

Sir Wilfrid Laurier

Canada's seventh prime minister

Quick Facts

Term(s) of Office:

- July 11, 1896–October 6, 1911

Born

- November 20, 1841, Saint-Lin, Canada East (Quebec)

Died

- February 17, 1919, Ottawa, Ontario
- **Grave site:** Notre Dame Cemetery, Ottawa, Ontario

Education

- McGill University, B.C.L. 1864

Personal Life

- Married 1868, Zoé Lafontaine (1841–1921)

Occupations

- Lawyer (called to the bar of Canada East in 1864)
- 1866–1867 Editor of *Le Défricheur*
- 1869–1878 Ensign, Arthabaskaville Infantry
- 1871–1874 MLA Quebec

Political Party

- Liberal
- 1887–1919 Party Leader

Constituencies

- 1874–1877 Drummond-Arthabaska, Quebec
- 1877–1919 Quebec East, Quebec

Other Ministries

- 1877–1878 Inland Revenue
- 1896–1911 President of the Privy Council

Political Record

- Leader of the Opposition 1887–1896
- Adoption of the regulations on the Manitoba Schools Question 1896
- Creation of Yukon Territory 1898
- Canadian participation in the South African War 1899–1902
- Alaska Boundary Dispute 1903
- Construction of a second transcontinental railway 1903
- Creation of provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta 1905
- Formation of Departments of Labour 1900 and External Affairs 1909
- Naval Service Bill 1910
- Leader of the Opposition 1911–1919

Biography

Canada has been modest in its history, although its history, in my estimation, is only commencing. It is commencing in this century. The nineteenth century was the century of the United States. I think we can claim that Canada will fill the twentieth century.—Sir Wilfrid Laurier, January 18, 1904

These words, so familiar to Canadians, sum up the spirit of optimism which characterized Laurier himself, as well as the country during the time he governed. His skill as a politician gave him the longest unbroken term of office as prime minister, while his charismatic personality endeared him to friend and rival alike, and made him a hero to the nation.

Wilfrid Laurier was born in Saint-Lin, Canada East in 1841, the son of a farmer. After a few years at the local elementary school, Laurier was sent to New Glasgow, a nearby town, to learn English. He spent seven years at a Roman Catholic college, and then studied law at McGill University. Laurier graduated in 1864 and began practising law in Montréal.

It was during these years that Laurier became involved in politics, supporting the Liberal party or "parti rouge", as it was known in Quebec. In 1866, he moved to L'Avenir and took over as editor of *Le Défricheur*, defending liberalism. It was not an easy platform to support in Quebec at that time; the clergy fiercely condemned "les rouges," and the rival "parti bleu" dominated the provincial government. Laurier won a seat in the legislature as a Liberal member in 1871, but resigned in 1874. That same year, he was elected to the House of Commons. During the brief Liberal regime under Alexander MacKenzie, Laurier served for a year as Minister of Inland Revenue. His spirited defence of Louis Riel in 1885 brought his oratorical abilities to the attention of the party, and when Liberal leader Edward Blake resigned in 1887, Laurier succeeded him.

During the election of 1891, the Liberal platform of unrestricted reciprocity with the United States proved unpopular, and the Conservatives won again. But with the death of Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald later the same year, the collapse of the Conservative party began. The Manitoba Schools Question hastened the process, and Laurier simply bided his time. After 18 years of Conservative (Tory) government, the nation voted Liberal in the 1896 election and Laurier became Canada's first Francophone prime minister.

National unity was of supreme importance to Laurier. He had seen how divisive the issues of Riel and the Manitoba schools had been, and he sought to reconcile the interests of French and English Canada with his policies. Laurier was a great admirer of the principles of British liberalism, and felt they offered the means by which Canadians of all ancestries could live in one nation. But at all times his dedication to Canadian unity took precedence over his esteem for British tradition.

In 1897, he was invited to London for the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria's reign. Although Laurier had indicated that, in the tradition of former Liberal leaders Alexander Mackenzie

and Edward Blake, he did not wish a knighthood; however, preparations to knight him had already been made. To avoid appearing rude, he accepted. There was an ulterior motive in the extravagant welcome Laurier received in Britain. Anxious to re-establish control over the foreign policy and defence of their colonies, the British were hoping that Laurier would acquiesce and convince others to follow. But they underestimated Laurier's determination to maintain Canada's control over its destiny. At three more Imperial Conferences between 1902 and 1911, Laurier held firm against the British encroachment on Canadian autonomy.

The 15 years of Laurier's government were distinguished with unprecedented growth and prosperity. Immigration expanded, especially in the West, leading to the creation of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905. Such growth required expansion of the railways and two new continental lines were built.

The golden age came to an end in 1911, when the Liberals lost the election over the issue of unrestricted reciprocity. As opposition leader, Laurier maintained the confidence of his party until the First World War. While he supported Canada's contribution to Britain's war efforts and urged young men in all provinces to enlist, Laurier was against conscription. The Liberal party was badly split over this issue in the 1917 election, and several Liberals formed a union government with the Conservatives for the duration of the war.

Laurier died on February 17, 1919, having served for 45 years in the House of Commons. At his funeral, 50,000 people lined the streets of Ottawa, while hundreds of dignitaries and officials from all over the country followed the funeral procession. This solemn occasion was one of the first public events in Canada to be recorded on film.

International Relations

The South African War (1899–1902) represented the first overseas conflict in which Canada became involved. It generated divided feelings in the population, between those who favoured loyalty to the British Empire, and those who felt that Canada's security was not directly threatened. Under intense pressure to support the British Empire, Laurier reluctantly agreed to the recruiting of a small battalion, later augmented by many additional volunteers.

Relations with the Americans were rocky during the Alaska Boundary dispute. In 1903, an international tribunal consisting of three Americans, two Canadians, and a British chief justice named Lord Alverstone was formed. Alverstone was in the difficult position of trying to avoid a deadlock. He allowed the United States to keep most of the land in exchange for four islands. Many Canadians were angered but the government didn't appeal the decision.

In 1908, the Laurier government enacted the Continuous Passage Act, which required all immigrants to travel from their point of origin to Canada without any stops. This created



a significant barrier to immigration from Asia. For immigrants from India, who were also British subjects, this Act made it impossible to immigrate to Canada.

In 1909, the Laurier government created the Department of External Affairs. This department issued passports to Canadians travelling abroad and served as liaison with the British Colonial Office in London, England.

The Naval Service Act was passed in May 1910, which established the Royal Canadian Navy. The small navy was created to protect Canadian sovereignty but with the provision to be transferred to the British Admiralty in the event of a war. The move divided the House of Commons and was one of the factors in Laurier's defeat in the 1911 election.

Anecdote

The prime minister and the newspaper boy

Saskatoon, July 29, 1910, early morning, the Prime Minister of Canada has just arrived at the railway station. He is here to lay the cornerstone of the first university in Saskatchewan. The province is not unfamiliar to this leader; only five years ago he oversaw the inauguration of Saskatchewan into Confederation. In this short time, the province has grown tremendously and this newly founded institute of higher learning is representative of Saskatchewan's increasing prosperity.

The prime minister is anxious to know what's going on in the country, so he buys a newspaper from a bright-eyed lad on the platform. He inquires about the young man's business and expresses the hope that he will be a great man someday. The newspaper boy recognizes his illustrious client and shares with him some of his youthful ideas. The prime minister and the paper boy engage in a lively conversation. But duty calls for both. The young man has papers to sell and concludes: "Well, Mr. Prime Minister, I can't waste any more time on you. I must get back to work."

The prime minister? Sir Wilfrid Laurier. And the newspaper boy? He is John G. Diefenbaker who, 47 years later, will also be Prime Minister of Canada.

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