1896-1919: FROM THE TURN OF THE CENTURY TO THE GREAT WAR

By Sean Mills

under the direction of Brian Young, McGill University

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1896-1919

Political

Wilfrid Laurier

The elections of 1896, which made Wilfrid Laurier prime minister, ended Conservative control of the House of Commons and marked a major turning point in Canadian history. The Liberals would come to dominate Canadian politics for much of the following century. From 1896 to 1929, Canada went through many changes; the prairies were settled and joined Confederation (Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1905), new immigrants transformed the ethnic composition of the country, and the economy expanded at an unprecedented rate. While the economy matured, wealth was increasingly concentrated and monopolies consolidated their control over Canadian society. Non-French and non-British immigrants were encouraged, and resource development continued, particularly in mining and hydro-electricity. Finally, World War One brought more profound changes to Canadian society. Laurier’s rise to power coincided with an economic upswing and his Liberal government came to be associated with the subsequent prosperity. In 1893, Laurier, then leader of the opposition, abandoned free trade and accepted many tenets of Macdonald’s National Policy, thus making voting for the Liberals less threatening to the manufacturing-dominated heartland. Laurier, who would go on to win three more federal elections, even ironically came to symbolize the essence of the National Policy; more railways were built, the West was settled, and industries flourished.
Development of the Public Education System

In the second half of the nineteenth century, education increased in importance. With the BNA Act, education was established as a provincial jurisdiction, and provinces were therefore at liberty to develop their own education systems and standards. Provinces created departments of education, and slowly moved towards establishing free compulsory schooling. In Ontario, Egerton Ryerson campaigned vigorously for the creation of public schools. In 1871 high schools were instituted in Ontario, and mandatory attendance of elementary school was slowly established. In Quebec, however, despite the initial creation of a ministry of education, dissolved in 1875, education was controlled by Catholic and Protestant religious committees under the Conseil de l’instruction publique, and the development of the education system generally lagged behind the rest of Canada. Because religious groups vehemently opposed state involvement in education, tuition fees were not abolished and compulsory schooling was not instituted until 1943. Quebec would have to wait until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, moreover, for the state to take control of schools and to establish a Ministry of Education (1964).

Economic

Settlement of the West

While both the construction of railways and the expansion of central Canadian industries fuelled the economic boom, it was the settlement of the West that captured the imagination of English Canada. The depletion of the supply of free farmland in the United States made the Canadian west the “last best west,” and large-scale
settlement began. The increasing demand, in industrial countries like Great Britain, for Canadian natural resources was a major reason for Canada’s prosperity; representing only $14 million in 1900, wheat exports, for example, were valued at $279 million by 1920 (Cook 380-381).

**Immigration**

Development of the West, however, depended on increased immigration. Clifford Sifton, Laurier’s immigration minister, worked incessantly to promote Canadian immigration in both Europe and the United States. Of the two million people who arrived in Canada from 1896-1911, approximately one million moved to the West. Sifton would be remembered for his desire and ability to attract those with “farming experience,” dramatically altering the ethnic composition of Canadian society. From its essentially French and British base, settlers were joined by immigrants from both eastern and western Europe; by 1921, 54 percent of the population of the West had been born outside Canada.

**Urbanization**

The early years of the twentieth century also had great effects on industrial centres like Montreal and Toronto. Immigrant communities were brought together by kinship, language, and a common experience of economic exploitation. Experiencing tensions with both the dominant populations and members of their own communities who had arrived earlier, Jewish and Italian immigrants, for example, succeeded in forming distinct cultural communities. The working and living conditions of the labouring classes were the darker
and less remembered aspects of “age of prosperity.” In additional, women, because of the sexual division of labour, wage discrimination, and their exclusion from organized labour, continued to receive lower wages than their male counterparts.

Middle-Class Reform Movement

The social problems caused by industrialization caused great concern among middle-class reformers. Herbert Brown Ames, for example, wrote a detailed report of the conditions facing Montreal’s working class, in *The City below the Hill* (1897). By the beginning of the twentieth century, Ontario’s Protestant churches were heavily involved in the progressive reform movement. Differing from the evangelical reformers that came before them, progressives argued that poverty was, at least in part, caused by the failings of the economic system. Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists led the “social gospel” movement that, moving beyond spiritual salvation, sought the improvement of the working classes’ social conditions. Attempting to create “God’s kingdom on earth,” Protestant churches set up home missions, settlement houses, and pressured for the passing of the Lord’s Day Act, which would give workers at least one day’s rest a week.

I ideological

Canadian Imperialism

The turn of the twentieth century saw important ideological developments in both Ontario and Quebec. In the years preceding the First World War, imperialism became the dominant form of nationalism among English Canadians, who desired the security of the British
Empire in which they hoped Canada would play a more prominent role. According to political scientist Louis Balthazar, because English Canadians lacked a national founding myth, “l’Empire, la Couronne deviennent leur mythe social, leur légitimation, leur raison d’être comme société” (Balthazar 84). English Canadians believed, despite their loyalty towards Britain, that it was Canada’s destiny to play a powerful role within the Empire. As historian Carl Berger states, the sense of nationality “was grounded upon a definite conception of Canada’s past, her national character, and her mission in the future, and at its heart was a yearning for significance and a desire to obliterate the stigma of colonialism” (Berger 259). Historian and political economist Stephen Leacock, exemplifying the imperialist attitude, compared England to an old man, and Canada to his son that had come to maturity. In the minds of most Canadians, imperialism was a form of nationalism, since they hoped, by sharing the responsibilities of the Empire, to gain a greater role in shaping imperial policies in Canada’s favour. Imperialism also had a far-reaching impact on religious communities, and religious leaders in turn often preached an imperialist message from the pulpit. Protestants from a variety of denominations struggled for influence in shaping the new nation. The deep imperial attachment was evident, for example, in English Canada’s massive approval of participation in the British war effort in South Africa; when news came that the British were forcing the Boers to retreat, university students took to the streets singing military songs, and factories and schools were closed.
French-Canadian Nationalism

While English Canadians were preparing to march off to war, however, French Canadians, less than enthusiastic about defending the British Empire, were questioning Canada’s attachment to Britain. In Montreal, French and English Canadians clashed in street riots. Henri Bourassa, a Liberal M.P., refused to support the British War effort, resigned from Laurier’s government, and became the chief spokesman of a new French-Canadian nationalism. Bourassa wanted Canada to sever its ties with the British Empire, reconstituting itself as an independent country based on a pan-Canadian equality of French and English. Denounced as a traitor outside of Quebec, Bourassa became the voice of an increasingly alienated French-Canadian population, which resisted participation in imperial conflicts. Bourassa’s opposition to English-Canadian imperialism did not end with his denunciation of Canadian participation in the Boer War. With Laurier’s decision to create, with the Naval Service Act of 1909, a small “tin pot” navy, Bourassa rejected the commitment to imperial defence while, at the same time, English-Canadians decried the small size of the fleet. The founder of the Montreal daily Le Devoir in 1910, Bourassa’s influence was greatest during the controversies surrounding the First World War.

World War One

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 came suddenly and Canadians, at first, expected it to be a short-lived conflict. As a colony, Canada was committed to the imperial war effort by the British declaration of war. Eager to enlist, young men, mostly recent immigrants from Great Britain, soon filled the streets of the country’s major cities. Despite poor management and unclear instructions, thirty
one thousand men and eight thousand horses were soon sent to Europe. In English Canada, patriotic citizens created mass recruitment drives and, in the name of imperial patriotism, forced Germans and Austrians out of the public service, and pressured Berlin, Ontario to rename itself Kitchener.

**Canadian War Effort**

It was the lack of French-Canadian participation in the war, however, that preoccupied English-Canadian public opinion and rekindled old ethnic hostilities. Only thirteen thousand of the recruits in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) were French-speaking and, although initially sympathetic to the allied cause, French Canadian support for the war waned as the conflict progressed. Commanded by British officers and operating in English, the CEF did not make French Canadians feel welcome; nor did French Canadians feel a particular need to defend British imperial interests.

**Military Service Act**

In May 1917, with the Military Service Act, Prime Minister Borden introduced conscription for single men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. While many farmers and labourers in English Canada opposed the Act, the strongest opposition came from Quebec. Needing to secure a mandate to proceed, Borden, with a new coalition of Conservatives and disaffected Liberals, called an election. To ensure victory, Borden extended the franchise to male and female members of the CEF and to the wives, mothers, and sisters of soldiers. Immigrants naturalized after 1902, moreover, lost the right to vote. The divided election results reflected the polarized state of the
country: although the Union party won 153 seats, the Liberals swept Quebec, winning 62 out of 65 ridings.

Conscription Crisis

With his mandate secure, Borden authorized conscription and, for the first time in history, the Quebec government debated the possibility of secession. Tensions escalated further when, in March 1918, angry anti-conscription demonstrations in Quebec City turned into riots. When Quebec police refused to intervene and disperse the crowds, the federal government sent troops who opened fire and killed four civilians. Although the military impact of conscription was negligible, and only twenty-four thousand conscripts ever saw action in France, the divisive effects of the conscription crisis would be felt long into the future (Conrad and Finkel 209).

Aftermath of War

When the Great War ended in November 1918, it was clear that Canada no longer resembled its pr ewar self. Six hundred thousand Canadians participated in the conflict, and 60,661 lost their lives. Those who did return often suffered from physical and psychological wounds. Because of its great sacrifice to the war effort, Canada did gain a more prominent international profile. Represented in the British delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, Canada, demonstrating some of its newfound independence, signed, for the first time in its history, a multilateral international treaty. In 1918 the Union government, building on the reforms of the Wartime Elections Act, extended the franchise in federal elections to women and, by the 1920s, most provincial governments had also granted women the right
to vote. Quebec was the exception, however, and conservative influences ensured the continued disenfranchisement of women until 1940.

**Crisis**

**Influenza Epidemic**

The coming of peace did not resolve social, economic, and public health crises in Canada. In the fall of 1918, for example, nearly as many Canadians died in an influenza epidemic as those who had died in battle. Moreover, with the return of soldiers to the labour market and the transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy, labour tensions developed and a wave of labour radicalism swept the country. Union membership rose from 143,000 in 1915 to 378,000 in 1919, with many on the left taking inspiration from the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Meeting in Calgary at the Western Labour Conference in 1919, delegates created a new industrial union, the One Big Union, that would organize workers in the class struggle.

**Winnipeg General Strike**

On 15 May 1919, the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Congress called a general strike, and roughly thirty thousand workers, only twelve thousand of them unionized, walked off the job. Although the Winnipeg general strike was the longest and the most complete of its kind, it was only part of the labour revolt that swept both the country and the entire Western world in the postwar period. According to historians Ian McKay and Suzanne Morton, for example, between “1917 and 1925 Maritimers rose in their thousands to demand radical change, creating a successful third party and fighting some of the
most spectacular and savage strikes ever seen in Canada” (Morton and McKay 43). Many Canadians feared the possibility of violent revolution, and the federal government moved quickly to suppress radicalism. By passing section 98 of the Criminal Code, Ottawa banned groups that were suspected of advocating the overthrow of the government.
Suggestions for Further Reading


