Nov. 1, 1999

TRANSCRIPT – Pierre Burton @ the Canadian Club

These intros are getting so long as so fulsome, I'll have to cut my speech back. [laughter] But I've been asked to talk about what Laurier said about the country in 1904. He said it twice… he first said it in Ottawa, then he said it in Toronto. I'm not sure what that means, does the century *belong* to Canada, but I would like to discuss with you today what I think are the four defining… I was going to say moments, but they were longer than that… which affected the country more than anything else. And they are, in historical order, the great land boom and immigration boom of the first decade of the century, and second, the Great War, third, the Depression, and fourth, the situation in Quebec, which is what we generally call… I've forgotten the… anyway… because that is still going on.

Let's start with the boom. You know, we had one of the greatest land rushes in history in this country. We bought in three million people to Canada and one million of them we settled between the Shield and the Rockies in a period of about ten years. And this was an enormous change in the country. And it wasn't accidental; it was purposeful! You know, people don't think of Canadians as being press agents or public relations pushers or popularizers, but as a matter of fact, one of the greatest public relations approaches in history was the public relations movement that began to fill up the Prairies and was started out of the Laurier administration by Clifford Sifton. Hard sell! You know, thousands and thousands of pamphlets sent to state fairs, to the St. Louis Exposition, thousands of ads for free land clubs in the British papers, thousands of slide projectors distributed around England, so that the representatives of the country could show people what the country looked like. They didn't show the snow or the icicles; they showed the wheat fields. [laughter]

And, you know, we talk about Hollywood junkets today… you know, all the newspaper men gather together and are sent on a free trip… except John Honderich I'm sure doesn't allow his people to pay, but most papers do… and off they go to Hollywood and they're wined and they're dined and they write something about the movies that you see in your paper. It's not accidental. But we had government junkets of the most *lavish* kind before Hollywood. They brought in *trainloads* of journalists, and editors, U.S. business and British politicians and newspaper people. Now, the wine flowed freely, and if the newspaper people were too drunk to write anything about the Golden West, there was a guy on board who did it for them! And had it typed up and shipped by wire at his expense to various papers in the country! I'm not sure that happens now or not. I don't know. [laughter]

What we wanted to get into this country were English immigrants, because this was an imperialistic country and Great Britain was our mother. Unfortunately, the English farmers didn't want to come to Canada; they were doing very well in England. So we didn't get English farmers; we got English clerks and people from the cities who knew nothing about farming. Now this created a lot of trouble, because a lot of them are arrogant and a lot of them are snobbish and they rub Canadians the wrong way. That's why you literally had, and I've seen it, advertisements saying, "No Englishmen need

apply". That's changed, I'm happy to say, but in filling up the "Last Best West", as it was called, we brought in people who *did* want to come here, *desperate* to come here, starving where they were in awful conditions in the Ukraine. We called them "Galeeshans" (??) and we either welcomed them or rejected them, depending on our politics. If you were a Liberal, they were the salt of the earth; if you were a Conservative, they were the *scum* of the earth. Mackenzie Bowle – who should have known better, he was a former Prime Minister – called them "disgusting creatures". A lot of racism in those days. What we wanted were Northerners because of the belief that Northerners were the best kind of people to farm the Prairies. They kept out the Italians until they started building cities, and then they found they needed builders and brought in millions of those.

But Laurier's famous quote suggests the optimism of that period. We've never had an optimistic period as great as the first decade of this century. We were prepared to do anything; we thought anything was possible. Laurier thought we could support not two more transcontinental railways, which were being built and would soon go bankrupt, but *five*! He saw no reason why there shouldn't be five transcontinental railways by the end of the decade and *100 million* people. That's how people thought in those days.

What happened was that with the filling up of the plains, we created a state within a state, a nation within a nation, and we created somebody called "the Westerner". That word was not used in our parlance before 1904. The Westerner is a man of great pride, great optimism, and if you want to put it strongly, great arrogance. He thought he was the greatest thing in the world, and if you thought of the West today, you might find a bit of that still around. [laughter] But the country was divided in many ways – certainly between the West and what the Westerners callt he East and what we call Central Canada – divided not only by psychology, but also by the presence of the Canadian Shield. So you had West vs. East, you had French vs. English and you had Imperialists vs. Nationalists. You had a chopped-up land full of tension, and the results of that are being felt today.

Now the second thing I wanted to talk about was the Great War. A lot of you will say, "Why does he mention the Great War as a defining moment and not the Second War?" Because the Great War and the Second War were the same war! They just went out to recess for a few years and started it all over again! But the Great War was a very Canadian war. The losses were devastating. We've never had losses like that before or since. They were far worse than in the second war. The conscription war of 1917 tore the country apart, and it's never quite recovered. The war also put Canada on the map! It made us stand tall in international eyes and in the League of Nations, where we got our own seat. Women got the vote as a result of the Great War. It was the end of imperialism and the end of puritanism.

But really, you know, the three wars – the Boer War, the Great War and the Second World War – are all linked together because the Boer War made war look easy. Not many people were killed in the Boer War, especially among Canadians – we sent out 7300-odd volunteers and there were… how many deaths? 224 people, and half of those

died of disease, so it made it look as if war was easy, and this had it's corollary when war began again. The generals were almost entirely myopic, as generals generally tend to be – they always fight the present war, as you know, on the basis of the last one. The generals thought the next war would be just like the last one – you know, red-coated volunteers dashing across the belt on black horses, we the lances pointed and the sabres at the ready. Forget it! They'd forgotten that there were two inventions that had been developed to the point that they were devastating – one was the magazine rifle, the other was the machine gun. But the mindset of the generals was such that they couldn't understand that warfare was about to change totally.

One man who understood it was a man named Ivan Bloch – B-L-O-C-H. He was a Polish Russian businessman and banker, and he published a book called *Is War Now Impossible?* at the end of the 19th century, and concluded that it was pretty well impossible, because as he said – and nobody got this – "everybody will be entrenched in the next war. The spade will be as indispensable to the soldier as his rifle." And that's exactly what happened. We know that they lived in what _____ (name??) called a _____ (??) world. I'm afraid that Bloch was ignored totally; one general said anything he'd written was trash, besides, he was an outsider who was not part of the military elite of those days. He was a civilian, he was a banker, he was a Russian, *and* from their point of view he was a Jew.

What the Great War brought to all of us was a great sense of disillusionment. We'd been led, by the propagandists, and by the novellists, to believe that war was the supreme sacrifice, that we were saving the world for democracy, that this was the war to end all wars, and we thought that until the bloodbath of the Sommes, in which 60 000 young Allied men, marching line after line after line after line after line towards the German Gun emplacements, only to be mowed down, line after line. 60 000 killed in one day of the Great War. The whole purpose of wartime propaganda was to prove to the mothers – who really were in charge of the recruiting, because they could say to their sons "Don't go" – was to prove to them that their sons *should* go, and that they were engaged in a crusade, that they were not going to die in vain. They have to fight for *something*, so what they did in World War One was to demonize the Germans, especially the Kaiser, who became the devil incarnate, the anti-Christ of all anti-Christs, the man who stamped all over poor little Belgium and deserved anything he got.

On the other hand, the positive side of the war, from our point of view, if you set aside the deaths, was that the Canadians stood very tall. They stood tall at Ypres, the assailant there, when in two gas attacks, they did not flinch, they stood steady; the French territorials ran as fast as they could, the Canadians held the line. Nobody had told them there was going to be a gas attack, though there was lots of evidence there would've been, but the Intelligence corps didn't think the gas was important, that it wouldn't have any effect, but it did, of course. Right after the gas attacks… well, not *right* after, but almost… we had a wonderful victory at Vimy, which was praised all over the world, because we had done what the British had tried to do and didn't do and what the French had tried to do and didn't do – we took the ridge and we took it in about half a morning. And the third thing is that the Canadians became the elite troops of the war, along with

the Australians, who they hated – they fought all the time, they kept them separate the whole time – but they were the shock troops that spearheaded the last 100 days which was again back to fire and movement, and as a result, took their place in the world in the League of Nations.

The war threw up some remarkable people, but the most remarkable of all was the general, Arthur Curry. A failed real estate man before the war started, forced to embezzle some money for his mess kit – which caused great embarrassment to the government the day when it turned out he was the best general they had – but Curry rose to the top, and I mean the top, because Lloyd George said, in the last year of the war, if the war went on another year, Curry would lead the British troops in place of Hague. That didn't happen, partly because Curry himself was so good, that prevented it from happening!

But… think of the losses. We lost 60 000 young men – *killed*, alone, never mind wounded – 60 000 of the best and the brightest killed, and then, in the flu epidemic that followed that, we lost another 30 000 rising young men, because the flu didn't attack *old* men, and it didn't attack children, it attacked the *same generation* that was being decimated by the war. We only had eight million people in the country then. You can't lose than many without devastating results. We lost how many poets, how many playwrights, how many leaders, how many businessmen, how many political leaders, we don't know. It caused a loss of nerve in this country.

It also brought disillusionment to the nation as it did to many nations; there was a lost generation and this was part of it. Our whole attitude towards war changed in the 20s and 30s, because the novellists, and the poets, and the writers who had been in the war began to say what the war was really like, and this had been kept from the people via the strictest censorship we have ever seen in a so-called free country. *Anything* that would influence recruiting or hurt recruiting was banned. And so the war was presented to the mothers of this generation as a wonderful adventure for their boys. So after the war there was kind of a double thinking in Canada – we were proud of what we did, but we also realized that what we had done was devastating. It was not the Christian sacrifice that everybody from Ralph Connor to Lord ____ (name??) claimed it was. It was a lie… and at *huge* cost.

There were 30 novels written during the World War One and every one of them said the same thing, that this was a wonderful war. And the real problem that that caused was that the peace movement which swept the country, the anti-militarist movement, made it very difficult for the military to do anything about it. The… you know, it went this far – a friend of mine wanted to join the Boy Scouts with me. His mother wouldn't let him because she didn't want him to wear a uniform. And that was general across all of Canada. The Cadets suffered, and the Boy Scouts suffered, and everybody else. And the military suffered to the point where when I joined the Army in '42, we still didn't have ___ (??) guns, because they hadn't made enough, because of the peace movement.

We also had the situation at the League of Nations; Mussolini was about to invade Ethiopia. One of our own people, Riddell, Walter Riddell, our representative at the

League, put forth a motion saying that we should apply oil sanctions to Italy. And as Riddell says himself in his memoirs, if that had happened, Mussolini would've been brought to his knees within three months. It did not happen, because the nations of the world didn't want it to happen, *especially* Canada, which under Mackenzie King was only interested in one thing, and that was no war. The war had been so horrible that people didn't want another one, but as a result, they got another one, whether they liked it or not. Canada was an isolationist country in the 30s. "Peace at any price" was the phrase, and it lead to appeasement, which as we all know through Churchill's memoirs, if nobody else's, it lead to a Second World War which was equally devastating.

But then you see, the 30s was a decade of penny-pinching, and the easiest way to pinch a penny was to deny weapons or materials to this very tiny group of militia and permanent force officers who formed the ____ (??) we had in the 30s. We also felt the effects of the land boom, very badly, in the 30s. When you realize that more was spent on servicing a debt that had been incurred by the two bankrupt railways that had formed the CNR, there was… then was the amount spent on relief. More money for interest than on the relief. And you know, you had R.B. Bennett, who said, uh… probably the worst Prime Minister we ever had. And that's going a sum, because there are quite a few right in line there. [laughter] What did Bennett say in 1931? *Listen* to this, there's resonance of it today: "We will *not* put a premium on idleness." Ye Gods, half the country was idle, desperate to get a job! And Bennett thought they were all lazy. You hear some echoes of that, even now. Bennett had a terror of revolution; he put… his solution to the unemployment problem was to put all the young men into what were then called, practically, slave camps, as far from the city as possible so they wouldn't revolt, and created a cultural wasteland in this country.

I know of only one book written about the Depression of the 1930s in Canada, and that was Irene Baird's book *Waste Heritage* about the post office strike in Vancouver. All this time in the States… isn't this interesting, we are known now as the country that really subsidizes the Arts, through the Canada Council, as a result of the Massey Commission, and every other way, and the States goes it alone, they hope for private enterprise to do it. But in the 30s, we didn't give a nickel from the government to the Arts, to culture, but in the United States under FDR they formed the Work Projects Administration and subsidized literally thousands of writers, dramatists, poets, artists and so on. And the result of this is that America got a culture out of this that we didn't get.

The bright spot is that the 30s were so devastating that it lead to the umbrella of social services for which we are universally renowned, and rightfully so. It also, I think, lead to the peace-keeping role that we play, because you see, one of the great Canadian words is "compromise". We had to learn it.

And this takes us to the Quiet Revolution, which was started really by Jean Lesage and later be Rene Levesque, who quit the Liberals and formed a new party. But it goes really back to the Boer War, as so much does. Because the split between the English and the French-speaking peoples began with Henri Bourrassa fighting Laurier – or aiding and abetting him in some cases, fighting the *other* party – who wanted to send a contingent,

paid for by the government, to South Africa. In the end they didn't, they sent volunteers, but the government paid for them, until they got to South Africa, and then the British paid. But this was a compromise. In World War One, Sam Hughes was half-crazy – he was minister of the militia in the government – cuckoo, and he was also an Orangeman who hated the French, as a result of which he put a Methodist in charge of recruiting in the province of Quebec and then wondered why nobody would join! And that has not been forgotten. French-Canadians have never wanted to be part of any European quarrel, and that's been the basis of our troubles with them, because the rest of Canada rallied around the old flag in the past.

I have a quote from Andree Lorindeau (sp??), who made a trek across Canada when he was Chairman of the Bi-Bi Commission; he came really as an outsider and a stranger to this weird country in the west. He said: "Provincialism is strong everywhere. They call themselves Canadians, but they look at things first and foremost as Albertans or Manitobans, etc. The only way to make any headway with them is to remind them that they *are* Canadians, that Quebec is part of Canada, that if separation split the country apart, they would feel its effects." And the same things were said by a prominent Quebec broadcaster who was given a Canada Council grant really to go across the country and see what was going on, Madame _____ (name??). And she wrote in her diary, "Canada does not exist as a whole, but it is regionalized into eleven different provinces. I write eleven because English Quebec is an entity of its own on this continent."

This is the great Canadian dilemma which as faced us for the whole century – the dilemma of geography vs. history. We are separated by enormous barriers that nobody else faces – three sets of mountains, the angry ocean cutting off two provinces, the Canadian Shield spang (??) in the centre of the country, you can't get across it with anything but a canoe until the railways were built. We're facing the same two problems in this country that they're facing in other parts of the world – globalization vs. balkanization. Government policy has always been the same, really, no matter who's in charge: 1. To keep the country from flying apart; 2. To prevent some other country from taking us over. This has been the dilemma that we have been trying to solve since Laurier's days.

I think we've learned something from the past, the good and the bad. I think in the coming millennium, if we can remain a distinctive identity in a North American economic and social sphere and social place, if we can hold together by reaching an accommodation with various geographical and historical elements in this fractured land, if we can do this not just for ourselves – and God knows that's important, to stick together and retain our identity – but to act as an example, a lesson for the rest of the world which we have learned the hard way… if we can, if we should manage to do this, to solve the twin problems of unity and diversity in a different age, well, the 20th century may not have been our century, but we sure learned a lot from it and we're making sure that we learn those lessons and put them to practical use. Thank you.