

PROMINENT CANADIANS.—XIX.

SKETCHES of the following Prominent Canadians have already appeared in THE WEEK : Hon. Oliver Mowat, Dr. Daniel Wilson, Principal Grant, Sir John A. Macdonald, K.C.B., Louis Honoré Fréchette, LL.D., Sir J. William Dawson, Sir Alexander Campbell, K.C.M.G., Hon. William Stevens Fielding, Hon. Alexander Mackenzie, Sir William Leonard Tilley, C.B., K.C.M.G., Alexander McLachlan, Hon. J. A. Chapleau, Sir Richard Cartwright, K.C.M.G., Sanford Fleming, C.E., LL.D., C.M.G., Hon. H. G. Joly, Hon. P. J. O. Chauveau, Sir Wm. Buell Richards, and Hon. Wilfrid Laurier, M.P.

HONOURABLE HONORÉ MERCIER, Q.C., PREMIER OF QUEBEC.

NO ONE among our leaders of Provincial politics has come to the front of late years with more prominence, and few have surmounted more difficulties in achieving success, than the subject of this sketch, the Hon. Honoré Mercier, Minister of Agriculture and Premier of Quebec. And that well marked prominence, in our opinion, has been largely due, apart from ordinary circumstances, to the very bitterness that his political adversaries have displayed in attacking him personally, and in attempting to thwart his designs with all the means at the disposal of a strong party organization.

When the Hon. H. G. Joly resigned the leadership of her Majesty's loyal Opposition in the Quebec Parliament, during the Session of 1883, the Liberals formed a minority of fifteen out of a House composed of sixty-five members; and only one Liberal held a seat in the upper branch of the Legislature, with a membership of twenty-four Legislative Councillors.

It required more than usual courage and devotion to party principles to accept the heavy responsibilities of leadership under such unfavourable circumstances, and Mr. Mercier, who was elected to the position, must have felt in accepting the honour conferred upon him at that time by his colleagues, that he was leading a forlorn hope in the daily struggle which he had to wage against a powerful Provincial Government, strongly supported by all the electoral influences of the Federal authorities at Ottawa.

Quebec was then looked upon as the stronghold of Conservatism, and it was only at short spasmodic intervals that the Liberals had ever had occasion to govern in that Province. At the present day, under the guidance of Mr. Mercier as Premier and Minister of Agriculture, the Liberals hold the reins of power in Quebec with a majority of sixteen in the Legislative Assembly and with a controlling influence in the Legislative Council.

The change wrought in such a short time (1883-88) has been sufficiently remarkable, even in Provincial politics, to cause the public to inquire by whose capable and energetic hand the movement was directed that achieved such success for the Liberal cause.

The Hon. Honoré Mercier was born at Iberville, in 1840, and belongs to a family of sturdy farmers who settled in Canada over two centuries ago. He was educated at the Jesuits' College, in Montreal, where he graduated with honours. He then commenced to read law in St. Hyacinthe, in the office of Messrs. Laframboise and Papineau, both afterwards called to the Superior Court Bench. Mr. Mercier was admitted to practice in 1865, but already, as a student, he had for two or three years taken an active part in the political struggles of the day, and at the age of twenty-two had become managing editor of *Le Courrier de St. Hyacinthe*. Although at first a great admirer and follower of Sir G. E. Cartier, he parted company with him on the question of Confederation, and ever since 1867, Mr. Mercier has been an enthusiastic exponent of the Liberal doctrines as they are understood and practised in the Dominion of Canada.

At the general elections of 1872 Mr. Mercier was elected to the Federal House of Commons for the county of Rouville, and took his seat on the Opposition benches, under the leadership of the Hon. Alexander Mackenzie. He took an active part in the memorable debates of those days on the question of the Pacific Scandal. At the general elections of 1874 he retired from the contest in Rouville to make way for one of his political friends, the late Mr. Cheval, M.P.

Again a candidate in 1878 for Parliamentary honours, he was this time defeated by Judge Tellier by a majority of six, in the county of St. Hyacinthe, but was the next year, 1879, elected to the Provincial Legislature for the same county, and appointed Solicitor-General in the Joly administration. Mr. Mercier entered the Cabinet on the eve of its downfall, but sat long enough on the Treasury Benches of Quebec to show himself a well informed, energetic, and eloquent debater. It is needless to recall here the facts connected with the defeat of the Liberal Cabinet through the treason of five members of the Legislature, who had been elected by Liberal constituencies to support Mr. Joly, but who voted against him to accept Cabinet and other positions from Mr. Chapleau, and who became supporters of the new Conservative Administration.

The Liberals became somewhat discouraged at this unexpected turn of affairs; and Mr. Mercier, for a moment thought of abandoning politics to devote himself exclusively to the practice of his profession. But his friends prevailed upon him to retain his seat in Parliament, and when the Honourable Mr. Joly, in 1883, resigned the leadership he was unanimously elected to replace him, by his Liberal colleagues.

In this new rôle Mr. Mercier was afforded an opportunity of displaying to full advantage those remarkable qualities which have placed him in so short a space of time in the front rank of Canadian statesmen. In the three succeeding years he showed himself, through good and ill report, to be a leader imbued with the courage of his convictions, always standing to his guns, and never flinching under the most raking fire of his adversaries. With only a corporal's guard of followers, he maintained a struggle against a Government, which, owing to its long lease of power, the skilful manner in which it had manipulated the constituencies, and the inherent

prejudice that appeared to exist against anything bearing the name of Liberal, seemed well-nigh invincible. Mr. Mercier's fight was a heroic one. With a following reduced to fifteen members, he had to check three successive Governments. His adversaries soon began to feel the force of his attack, and one after the other the Hon. J. A. Chapleau and Hon. J. A. Mousseau retired discomfited from the field, leaving in other hands the direction of the party. The Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition in the Local Legislature, by his scathing denunciation of the mismanagement and recklessness of his opponents, succeeded in demoralizing the Conservative ranks, and gained for himself great popularity in the country. That courage which is one of the most prominent traits in Mr. Mercier's character was at this period of his career brought out in strong relief. Poor in this world's goods—having a family to support—a large and complicated law practice to attend to—with a mere handful of followers and the chances a thousand to one against him—unmercifully maligned, misrepresented, and traduced by his opponents he stood by his post while his enemies derided him, until devotion won its reward and success crowned his brilliant efforts. Looking over the whole field of Canadian politics, few instances can be found of a party leader who has attained such success in the face of such seemingly insurmountable difficulties. To properly understand the situation, it must be remembered that in 1886 when Mr. Mercier entered upon the campaign that resulted in the defeat of his opponents, the Liberal party was without organization or discipline. The genius of its leader speedily asserted itself, and once more placing himself at the head of his followers, he commenced a combat with his opponents that ended only with their overthrow. It was virtually a struggle to the death.

The memorable events of the campaign of 1886, its *raison d'être*, the exciting incidents that attended it, and the absorbing interest with which it was watched throughout the Dominion, are too recent in the minds of all readers to require any elaboration in this article. Dealing as we are with Mr. Mercier in a personal aspect, and as a party leader, it is only necessary to point out a few of the salient features of this remarkable period in his career. There are those who pretend to find fault with the present Premier for his actions at this stage. But it must not be forgotten that at this time Quebec politics were in a peculiar position. There were those in both parties who were disgusted at the inaptitude and mismanagement shown by the Government of the day, and it was seen that something had to be done for the honour of the Province. Dissatisfaction was appearing in the Conservative ranks, and it was therefore not surprising that the eyes of many Conservatives turned to Mr. Mercier as the only leader capable of inaugurating a new and more successful era in Provincial politics. Mr. Mercier was too great a tactician, as well as too patriotic a Canadian, to lose sight of the opportunity. He saw with the eye of a practised statesman that by uniting all sections on behalf of a good and honest Government, the result would be a comparatively easy task. This was the *raison d'être* of the new National Party, of which Mr. Mercier became the head and active spirit. The result of his foresight was speedily apparent. When the general elections of 1886 were brought on, Mr. Mercier devoted himself to the exposition of his new policy with herculean energy. With a few trusted followers he began an extended tour from one end of the Province to the other, addressing meetings in county after county, and appealing personally to the people for the endorsement of his programme. It was, in many respects, a remarkable incident. His opponents had money and the *prestige* that long years of government assures, the leader of the gallant little band of Oppositionists had only his untiring energy and the heroic devotion of a small band of enthusiastic supporters. But with all the disadvantages under which he laboured, he never faltered in his gallant struggle. Traversing the length and breadth of the Province he addressed no less than one hundred and sixty public meetings, crossing swords with the most redoubtable of opponents, and utterly worsting them in debate. His vigorous assaults soon commenced to have their effect. The people, accustomed to believe that there was nothing good outside of the Conservative party, began to ask themselves if a man who displayed such splendid courage, such determined energy, and such powerful talents as he had shown, was not fit for the highest position in the Province. Moreover his political programme was one that secured the support of the great body of the electors. There was the most urgent necessity for the speedy restoration of the Provincial finances to a sound basis, the readjustment of the representation, and the better protection of Provincial rights. Mr. Mercier was the only leader in Provincial politics who had the courage to come out squarely on these issues, and to his firm and decided stand in this respect, not a little of his future success was due. The results of the elections are known to every one familiar with Canadian politics. Going to the country with a following of fifteen members, out of a House of sixty-five, Mr. Mercier returned with a substantial majority in the Chamber.

The defeated Government did not take the result with the best possible grace, and it was not until after considerable and vexatious opposition that it yielded to the inevitable, and that Mr. Mercier was called upon by Lieut.-Gov. Masson to form a Cabinet. This he accomplished with great success, giving representation to the different elements in the party, and gathering around him several of the strongest figures in Provincial parliamentary life.

The subsequent events of Mr. Mercier's career are of too recent occurrence to require much attention at this time. After a brief adjournment of the Legislature he again appeared before the House as Leader of the Government with a clearly formulated policy, which he was prepared to defend all along the line. Its principal planks, as already indicated, were the restoration of the finances to a sound basis, the re-adjustment of representation, and the protection of Provincial rights. Several of these measures the Premier has successfully inaugurated, others are only await-