The Relevance of Laurier's Ideas on French-English Relations: A Century Later



by Blair Neatby
Department of
Canadian Studies
Carleton University

This is a risky enterprise. We are not here as antiquarians, fascinated by the past only because of its remoteness or its novelty. We are here because we assume that the Canada of one hundred years ago was, in some way or in some degree, the father (or the mother) of the Canada of today, and that the ideas and the policies of the man who became Prime Minister over a hundred years ago may have some relevance to our concerns today.

And, indeed, it would be possible to make the election of 1896 seem almost contemporary. In that election campaign, Canadians were still debating whether free or freer trade with the United States was compatible with a politically independent Canada. Canadians were also debating minority rights and provincial autonomy, to say nothing of the rights of labour or whether immigrants would be — or should be — assimilated.

But we would be misguided — and dangerously so — if we confused 1896 with today. The last century saw more revolutions — political, social, economic and technological — than any of us can keep track of. And so when Wilfrid Laurier talked of national unity, which he frequently did (as have all Prime Ministers, before and since) we must remember that, even if the words have a familiar resonance, they did not mean to Laurier or to his audience what they mean to us today. When we read the past into the present we are often closer to propaganda than to history.

But I am an historian. That means, almost by definition, that I think the past can help to explain the present. And I do think we can learn from looking at Laurier's career. But, as I said at the beginning, it is a risky enterprise. Take, for example, a quotation from a letter Laurier wrote to a fellow Liberal in 1904:

My object is to consolidate Confederation, and to bring our people(s) long estranged from each other, gradually to become a nation. This is the supreme issue. Everything else is subordinate to that idea.[1]

We might quibble today about the word "nation" but there is plenty of evidence to show that Laurier was committed to the survival of French Canada as a distinctive cultural community. The nation he was talking about was not an homogenized society but a political association of the two major cultural



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groups. Once that is clear, some of us, including me, would applaud this ideal of ending the estrangement of French and English Canadians and of consolidating their political association.

But what kind of association did Laurier envisage? In constitutional terms he was a classical federalist, defending the sovereignty of both the federal and the provincial governments within their separate spheres. For example, he was opposed to the power of the federal government to disallow provincial legislation which dealt with issues that fell within the provincial sphere. That did not mean that Laurier thought that the sphere allocated to the federal government should be reduced; he believed that the Fathers of Confederation had wisely avoided the American pattern and had given the residual powers to the central government. But this is a complex issue. What would Laurier have said about the reliance of the federal government on its "spending power" to encroach on the provincial sphere? And how would he have balanced provincial and minority rights? A thesis could be written on this topic — and has been.[2]

Before your eyes glaze over, let me assure you that I don't intend to go any further into Laurier's views on the constitution. They may well have been appropriate for an age when governments played a very

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limited economic role but, to me, they have very little relevance to the modern industrial world. (And they could only become relevant if the neo-conservatives really do succeed in turning the clock back by taking the government out of business.)

Let me focus on a more specific question. When Laurier talked about his own cultural community, about French Canada, what did he see as necessary for its survival?



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He thought of English — the language of Shakespeare as he regularly called it — as the dominant language in Canada, and he assumed it would regularly be the language of the workplace, even in Quebec.

Provincial sovereignty was part of it. If Quebec was sovereign within its sphere the Quebec government could do much to ensure the cultural survival of the majority of its citizens. By that Laurier did not mean survival within a ghetto. "For me," he wrote in 1896, "the safety of the French race lies not in isolation but in competition. Give our children the best possible education, put them on an equal basis with those of the other race, and give them the legitimate pride they will have in such a competition. There is safety. There is autonomy."[3] Doesn't that have a nice ring to it? If Laurier had thrown in a reference to a level playing field he would have sounded like one of today's politicians.

But what did he mean by an "equal basis"? It turns out that he was less contemporary than he sounds. He thought of English — the language of Shakespeare as he regularly called it — as the dominant language in Canada, and he assumed it would regularly be the language of the workplace, even in Quebec. In that context an "equal basis" meant French Canadians competing in English. As for French Canadian minorities outside of Quebec, he favored some instruction in French but he wanted an educational system which would give them a sound knowledge of English. For Laurier "equal basis" meant bilingualism for the minority.

Indeed, what is striking to Canadians today is how little concern Laurier showed for the protection of the French language. For him cultural survival seemed more closely linked to religion. In the schools controversies in Manitoba, in Saskatchewan and Alberta, and in Ontario, Laurier could apparently accept the notion of French-Catholic children attending predominantly English-language schools but he was appalled by the possibility that they might be sent to Protestant or even non-Catholic schools. And although we may find it difficult to believe, it is just possible that Laurier was right; in his day religion may have been more central to cultural identity than language. We are a long way from 1896.

What then can we learn today from Wilfrid Laurier's career? Canadian society — or the Canadian societies — of 1896 are so remote from our contemporary world that the measures and the policies which seemed appropriate then have, I think, little relevance for us. But in a broader perspective there are surely some lessons to be learned. The past is different but the past is also prologue.

Laurier, for example, assumed that there were two peoples in Canada and that Canada would work as a political nation only if the two peoples could collaborate for their common good. Today Canada looks more complicated, and we would have to include the First Nations and other cultural groups, but Laurier's emphasis on French-English collaboration is surely not out-dated. And Laurier's perspective on this collaboration still, I think, deserves attention. The minority, he believed, had to adapt; the majority, he believed, had to be generous. This, as he knew, would never be easy for either group but, as a liberal, he believed it was possible. He believed that individuals and peoples could learn to live together. He could be frustrated by the insensitivity on both sides and by emotional outbursts and resentments which made collaboration difficult, but as a liberal he believed that men of goodwill could appreciate other points of view and could make the system work. He also believed that most people were people of goodwill even if they disagreed with him.

For example, one of the most poignant incidents in Laurier's long political life was the conscription crisis of 1917. Laurier, like all of the leading federal politicians, had been opposed to conscription in 1914. Laurier never changed his mind; this form of coercion seemed to him illiberal and, more pragmatically, it did not seem necessary to win the war. By 1917, however, events at home and abroad had convinced many English Canadians to change their

minds. Laurier believed, with some justification, that the advocates of conscription saw it as a way of forcing the laggard French Canadians to fight. When Borden introduced the conscription bill in 1917 Laurier's influence and his personal prestige were enough to persuade the majority in the Liberal caucus to oppose the measure. But to many English-Canadian Liberals the justification for conscription outweighed their loyalty to Laurier and the Liberal party and they supported the bill.

To Laurier conscription meant the tyranny of the majority and the destruction of his ideal of national unity. After thirty years as party leader he might well have felt that these Liberals had deserted him and even betrayed him. Instead he understood that these dissident Liberals were also men of principle. In reply to a loyal English Canadian who had denounced these traitors, he could even defend their behavior:

Yesterday it was Pardee and today it will be Graham! (Pardee and Graham were prominent English Canadian Liberals from Ontario who had been with Laurier in office and in opposition but who were now speaking in support of the conscription bill.) Graham and Pardee as dear to me as my own brothers! Do not, however, think hard of them for I do not. They have behaved all through most honourably, and there is not and there will not be any loss of friendship between us. The pain is no less acute on their side than on mine, and I know only too well the difficulties that faced them.[4]

This letter is a reminder that politicians are persons and that personal relations can be of crucial importance. Pardee, Graham and other English-Canadian Liberals broke with the party in 1917 but when the war was over Laurier persuaded his French-Canadian followers and those English Canadians who had remained loyal to the party to allow these former Liberals to rejoin. And so it was that by 1921 the Liberal party was once more a national party, with significant support in both English and French Canada — which in turn helped to make it the governing party for most of the next sixty years.

But why was it important to Laurier to consolidate Confederation, to bring English and French Canadians together within the Liberal party? Again I should remind you that we are talking about another age. In 1896 Canada was a British Dominion. The idea of a separate and independent Quebec was confined to political cranks and heretics. Since Confederation existed, pragmatic politicians like Laurier (and Macdonald before him) tried to make it work. And that meant including French as well as English Canadians in politics.

There was, however, more to it than mere pragmatism. Laurier surely believed that the collaboration of the two cultural groups, if not a moral imperative, was at least a moral good. Men of goodwill should be able to work together in the pursuit of the common good. And if they could not agree, they should — in a favored phrase of Laurier's — "agree to disagree".

It is true that today there is a choice which did not exist in Laurier's day — Quebec could become a separate and independent country. But there are some constants. It was not easy in 1896 and it is still not easy being a member of a minority and having to accept the half-loaf of compromise. And in English Canada it can be frustrating being a member of the majority but having to make concessions to a minority group. Laurier certainly knew this a century ago but he also believed that the political association of the two cultural groups was enriching for both. There were economic advantages, but to Laurier it was more than that. A country of two cultures and two languages brought the awareness of diversity and the challenge and the opportunity to be less insular, less parochial. It was an ideal which in Laurier's day was not fully shared by the nationalists in Quebec or the imperialists in English Canada. Today, after a century of change, the context is different, but Laurier's approach is still one of the options. If there are enough men and women of goodwill in both French and English Canada, committed to peaceful accommodation, it is possible to believe, as Laurier did one hundred years ago, that the federal union can survive and that its survival will be a positive achievement. To that extent, Laurier's vision of Canada still seems to me to be relevant even today. ■

1 Laurier Papers, Laurier to W. Gregory, 11 Nov. 1904
2 Jane E. Harrison, Wilfrid Laurier's Views on Canadian Federalism, M. A. thesis, Carleton University, 1985
3 Laurier Papers, Laurier to C. Angers, 9 Dec. 1896 tsltn
4 Laurier Papers, Laurier to A. Aylesworth, 22 June 1917

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