

Report of the Annual Meeting

Laurier and Imperialism

H. Blair Neatby

Volume 34, numéro 1, 1955

URI : id.erudit.org/iderudit/300372ar
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300372ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN 0317-0594 (imprimé)
1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Neatby, H. (1955). Laurier and Imperialism. *Report of the Annual Meeting*, 34(1), 24–32. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300372ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1955

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne. [<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>]



Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. www.erudit.org

LAURIER AND IMPERIALISM

H. BLAIR NEATBY
University of British Columbia

A DISCUSSION of any aspect of Sir Wilfrid Laurier's career must begin with the recognition that Laurier believed that the relationship between the English-Canadian and the French-Canadian societies was the central problem in Canadian politics. As he wrote to a friend in 1904: "My object is to consolidate Confederation, and to bring our people long estranged from each other, gradually to become a nation. This is the supreme issue. Everything else is subordinate to that idea."¹ It was inevitable that Laurier should focus his attention on the problem of racial harmony within Confederation. As a member of the minority group, and as a leader of a political party which depended upon political support from both racial groups, he was constantly conscious of the need to devise a political policy acceptable to both groups. Even before Laurier became Prime Minister, the Riel crisis and the Manitoba Schools Question had sharply divided Canadians. Thus, when in office, Laurier instinctively considered political problems in terms of avoiding friction between English- and French-Canadians. One such political problem, of direct concern to us, was the question of Canada's relation to the Empire. English-Canadians and French-Canadians differed in their attitude to the Empire, and Laurier had to bear in mind these different attitudes.

To English-Canadians, imperialism was an attitude or a sentiment. Imperialism in Canada had no connection with Marxist imperialism, the 'last stage of monopoly capitalism'. Monopoly capitalism was not unknown in Canada, but for it Canadians had invented the phrase 'National Policy'. Nor was Canadian imperialism closely associated with the mission of 'bearing the white man's burden'. Canadians were too concerned with establishing themselves in North America to become involved in carrying their civilization to others. In Canada, imperialism had a meaning of its own. Broadly speaking, it meant the consciousness of belonging to the British Empire; in practice it meant a devotion to England, the heart of the Empire.

This affection for England took various forms. The most articulate form of Canadian imperialism was based on the assumption of racial superiority; the belief that Anglo-Saxons were destined for world leadership. This vision of a militant Anglo-Saxondom appealed to some English-Canadians, to whom a united Anglo-Saxon Empire seemed preferable to the relative obscurity of an isolated colony. Thus in 1892 Sir George Parkin published a book entitled *Imperial Federation*, significantly subtitled 'The Problem of National Unity'.² Parkin argued that there was already an imperial unity based on the common racial origins of British subjects at home and in the colonies. It was natural for men like Parkin to look forward to a political union

¹ Public Archives of Canada, Laurier Papers, 92017, W.L. to W. Gregory, 11 Nov., 1904.

² Sir George Parkin, *Imperial Federation*, (London, 1892).

which would reflect this racial unity. Such extreme Canadian imperialists merit attention because they were a vocal group, and to many French-Canadians at least, seemed representative of all Canadian imperialists.

Racial imperialism was not typical of English-Canadians. More common was the imperialism of those bound to the old country by less clearly formulated sentiments. Many Canadians were British emigrants, or sons of British emigrants, who felt a natural affection for their Motherland. Others were nurtured on the traditions of the United Empire Loyalists and so developed a loyalty to Great Britain which was often firmly founded on family or social pride. Added to this was the appeal of patriotic English literature, and especially English poetry, at a time when such literature had no domestic Canadian rival. However intangible and undefined such sentiments may have been, they were ever-present factors to be reckoned with in Canadian politics, as both Macdonald and Laurier knew.

But there was yet another form of Canadian imperialism; another way in which Canadians were conscious of belonging to the Empire and of being indebted to England. And this form is especially relevant because Sir Wilfrid Laurier was such an imperialist. This was the imperialism based on a respect for the principles, and especially the political principles, which Great Britain seemed to represent. To such imperialists, pride in the Empire was based on the belief that the British Empire was the bulwark of liberty and justice in the world. This might be described as intellectual imperialism rather than racial or emotional imperialism. Being a reasoned rather than an emotional attachment to England, it was the most moderate form of imperialism, but it was nonetheless significant.

In French-Canadians, Canadian imperialism evoked much different responses. Appeals to the unity of the Anglo-Saxon race could arouse nothing but repulsion. Indeed, the counterpart of the racial imperialists among French-Canadians was that group of extreme *nationalistes* who looked forward to the creation of a French-Canadian nation in North America.³ Similarly, the sentimental attachment felt by English-Canadians for the Mother Country was duplicated among French-Canadians by a love for the land of their birth. And the political attitude of French-Canadians was to a large extent determined by their desire for survival as a racial, linguistic and cultural group. Any form of political unity for the Empire would so reduce their influence as to endanger this survival. Many French-Canadians respected and appreciated an Empire in which Canada had been granted self-government, and in which the minority in Canada were given certain guarantees of language, religion and law. Yet even here, their concern was with the preservation of what they considered to be their rights. In view of the Riel episode and the Manitoba Schools Question, it seemed unlikely that their rights would be extended. Thus French-Canadians in general were suspicious of any form of imperialism. Any changes in Canada stemming from devotion to England were not likely to improve their chances of survival.

³ See *Québec, La Verité*, 1 June, 1905, for statement by J. P. Tardivel.

Sir Wilfrid Laurier had stronger imperialist sentiments than many of his compatriots. Naturally, he too lacked the strong emotional attachment to Great Britain based on the concept of Anglo-Saxon superiority, as well as the sentimental attachment to Great Britain as the Motherland. But Laurier did have a sincere respect for the British political system, and for British political ideals, and even for British society. This respect for Britain is apparent at the outset of Laurier's career. His attitude as a young politician may be illustrated by his famous speech on political liberalism in 1877.

This speech was delivered at a time when the Liberal Party in Quebec was threatened with extinction. The Roman Catholic clergy had virtually identified the Party with the Catholic-liberal movement in Europe, the movement within the Roman Catholic church by which some men had hoped to reach a compromise between the church and the liberal democratic ideas of the mid-nineteenth century, but which had been condemned by the Syllabus of Errors in 1864. And the episcopacy of the Province had openly declared its intention to intervene in politics whenever the sin of Catholic-liberalism was apparent.⁴

Laurier's speech was a reply to the charge of Catholic-liberalism. He of course found it necessary to deny that the Liberal Party still adhered to the anti-clerical policy of social revolution advocated by the *Rouges* in the past. But of more significance was his attempt to distinguish between Catholic-liberalism and political liberalism. His argument was surprising, in view of the continental origin of the problem and the background of the man himself. It must be remembered that the radicalism of the *Rouges* had been transplanted to Quebec from France, that the extreme clericalism in Quebec had its counterpart in France, and that such compromises as the separation of church and state had their advocates in France. And discussing this problem was Laurier, a young French-Canadian lawyer, educated at L'Assomption College, articulated to a French-Canadian law firm in Montreal, practising law in a small French-Canadian town, entering politics at an early age; all this was typical of an ambitious French-Canadian of the period. And yet Laurier did not turn to the history of French Canada to defend his political philosophy, he did not claim to be following in the footsteps of Lafontaine or Cartier. Nor did this French-Canadian turn to French sources to support his arguments; he included no quotations from Montalembert or Lacordaire in spite of the fact that these men had written on the similar problem in France. Instead, this French-Canadian included in his speech two lengthy quotations from Macaulay and supplemented them with three verses from Tennyson.⁵ Macaulay and Tennyson are not cosmopolitan literary figures; among historians and poets they seem peculiarly English in their beliefs and prejudices. It is significant that Laurier should turn to them when analyzing the political philosophy of the Liberal Party in Quebec. Even at the beginning of his career he instinctively turned to Great Britain as the source of his political ideas.

⁴ *Mandements, lettres pastorales, circulaires et autres documents publiés dans le diocèse de Montréal*, (Montreal, 1887), VII, 211.

⁵ U. Barthe, ed., *Wilfrid Laurier on the Platform, 1871-1890*, (Quebec, 1890), pp. 51-80.

In this speech Laurier made it clear that to him, English liberalism represented the principles of liberty and political justice. "Liberty as it has been practised in France has nothing very attractive about it. The French have had the name of liberty, but they have not yet had liberty itself."⁶ Laurier attributed political liberty in Canada "to the liberal institutions by which we are governed, institutions which we owe to our forefathers and the wisdom of the mothercountry."⁷ In this speech he refers to the achievements of Fox, O'Connell, Grey and Russell to illustrate this political liberty and justice. Twenty years later, on the death of Gladstone, he selected as Gladstone's supreme quality, "his intense humanity, his paramount sense of right, his abhorrence of injustice, wrong and oppression wherever to be found . . ."⁸ Always, Laurier found in English politicians the political principles to which he himself subscribed.

Laurier found much to admire in nineteenth century English liberalism because he too was a nineteenth century liberal in his views on economics, society and politics. A firm believer in the right of private property, he could even express regret that Canada had no constitutional counterpart of the American 'due process of the law' clause. "I have often thought it would be well to introduce such an amendment to our own constitution. The provisions of the American constitution protecting the sacredness of contract have been a source of incalculable strength to the union."⁹ Laurier even considered that he was a free-trader. The exigencies of Canadian politics or, less cynically, the necessity for a diversified Canadian economy, explained the Liberal tariff policy after 1896, but this did not represent a change in Laurier's economic philosophy. Even in 1909 he could describe himself as "a free-trader sound in theory, but somewhat deficient in practice."¹⁰

It is worth noting that this emphasis on individual rights did not mean that Laurier was an ardent democrat in the equalitarian sense. Again he found much to attract him even in the social structure of English politics. In 1877 he extolled the peers of England who had sacrificed their privileges for the benefit of their fellow beings.¹¹ In 1909, during the Parliament Bill controversy, Laurier wrote in almost nostalgic vein about the decline of the English aristocracy. "I am sorry that the aristocracy did not rise to the occasion. The old order of things must give way. It made England very great, but has served its time and must be replaced by the new force which is coming to the front everywhere: democracy."¹² These are the sentiments of a man who himself had the charm, the dignity and the reserve of a *grand seigneur*. Thus Laurier's respect for British political traditions went beyond intellectual appreciation, and even involved a sentimental admiration for the political role of the old Whig aristocracy.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁸ Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 26 May, 1898, p. 6118.

⁹ Laurier Papers, 161567, W.L. to W. Nesbitt, 3 Nov. 1909.

¹⁰ Laurier Papers, 159367, photostat of inscription in book, 1 Sep., 1909.

¹¹ Barthe, ed., *Laurier on the Platform*, p. 65.

¹² Laurier Papers, 164110, W.L. to J. Sutherland, 25 Dec., 1909.

But of greater significance to Laurier was the political aspect of the English liberal philosophy. Laurier's predilections were political rather than economic. And the liberal emphasis on individual rights in the political sphere had a natural appeal to a French-Canadian Liberal. The answer to clerical interference in the 1870's was to be found in the individual liberty of the elector. In 1886, Laurier could defend the Métis of western Canada on political grounds, and so avoid appeals based on race or religion. The French-Canadian emphasis on provincial rights and, later, on minority rights was also a natural development of this liberalism. The French-Canadian minority in Canada was dependent upon the tolerance and the sense of justice of the English-Canadian majority, and these were the very qualities emphasized by liberal philosophy. Nor is it irrelevant that in the early years of his political life, Laurier found himself closely associated with Edward Blake. In spite of the differences in religious and social background and even in temperament, Blake and Laurier were liberals of the same mould. And Blake, more than any other English-Canadian of the period, seemed able to apply these English liberal standards of tolerance and political justice to French-Canadians at a time when racial intolerance was so prevalent. This friendship must have confirmed Laurier's belief that English political principles could provide a solution for the problem of racial harmony in Canada. It was this respect for British political traditions which helps to explain Laurier's attitude to imperial problems in later years.

Laurier's liberal philosophy could not make him an Imperial Federationist. Imperial federation — or any other scheme of imperial centralization — was out of the question for a French-Canadian or for any politician interested in racial harmony in Canada. But also, the principle of individual liberty in imperial relations meant local autonomy. Laurier believed that it was the recognition of the political rights of the separate colonies which had made the survival of the Empire possible. Thus he regarded imperial federation as the negation of the principles upon which the Empire rested. To him it was such a visionary scheme that it bore no relation to practical politics.

In his early years, Laurier even assumed that separation, not centralization, was to be the fate of the Empire. He expected local autonomy gradually to be transformed into independence. But Laurier had no intention of hastening the process. Until English-Canadians and French-Canadians alike could accept independence, he was willing to suppress his view in the interest of racial harmony.¹³ And in later years he more willingly accepted Canada's position within the Empire. Separation could be avoided by the preservation of autonomy in the future. It might be argued that this concept of the Empire was no more than the idea of independence in disguise. It seems a paradox to talk of countries being autonomous, and yet being part of an Empire, and it might appear that Laurier had resolved the paradox by accepting colonial bonds only when those bonds became meaningless. But this conclusion cannot be justified. Instead, to Laurier the Empire had a

¹³ Public Archives of Canada, Lemieux Papers, I, Laurier to R. Lemieux, 1 Dec., 1892.

fundamental unity. To Laurier, the imperial connection was based on the rather intangible bonds of a common political heritage and common political ideals; yet these intangible bonds had concrete results when imperial problems arose at the turn of the century. The British Empire could have vitality even without contractual obligations.

Laurier's respect for British political traditions was an essential part of his policy during the Boer War. From the beginning he was convinced that the crisis in the Transvaal was of no concern to Canada. He informed the press that the Canadian militia could not be sent off to South Africa because the war was not being fought for the defence of Canada and that, in any case, nothing could be done until Parliament was summoned to provide the money.¹⁴ But these were only pretexts. Like Sir John A. Macdonald in 1885, Laurier did not believe it was his responsibility to help 'Chamberlain and Co.' out of a hole. But when it became obvious that English-Canadians believed that the Boer War was of direct concern to them, Laurier had to reconsider his decision. Again he was faced with an issue upon which the two racial groups in Canada disagreed; again he sought a compromise which would at least be acceptable to both groups. The Canadian Government decided to recruit, equip and transport volunteers to South Africa, with the Imperial Government assuming all subsequent expenses.

It seems clear that the decision to send troops, although necessary because of the danger of racial division, was possible for Laurier only because he believed that the Boer War was a just war. With his interest in political liberty and justice, it was natural for Laurier to sympathize with the British subjects in the Transvaal. Months before the war began, he had privately expressed to Governor General Minto his strong sympathy for them.¹⁵ To a more cynical correspondent, he could state that, "To me it is clearly and manifestly a war for religious liberty, political equality and civil rights."¹⁶ In Parliament he went so far as to state that he believed "there never was a juster war on the part of England."¹⁷ Since he believed this, the decision to send troops could be determined by a consideration of Canadian interests. Once he recognized that public feeling among English-Canadians was strongly in favor of participation, Laurier was free to accept participation in the interests of national unity. His confidence in the honorable motives of British statesmen had made his decision an easier one.

To illustrate the importance of Laurier's confidence in the British sense of justice it is instructive to contrast his attitude with that of Henri Bourassa. Bourassa agreed wholeheartedly with Laurier's original decision to keep out of the war. But when Laurier changed his mind, Bourassa felt constrained to oppose his leader. Bourassa could not credit British statesmen with such honorable motives as the desire to defend political liberty. Instead, Bourassa saw the war as the result of commercial imperialism: the natural result of the decline of British

¹⁴ *Toronto Globe*, 4 Oct., 1899.

¹⁵ Public Archives of Canada, Minto Papers, XX, 98, 2 May, 1899.

¹⁶ Laurier Papers, 40865, W.L. to L. Gabriel, 6 Jan., 1900.

¹⁷ Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 13 Mar., 1900, p. 1842.

industrial supremacy.¹⁸ Thus to Laurier the war was an isolated incident; to Bourassa it was the first of many such imperial wars. And so to Laurier, participation would eliminate a cause of friction between the two races in Canada; whereas to Bourassa, participation would set a precedent for future participation in imperial wars. Thus the disagreement between Laurier and Bourassa as to the British motives helps to account for the disagreement with respect to participation. If Laurier had not been an intellectual imperialist, with confidence in the justice of British diplomacy, it would have been difficult for him to accept participation in any form.

The same attitude can be seen in connection with Laurier's naval policy in 1910. Again Laurier would have preferred to avoid the question. At the Colonial Conference of 1902 he had refused to consider a direct contribution to the British Navy, explaining that his Government was "contemplating the establishment of a local naval force."¹⁹ In 1909 his Government was still contemplating. In that year, however, the German naval threat in Europe and the imperial sentiment roused by it in Canada ended the procrastination. The Naval Service Act of 1910 authorized a Canadian Navy, a navy which could only be placed on active service when the Governor in Council decided that a state of emergency had arisen; but a navy which could be placed at the disposal of the British Admiralty if the Canadian Government considered it advisable.

In this connection, the crucial point is whether Laurier expected this navy to become part of the British Navy in time of war. It seems clear that, in the event of a major war, he did. We may safely ignore his phrase, "When Great Britain is at war, Canada is at war",²⁰ since this was only a legal dictum and gave no guarantee of active participation in such a war. And yet, in spite of Laurier's well known aversion to the 'vortex of European militarism', he could agree with the more aggressive Canadian imperialists that British naval supremacy was desirable. And in a speech delivered in Montreal Laurier went even further and stated that Canada should support Great Britain when this naval supremacy was threatened.

Nous ne sommes obligés de prendre part à aucune guerre, mais cependant je déclare que, s'il y avait des guerres — je ne veux pas Messieurs, d'équivoque sur ce point, — je suis ici pour défendre la politique que nous préconisons, s'il y avait une guerre dans laquelle la suprématie navale de l'Empire serait mise en péril, je serais d'opinion moi-même, — et je ne veux pas que d'autres en soient blâmés, parce que j'en prends la responsabilité — *je crois que nous devons aider l'Angleterre de toutes nos forces.*²¹

To understand fully the significance of this statement, it should be remembered that this speech was delivered in October, 1910, during the Drummond-Arthabaska by-election campaign, and was in fact Laurier's campaign speech. At this time Laurier was being denounced

¹⁸ H. Bourassa, *Great Britain and Canada*, (Montreal, 1902), p. 27.

¹⁹ *Colonial Conference, 1902, Minutes of Proceedings and Papers*, (London, 1902), p. 74.

²⁰ Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 12 Jan., 1910, p. 1735.

²¹ A. D. DeCelles, ed., *Discours de Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 1889-1911*, (Montreal, 1920), p. 192, editor's italics.

by Bourassa and the *nationalistes* as an imperialist. Under these circumstances it is inconceivable that Laurier would have made such a provocative statement if he had not been sincere. Even though it was his policy, that he could make this statement at such a time suggests that Laurier had a quality considered rare among Canadian politicians, that he had the courage of his convictions.

Again the contrast between the attitude of Laurier and Bourassa illustrates how Laurier's respect for the political principles which Great Britain represented, made possible the acceptance of an imperial role for the Canadian Navy. Bourassa still suspected the motives of the British leaders, and so believed that Laurier's policy would involve Canada in wars provoked by the Chamberlains and the Rhodes in England.²² And so Bourassa could argue that the British Navy was no concern of Canada's; that Canada's only potential enemy was the United States, and that against the United States the British Navy would be of no protection.²³ But implicit in Laurier's policy was the assumption that Great Britain was the bastion of political liberty in the world, and that in a major war the British Navy would be defending the principle of political liberty rather than furthering British commercial interests. Hence Laurier was willing to commit Canada to the defence of British naval supremacy because the navy was a defence of British political principles in Canada too.

Laurier's attitude during the war of 1914-1918 is consistent with this point of view. In the special session of 1914, he reaffirmed his confidence in the motives of the British authorities by describing the war as being fought for freedom, for democracy, for civilization.²⁴ In 1916, to the suggestion that the war was luring Canada towards imperial federation, Laurier replied that "looking at it from the broader aspect, the triumph of Germany would be the triumph of Imperialism ten times aggravated by German *Kultur*."²⁵ And even in 1917, when the war was increasing racial tensions in Canada to an alarming degree, Laurier was still able to argue that the various suggestions of a negotiated peace could not be accepted because such a settlement could not secure the principles for which the allies were fighting.²⁶ Had Laurier been an isolationist, he would surely have favored peace on almost any terms in 1917 in order to avert the conscription crisis. Even Laurier's attitude towards conscription was not inconsistent with this point of view. To Laurier, unity in Canada was still of paramount importance. He rightly believed that conscription would divide the country. Since conscription was unacceptable to the French-Canadians under any circumstances, it would be the negation of British political traditions to coerce them. The necessity of Canadian participation in the war was never questioned, but it should not be at the cost of sacrificing the political principles upon which the 'consolidation of Confederation' depended.

²² H. Bourassa, *Le Projet de loi navale*, (Montreal, 1910), p. 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁴ Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 19 Aug., 1914, p. 9.

²⁵ Laurier Papers, 192951, W.L. to J. Walsh, 31 Aug., 1916.

²⁶ Laurier Papers, 194414, W.L. to W. Edwards, 11 Jan., 1917.

Thus our conclusion must be that Laurier was a moderate imperialist. On one occasion he wrote: "I have stated again and again that I was neither an Imperialist nor an anti-Imperialist: I am . . . a Canadian first, last and always."²⁷ But as a Canadian, vitally concerned with racial harmony in Canada, Laurier found in British liberal traditions the political principles upon which he believed the successful union of the two races could be achieved. To him, the Empire, and more specifically Great Britain, came to represent the bulwark of political liberty. For this reason he could and did oppose any schemes of imperial federation, since such centralization challenged the political liberty of the component parts of the Empire. But he was willing to condone Canadian participation in the Boer War because he saw it as a war to enforce political justice, and he was willing to rally to the defence of Great Britain in time of danger because he believed Great Britain would be defending the very political principles upon which the consolidation of Confederation depended. To this extent, Laurier was an imperialist.

²⁷ Laurier Papers, 196799, W.L. to F. Carrel, 24 Aug., 1917.

DISCUSSION

Mr. Willms, Mr. Weibrenner, Professor Lower and Professor Sissons led the discussion of the two papers on Laurier. It was apparent from the two papers that there was much of the practical politician, as well as liberal idealism in Laurier's make up. Perhaps the touchstone, was Laurier's speech of 1877, which showed his courage, literary ability, and political principles. Laurier could never be an imperialist in the dictionary definition of the word, for Quebec opinion might swing away to follow such men as Bourassa. Yet Bourassa shared Laurier's admiration for British liberal philosophy. *Mr. Neatby* felt that Laurier and Bourassa differed in that the former believed that British politicians respected British traditions, whereas the latter did not believe that they did. To Laurier, Bourassa seemed to overemphasize French Canadian nationalism, but was not a personal rival. *Mr. Colvin* suggested that Laurier's speeches reflected the composition of his audience. In the field of imperialism, Laurier did nothing concrete to promote imperial unity — political, military or economic. Canadian independence was more important to him than imperial unity.