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PRIME MINISTER HARPER COMMEMORATES
THE BIRTH OF SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD

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ANNOUNCER: The Right Honourable Stephen Harper.

[Long applause]

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE STEPHEN HARPER (Prime Minister of Canada): Merci beaucoup. Thank you very much everybody. Thank you Arthur for that very warm and kind introduction and thank you also. I know everybody here wants to thank you. Arthur really has put his heart and soul into these celebrations and really deserves to be recognized.

[Applause]

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are here to honour our very first Prime Minister so I would obviously like to begin by acknowledging again—once again—the other former prime ministers who are here with us today, the Right Honourable John Turner, 17th Prime Minister of Canada, and...

[Applause]

And the Right Honourable Kim Campbell, 19th Prime Minister of Canada.

[Applause]

Greetings to His Excellency High Commissioner Drake and Mrs. Drake as well as my parliamentary colleagues past and present, I recognize a number of people here today. Of course also Lieutenant-Governor Dowdeswell, Mayor Paterson, everybody from other levels of government, provincial, municipal, First Nations. I'd also like to salute the special guest who I suspect has travelled the greatest distance to be here with us today, and that is the Right Honourable

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Tricia Marwick, presiding Officer of the Parliament of Scotland. Welcome to Canada.

[Applause]

It's a pleasure to be here in Kingston, the first capital of the pre-Confederation province of Canada et d'être ici pour célébrer le deux centième anniversaire de naissance de notre premier premier ministre, sir John A. Macdonald.

It's a pleasure to be here to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of the birth of our first Prime Minister. Sir John Alexander Macdonald, that has been mentioned, served this city faithfully and Kingstonians returned his loyalty, electing him to office 13 times over nearly half a century--first as a young Alderman and the last time, just before his death, as Prime Minister.

It's also very appropriate that we mark the occasion in this historic building for as our mayor noted, Macdonald began his political career the year the cornerstone here was laid—1843. His portrait, the restoration of which we will see today, has dominated this room for many years, and even in death he returned, for here in this very room, he lay in state.

At that time, even one of his great opponents, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, conceded, and I quote:

“It is almost impossible to conceive that the political life of this country, the fate of this country can continue without him.”

But it did, and today we gather, not to mourn his passing but to celebrate his birth.

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Parce que sans sir John A. Macdonald le Canada, tel que nous le connaissons, le meilleur pays au monde, n'existerait tout simplement pas.

Without Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada as we know it—the best country in the world—simply would not exist.

[Applause]

Another Prime Minister, Arthur Meighen, said the following 50 years after Sir John's death. Quote:

“We turn aside for a mere moment to pay tribute where tribute is due and to gain inspiration if we can, courage if we can, wisdom if we can, at the fountain of history.”

For Macdonald's story is the story of Canada. A shining example of modesty, hope, and success. Born in Glasgow in humble circumstances, no-one had reason to suppose great achievements lay in young John's future, with one exception of course, his mother. “Mark my words,” she said, “John will make more than an ordinary man.” And so he did.

The child of a hardworking family recently arrived in Upper Canada, he used his sharp mind, an ability to think big and a capacity to build bridges, he took a group of poor, wilderness colonies and spent a lifetime of hard work building them into a promising, young country.

Et n'oubliez pas. Rien de ce que Macdonald a accompli avec les autres pères de la Confédération n'était certain ou inévitable.

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Never forget, there was nothing certain or inevitable about what Macdonald and his fellow Fathers of Confederation accomplished. It was, in fact, remarkable. And it is truly a story that every generation should learn and know.

I've sometimes thought that Macdonald forged Canada out of sheer will. Macdonald a forgé des coalitions et des consensus entre des partis politiques, entre l'ouest et l'est, entre francophones et anglophones. En effet, la grande amitié qui lui liait à George-Étienne Cartier, dont nous avons célébré le bicentenaire l'an dernier, est l'un des grands piliers de l'histoire de notre pays.

When Maritimers were considering their own political union, Macdonald crashed the Charlottetown conference and convinced everyone there to think of something far more grand. When the time came to craft what would become Canada's constitution, the 72 resolutions that formed the basis of the British-North America Act, he wrote two thirds of the document in his own hand. That, by the way, is D'Arcy McGee's account.

For his part, Macdonald, with a politician's gift for claiming credit said simply that he had no help.

[Laughter]

And after July 1st 1867, with the Dominion of Canada finally established, his work continued. He oversaw the acquisition of Canada's great western and northern expanse, created the Northwest Mounted Police to patrol it, and built a railway all the way across it to the Pacific.

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À la fin de ses quarante-huit ans en politique, sir John A. Macdonald avait déjà bâti l'essentiel du pays qui est le nôtre aujourd'hui.

His achievement—Confederation from sea to sea to sea—is truly larger than life. And yet, remarkably, Macdonald never became—never has become—a kind of mythological figure like similar characters in so many other countries.

Comme canadiens, nous avons voulu comprendre que même nos plus formidables citoyens sont des êtres humains qui, malgré leurs réalisations extraordinaires, ne sont pas à l'abri des fautes et des défaillances comme tout autres êtres humains.

As Canadians, we've insisted on understanding even our greatest citizens as human beings who despite superlative achievement, have faults and failings like any other. In Macdonald's case, perhaps most often noted, was his penchant for alcohol and its abuse. Maybe it relieved the pressures that came with executing such a grand high-risk project, maybe it eased the burden of a personal life tainted by tragedy and hardship. Whatever it was, Macdonald was acutely aware of his own humanity and as a consequence, very forgiving of it in others.

“My sins of omission and commission, I do not deny,” a contemporary once recalled him saying, “but I trust that it may be said of me in the ultimate issue, much is forgiven because he loved much, for I have loved my country with a passionate love,” unquote.

This passionate love, this true patriot love is our inheritance. It is also our burden. On n'a jamais fini de bâtir un pays. Nation-building is never complete. Just as the job was only partway done upon Macdonald's death nearly a

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quarter-century after Confederation, still as we speed toward the sesquicentennial, a period over which precious few other constitutional orders have survived, the challenges and opportunities have become ever greater for us.

In a toast following the Charlottetown Conference 150 years ago, Macdonald raised his glass to Cartier, Tupper, Tilley, Brown, Taché, Galt, and all the others, and he said the following:

“For twenty long years I’ve been dragging myself through the dreary waste of colonial politics. I thought there was no end and nothing worthy of ambition but now I see something which is well worthy of all I have suffered in the cause of my little country.”

Here perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, we can accuse Macdonald of understatement. The Canada we love today is in many ways, so much more than even his grandest imagination could conceive. But in other ways, it is exactly the great nation to which he aspired. Peaceful and prosperous. A country of courage and compassion, of faith and optimism, confident in a complex identity, and secure in our place in the world.

So, 200 years after the birth of our first prime minister, we should continue to dream as he did. Dreams as rugged as the Atlantic coast, mighty as the St. Lawrence, vast as the great forest, wide as the prairie skies, as beautiful as our northern lights.

Et au moment où nous nous préparons fièrement aux célébrations de 2017, souvenons-nous qu’elles sont en grandes parties été rendus possible grâce à un homme ordinaire dont on attendait peu mais qui, quand on lui en a donné l’occasion, a fait des choses extraordinaires.

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So as we proudly participate (sic) the celebrations of 2017, let us always remember that so much of it was made possible by an ordinary man of whom little was expected but who, given the opportunity, did extraordinary things. And that in my mind is really what this country is all about, like none other in the world. A country where what you've done and where you're going always matter more than where you're from or who you know. A country that thus embodies the story of its founder. It is a legacy that today we re-commit to protecting and preserving and passing on to future generations. A Canada where all things are possible. That is Sir John's legacy to us. Let it be ours as well to future generations.

Merci beaucoup. Thank you.

[Applause]

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