

While Pope and others had continuously been advocating this arrangement ever since the creation of the Department, there had at some stage been introduced a variant form and suggestion that the Department should be placed under the "President of the Privy Council" instead of specifically under the "Prime Minister". In the debate on the earlier External Affairs Department Bill on March 4, 1909, Mr. Foster had alluded to this suggestion, that all the external business should be dealt with "by a few experts in the office of the Privy Council over which the Prime Minister presided."

In reply, Sir Wilfrid Laurier had said:

The Prime Minister may not necessarily be the President of the Council. Sir Charles Tupper when he came into office, took the portfolio of Secretary of State. When Sir John Macdonald formed his government in 1878 he took the portfolio of the Interior in addition to his duties as Prime Minister. When the present government was formed in 1896 I came to the conclusion that the Prime Minister should be President of the Council. I am still of that opinion. Very shortly after I took office I discussed this point with Sir Charles Tupper and he thought I should have taken the portfolio of the Secretary of State. I differed with him; I thought the Prime Minister should be President of the Council. Whenever there is change of government my hon. friend on the other side of the House may not become President of the Council but he may become Secretary of State or take some other portfolio. It does not matter under which Minister the Department of External Affairs may be placed, it is sufficient that it should be under a responsible Minister.⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ House of Commons Debates, 1909, p. 2003.

N. B. The practice of combining the offices of Prime Minister and President of the Privy Council had its inception in 1883, on October 17th when for the first time the Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald was sworn in to the office of President of the Privy Council. Prime Minister Sir John Abbott continued this, but Prime Minister Sir John Thompson did not assume the extra office. Sir Mackenzie Bowell did so, but Sir Charles Tupper did not, preferring to add the office of Secretary of State to that of Prime Minister. Sir Wilfrid Laurier was President of the Privy Council, and so was Sir Robert Borden in his first Ministry. When he became Prime Minister of the Unionist Government, in 1917, he appointed Hon. Newton Rowell as President of the Privy Council, as Borden had the additional portfolio of External Affairs. Since Dec. 29, 1921 however the Prime Minister has also been President of the Privy Council, although there is no rule requiring him to hold that office.