

A DAY OF HONOUR?**PART THREE OF FIVE**

He stood for us

Robert Borden's Canada forged its sovereignty in the heat of the First World War, writes former prime minister BRIAN MULRONEY

One of Canada's great nation builders of the 20th century was Robert L. Borden, prime minister from 1911 to 1920, who shaped the sovereign destiny of our country during the First World War. In any ranking of Canadian prime ministers, there is Sir John A. Macdonald and there are the others. But Robert Borden is among the great ones, not only because of his resolute wartime leadership, but his continuous and persistent assertion of Canadian sovereignty. Indeed, the theme of Canadian sovereignty is the common thread that weaves the tapestry of his distinguished career.

There is a strong historical case to be made that if Sir John A. Macdonald was the father of Canadian nationhood, Sir Robert Borden was the father of Canadian sovereignty. Canada's sovereignty was born in the crucible of his wartime leadership, and written in the blood of tens of thousands of young Canadians who died in the killing fields and trenches of Western Europe.

Borden bluntly told British prime minister David Lloyd George in 1917: "The Dominions have fought in the war upon the principle of equal nationhood." That principle, he added: "has been consecrated by the efforts and sacrifices" of Canadian soldiers, and "it must be maintained."

At the Imperial War Conference of 1917, Borden was the principal author of Resolution IX, which affirmed "the right of the Dominions to an adequate voice in foreign policy and foreign relations." McGill University's Desmond Morton, one of Canada's leading historians, has observed: "The emergence of Canadian sovereignty was the one great Canadian victory of the war."

At war's end, Borden made strenuous representations for Canada's inclusion at the Versailles Conference, which dictated the terms of the peace and determined the shape of the postwar world. When Lloyd George proposed that Canada should participate only when there was a matter of Canadian interest, Borden angrily rejoined: "To provide that Canada should be called upon only when her special interests were in question would be regarded as little better than a mockery."

As Robert Craig Brown wrote in his biography of Borden, Sir Robert argued: "At the very least, Canada was entitled to representation equal to that of the smaller powers at the peace conference. His nation, he snapped, had 'lost more men killed in France than Portugal had put in the field.'"

In a letter to his wife, Borden recognized the difficulty of Canada's Dominion status within the British Empire, and he wrote of "Canada's anomalous position; a nation that is not a nation. It is about time to alter it."

In the end, Borden won the day, and won for Canada its own representation at the Versailles Conference, as well as one of five seats within the British delegation. Having won the right to sit at the peace table, Borden insisted that the resulting Treaty of Versailles be presented to Parliament for debate in September 1919.

In a historic address, Borden told the House of Commons: "In this, the greatest of all wars, in which the world's liberty, the world's justice, in short the world's future destiny were at stake, Canada led the democracies of both American continents. Her resolve had given inspiration, her sacrifices had been conspicuous, her effort unabated to the end."

And he continued: "The same indomitable spirit which made her capable of that effort and sacrifice, made her equally incapable of accepting at the peace conference, the League of Nations or elsewhere, a status inferior to that accorded to nations less advanced in their development, less amply endowed in wealth, resources and population, no more complete in their sovereignty and far less endowed in their sacrifice."

Parliament, and Borden's Union Government, would ratify the Treaty of Versailles, and our country would join the League of Nations, marking Canada's real entrance into the community of sovereign states.

But Borden continued to assert Canadian sovereignty in other areas of foreign policy, establishing a Canadian legation in Washington, a minister plenipotentiary who would be resident in the British embassy, but receive his instructions from Ottawa.

It must be noted that while Borden had once supported the principle of reciprocal trade with the U.S., and even proposed a referendum on the issue, he finally opposed Sir Wilfrid Laurier's reciprocity agreement in the historic 1911 election. Was it the right decision at the time? In some ways, this was the seminal decision of his decade-long career as leader of the opposition.

There's no clear historical verdict, except that it got him elected, and ultimately gave him the opportunity to become

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a great wartime leader. It also reminds us that public policy is not made in a vacuum, but in a context of human and economic events.

Yet, from the beginning of his prime ministership, Borden recognized the importance of establishing good relations with the United States. He was also an early advocate of Canada's historic role as an intermediary between the U.S. and the British Empire. In a speech in New York shortly after taking office in 1911, Borden saw "the duty of Canada to become more and more of a bond of goodwill between this Great Republic and our Empire." Thus was essentially born Canada's role as the honest broker, which to this day remains an important feature in the conduct of Canadian foreign policy.

Again, Borden was fleshing out Canada's emerging sovereignty. Canadian sovereignty had always been his litmus test, even in opposition. During the great naval debate of 1910, as noted by biographer Mr. Brown, "Borden believed that proposals for imperial institutions, which might limit Canada's determination of her own affairs, were dangerous."

Borden was an advocate of Canadian sovereignty by experience as well as by conviction. During his first wartime visit to England in 1915, he observed first hand the decrepitude that had infected the British imperial system, and he had a vision of moving from empire to commonwealth.

He took the Conservative Party, which had been out of office for 15 years, and secured consecutive majority governments for the Tories and the Union Government in 1917, providing for the alternation of governance that is essential to democracy.

Borden's many other achievements in office included universal suffrage - granting women the right to vote in 1918; the establishment of the Civil Service Commission, the Wheat Board and the Canadian Tariff Commission; and the rescue of Laurier's bankrupt trans-continental railways.

He also brought in Canada's first income tax as a "temporary" measure in wartime in 1917. While taxes are still with us, Borden's income tax is compelling proof that wars can only be fought, and nations built, at a price to all citizens. As a wartime prime minister, he raised a citizen army of half a million men in what was then a country of only eight million people, and successfully prosecuted a devastating conflict in which 60,000 brave Canadians gave their lives.

Sir Robert Borden was much more than a competent manager of Canada's affairs. He was confident of Canada's

ability to manage its own affairs. Above all, he stood for the integrity of Canada's government and the independence of our people. That Canada's sovereignty is so admired around the world in our time is due in great measure to the fact that it was constantly and courageously asserted by Sir Robert Borden in his own time.

Brian Mulroney was Canada's 18th prime minister.
