

Wilfrid Laurier's Speech to the House of Commons June 8, 1891

Sir John A. Macdonald died on June 6, 1891 at the age of seventy-six as Prime Minister of the Dominion of Canada. Two days after his death, the Speaker rose in the House of Commons to address the members and ask that they pay tribute to him and exhibit the importance of his passing.

Below is the complete transcript of the proceedings on that day June 8, 1891. Wilfrid Laurier, the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, was one of three speakers who spoke about Macdonald that day. His speech is one of the most remarkable in Canadian history. Here is the context of the speech.

Hector Langevin, a minister in the Liberal-Conservative government led by Macdonald, spoke first from a prepared speech. He was grief stricken at the loss but managed to deliver it before succumbing to his emotions. Then Wilfrid Laurier arose and spoke for a nation -- not to gloss over Macdonald's shortcomings, but to pay tribute to his unequalled achievements and remarkable qualities as a leader. Next came the notorious Nicholas Flood Davin who gave a banal and self-serving speech. The contrast between the first two speeches and the last provides some insight into the speaking styles of the nineteenth century.

Sir John A. Macdonald served in public office continuously for forty-seven years, first as an alderman representing Kingston, and then continuously as a member of the legislative assembly of Canada from 1844 until his death in 1891. Before Confederation in 1867, he served as the Joint Premier of the Province of Canada and from 1856 to 1862; and then as Co-leader of the Great Coalition from 1864 to 1867. At Confederation, on July 1, 1867, he became Canada's first prime minister and served two terms for a total of nineteen years until his death while still in office as prime minister. He also served during his entire career in politics (often in a dual role) as Receiver General; Superintendent General of Indian Affairs; Attorney General; Minister of Militia Affairs, Railways and Canals, Interior and Justice.

He was perhaps best known as the principal architect of the constitution of 1867 and one of the founding Fathers of Confederation in 1867. He was prime minister during the creation of the provinces of Manitoba, British Columbia, and Prince Edward Island; the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway; the establishment of the North West Mounted Police; the formation of the first national park at Banff, Alberta; and the construction of railways and canals across the new Dominion of Canada.

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Monday, 8th June, 1891.

The Speaker took the Chair at three o'clock.

Prayers.

On the death of Sir John A. Macdonald

Speaker of the House of Commons:

I desire to inform the House that, in view of the fact that the right honourable Leader of this House died so late on Saturday night, it was impossible for me to communicate with honourable Members earlier than the present, I thought it was only a fitting tribute to one who had occupied so prominent a position both in Parliament and in the councils of the country for so long a time, that we should exhibit some signs of mourning in this House to-day, and I took the responsibility of ordering that the symbols of mourning which are shown here to-day should be put up this morning. I venture to express the hope that hon. Members on both sides, irrespective altogether of politics, will sustain me in the action I have taken.

Honourable Members.

Hear, hear.

Sir Hector Langevin (Minister of Public Works):

Mr. Speaker, having to announce to the House the sad event that has been known for two days now, I was afraid I could not trust to my memory, and I, therefore, thought it desirable to place in writing what I wished to say.

Accordingly, I will now read the observations I desire to offer. Mr. Speaker, as the oldest Privy Councillor it falls to my lot to announce to the House that our dear old chief, the First Minister of Canada, is no more.

After a painful illness of two weeks, death put an end to his early career on Saturday evening last. To tell you, Mr. Speaker, my feelings under the circumstances is more than I can do. I feel that by the death of Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada has lost its greatest statesman, a great patriot, a man of whom any country in the world would be justly proud.

Her Gracious Majesty the Queen never had a more devoted and loyal subject than the grand old man, whose loss we all deplore and regret from the bottom of our hearts. For nearly fifty years he has directed the public affairs of this country. He was among the Fathers of Confederation the most prominent and distinguished. He put his whole soul into that great undertaking, knowing full well that the confederation of all the British North American Provinces would give to our people a country and institutions to be glorious of, and to the Empire not only a right arm, but a great and safe highway to her Indian and other possessions.

He told me more than once how grateful he was to the people of Canada to have allowed him to have consolidated that great work. The fact is, his love for Canada was equal to that he had for his own mother country.

Mr. Speaker, when the historians of Canada write the history of the last fifty years, they will have to write the life of Sir John A. Macdonald, and, in writing his life, they may not agree with all his public acts, but they cannot fail to say that he was a great man, a most distinguished statesman, and that his whole life was spent in the service of his country, dying in the midst of his official duty, not having had a day's rest before he passed to a better world.

I need not express, Mr. Speaker, my own personal feelings. Having spent half of life with him as his follower and as his friend, his departure is the same as if I lost half of my existence.

I remember how devoted he was, not only to the old Province of Canada, but how chivalrous he showed himself to the Province of Quebec, and specially to my French Canadian countrymen.

He had only a word to say, and instead of being at the head of a small band of seventeen Upper Canada members, he would have had all the representatives of his province behind him. But, as he told me several times, he preferred to be just to his French compatriots and allies, and the result was that when Confederation came, the Province of Quebec had confidence in him, and on his death-bed our great chief could see that his just policy has secured peace and happiness to all.

Mr. Speaker, I would have wished to continue to speak of our dear departed friend, and spoken to you about his goodness of heart, the witness of which I have been so often, but I feel that I must stop; my heart is full of tears. I cannot proceed further. I move:

That, in the opinion of this House, the mortal remains of the Right Hon. Sir John A. Macdonald, G.C.B. should be publicly interred, and

that this House will concur in giving to the ceremony a fitting degree of solemnity and importance.

Wilfrid Laurier (Leader of the Opposition: Liberal Party of Canada):

“Mr. Speaker, I fully realize the emotion which chokes the hon. gentleman. His silence, under the circumstances, is far more eloquent than any human language can be. I fully appreciate the intensity of the grief which fills the souls of all those who were the friends and followers of Sir John Macdonald, at the loss of the great leader whose whole life has been so closely identified with their party; a party upon which he has thrown such brilliancy and lustre.

We on this side of the House who were his opponents, who did not believe in his policy, nor in his methods of government; we take our full share of their grief—for the loss which they deplore to-day is far and away beyond and above the ordinary compass of party range. It is in every respect a great national loss, for he who is no more was, in many respects, Canada’s most illustrious son, and in every sense Canada’s foremost citizen and statesman.

At the period of life to which Sir John Macdonald had arrived, death, whenever it comes, cannot be said to come unexpected. Some few months ago, during the turmoil of the late election, when the country was made aware that on a certain day the physical strength of the veteran Premier had not been equal to his courage, and that his intense labour for the time being had prostrated his singularly wiry frame, everybody, with the exception, perhaps the angel of death had touched him with his wing.

When a few days ago in the heat of an angry discussion the news spread in this House, that of a sudden his condition had become alarming, the surging waves of angry discussion were at once hushed, and every one, friend and foe, realized that this time for a certainty the angel of death had appeared and had crossed the threshold of his home. Thus we were not taken by surprise, and although we were prepared for the sad event, yet it is almost impossible to convince the unwilling mind, that it is true, that Sir John Macdonald is no more, that the chair which we now see vacant shall remain forever vacant; that the face so familiar to this Parliament for the last forty years shall be seen no more, and that the voice so well known shall be heard no more, whether in solemn debate or in pleasant and mirthful tones. In fact, the place of Sir John Macdonald in this country was so large and so absorbing, that it is almost impossible to conceive that the political life of this country, the fate of this country, can continue without him. His loss overwhelms us. For my part, I say with all truth, his loss overwhelms me, and it also overwhelms this Parliament, as if indeed one of the institutions of the land had given way.

Sir John Macdonald now belongs to the ages, and it can be said with certainty, that the career which has just been closed is one of the most remarkable careers of this century. It would be premature at this time to attempt to fix or anticipate what will be the final judgment of history upon him; but there were in his career and in his life, features so prominent and so conspicuous that already they shine with a glow which time cannot alter, which even now appear before the eye such as they will appear to the end in history.

I think it can be asserted that for the supreme art of governing men, Sir John Macdonald was gifted as few men in any land or in any age were gifted; gifted with the most high of all qualities, qualities which would have made him famous wherever exercised and which would have shone all the more conspicuously the larger the theatre. The fact that he could congregate together elements the most heterogeneous and blend them into one compact party, and to the end of his life keep them steadily under his hand, is perhaps altogether unprecedented. The fact that during all those years he retained unimpaired not only the confidence, but the devotion—the ardent devotion and affection of his party, is evidence that beside those higher qualities of statesmanship to which we were the daily witness, he was also endowed with those inner, subtile, undefinable graces of soul which win and keep the hearts of men.

As to his statesmanship, it is written in the history of Canada. It may be said without any exaggeration whatever that the life of Sir John Macdonald, from the date he entered Parliament, is the history of Canada, for he was connected and associated with all the events, all the facts which brought Canada from the position Canada then occupied—the position of two small provinces, having nothing in common but a common allegiance, united by a bond of paper, and united by nothing else—to the present state of development which Canada has reached.

Although my political views compel me to say that, in my judgment, his actions were not always the best that could have been taken in the interest of Canada, although my conscience compels me to say that of late he has imputed to his opponents motives as to which I must say in my heart he has misconceived, yet I am only too glad here to sink these differences, and to remember only the great services he has performed for our country—to remember that his actions always displaced great originality of views, unbounded fertility of resources, a high level of intellectual conceptions, and, above all, a far-reaching vision beyond the event of the day, and still higher, permeating the whole, a broad patriotism--a devotion to Canada's welfare, [to] Canada's advancement, and [to] Canada's glory.

The life of a statesman is always an arduous one, and very often it is an ungrateful one. More often than otherwise his actions do not mature until he

is in his grave. Not so, however, in the case of Sir John Macdonald. His career has been a singularly fortunate one. His reverses were few and of short duration.

He was fond of power, and, in my judgment, if I may say so, that may be the turning point of the judgment of history. He was fond of power, and he never made any secret of it. Many times we have heard him avow it on the floor of this Parliament, and his ambition in this respect was gratified as, perhaps, no other man's ambition ever was. In my judgment, even the career of William Pitt can hardly compare with that of Sir John Macdonald in this respect: for although William Pitt, moving in a higher sphere, had to deal with problems greater than our problems, yet I doubt if in the intricate management of a party William Pitt had to contend with difficulties equal to those that Sir John Macdonald had to contend with.

In his death, too, he seems to have singularly happy. Twenty years ago I was told by one who at that time was a close personal and political friend of Sir John Macdonald, that in the intimacy of his domestic circle he was fond of repeating that his end would be as the end of Lord Chatham—that he would be carried away from the floor of Parliament to die. How true that vision into the future was we now know, for we saw him to the last, with enfeebled health and declining strength, struggling on the floor of Parliament until the hand of fate pinned him to his bed to die. And thus to die with his armour on was probably his ambition.

Sir, death is the law—the supreme law. Although we see it every day in every form, although session after session we have seen it in this Parliament striking right and left without any discrimination as to age or station, yet the ever-recurring spectacle does not in any way remove the bitterness of the sting. Death always carries with it an incredible sense of pain; but the one thing sad in death is that which is involved in the word separation—separation from all we love in life. This is what makes death so poignant when it strikes a man of intellect in middle age.

But when death is the natural termination of a full life, in which he who disappears has given the full measure of his capacity, has performed everything required from him, and more, the sadness of death is not for him who goes, but for those who loved him and remain. In this sense I am sure the Canadian people will extend unbounded sympathy to the friends of Sir John Macdonald—to his sorrowing children, and, above all, to the brave and noble woman, his companion in life and his chief helpmate.

Thus, Mr. Speaker, one after another we see those who have been instrumental in bringing Canada to its present stage of development, removed from amongst us.

To-day, we deplore the loss of him who, we all unite in saying, was the foremost Canadian of his time and who filled the largest place in Canadian history. Only last week, was buried in the city of Montreal, another son of Canada, one who at one time had been a tower of strength to the Liberal party, one who will ever be remembered as one of the noblest, purest, and greatest characters that Canada has ever produced, Sir Antoine Aime Dorion. Sir Antoine Aime Dorion had not been in favour of Confederation. Not that he was opposed to the principle; but he believed that the Union of these provinces, at that day, was premature. When, however, Confederation had become a fact, he gave the best of his mind and heart to make it a success.

It may indeed happen, Sir, that when the Canadian people see the ranks thus gradually reduced and thinned of those upon whom they have been in the habit of relying for guidance, that a felling of apprehension will creep into the heart lest, perhaps, the institutions of Canada may be imperilled.

Before the grave of him who, above all, was the father of Confederation, let not grief be barren grief; but let grief be coupled with the resolution, the determination that the work in which Liberals and Conservatives, in which Brown and Macdonald united, shall not perish, but that though United Canada may be deprived of the services of her greatest men, still Canada shall and will live.

I agree to the motion.

Nicholas Flood Davin MP:

I think, Sir, it would be unbecoming, if I may venture to say so, that I should remain silent on this occasion, and that no expression should be given of the way the North-West feels at this supreme hour.

For myself it would be hard not to express a sense of grief at such time as this, because it so happens that for some years I was brought closely into contact with him whom we mourn at this time, and I was able to see into those features of his character which were probably of as much value to the world and as much the secret of his strength as the great abilities which struck the superficial observer.

Mr. Speaker, the man whom we mourn here to-day was emphatically a great man. When I came to Canada first, his friends, misdoubting that they might have formed a provincial conception of Sir John Macdonald, used to come to me and ask how he would compare with the great men in England.

I said he could stand up to the greatest of them, and when I knew him intimately and was brought closely in contact with him, I became more and

more convinced that, far from doubting whether he could stand up to the greatest of them, few of them had the varied qualities, the extraordinarily varied and complex qualities, that are necessary to make a political leader such as was Sir John Macdonald.

Ranging over the field of history, and reading the names of the men who have reached those heights which it takes a lifetime to climb, it is hardly possible to find one who has possessed the diverse qualities of the great man who the other day was leading in this House. You may find great power of intellect, great powers of statesmanship, far-reaching views, great powers of oratory, but where will you find, conjoined with all these, that incomparable, that genial humour, that politeness which never fails, that delicate consideration for the feelings of others, that exquisite urbanity, that distinguished Sir John Macdonald—that ever and anon played, the light and shade of a rich and abounding nature—

“Le bon sens ironique e la grace qui rit.”

Sir, the measure of his great abilities are the difficulties that he overcame. I remember, when I first visited these buildings, some twenty years ago, a gentleman then occupying one of the highest positions in the Government, said, to my surprise, when I admired the buildings: “But what an expense, what a waste of money.” Now we find they are hardly equal to their needs; and the fact is, these very buildings emphasize the imperial cast of mind of the great man who is gone.

I remember the first time I had a conversation with him, some seventeen or eighteen years ago, he drew a sketch of the British possessions confederated together, and then, in his own emphatic way, he said, “That is the time when I should like to lead.”

In truth he was not only a Canadian, but an Imperial statesman, and the brightest gem in the British Crown polished and set by his hand. Thrice in his great career he accomplished events such as give tone, and colour, and form to history, and affect the relative position of nations. I have read somewhere of a child who planted a tree, which ultimately shaded his old age, and with the dews of evening watered his grave.

Sir John Macdonald is in that position, because he found Canada a petty province and he leaves it something like an empire. At this moment a nation more important than the nation over which Elizabeth ruled, weeps the loss of a statesman who built it up. As I have said, it does seem to me that the qualities most startling in that remarkable man were the kindness of heart and that alchemistical power which transmuted all that came near him into gold—which made of every foe that came within its influence either a friend or a devotee. And when we think of his loss, we mourn, not merely the

statesman who directed the affairs of the country, but the friend; and not only do we that knew him thus mourn, but even those not personally acquainted with him, for he had that power, which only belongs to the highest genius, of making men who never saw him feel the extraordinary charm of his personality.

We may build statues to him in these grounds, monuments will arise to him in Kingston, but the real, the grandest monument to Sir John Macdonald will be the love that Canada feels it her privilege to cherish for so great a personality. But even should we never erect a statue to his memory, humanity would keep his memory green, for he belonged to that rare group of men who enchain the memory of mankind. Sir, language was addressed to a great countryman of his, a great Scotchman—not a statesman, but belonging to another order of activity—which might well be applied to the great statesman we mourn:

Dead heroes in marble from memory fade
But warm hearts shall weep where thine ashes are laid,
And earth's proudest priesthoods like phantoms flit by,
But thou'rt of the priesthood that never can die.

Motion agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT