Laurier and Immigration



by Irving Abella
Department of History
York University

A historian, undoubtedly a Liberal, once wrote that when Laurier became prime minister, Canada was born again. Putting aside his partisan puffery, there is clearly some truth to this statement. Yes, in the latter half of the 1890's Canada was indeed reborn, but it had far less to do with Laurier than with developments outside of Canada. Yet, opportunistic politician that he was, Laurier took full credit for the transformation of Canada.

In 1896, after 25 years of depression and gloom, prosperity returned to Canada. The pessimism of the preceding generation was replaced with an apparently boundless and hopelessly naïve optimism. Laurier himself was carried away and said that the 20th Century would be Canada's. A speaker at a Canadian club meeting in Winnipeg reflected the spirit of the times. "In 40 or 50 years Canada would have a population of some 50 million people and Saskatchewan and Alberta will be greater than Ontario in population and Winnipeg will be the great centre of North America," he said. Another Liberal cabinet minister promised that by the end of the 20th Century, Canada would have a population of some 400 million people. (It fell 370 million short). And why shouldn't they have been optimistic? After all, after two decades of bust, the long awaited boom had begun.

For many, however, it was too late. So many Canadians had lost hope that fortune would ever smile on Canada again, that well over a million left their farms and homes after Confederation to make their way across the border to the United States. And who could blame them? For farmers, the great American plains offered better land, to say nothing of a better climate and a better standard of living. And for thousands of penurious French-Canadians unable to eke an existence out of their marginal land, the factories and textile mills of New England gave new hope. As long as America remained hospitable, there seemed little reason for Canadians without jobs or failing farms not to go, and even less reason for European immigrants to come.

However, with the dawn of the new century, events outside of Canada began almost imperceptibly to alter the course of our history. Most of the fertile Americans land had been settled and the frontier was rapidly closing. The worldwide depression was lifting and there were now markets and higher prices for Canadian goods. With cheap land no longer available in the United States, prospective immigrants began looking for the first time to Canada. Except for the criminals, paupers and the diseased, Canada was open to anyone except, of course, for the Chinese who had to pay a $50 head tax. Aside from that, Canada had no immigration restrictions and no immigration policies. Until the 1900's she scarcely needed any. What she needed, of course, were incentives.

Laurier himself was convinced that Canada needed more immigrants in order to survive as a nation. He was, as one historian remarked, a gifted leader of men and a keen philosopher of politics who knew how to take advantage of opportunities and to give a touch of nobility to his cause. He was also a shrewd judge of character and ability; he knew there was only one man in his cabinet who shared his expansive vision of Canada and who had the energy and organizational skills and above all, the dreams to successfully carry out his politics.

The man appointed by Laurier to sell Canada to prospective immigrants was a forceful young businessman, the Minister of Interior, Clifford Sifton. Indeed, Sifton saw his task as basically salesmanship. "In my judgment," he said, "immigrants have to be enticed to come to Canada. The immigration work had to be carried out in the same manner as the sale of any commodity. Just as soon as he stopped advertising and doing missionary work, the movement is going to stop." Born in Ontario, Sifton had moved to Manitoba, made a fortune and having done that, he returned to the East with a sense of mission. He was determined to overcome Ottawa's resistance to Western settlement, to convince Ottawa that the future of the nation was dependent upon the development of the West. He was committed to bringing into the West the type of settler who could best adapt to the rigors of pioneer life. Like many transplanted Easterners, he had become a passionate Westerner and set about devising an immigration policy which was unashamedly designed to benefit Western Canada. "Our desire," he told the prime minister, "is to promote the immigration of farmers and farm laborers." "Urban immigrants," he added, "are undesirable from any standpoint." To him, these were the 'riff-raf' of the world's society. "They would not contribute a thing to the development of the natural resources of our country nor be of any productive benefit to Canada."

Sifton specifically ordered Canadian immigration officials to try to prevent the influx "of laboring men and mechanics." "The only good immigrant," he said, "was a farmer. Agriculture was the foundation of all real and enduring progress in the world." 'Only farmers need apply' was the operating slogan of Laurier's and Sifton's immigration policy.

As soon as he came into office, Sifton galvanized the immigration branch, which for years had been the

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backwater of government work. It was, he said, "a department of delay, a department of circumlocution, a department in which people could not get business done, a department which tired a man to death who undertook any business transaction with it." Nobody wanted to work in the department and nobody had any use for it. When Laurier and Sifton took over, new blood replaced the stodgy time-watchers who sat at their desks doing nothing. Seemingly limitless amounts of money were poured into the branch to pay for the new appointments, to launch massive advertising campaigns in the United States and Great Britain and to subsidize tours of Western Canada by foreign journalists.

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Each new settler was promised 160 acres of free land, although free did not necessarily mean arable, as many colonists were to discover. Agents were sent to nations all over the world — at least all over the world as Sifton saw it (his world being Europe) — to spread the word about the opportunities in Canada, and steamship passengers were offered large discounts for coming to Canada. Travel agents were given bonuses for sending potential settlers to Canada. Exhibitions throughout Europe often contained large displays outlining the advantages of living in Canada. There was scarcely a method not tried by the creative Sifton to encourage immigrants from those countries he believed would supply Western Canada with the young, hardy and aggressive pioneers she so desperately needed. Indeed, some of the arrangements were so highly irregular that they merited some governmental investigation.

Many European countries were incensed at what Canada was doing. They were angered because many of the settlers Sifton wanted were precisely the ones that these countries were loathe to lose. Laws were passed in Europe to restrict Canadian immigration efforts. In France for example, all government officials including school teachers and postal workers were ordered to warn potential immigrants of the dangers of immigrating to Canada. The greatest ally for most of these countries, of course, was the Canadian climate which was continuously used in their struggle to keep Europeans at home. Indeed, in some countries signs were hung in post offices highlighting the previous day's temperature in Winnipeg in order to deter immigrants from coming to Canada. And Sifton even considered seriously banning the publication of Prairie temperatures lest they frighten off prospective immigrants.

Sifton and Laurier even entered into a deal with a company called the North Atlantic Trading Company which agreed to direct all agricultural immigrants from Europe to Canada and, in return, the Canadian government would pay them a bonus for each immigrant delivered. The company had to convince immigrants to go to Canada even though most wished to travel to America. In fact, we know that many immigrants got on a boat thinking they were going to Chicago or New York via Montreal or Quebec, which they were told was only a street-car ride away from the American cities. There is marvelous anecdotal evidence in the archives about how this company hoodwinked thousands of immigrants to come to Canada and settle in the West. In the end, they got 70,000 of what Sifton described as, "the world's best immigrants" to come to Canada.

Sifton's great achievement, of course, was to be able to reverse the tide of immigration to the United States. Prodded by an army of Canadian immigration agents and by a profusion of pamphlets describing the wonders of the "last, best West" and by offers of free trips and free lands, hundreds of thousands of American farmers crossed the borders and took up new homes in Canada in the Canadian West. These were, in Sifton's words, "of the finest quality and the most desirable settlers."

Undoubtedly the most innovative and radical scheme was his encouragement of continental European immigration. His ideal immigrant was "a stalwart peasant in a sheepskin coat, born of the soil, whose forefathers had been farmers for ten generations, with a stout wife and half a dozen children." Sifton did not care whether he was of British stock, so long as he was hale and hardy and ready to cultivate the soil. Nor did he care whether these immigrants could read or write. For the work he had in mind for them, it didn't matter. These Poles, Ukrainians, Slavs, Russians and others were slated to open up the vast, isolated, largely unsettled areas of the Canadian West. Sifton and Laurier's orders were clear — immigration agents were to opt for brawn over brain, for strong backs over strong minds. All the eastern European peasants wished for was free land and a place where, in the words of one, "we do not have to bow our heads to no one." In Canada, he got both.

In return, these immigrants not only cleared and cultivated huge areas of the Canadian West, but they also built the roads and railways, cut the lumber, and mined the coal which allowed the great boon to continue. Though most of them came to Canada to take up land, they were most likely to pick up picks and shovels. Despite Sifton's emphasis on agricultural immigrants, many who arrived were neither able nor willing to settle on the land. In order to build up a stake for their homestead, many were forced to become wage laborers. Others found they could survive their first few years of farming only by working on railway gangs or construction crews. These immigrants provided the cheap labour that many industri-

alists and government officials thought was necessary for Canada's expanding industrial development.

Ironically, the most important determinant of immigration in these years was not the government, nor was it Sifton's ideal of an agricultural immigration. Rather, it was the business community. They lobbied incessantly and successfully for an open-door immigration policy. Any European who wanted, so long as he or she was healthy, unskilled and preferably illiterate, should be allowed to come to Canada. What industrialists wished above all else was to have a cheap, pliant labour force. And who could possibly be cheaper and more pliant than the hungry, docile southern and eastern European immigrants. This vast, apparently limitless source of manpower would assure the business community that labour costs would remain low and that the nascent trade union movement would be aborted.

In the minds of most Canadians, these immigrants were both unassimilable and unorganizable. They would remain in Canada so long as their work was needed. When it no longer was, they were returned home. And indeed, many immigrants shared this belief. They saw themselves as temporary sojourners coming to Canada to earn enough money to, in the words of one young Italian laborer, "live like a prince" when they returned home. They arrived in Canada simply to improve their situation at home. So committed were they to returning that most left their families behind in the old country. Unfortunately, most found their wages so low that they could barely survive in Canada, let alone put anything aside for the journey home. In the end, most became immigrants and eventually brought their families to Canada.

And indeed in the booming early years of the 20th century, the work of these migrants was absolutely essential to this country. Under Laurier's expanded vision, two transcontinental railways were being rapidly pushed across the West, new mines and smelters were opening up all over the country, and factories were producing more than ever before. These were all labour-intensive industries which relied on low-paid workers. The large British immigration of this period could not satisfy this need. Most immigrants from the United Kingdom came with skills and union backgrounds, both of which were anathema and unacceptable to Canadian employers. According to the president of the CPR, Canada needed men who were accustomed to roughing it. It would be a huge mistake, he said, to bring in British immigrants "who came here expecting to get high wages, a feather bed and a bathtub." They were not, he and his colleagues agreed, suited to frontier conditions. What Canada needed, the employers stressed, were more Europeans, particularly Ukrainian or Slavs. These had proven to be obedient and industrious workers who rarely complained about the admittedly deplorable camp conditions. Perhaps because they could not speak English.

It was thus in the Laurier years that a multicultural Canada came into being. In the fifteen years of Laurier's regime, some 100,000 Italians came to Canada. And so did 65,000 Jews, 95,000 Poles, 80,000 Russians, 85,000 Ukrainians, as well as tens of thousands of Germans, Hungarians, Swedes, Slavs and other Europeans — as well as, of course, over a million Brits.

But there was a dark side to Laurier's immigration policy. It was unabashedly racist and restrictive. It was under Laurier's next minister of immigration, Frank Oliver, that the immigration act was changed to officially close off Canada to most of the world. Only white American and Europeans were acceptable as immigrants. No one else was acceptable. It was a policy that would last for the next sixty years. For immigration purposes, the world would be divided into preferred and non-preferred races. The preferred races were white Europeans — the rest of the world was off limits. There would be no Africans, no Latin Americans and very few Asians. And for those Chinese and Japanese who made it to this country, they were subject to violence and severe restrictions. It is important to remember that Laurier's was an immigration policy that was ethnically selective and economically self-serving and it was a policy that most Canadians accepted at that time and, as recent public opinion polls seem to indicate, would probably favour today. ■

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