

**Sir Wilfrid Leads the Band**



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It is said, with more poetry than truth, that the railroads made Canada one. They were indeed vital in the early days of Confederation. (The promise of rail links brought in British Columbia in 1871.) But the railroad ties that bound Canada were not enough.

Canada began with two solitudes — the French and the English — divided by religion, language, philosophy and alienating myths. The country has been held together for more than a century by judicious and determined men, who have kept a variety of diverse forces in working balance. In Canada, politics has often been described as the art of the impossible.

John A. Macdonald tactfully ignored his Ontario supporters' loud demands that he find and hang Louis Riel, the part French, part Indian leader of the Métis uprising of 1869. (Riel would hang in 1885 after another rebellion, and as a result the Conservative party would diminish in Quebec.)

The second master of unification, Sir Wilfrid Laurier of Quebec, prime minister from 1896 to 1911, made Quebec into a Liberal stronghold. In 1896 he convinced the Catholic voters of Quebec that they should solidify provincial control over education rather than demand that the government of Manitoba support a dual Catholic/Protestant school system. Laurier could balance conflicting interests as deftly as he balanced the morning egg in his egg cup because he had a profound understanding of Canada and of parliamentary government.

Canada is governed by Parliament — an elected House of Commons and an appointed, less powerful

Senate. The prime minister is the member of the House who is head of the party forming the government. Each member of his cabinet is a member of Parliament too. Within the covenant of Cabinet solidarity they can (and sometimes do) exercise considerable independence. The prime minister can take away their portfolios but not their seats.

Laurier was the master of his own House. Henri Julien, the brilliant draftsman who drew cartoons for the *Montreal Daily Star*, saw Laurier and his cabinet as one harmonious minstrel band, composed, as it were, of members from all provinces and both linguistic groups. (It was common North American practice in the late nineteenth century to picture politicians in black face as lackeys, reflecting a prevailing, if unconscious, racism.) Julien didn't hurt as much as Bengough, but he was a much better draftsman.

Laurier brought the Confederation into the twentieth century with its parts distinct but the whole intact. His juggling of interests was helped by an ever-expanding economy — exports poured out and immigrants poured in — but the old balance was tipping and he was not in tune with the farmers of the west. They helped bring back the Conservatives in 1911, and the Conservatives remained in power through the First World War, when they formed a coalition with English-speaking Liberals.



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