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Centennial lecture to explore Arctic sovereignty from Sir Wilfrid Laurier to today

WATERLOO – More than 100 years ago, Sir Wilfrid Laurier became the first prime minister to focus on strengthening Canada’s sovereignty over the Arctic. Today, climate change is profoundly affecting the Arctic and new questions are being raised about boundaries and ownership over vast oil and gas reserves.

The past, present and future of Canada’s Arctic sovereignty is the focus of a Wilfrid Laurier University lecture “Canada’s Arctic Sovereignty: From Prime Minister Laurier to Today” featuring acclaimed authors Shelagh Grant and Michael Byers. The lecture takes place Monday, Nov. 29 at 7 p.m. in the Senate and Board Chamber at Laurier’s Waterloo campus. The event is free and open to the public.

The lecture is the first in a four-part series entitled *100 years after Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier: Canada's Political Landscape*. The series celebrates both the university’s centennial in 2011, and the centennial of the end of Laurier’s time as prime minister. He served from 1896 to 1911.

Grant, author of the recently published *Polar Imperative, a History of Arctic Sovereignty in North America*, will discuss the history of the Arctic and Sir Wilfrid Laurier’s role. Byers, author of *Who Owns the Arctic? Understanding Sovereignty Disputes in the North*, will explain the sometimes-contradictory rules governing the Arctic and the disputes that still need to be resolved.

“These Arctic issues are important on their own, but it is also significant that they were important to former prime minister Laurier,” said retired Laurier professor Frank Millerd, who helped organize the lecture.

On September 1, 1880, Britain transferred the Arctic Islands to Canada, making it the second-largest country in the world. Initially Canadians were indifferent about Arctic sovereignty. But incursions by foreign explorers and whalers, and uncertainty about Canada’s title to the Arctic islands prompted Sir Wilfrid Laurier to be the first Canadian prime minister to work at strengthening Canada’s sovereignty over the Arctic. Starting in 1897, regular expeditions to the Arctic were mounted to claim Arctic islands, and police posts were established to provide evidence of Canadian occupation of the area.

Today, Canada is debating boundary issues with the United States and Denmark. In addition, climate change is making the North’s vast oil and gas reserves more accessible, and reduced ice cover is encouraging more freight and tourist ship voyages through the Northwest Passage. There are also questions about how to protect the rights of indigenous people as change occurs.