

A fine introduction to a great PM

By HENRY ROPER

Sir Wilfrid Laurier led the federal Liberal party from 1887 until his death in 1919. From 1896 to 1911 he served as prime minister of Canada.

When he became leader, Liberal prospects were dim. The party advocated free trade despite the popularity of Conservative prime minister Sir John A. Macdonald's "National Policy" of encouraging Canadian industrial development through protective tariffs.

French-English relations had reached a new low following the execution in 1885 of Louis Riel. In Ontario, the powerful Orange Order looked with suspicion upon Roman Catholics and French Canadians. The Church hierarchy in Quebec viewed the Liberals, even led by a French Canadian Roman Catholic, as dangerously anti-clerical.

How Laurier overcame these obstacles to become Canada's first French Canadian prime minister is one of the defining stories of Canadian history.

The distinguished Quebec journalist André Pratte has compressed Laurier's biography into a short, readable book, part of Penguin Canada's Extraordinary Canadians series, edited by John Ralston Saul.

Pratte argues that the key to Laurier's political success was his understanding of the importance of compromise.

Born in 1841 in the village of Saint-Lin, P.Q., the son of a surveyor with radical views, Laurier was sent at the age of 10 to be educated in English for two years before attending French secondary school. He then took a law degree at McGill.

By education and temperament he was unusually fitted to have a balanced view of the issues that threatened to divide the country. He soon abandoned his youthful radicalism to become a voice for moderation throughout his long career.

Although handsome, charming and a charismatic orator in both French and English, the Liberals chose him with some reluctance to succeed the brilliant but politically inept Edward Blake, who was no match for the wily Macdonald.

After losing to the Conservatives in 1891 over the tariff question, Laurier moved his party towards acceptance of the National Policy.

He skilfully handled the great issue that divided Canadians during the 1890s, the elimination of denominational schools by the province of Manitoba. Laurier argued, in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church and Quebec Conservatives demanding redress through federal legislation, that provincial responsibility for education must be respected, even in instances of obvious injustice. Hopelessly divided over the Manitoba School question and lacking strong leadership after Macdonald's death in 1891, the Tories imploded.

Laurier's approach to governing Canada by relying on "sunny ways" was ideally suited to the period of prosperity that began at the time he assumed power. However, he was eventually brought down by the Liberals' attempt to establish a "reciprocity agreement" on agricultural commodities with the United States.

English Canadian imperialists, already enraged by the Laurier government's refusal to fund British warships in favour of creating a Canadian navy, argued that the agreement would eventually lead to annexation.

In Quebec, the Tories were helped by French Canadian nationalists led by Henri Bourassa. The visionary Bourassa envisaged a bicultural and bilingual Canada; he condemned Laurier for failing to defend the interests of French Canadians throughout the Dominion.

Laurier's final years in politics were consumed by the conscription crisis during the First World War. A lifelong anglophile who supported the war, he was, however, unable to accept conscription, which aroused ferocious opposition in French Canada.

Conscription proved an issue on which there was no compromise. Many leading Liberals, with the notable exception of Mackenzie King, joined prime minister Robert Borden in forming a Unionist government, which went to the country in December 1917 on a platform of conscription.

The campaign was the most bitter in Canadian history, tainted by such slogans as "A vote for Laurier is a vote for the Kaiser." Despite vilification and crushing defeat in English Canada, Laurier neither lost his dignity nor his belief in the country, stating that "I still have faith in the sound sense of the Canadian people and in the broad forces that make for national unity on a base of fair and respecting partnership. Once the war is over, no election, no dozen elections, no unscrupulous propaganda, can prevent Canadians more and more becoming Canadians first ..."

When he died in 1919, the nation mourned; two years later the Liberals under his successor Mackenzie King returned to power.

As a man and politician Wilfrid Laurier touched greatness; no figure in our history inspired such affection in all parts of the country. André Pratte's book is not simply a panegyric.

He does not hide Laurier's failures, such as his misguided encouragement of three transcontinental railway systems. Pratte also examines Laurier's happy though childless marriage and his intriguing relationship with Emilie Lavergne, the wife of a friend and legal associate. Her son Armand, who became a leading French Canadian nationalist, strikingly resembled Laurier in

appearance, although not in personality and character. There is no hard evidence to support the widespread rumour that Laurier was his father.

Pratte laments in his introduction that so few Canadians are aware of Laurier's achievements. This book is a good place to start for those wishing to learn more about one of our greatest prime ministers.

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