industrial and financial interests allied with the Conservatives to defeat the Reciprocity bill, believing that it threatened their economic hegemony.

Quebec was another key battleground. Henri Bourassa proved to be a great deal of trouble for Laurier, helping to reduce the Liberals to 38 seats from 54; nevertheless, even if the Liberals had maintained their position in the province, the party would not have had enough seats to overcome the disaster in Ontario. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Quebec was the way French and English were played against one another. In this sense the methods employed by Bourassa in Quebec and by the Orange Order in Ontario were complimentary even as they were antagonistic, since extremists always feed off each other in their attacks upon the centre. Laurier expressed the essence of this problem, which he faced throughout his career, when he said,

I am branded in Quebec as a traitor to the French and in Ontario as a traitor to the English. In Quebec I am branded as a jingo and in Ontario as a separatist. In Quebec I am attacked as an Imperialist and in Ontario as an anti-Imperialist. I am neither. I am a Canadian. Canada has been the inspiration of my life. I have had before me as a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day a policy of true Canadianism, of moderation, of conciliation.²

Canadian politics, when it worked, had been a delicate balancing act between the French and English ever since the Union of Upper and Lower Canada in 1841; but under the leadership of Laurier, the Liberal party faced an additional difficulty: a French Canadian leader within a predominantly English country, something most Englishmen would not accept or would only accept begrudgingly. When Laurier was first nominated as leader he had grave misgivings, which would often resurface throughout his career.

The problem was further accentuated during Laurier's time by the ascendance of Imperialism throughout English Canada (particularly in Ontario, the bastion of the Orange Order)

² Ibid. p. 380

and of the Nationalist movement in Quebec, led by Bourassa. Many of the most bitter disputes of the period were of a racial and religious nature, such as the Manitoba Schools issue. Such conditions made it very difficult to maintain national, let alone party unity, particularly when the extremist elements in both Ontario and Quebec could never be satisfied with any compromise, no matter how unrealistic their own wishes and opinions might have been. These sorts of fault lines within the population as well as within the Liberal ranks erupted in the 1911 election, particularly in Ontario. Laurier confirmed that this was his view when he wrote,

It is the province of Ontario which has defeated us. Our losses elsewhere were not very serious and would simply have reduced our majority, but Ontario went solid against us. It is becoming more and more manifest to me that it was not reciprocity that was turned down, but a Catholic premier. All the information which comes to me from that province makes this quite evident.³

It was not simply the citizenry which had rejected Laurier, but even members of his own party, most prominently Clifford Sifton, once the Prime Minister's chief lieutenant in Western Canada. Sifton and Laurier had been on different sides of a number of French-English, Catholic-Protestant disputes, with Sifton resigning as Minister of the Interior in 1905, although he remained a Liberal member. Sifton had been a leading political organizer for the Liberal Party, as well as an advocate of free trade with America throughout Laurier's administration, but in 1911 Sifton unexpectedly broke with Laurier and joined the Conservatives in opposition to Reciprocity. When news of Sifton's decision to oppose the government reached Laurier, the Prime Minister summoned him for a private meeting. Laurier later recounted part of the discussion to his biographer O.D. Skelton. Laurier asked him, "'Why?' 'Because I do not believe in it.' 'You did once.' 'Yes, but conditions have changed.' 'No, it is you who have changed. Your opposition is personal; what is it?'"⁴ Laurier would never discover the reason for Sifton's decision, since only years afterwards would historians describe how not long after the Reciprocity bill was introduced

³ Ibid. p. 382

⁴ Ibid. p. 372

into Parliament, “important business spokesmen who had long supported Laurier's party, Zebulon Aiton Lash and Lloyd Harris, joined Clifford Sifton, former minister in the Liberal cabinet, and John Willison, the Conservative editor of the *Toronto News*, to propose an alliance with Borden's party” in exchange for political favours and appointments.⁵

The loss of Sifton was a significant blow to the Liberals. Laurier once remarked that “Mr. Sifton was the master mind in parliament. He could discern the current political tendencies, put his finger on the popular pulse better than any other man in my experience. His executive capacity was extraordinary...”⁶ But the Liberals had not simply lost a crucial organizer, they had also acquired a dangerous enemy, for Sifton then turned his talents against his old party. Skelton recounts that “while Mr. Borden... remained the leader of the party, the real campaign manager was Clifford Sifton...” It was Sifton,

aided by Zebulun Lash, the confidential lawyer of Mackenzie and Mann [the controlling partnership of the Canadian National Railway], who organized the Revolt of the Eighteen, a carefully staged and very effective repudiation of reciprocity by eighteen residents of Toronto, all eminent in the world of finance, and all attached or semi-detached Liberals, and it was Sifton who organized the no-popery cry on the back concessions of Ontario.”⁷

Sifton’s attacks against the Liberal Party in Ontario confused the issue of the election and focused attention not on the merits, or lack thereof, of the trade agreement, but on issues of religion and race – the prejudices which provoked the voters of Ontario in 1911 as they had so many times before, with the most predictable of results.

Unfortunately for the Liberals, the party did not seem capable of repulsing the Conservative assault; their party organization was demoralized, disorderly and ill-financed. Skelton, a key figure in the Ontario Liberal Party, recounts how the Liberals “had come to trust too much on campaign funds, and now they faced an issue where their opponents could cover their

⁵ Brown, Robert Craig. *Sir Robert Borden*. Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=7998

⁶ Skelton, p. 371

⁷ Ibid. p. 372

million with three.”⁸ What's more, Liberal organizer Alex Smith, who, although lacking knowledge of the greater forces at play, understood the reality on the ground, wrote to Laurier that,

You were not defeated by these cries [of race and religion.] The cries got the start of you because you had no organization. We had nobody in charge. It was like playing marbles with marbles made out of mud. Warnings, directions, and offers of assistance were all resented, and the result was that you had not the support of the lineal descendants of those who were proud to see you elected in 1896. The two main causes of your defeat were, first, fifteen years in power and, secondly, no organization.⁹

Despite the dismal Liberal organization, party conditions alone cannot fully account for the Liberal defeat, for there were great financial forces with immense power and influence involved. It is in light of this fact that the significance of the relationship between Sifton and the partnership of Mackenzie and Mann becomes clear, not only because of its particular nature, but also because it typified a general characteristic of electoral politics. The railway barons had been closely associated with Sifton since at least 1895, and Sifton, who had been instrumental in establishing the financing for Mackenzie and Mann's many enterprises, had certainly benefitted from the relationship. In fact, Sifton had been hounded for years over allegations of corruption in his associations with Canada's business interests. It is overwhelmingly probable that the primary cause of Sifton's opposition to reciprocity was to be found in his own financial connections.

As for the railways, they were adamantly opposed to reciprocity with the United States, fearing that their east-west trade would be threatened. Sir William Van Horne, a former President of the CPR, was notorious for his directive “to bust the damned thing.”¹⁰ Behind the railways were the manufacturers and the financial houses, all intimately connected. These combined interests poured millions of dollars into the Conservative Party, much of which would have gone to the Liberals in previous years, thus limiting the ability of the Liberals to respond to Conservative attacks with comparable logistics. As a biographer of Sir Edmund Walker,

⁸ Ibid. p. 371

⁹ Public Archives of Canada: Laurier, 190118-20. Cited in Schull, Joseph. *Laurier*, pp. 537, 538

¹⁰ Skelton, p. 370

imperialist, banking magnate (the banker of Mackenzie and Mann, no less) and founding member of the Canadian Round Table, writes:

It was in fact the business community, not the ineffectual Conservative opposition, that led the campaign against Laurier. The most highly organized and nationally prominent anti-reciprocity force was the "Toronto Eighteen," headed by Walker. Described by one historian as "an interlocking structure of banking, transportation, insurance, manufacturing and other related interests," they unleashed, in the words of another, "a firestorm of anti-American sentiment." They helped create such propaganda bodies as the Canadian National League and the Canadian Home Market Association, published anti-free trade tracts, cartoons, and advertisements, and blanketed the nation with pamphlets publicizing their position.¹¹

These powerful interests were primarily centered in Toronto and Montreal and were highly integrated with the British Imperial Establishment, which was dominated at the time by a society of men known as the Round Table Group, who were dominated in turn by Lord Alfred Milner. The policy of the Round Table in the lead-up to The Great War was the containment and eventual subjugation of Germany, which was the real reason for pushing Imperial federation and the creation of an Imperial navy. In their attempt to discreetly increase British control over the Empire they organized groups throughout the self-governing colonies, with Canada being of particular importance as the ranking dominion. The men recruited by the Round Table were invariably members of the elite, whether in government, academia, journalism or business. A striking example of their influence is provided by Sir Edward Peacock, one of the earliest Canadian members. Over his career Peacock would be a director of the Bank of England, the Hudson's Bay Company, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, Baring Brothers, as well as a Rhodes Trustee.¹² This man was clearly circulating in the highest echelons of power both in Canada and in Britain; and such connections were the standard for members of the Round Table, such as Sir Edmund Walker, mentioned above. Carroll Quigley, the pre-eminent historian of the Round Table, provides an astonishing list of members in his article, *The Round Table Groups in*

¹¹ Kimmel, David. *Sir Byron Edmund Walker*. Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=7878

¹² Quigley, Carroll. *The Round Table Groups in Canada, 1908-1938*. Canadian Historical Review, Vol. 43, p. 207

Canada, 1908-1938, which only further highlights the extraordinary influence wielded by the society. Borden himself would become intimately involved with the affairs of the group for many years, and, quite significantly, would meet twice with Milner in July of 1909.¹³

The Round Table's quest for power and influence raised a great deal of suspicion. For example, in 1913 Rodolphe Lemieux, a former Liberal Cabinet Minister, wrote to Round Table member George Mackinnon Wrong,

"I find that almost all of the contributions [to the Round Table Quarterly magazine] on Canada are tainted with ardent toryism. ... [The Round Table Group] did not realize what were Laurier's troubles [in balancing French and English interests]. Their aim was to destroy Laurier by all means... There is an *inner circle* in that organization – I know it, *I feel it*."¹⁴

J.W. Dafoe, editor of the Winnipeg Free Press, wrote that,

"I have regarded the Canadian members of the Round Table as persons who were being shepherded along a definite path to a predetermined end, and I have thought that many of them were thus being shepherded so skilfully that they realized neither the road that [they] were travelling, nor the goal to which they were tending."¹⁵

Furthermore, Laurier made his own views clear in 1917 when he wrote that "Canada is now governed by a junta sitting at London, known as 'The Round Table,' with ramifications in Toronto, in Winnipeg, in Victoria, with Tories and Grits receiving their ideas from London, and insidiously forcing them on their respective parties."¹⁶

The policies of the Round Table were directly contrary to those of Laurier's administration, and had been so since the beginning. As representative of Britain's most important colony, Laurier had frustrated every imperial scheme proffered by the British Establishment since 1897, and in doing so the Prime Minister had made a number of enemies. It is not difficult to imagine that the Round Table would have desired almost anyone to be Prime Minister rather than the intransigent French Canadian, especially if that person was himself an ardent imperialist, like Sir

¹³ Ibid. p. 209

¹⁴ Wrong Papers, Rodolphe Lemieux to G. M. Wrong, Aug. 29, 1913. Cited in Eayrs, James. *The Round Table Movement in Canada, 1909-1920*. Canadian Historical Review. Vol. 38, No. 1, p. 5

¹⁵ Wrong Papers, J. W. Dafoe to G. M. Wrong, Oct. 16, 1916. Cited in Eayrs, p. 5

¹⁶ Skelton, p. 510

Robert Borden. Moreover, with Britain's steady build-up for war against Germany, the political machinery of Imperialism was moving to consolidate its control over the Empire. It could not tolerate a Canadian Prime Minister who would not dance to their tune, so to speak. As Joseph Schull writes of the period before the election:

Sifton was now Borden's or Borden was Sifton's, and somewhere behind both were the heirs of Joseph Chamberlain. The propaganda of Empire, intricate and incessant, was now developing as a recognizable force. Its manifestation in Canada was the Round Table Group, which Willison had helped to found with the support of affable gentlemen from beyond the seas. Laurier had watched the assembling with distaste and distrust, not the less because it was done very privately and very quietly, reaching out always toward those in strategic places in the life of the country. The purpose obviously was to recruit the susceptible and influential in support of the imperial dream, and with that dream the prospect of reciprocity would hardly accord.¹⁷

Before and during the election campaign, due to the factors described above, the Conservatives and their financial backers were well positioned to play upon the imperialist tendencies of Ontarians by vilifying Laurier as a traitor and a puppet, either of Quebec or the United States. Issues of race and religion replaced debate over economic policy. The old fear of annexation to the United States was raised once again; and it certainly did not help when President Taft foolishly declared that reciprocity would "make Canada only an adjunct of the United States," or that Champ Clarke, Speaker of the House of Representatives, boasted that "we are preparing to annex Canada," and spoke of the day "when the American flag will float over every square foot of the British North American possessions, clear to the North Pole."¹⁸ Such statements inflamed the Canadian public and seemed to confirm their suspicions, even though Laurier attempted to dismiss them as misguided rhetoric.

Meanwhile, Borden stayed away from Quebec and left the campaigning there to his Quebec lieutenant, Frederick D. Monk and Borden's strange new bedfellow, Henri Bourassa. As a biographer of Borden writes, for Monk, Bourassa and the *Nationalistes* "the issue was not reciprocity, it was Laurier: Laurier and his Naval Service Act, Laurier and his capitulations to

¹⁷ Schull, p. 524

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 530

English Canadian interests through the years, Laurier and his alleged corrupt dominance of politics in Quebec.”¹⁹ It is a telling aspect of the election that Bourassa, the anti-Imperialist, had developed such a vindictive grudge for Laurier that he would work for the Anglo-Saxon Imperialists of Ontario! Furthermore, and more extraordinarily, Bourassa, so often claiming that Laurier’s Naval policy would lead to conscription, supported the party that actually would introduce conscription! Clearly Bourassa, who had grown more extreme in his views as he drew ever closer to the Ultramontane movement in Quebec, was driven by a personal vendetta against Laurier, which corrupted his judgement, with disastrous consequences in later years. One of Laurier’s close collaborators, Ernest Lapointe, noted another factor in Bourassa’s new allegiance when he wrote, “I should say that M. Bourassa has opposed reciprocity since the capital of his paper [Le Devoir] has increased by \$200,000. I should say that M. Bourassa has been bought.”²⁰

In order to satisfactorily explain the election of 1911 it is not sufficient to demonstrate the nature and power of the alliance against Laurier, since this alliance would have been entirely ineffective unless there was something within the population upon which Laurier’s enemies could work. In Ontario the problem was the Orange Order, while in Quebec the problem was Ultramontanism. John Ralston Saul has argued that these mass movements were the two great tragedies of Canada’s first century:

Each in its own way was a spearhead of intolerance and a manipulator of fear. The Ultramontanes took French Canada off a relatively normal track of political and social evolution. In many ways, the result was the loss of a century. The infection of healthy nationalism with a sectarianism that can still be felt in the negative nationalists was one of their accomplishments. The Orange Order provoked the Métis persecution, attacked francophone rights and caused Ontario also to lose close to a century of balanced evolution. Its infection of society can still be felt when unilingual movements or other reflections of prejudice break out.

It could be argued that these two racist, anti-democratic movements are the most important contributions made to Canadian political life by the mother countries. They invented and sent us organized philosophies which summarized their own internal battles and prejudices. These quickly took on lives of their own here and became the clear expression of the forces eager to

¹⁹ Brown, Robert Craig. *Sir Robert Borden*. Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=7998

²⁰ Rumilly, *Histoire*, vol. XVI, p. 86. Cited in Schull, p. 531

destroy the moderate reformers. It follows that they were determined to destroy the positive, reforming anglophone-francophone alliance.²¹

These were the movements which Laurier's political enemies appealed to, movements which viewed Canada through distorted ideological lenses, which knew neither compromise or goodwill for those not of the same religion, ethnicity or creed. For these reasons, as noted above, the opponents of reciprocity did not campaign on the basis of economics; instead they manipulated the emotions and prejudices of the populace, doing their best to bring out the worst in Canadians, all for the sake of the economic elite and British Imperialism. O. D. Skelton summarized the moral dimensions of the election when he wrote that,

It was not well that an honourable [national] sentiment could be so easily manipulated and traded upon; it was not well that powerful financial and railway interests... should be able by lavish expenditure or raging, tearing propaganda to stampede unthinking thousands. It was not well that the endeavour to work out a moderate and middle policy in imperial and international affairs, a policy which would prevent a cleavage on racial lines, should be halted by extremist assaults. Nor was it well, even from the standpoint of the victors in this fray, that the city and the city-centred powers should have so flagrantly and blindly subordinated the country's interest.²²

When all of the arguments presented in this paper are combined, it becomes clear why Laurier lost the election of 1911. It was not a simple matter, but then again, Canadian politics has never been and will never be simple.

The study of this unfortunate episode of Canadian history is instructive for the very reason that so much of Canada's modern political discord can be seen in the divisions and prejudices of Laurier's era. Nonetheless, one may hope that with time Canadians will learn from their past mistakes and that the nation may once again be led by men and women in the spirit of Wilfrid Laurier, the "faithful servant of his country," and "the finest and simplest gentleman, the noblest and most unselfish man, it [had] ever been [Skelton's] fortune to know."²³

²¹ Saul, John Ralston. *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, pp. 32, 33

²² Skelton, pp. 381, 382

²³ Skelton, *Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Vol. I*, preface.

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