

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: Decency in Demonstration

By Michelle Johnson

It is the morning of Tuesday, September 5, 1893 and the platform of the Aurora train station is overflowing with onlookers. The station yard is at capacity and a procession of empty carriages are waiting for their passengers to arrive. At 9:30 a.m. the train pulls in and off steps the Honourable Wilfrid Laurier M.P, leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, accompanied by his wife, Zoe Laurier. The 12th Battalion Band begins to play 'The Maple Leaf Forever' and Aurora's mayor along with members of council greet the esteemed guests.

After the official greeting at the station, the dignitaries proceed into the yard, step into their horse-drawn carriages, and embark on a procession that travels west on Wellington to Yonge, south on Yonge to Mosley, then east down Mosley to Town Park. Like the station platform, the Town's streets are filled with residents and visitors eager to welcome Laurier and experience this historic day.

The welcome given to the Liberal leader was not confined to Liberals alone. Many of the leading Conservatives of Aurora and Newmarket joined in it, and gave the demonstration largely a non-partisan aspect? (Aurora Banner, Sept 8, 1893).

The turnout for Laurier's visit 125 years ago was impressive, and certainly historic, but what is most commendable about his visit was the way that politicians across political parties spoke about and to one another. This exercise in political decency began in Town Park, when Mayor Herbert Fleury gave an address that observed, 'Composed as we are of persons of widely different political views, you will readily see that our action on this occasion has no political signification?' (Aurora Banner, Sept 8, 1893). When replying to Fleury's remarks, Laurier commented that he was pleased to know that people who shared diverse political views were 'dwelling together in harmony?' (Aurora Banner, Sept 8, 1893). He went on to reflect on his own relationship with a political opponent, Sir John A. Macdonald, and noted that while they stood on opposite sides of the table, Laurier had considerable respect and admiration for him.

The paper goes on to report that, 'the Conservatives had nothing but good wishes for the gathering and the kindest feelings personally to Mr. Laurier, who has won the respect of the people of all parties by frank and honest discussion of the public questions of the day without bitterness?' (Aurora Banner, Sept 8, 1893).

After Mr. Laurier's introduction in Town Park, the procession made its way to Mr. William's Grove, located just south of the neighbouring Town of Newmarket, where a large picnic was held and more speeches delivered.

Laurier's visit came to be known as the Laurier Procession & Picnic and had an estimated attendance of 10,000 people. In the days following, the visit was reported on as being, 'the greatest open air demonstration in the history of Canadian Politics?' (Aurora Banner, Sept 15, 1893).

Laurier was triumphant in the 1896 federal election and would go on to become Canada's 7th Prime Minister serving from 1896-1911.