

THE ENGINEER IN CANADA

SPEECH DELIVERED LAST THURSDAY AT A LUNCHEON OF THE OTTAWA BRANCH, CANADIAN SOCIETY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS — CANADIAN ENGINEERS HAVE ESTABLISHED REPUTATION FOR HONOR AND ABILITY.

By SIR WILFRID LAURIER, P.C., G.C.M.G.,

Formerly Prime Minister of Canada.

I THANK you that it is to-day my privilege to sit with you at this hospitable board, and I hasten to offer to you, sir, and to the members of the Canadian Society of Civil Engineers, a sincere expression of my gratitude for the honor of the invitation with which you have favored me. I appreciate it all the more that I am here with none of the trammels and trappings of office! I come to you, as you are yourselves, a humble citizen of Canada, and the only bond of union which I know at this time between you and me is that whilst you have the pride of the profession which you embraced in your younger days, I, for my part, have the pride of the achievements of the engineers of Canada.

Sir, you have just told me that I am 75 years young which, I am bound to say, is a flattery which I cannot accept. I am 75 years old. That is the fact. I cannot help it and therefore why should I disguise it? I am 75 years old, but I have this to say: that I ought to be thankful to Providence that my eye is still clear and, if you will permit me to refer to a subject to which I shall not further allude, I think I have yet a few kicks in my body!

In the course of a long career which has been devoted to the public service as I have understood it, it was my proud fortune to come in contact, and sometimes in very close contact, with some of the engineers of the past, all able men, all men of the greatest eminence, all men held in the highest respect, not only within the sphere of their own immediate calling but within the broader circle of Canadian citizenship. I refer to the dead alone; I refer to such men as Frank Shanly, Thomas C. Keefer, John Page and Toussaint Trudeau; and if I were privileged to speak of the living, I could not help mentioning the name of my very old and dear friend, Sir Collingwood Schreiber, whom I am so glad to see at this board to-day.

All these men were connected in their day with all the great works on the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes.—bridges, canals, wharves and other works which uplifted Canada from a position not very far removed from that of primitive savagery, to the proud position which it now occupies in the eyes of the civilized world. The labors of these men showed that even in those early days in our country, Canadian engineers were the peers of the engineers in any part of the world. They do not claim to be the superiors, but they do claim to be the equals, and it is with much reason that they make that claim. They do not fear rivalry from any quarter from which it may come. In our own day we have had evidence that when engineers are brought in from other lands the work is not done better but that, on the contrary, it is not done as well as if it had been undertaken by our own engineers.

May I recall a fact with which I am, unfortunately, but too well acquainted? When the Quebec Bridge Co. undertook to construct the bridge across the St. Lawrence, it was seen to be a work of such magnitude that many believed that the resources of engineering science in our own country would not be adequate, and the board of

management of the company entrusted the building of the bridge to an American firm. The plans of the bridge were designed by an American engineer, an engineer of great eminence, undoubtedly, an engineer of great renown, who had had a large career in bridge engineering and who was supposed to be the highest authority in that branch of engineering science. His plans were accepted—I will show you why by-and-by—and you know the result. The story is always present to our minds; at all events it is always present to mine. Before the first span of the bridge had been completed it dropped into the St. Lawrence under its own weight, conclusively showing that the plans were defective, a fact which was not disputed by even the engineer who was the author of those plans. For my part, as a Canadian, I may say in all sincerity, and I do not seek in any way to disguise it, the only consolation I have with regard to this accident is that the plan was not the work of a Canadian but of an American engineer.

But, sir, the poet has said that to err is human, to forgive divine. We forgave—that was the only thing to do—but we determined to try our luck anew and to try it under other auspices and circumstances. We determined to go on with the work at that time, but to transfer the enterprise from the hands of the company to the hands of the government of that day; that was in 1908. We determined this time to entrust the work to Canadian engineers and Canadian builders. Unfortunately, as you know, at the last moment an accident occurred; but the accident showed, and showed conclusively,—and this is a fact of which we all as Canadians must be proud,—that it was not due to any fault in the design of the bridge, because the bridge structure remained as solid as the rocks on the shore under the terrible strain which was put upon it by the sudden drop of the central span. We have the most conclusive evidence, and it is a fact which was not only evident to those who were present on that fatal day, but which has been proved by actual examination, that no fault is to be attributed to the engineers. The accident was due to a flaw in the metal. From all this I think there is to-day a lesson to be drawn, and that lesson is that it is folly to go abroad to seek what we can find at home. We can make a mistake once—that is pardonable—but it is unpardonable to make the same mistake a second time.

I do not belong to your profession, but I honor it not only because it is the profession of engineering but because the engineers are fellow-countrymen of my own and we are Canadians all. Canadian engineers do not pretend, do not claim, any superiority over the engineers of any other country; neither will they admit inferiority to the engineers of any other country. They claim that they are equal to the highest development of engineering science to this day; or, if they are too modest to claim it, I claim it for them. That is my view and I express it as I feel it, not only in your presence but I would be glad to do so wherever my voice can be heard in any part