

THE BORDEN CABINET—I. THE PRIME MINISTER

by H. F. Gadsby.



Rt. Hon. R. L. Borden.

WHEN Canada kicked Sir Charles Tupper downstairs with great heartiness in 1900 that stout old hero picked himself up, scraped the mud out of his hair and promptly handed over the leadership of the Conservative party to Robert Laird Borden. All the other possible leaders had too much past. For eleven years Leader Borden fought the clock waiting for Sir Wilfrid Laurier to die or quit. During that long time the Conservative party in the House had a chance to tire of their leader whom they had spoken of at the outset as a thorough gentleman and a great constitutional lawyer. In eleven years his reputation on both counts had started to fray at the ends. His own side said they would prefer less decorum and more action. They spoke privately of his frequent expository visits to the British North America Act as "stodgy" and began to yammer for constructive leadership—which was something Mr. Borden didn't have. Rufus Pope was one of those who wanted to start something. He was the big ballyhooper in a numerous movement to substitute a Head of Hair at Victoria, B. C. a Head of Hair at Ottawa yept Richard McBride, for another Head of Hair at Ottawa yept R. L. Borden. Since then Rufus has been choked with butter—he is now a Senator. The other

conspirators have also been killed with kindness, but that their heart's desire not more than three years ago was Borden's downfall they cannot deny. Meanwhile on March 29th 1909, Leader Borden solemnly opened his mouth and solemnly put his foot in it by delivering a speech in which he gave thirty-four reasons why Canada should have a navy of her own on the Laurier model. Incidentally he foreswore contribution and all such unpatriotic works. Three years later Premier Borden swallowed this speech, bones and all, turning himself inside out to do so. It was a great feat in contortion.

On September 25th, 1911, Leader Borden became premier through the defeat of Sir Wilfrid Laurier on the reciprocity issue. Sir Wilfrid, good sportsman that he is, scorned to play safe. No plebiscites for him. He considered that a bedrock Liberal policy, such as freer trade, was good enough for a general election. On Leader Borden's side were money and the old flag. On Sir Wilfrid's side were a good cause, argument and statistics. As George M. Cohen aptly remarks, the old flag has saved many a bum show—Borden won out. In Ontario Leader Borden joined hands with the food monopolists and yelled "more navy". He also said that Sir Wilfrid Laurier was not British enough. What couldn't be said on the platform about Sir Wilfrid Laurier's race and religion was whispered on the side lines. In Quebec Leader Borden lined up with the Nationalists. Henri Bourassa was an instrument ready to his hand. Also he hated the navy because it was the Laurier navy. To Henri, Borden said "Come, we will slay Laurier". To the Nationalists who believed in Bourassa and hated the navy on its own account he said "No more navy until you have voted on it". The Nationalists took him at his word. Thus did Robert Laird Borden, looking two ways for Sunday, chase the devil around the stump in dear old Quebec.

To Henri Bourassa fell the choosing of the Cabinet Ministers from Quebec. The two samples he wished on Premier Borden were Pelletier, whose policy is to change the name of the post office wherever he can't fire a Grit postmaster,

and Nantel whose conception of the British flag is something that looks like a colander so badly is it shot to pieces. These men ceased to be Nationalists as soon as they became office holders. Frederick De Bartzseh Monk, whose colors refused to run in the wash and who clamored loudly for the plebiscite which Premier Borden had promised was allowed to resign and not a drum was heard, not a funeral note as his corpse to the rampart they hurried.

After a stand-pat session in 1911-12, Premier Borden went to England accompanied by Pelletier and J. Douglas Hazen. While they were yet afar off the Centralizers saw them, went out to meet them, fell on their necks, kissed them, took them to the high places and showed them the all-red map of the world, soaped them, dined them, wined them. The Centralizers are great entertainers. They are mostly Tory lords and landed aristocrats who would fight Germany, stir up bloodshed in Ireland, and set the British Empire by the ears generally, so long as they can hold what they have by keeping democracy occupied elsewhere.

Sir Wilfrid Laurier had met them before, but had not been beguiled. To all their ventures he had said "I believe in the perpetuity of the British Empire and home rule for Canada". But Premier Borden was another story. He was quite carried off his feet. By the time dinner was over they were giving three cheers for Dreadnought Bob and Dreadnought Bob was giving three cheers for three Dreadnoughts and three cheers more for thirty-five million dollars. J. L. Garvin who furnishes what few ideas the English Tories have, said in print, in his artless Irish way that R. L. Borden was Canada's "stern, strong, silent son".

When Premier Borden came back to Canada he lived up to Garvin's benediction—he was stern, strong, silent. Often and often in the long running fight on the navy the Premier's stern was the only thing the Opposition could see. Also he was strong, in fact irresistible until he met an immovable body called the Senate. Silent! Well, I should say! Not only himself and his followers, but he wanted everybody else to be. The Closure Bill is the measure of his silence.