

SPEECH: SIR JOHN A. Macdonald – Canada Day

DATE: JULY 1, 2015

LOCATION: PICTON

PRESENTED BY: TREASURER MINOR

[FINAL AS DELIVERED]



The Law Society of
Upper Canada | Barreau
du Haut-Canada

To our distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen: Thank you for including the Law Society of Upper Canada in today's unveiling and dedication of Ruth Abernathy's stunning tribute to Sir John A. Macdonald, entitled "Holding Court."

I am very pleased to be here in Mississauga traditional territory and in these lands shared with the Mohawks of Tyendinega.

Prince Edward County is a fitting place to acknowledge the beginnings of the Macdonald's legal career. A career that brought him into frequent contact and engagement with our organization over his entire adult life.

The Law Society of Upper Canada was incorporated in 1797 to regulate the province's legal profession in the public interest. We set the standards for

entry to the profession, and enforce the rules of professional conduct. We are still actively engaged in those functions, and our membership has grown from 15 lawyers in 1797 to more than 48,000 lawyers and 6,000 paralegals today.

John A. Macdonald came to the attention of the Law Society early.

In 1830 he was one of three young men admitted as students-at-law, following their successful completion of examinations. John was 15.

He learned quickly. “Holding Court” depicts the 19-year-old Macdonald arguing his first court case before a jury here in Picton. A case he won, despite the fact he was still a student at law.

In 1835, the Law Society granted him a licence to practice as an attorney and a solicitor, and then a year later Macdonald passed the barrister’s examination and was called to the bar as a barrister of law. He was just 21.

It was the beginning of his long and successful legal practice.

It is notable that he found ways to give back to the legal profession, despite the many other demands on his time. He gave significantly of his time to stand as an elected bencher, or governing director, of the Law Society of Upper Canada for 22 years.

In addition, Macdonald understood from his own experience the huge value of a mentor to guide the young student-at-law. So as his legal practice grew, he took on young students himself. Two of those early students were Oliver Mowat and Alexander Campbell. Their careers flourished. Both subsequently joined Macdonald as Fathers of Confederation. Alexander Campbell became a federal cabinet minister and Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. Oliver Mowat became premier of Ontario.

While not all views of Sir John A. Macdonald would be today regarded as socially progressive, he deserves recognition for his support of women. He proposed extending the vote to women in the 1880's – a time when no

country had female suffrage. Although Macdonald was never able to bring the motion to a vote in Parliament, as biographer Richard Gwyn notes, Macdonald became “the first national leader in the world to attempt to grant women the vote.”

Even after his death, Macdonald’s commitment to equality for women continued to manifest itself. Not only were women not allowed to vote, they were also barred from becoming lawyers. When Clara Brett Martin challenged the Law Society in 1891 by asking to be admitted, she was refused. In 1892 the government amended the Law Society’s legislation to admit women. Our Law Society became the first common law jurisdiction in the world to admit women. And the government that passed that legislation was led by Premier Oliver Mowat, the former student-at-law mentored by Sir John A. Macdonald.

Let me finish by telling you that women now occupy a fully equitable place in the legal profession. Since the year 2000, more than half of the new lawyers called to the bar in Ontario each year have been women. I am

convinced that Sir John A. Macdonald would not be surprised, and that he would fully approve.

Thank you.