

Laurier's speech to the House of Commons on the death of
Sir John A. Macdonald, June 8, 1891.

R.H. Thomson at the Unveiling and Dedication Ceremony
of the Ruth Abernethy Portrait of John A. Macdonald
Picton, July 1, 2015

The Fairmont Royal York Hotel Dinner at the 200th
Anniversary of the Birth of Sir John A. Macdonald
Toronto, January 10, 2015

Mr. Speaker. The silence which chokes the honourable gentleman is more eloquent than any human language could be. I fully appreciate also 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.

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.

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 unexpectedly. 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, of his buoyant self, was painfully anxious lest perhaps the angel of death had touched him with his wing. When, a few days ago, in the heat of an angry discussion in this Parliament, 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 everyone, 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.

I think it can be asserted that in the supreme art of governing men, Sir John Macdonald was gifted as few men in any land or in any age were gifted, qualities which would have made him famous wherever exercised. That he could congregate together 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 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, subtle, indefinable 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.

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 displayed great originality of views, unbounded fertility of resources, a high level of intellectual conceptions, and, above all, a broad patriotism—a devotion to Canada's welfare, to Canada's advancement, and to Canada's glory.

Edited by Roderick Benns, Richard Gwyn, David Warrick, R.H. Thomson, 2014

