

## LAURIER, AYLESWORTH, AND THE DECLINE OF THE LIBERAL PARTY IN ONTARIO

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The Liberal party collapsed in Ontario in 1911. This was one of the most significant developments in Canadian political history for it resulted in the defeat of the Laurier government. Yet historians have failed to provide an adequate explanation. They have generally attributed the débâcle to reciprocity, although the proposal should have been popular in rural Ontario; or to charges of disloyalty to the British Empire, although Laurier and the Liberal party had survived a more blatant Anglophile and Francophobe campaign in 1900. For the most part they have overlooked the role which regional and provincial leaders play in the Canadian political system. Reciprocity might or might not have brought economic prosperity to Ontario and the Dominion. It might or might not have been destructive of a Canadian nationality. But in the face of growing skepticism about the nature of Laurier Liberalism and the social and political values of its chief spokesman in the province, the people of Ontario put the American temptation behind them. At a time when leadership was essential, the Liberal party in Ontario was found lacking.

Ontario had been a predominantly Conservative province in national politics since Confederation. By the beginning of the 1890's, however, it was turning toward the Liberal banner. Laurier played a leading role in this transfer of political allegiance. In 1887 he had hesitated to accept the party leadership because he believed that a French-Canadian Roman Catholic leader would be a handicap in the English-speaking provinces, particularly in Ontario. But after assuming the leadership, he persistently pursued an Ontario policy to minimize the disabilities of his racial and religious background. He adopted a platform of unrestricted reciprocity to gain political support in the province. During the Manitoba school controversy, he maintained a position consistent with the principles of provincial rights and non-denominational schools, the twin pillars of Ontario Liberalism for over two generations. And in response to imperialist pressures from the province, his government introduced the preferential tariff and