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# Laurier and Honours' Patronage in Early 20th Century Canadian Politics

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by Christopher McCreery

*The present minority Parliament has made Canadians extremely aware of the importance of an extra seat or two in Parliament. Of course this is hardly a new phenomena. This article outlines a plan to free up a seat in the Senate at a time when the Liberals badly needed one and their Leader, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, knew how to manipulate the system of honours to his advantage.*

During the closing days of the Great War, the subject of knighthoods and peerages became such a contentious issue that it led to their near complete abolition in Canada.<sup>1</sup> A fear that such honours would be used to create a caste of titled nobility in Canada, and a belief that Canada was fighting for democracy not aristocracy led the House of Commons to adopt the Nickle Resolution in 1918 and the Report of the Special Committee on Honours and titles in 1919. Both are commonly referred to as the "Nickle Resolution," although it is only the Report of the Special Committee that called upon the King to cease bestowing knighthoods and hereditary titles upon Canadians.

One of the most prominent advocates of this new policy of prohibition was Sir Wilfrid Laurier – the man who in many ways had perfected the use of honours for patronage purposes in Canada. During Laurier's term as Prime Minister from 1896 to 1911 more Canadians were knighted than at any previous time in our history. Some 61 Canadians including 5 Senators were made either a Knight Bachelor (Kt) or the more prestigious Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George (KCMG). Such honours were highly sought and offered more prestige and exclusivity than a Senate seat or even a Lieutenant Governorship. In modern terms these awards were tantamount to being made an Officer or Companion of the Order of Canada.

The story of Sir James Robert Gowan illustrates how at least in one case, the promise of an honour was dangled as a way to free up a parliamentary seat. Senator Gowan was a Liberal-Conservative Senator for Ontario. He was 89 years old when made a KCMG in November 1905, thus making him the oldest Canadian to have been knighted.

Gowan had been made a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George in 1893, and had long hoped to be elevated to be a KCMG which, according to him, had been promised him years before by Sir John Thompson. Alas for Gowan, Thompson had died before the recommendation was made.<sup>2</sup> In 1899, Gowan went so far as to write to the Governor General, Lord Minto with the Thompson story, including in his letter a list of his services to Canada and a glowing declaration of his loyalty.<sup>3</sup> Usually when a Governor General received such a letter it was filed and given no further attention. But Minto, possibly taking pity on an aging Senator with a somewhat plausible case, sent the letter on to Laurier.<sup>4</sup> He expressed the hope that Laurier would see fit to recommend Gowan for a knighthood in the following year.

Laurier told his Minister of Justice, David Mills, about Gowan's plight. At this time the Liberals needed to increase their presence in the Conservative dominated Senate, and the 85-year-old Conservative Senator in search of a knighthood sailed into their sights as the weak link of the Tories in the Senate. Late in 1900 Mills approached Gowan and made a deal. On December 22, 1900 Mills wrote to Sir Wilfrid.

I have his [Gowan's] resignation in my hands, addressed to the Governor General, which I am authorized to submit to His Excellency, whenever he is knighted,

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*Christopher McCreery is Executive Assistant to Senator Michael Kirby. This article is based on research from his recently published book *The Canadian Honours System*, and his forthcoming history of honours in Canada *The Order of Canada – Its Origins, History and Development*.*

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which if not done, I am to return to him. I trust the arrangements will be carried out without any difficulty and the old man will not be disappointed. His place [in the Senate] is of great consequence to us at the present time. I have no doubt his resignation will facilitate the arrangement for bringing Dr. Landerkin, Mr. Wood from Hamilton, and someone else in place of Senator Reesor. If this is done, it will strengthen our position in the Senate at the opening of session.<sup>5</sup>

Mills hoped that Laurier would convince Lord Minto to have Gowan added to the New Year's honours list. With only a few days' notice it was unlikely to happen. Laurier went to see Lord Minto the day after Christmas,<sup>6</sup> but neither Laurier nor Lord Minto mentioned Gowan's quest for a knighthood. Laurier did not mention Gowan's KCMG to Minto and Gowan's resignation was never submitted. Apparently, Laurier was not as concerned with his party's situation in the Senate as his Minister of Finance.

For some time Lord Minto had supported Gowan's application for a knighthood,<sup>7</sup> but had been unable to receive permission from Laurier to send the recommendation on to King Edward VII. In May 1904 Laurier changed his mind and asked Minto to recommend Gowan and Senator George Cox for a KCMG. Senator Cox was a prominent Ontario Liberal. Laurier told Minto that if Cox and Gowan could not both be recognized with a knighthood, then neither should receive one. Laurier knew that Minto desired to see Gowan knighted and calculated that if he added a Liberal appointment to counterbalance that of Gowan, Minto would capitulate. Minto sent a request to the Colonial Office which was denied, the supply of honours never being sufficient to meet the demand.<sup>8</sup> Had Minto submitted a personal request for one knighthood to be awarded, the Colonial Office would likely have made allowances, but asking for two extra awards was excessive. Minto was certain that Gowan would be elevated to a KCMG.<sup>9</sup> Laurier forgot about the matter, although the Colonial Office, that paragon of efficiency, did not. Despite the protests of the new Governor General, Lord Grey, Gowan was finally made a KCMG on November 9, 1905. Lord Grey wrote to Laurier, "in spite of my protest His Majesty has been graciously pleased to confer a KCMG on Hector [*sic*] Gowan."<sup>10</sup>

Gowan retained his seat in the Senate until 1907 and died in 1909. Laurier's attempt to use a KCMG as a method of getting Gowan to resign had failed, as had his further attempt to couple the award of a KCMG for Gowan with one for Liberal Senator Cox, with the rider that both men be recognized simultaneously. In this case, Laurier's attempt to use honours for narrow political advantage backfired, but one emerges with the sense that a

tactic that misfired in this case was probably used to better effect in others.

Ultimately events relating to a Canadian living in the United Kingdom brought the honours debate to the fore once again. The result was a virtual end to the award of knighthoods to Canadians, and a periodic prohibition on Canadians receiving any British honours. The taint of patronage and corruption would play a significant role in the downfall of the British-Imperial honours system in Canada and the establishment of the Order of Canada nearly half a century later.

For all his own apparent unwillingness to be knighted, and in spite of his 1918 anti-honours platform that would become known as his 'democracy first' argument, Laurier – like his Conservative predecessors – enthusiastically integrated honours into his formidable patronage machine. It is of course difficult to say with certainty how many knighthoods Laurier awarded in order to secure new friends for the Liberal Party but during the Nickle debates in 1918, Laurier's enemies delightedly reminded the House of his use of patronage as a way of securing political advantage.

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1. Indeed following the First World War the practice of purchasing honour sparked a scandal that led to a British Royal Commission – led by former Canadian Governor General the Duke of Devonshire. See Tom Cullen, *Maudy Gregory* (London: Quality Books, 1975), p. 125. For example Lord Beaverbrook paid J.C.C. Davidson, chairman of the British Conservative Party, £10,000 with the understanding that Andrew Holt would be knighted in the 1929 New Year's Honours List. However, no knighthood was awarded, and the money was returned to Beaverbrook. A.J.P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, (London: Hamish Hamilton Press, 1972) p. 256.
2. NAC, MG 26 G, *Laurier Papers*, p. 34045, Sir James Gowan to Lord Minto, May 31, 1899.
3. *Ibid.*
4. We know Minto gave the letter to Laurier because it can be found in the Laurier papers.
5. NAC, MG 26 G, *Laurier Papers*, p. 51788, David Mills to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 22 December 1900. Senator Reesor resigned from the Senate in early January and Andrew Wood was summoned on January 21, 1901. Dr. George Landerkin was to follow, being summoned on 16 February 1901.
6. NAC, MG 26 G, *Laurier Papers*, p. 51789, Sir Wilfrid Laurier to David Mills, December 24, 1900.
7. Saywell and Stevens, eds., *Lord Minto's Canadian Papers*, Volume II, p. 460, Lord Minto to Lyttelton, May 19, 1904.
8. *Ibid.*, Volume II, p. 504, Lord Minto to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, June 24, 1904.
9. *Ibid.*, Volume II, p. 505, Lord Minto to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, June 25, 1904.
10. NAC, MG 26 G, *Laurier Papers*, p. 20334, Lord Grey to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, November 8, 1905.