Macdonald had served in the House of Commons for 24 years, 19 of those as prime minister. Through his initiatives, British North America had become a confederation of seven provinces and a Northwest Territory, which would soon yield two more. A track of steel and a telegraph line linked the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The population of Canada had blossomed from 3.5 million in 1867 to 5 million at the time of his death.

During an 1884 Conservative rally to celebrate his fortieth year as a politician, Macdonald had said, “When I look back through my forty years of public life; when I remember how few remain of those who with me entered full of hope, life and the earnestness of youth; when I bear in mind that those who do remain are like myself, feeble old men...”

Just then, someone cried out, “No! No! You’ll never die, John A.”

WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE

The first attempt in the House of Commons at conferring the right to vote upon women had been made by Sir John A. Macdonald. “A majority of this House are opposed to female suffrage,” Macdonald acknowledged when he introduced his Franchise Bill in 1885. “I had hoped that Canada would have the honour of first placing woman in the position that she is certain, eventually, after centuries of oppression, to obtain. It is merely a question of time all over the civilized world.” But before it became law, the prime minister’s Franchise Bill was amended to exclude women’s suffrage.

The second attempt was made during Sir Mackenzie Bowell’s short tenure as prime minister. Bowell was 70 years old when he took office in 1894, an emergency and compromise choice of a Conservative caucus staggered by the deaths of two of its leaders in four years. With the Manitoba School Question threatening the unity of his Conservative caucus, Bowell was undoubtedly none too pleased when, on May 8, 1895, his own backbencher, Nicholas Flood Davin, stood up in the chamber to table a women’s suffrage resolution.

Davin was an Irish-born Canadian who had made his home in the Northwest Territory. The 52-year-old bachelor moved “that in the opinion of the House, the privilege of voting for candidates for membership thereof should be extended to women possessing the qualifications which now entitle men to the electoral franchise.” The proposal would not allow women to be candidates, but simply to vote.

Nicholas Flood Davin (Assiniboia West): Mr. Speaker, look at what women have done in politics. We need not go beyond our own gracious Queen. If they can discharge the highest of political duties, how can they be unfit to discharge one of the smallest duties they can be asked to discharge in the political sphere, namely, to say for whom they may vote to be a member of Parliament.

The enfranchisement of women would elevate the tone of politics. Women are quicker in their perceptions than men. To include them among the electorate would quicken the intelligence and perceptiveness of the constituency. If the House shall sanction this proposition, and so justify me in bringing in the bill that shall translate it into law, I believe this Parliament will take a wise step.

James McMullen (Wellington North): I would not be at all surprised to find, in the mover of such a motion, a member who had shown his great appreciation of the fair sex by proposing to one of them and linking his fortunes with her. But to find a confirmed bachelor propose such a motion is, I confess, a surprise.

I think, Sir, that it will take away from the real charm and womanliness of women if they were given the franchise and allowed to mix in politics. I can imagine that I might go home some evening and find, instead of my being expected, with tea on the table, nothing was done, because the absorbing question of the hour was politics. I might find a very nice-looking politician sitting in the parlour soliciting a vote. I am afraid that a good many married men might get tired of the situation.

But seriously, if the franchise were given to women, the question would not stop there. The next thing would be that women would wish to be candidates for Parliament, and some of us would be left out in the cold. I am hardly prepared to vote for that.

Severin Lachapelle (Hochelaga): Mr. Speaker, to allow women to vote is, without any necessity, to impose on them a new obligation,
a new duty, in addition to those which they have already as daughters, wives and mothers. I have too much regard for women — and this is my way to show them my respect — to impose on them a new function, to overburden their weak shoulders, which could not bear such a heavy burden. Perhaps I am putting myself in opposition to history, which says the French people are essentially a most courageous people. I regret, I say, having to record such an opinion, but I think it is the conclusion to which the House should come.

WILLIAM F. MACLEAN (York): If women had their say in politics today, the country would be ruled by emotion rather than reason. Politics are not suited to the physical limitations which surround her sex. Her Majesty Queen Victoria is held up to us as a great queen and one of the leading politicians of Europe, but there are many who think that even her position would have been better filled by a man.

MR. DAVIN: A man like George IV?

GUILLAUME ANYOT (Bellechasse): Mr. Speaker, we all admit that women are the most beautiful part of humanity. They are, so to say, the point of connection between earth and Heaven. They soothe and alleviate social evils. She is made for the house, for the home of which she is an angel. There would be much imprudence to make a voter of her, to entangle her in the acts of shoving and acts of violence which accompany our political contests. Let us leave them their moral purity, their bashfulness, their sweetness, which give them in our minds so much charm. Providence intended that it be so. It ill-becomes the community to change her sex and to degrade her by the exercise of the franchise. You make men of women and you deputize them.

On June 5, 1895, the vote was taken, and Nicholas Davin’s resolution was defeated 105 to 47. The exclusive club of male legislators still honestly believed what their ancestors had told them — and perhaps also that the earth was flat.

NEST OF TRAITORS

THE GOVERNMENT of Manitoba was adamant: they would not repeal their education legislation. Separate schools were too expensive and the division of resources favoured the smaller Roman Catholic schools. Since the Manitoba law was passed in 1890, three legal battles were fought on the matter, each going to final appeal before the Privy Council in England. The highest courts had confirmed the authority of provincial governments to do away with dual school systems, one for Protestants and another for Roman Catholics.

At first, the federal cabinet tried to negotiate with the Manitoba legislative council. The Manitoba Act provided for an appeal to the Governor General of any grievances with regards to education laws enacted by the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. The Governor General could enact remedial legislation under the advice of the federal cabinet.

In May 1894, a petition signed by no fewer than 31 Roman Catholic bishops landed on the desk of Canada’s first Roman Catholic prime minister, John Thompson, urging disallowance of the provincial bill. Thompson told the government of Manitoba to amend its proposal or face remedial federal legislation. The die was cast for a showdown.

In December 1894, Thompson died suddenly while visiting Queen Victoria in England. He was replaced by Mackenzie Bowell. In June of 1895, the Manitoba legislature called the federal bluff and stated it would not obey the federal order. Immediately, the soul-wrenching of Bowell’s mixed cabinet, made up mostly of Protestants, raged intense. Three Quebec ministers insisted that remedial legislation be forthcoming immediately. Before long, Auguste Réal Angers, the minister of agriculture, resigned in disgust, exasperated by the prolonged indecision.

The speech from the throne opened the 1896 session of Parliament and promised remedial legislation. That was likely the primary reason for Adolphe Caron’s announcement in the House of Commons. But for the ministers concerned, political convenience dictated that Bowell’s inability to replace Angers was cited as the primary reason for what transpired on January 7, 1896.

>> SIR ADOLPHE CARON — Postmaster General (Rimouski): Mr. Speaker, I have an important announcement to make to the House. Seven members of the cabinet have tendered their resignations to the