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- Flat repair
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Oak Ridges MP's bill fuels Laurier/Macdonald debate

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

John A. day? Not likely, a federal government spokesperson said yesterday.

Canadian Heritage Minister Sheila Copps was persuaded by bureaucrats not to support Oak Ridges MP Bryon Wilfert's private member's bills to declare national holidays on the birthdates of Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the *National Post* suggested this week.

Copps was told Canada's gross national product would fall by \$3 billion for each statutory holiday created, the *Post* said.

Wilfert, a former history teacher, introduced the private bills last year, calling them "one of my main goals in this parliament."

At the time, the Liberal MP said the bills would not create statutory holidays, "but rather ensure that the legacy and contribution of these two great former prime ministers is duly recognized."

The bills died from lack of support earlier this year. Sir John A. Macdonald Day would have been Jan. 11 and Sir Wilfrid Laurier Day Nov. 20.

Wilfert may not have intended the holidays to be statutory, but his bills would have amended the Holidays Act, which refers to statutory holidays, said Len Westerberg, a spokesperson for the heritage department.

"This is what apparently the process would have led to," he said yesterday.

Copps later met with Wilfert and advised him he could present a stand-alone bill that did not amend the act, Westerberg said.

Wilfert was away on vacation and could not be

reached.

In 1996, Prime Minister Jean Chretien declared a national but non-statutory holiday for Feb. 15, called both Flag Day and Heritage Day.

HONOUR HISTORICAL HEROES

But Westerberg added the heritage department gets requests all the time to declare national days.

There are so many Canadian historical figures and heroes, he argued, "you'd have the whole calendar filled in no time."

"Why not have one for this other prime minister?" Westerberg asked. "Why not have one for so-and-so... Why not have one for Alexander Graham Bell?"

Declare a national holiday, and "you start setting a precedent that people refer to," which explains why there are so few, he added.

However, the *Post* reported that Copps told Wilfert she intends to declare Nov. 20 a non-statutory holiday in honour of Laurier.

Wilfert had wanted to raise the profiles of Macdonald and Laurier, two of the most important politicians in Canadian history.

The MP has complained that far more Canadian children can identify Ronald McDonald than John A. Macdonald, the country's first prime minister.

Macdonald and Laurier influenced what Canada would become and national days honouring them would help build a Canadian "sense of place" and "put history on the map, put our past into our present a little bit," said Bruce Richard, curator of the York Region district public school board's heritage schoolhouse and founding coordinator of the board's annual Heritage Fair.

"Kids and adults would have these names planted in their memories again," Richard, past-president of the Ontario Historical Society, added yesterday.



BRYON WILFERT
MPP's motion sparks controversy

By Appointment



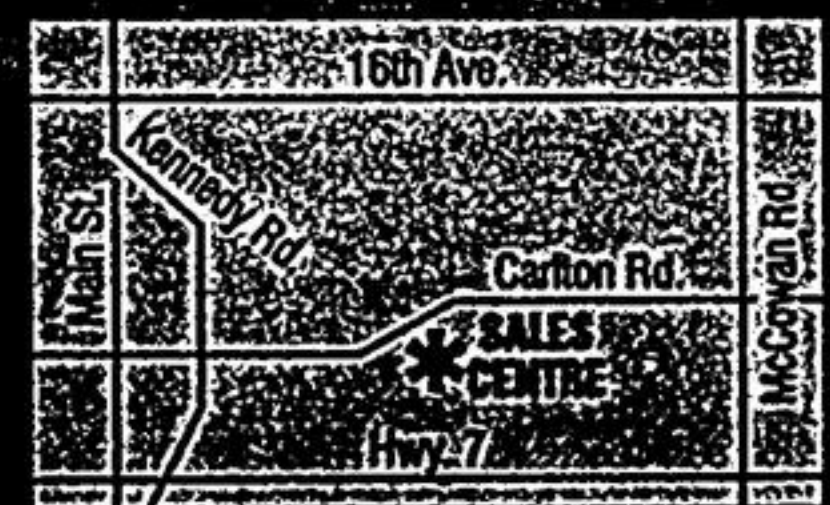
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