

William Lyon Mackenzie King

Canada's tenth prime minister

Quick Facts

Term(s) of Office:

- December 29, 1921–June 28, 1926
- September 25, 1926–August 7, 1930
- October 23, 1935–November 15, 1948

Born

- December 17, 1874, Berlin (Kitchener), Ontario

Died

- July 22, 1950, Kingsmere, Quebec
- **Grave site:** Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Toronto, Ontario

Education

- University of Toronto, B.A. 1895, LL.B. 1896, M.A. 1897
- University of Chicago 1896–1897
- Harvard University, M.A. Political Economy 1898, Ph.D. 1909

Personal Life

- Bachelor

Occupations

- 1900–1908 Canada's first Deputy Minister of Labour and editor of the *Labour Gazette*
- 1914–1918 Labour consultant, Rockefeller Foundation
- Author

Political Party

- Liberal
- 1919–1948 Party Leader

Constituencies

- 1908–1911 Waterloo North, Ontario
- 1919–1921 Prince, Prince Edward Island
- 1921–1925 York North, Ontario
- 1926–1945 Prince Albert, Saskatchewan
- 1945–1949 Glengarry, Ontario

Other Ministries

- 1909–1911 Labour
- 1921–1930, 1935–1946 Secretary of State for External Affairs

Political Record

- Industrial Disputes Investigation Act 1907
- Leader of the Opposition 1919–1921, 1926, 1930–1935
- Old Age Pension 1926
- Appointed Cairine Wilson first woman senator 1930

- Rowell-Sirois Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations 1937
- Led Canada as prime minister throughout Second World War 1939–1945
- National Resources Mobilization Act 1940
- Unemployment Insurance 1940
- National Plebiscite on Conscription 1942
- Construction of the Alaska Highway 1942–1943
- Family Allowances Act 1944

Biography

It is what we prevent, rather than what we do that counts most in Government.—Mackenzie King, August 26, 1936

This statement sums up best the secret of Mackenzie King's success as prime minister. King's record as prime minister is sometimes difficult to assess. He had no captivating image, he gave no spellbinding speeches, and he championed no radical platform. He is remembered for his mild-mannered, passive compromise and conciliation. Yet Mackenzie King led Canada for a total of 22 years, through half the Depression and all of the Second World War. Like every other prime minister, he had to possess ambition, stamina and determination to become prime minister and, in spite of appearances, his accomplishments in that role required political acuity, decisiveness and faultless judgement.

William Lyon Mackenzie King was born in Berlin (later renamed Kitchener), Ontario in 1874. His father was a lawyer and his maternal grandfather was William Lyon Mackenzie, leader of the 1837 Rebellion in Upper Canada. From an early age, King identified with his grandfather, an association that influenced him throughout his political life.

King studied economics and law at the University of Toronto and the University of Chicago. After graduating with an M.A. in 1897, he pursued his studies at Harvard. In 1900, he entered the civil service and became Deputy Minister of the new Department of Labour. King joined the Liberal party and won a seat in the 1908 election. The following year he was appointed Minister of Labour in Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier's Cabinet.

After he lost his seat in the 1911 election, King worked as a labour consultant for the Rockefeller Foundation in the United States. He ran and lost again in the 1917 election. Unlike most English-speaking Liberals, he stood by Laurier in opposition to conscription.

In 1919, King was elected leader of the Liberal party in the first leadership convention held in Canada. The party was still bitterly divided, with some Liberals in the Union government and some in Opposition. King's stand on conscription two years before won him the loyalty of Quebec.

Furthermore his skills as a conciliator were well developed by his labour experience and he put them to good use rebuilding the party. The Liberals won the 1921 election.

The contentious issue of King's first term of office was tariffs and freight rates. King reduced them, but not enough to satisfy the prairie farmers, who gave their support to the Progressives, a new political party formed to represent their interests. After the 1925 election, King could maintain his majority only with their support. The Liberals lost a vote of confidence the following year. The Governor General refused King's request to dissolve Parliament and called on Arthur Meighen, Leader of the Opposition to form the government. However, this lasted only four days, until King called for a vote on the constitutional right of Meighen to govern. The Conservatives lost the vote and an election was called.

Despite a recently uncovered scandal involving the Liberal Minister of Customs, King and his party won the 1926 election. He took advantage of the prosperity of the late 1920s to reduce the war debt and to introduce an old-age pension scheme. Although the Liberals lost the 1930 election, it was to their benefit in the long run. The worst years of the Depression were associated with the Conservatives. The Liberals were reinstated in government in 1935.

King led the nation through the Second World War, during which Canada contributed food supplies, financial aid, the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, ships, aircraft, tanks and over a million Canadian troops to the Allied cause. The close friendship of King with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President F. D. Roosevelt was one of the cornerstones of the Allied effort. One of the secrets of King's success as a leader was his ability to recognize the talents of his party members. He filled his Cabinet with extremely capable men and delegated to them the authority to carry out their tasks.

National unity was King's most important goal. He recognized that this did not mean forcing all Canadians to espouse one single vision, but accommodating a multitude of differing, and sometimes conflicting, viewpoints. It was this wisdom and his ability to compromise that allowed King to successfully negotiate the issue of conscription in 1944 and avoid the divisiveness of 1917.

As part of his ideals on social reform, King introduced unemployment insurance in 1940 and family allowance in 1944. Perhaps the most significant indication of King's success as prime minister is the fact that upon his retirement in 1948, his successor, Louis St. Laurent, won an election the following year and kept the Liberals in power for another eight years. Politics had been King's life and an exhausting one at that; he died in 1950, less than two years after retiring.

International Relations

In 1923, the Canadians and Americans worked out an agreement concerning fishing rights in the North Pacific, known as the Halibut Treaty, the first treaty independently negotiated and signed by the Canadian government. The British wanted to co-sign the agreement, but King insisted that this matter concerned only Canada and the United States; the British acquiesced.

The Chinese Immigration Act, introduced in 1885, was intended to discourage immigrants from China by charging each immigrant with a head tax of \$50; in 1900 this was increased to \$100 and in 1903 to \$500. This tax was abolished in 1923, and replaced with the Chinese Exclusion Act, which essentially closed the doors to the Chinese by restricting their admission to Canada.

Between 1925 and 1929, Canada opened diplomatic posts in Geneva, Washington and Tokyo. King raised the status of the Commissioner General in Paris by making the position equal to a minister in 1928.

King played an active part in the Imperial Conference of 1926. The conference concluded with the Balfour Report, which declared that the Dominions were “autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another....” This declaration led to the Statute of Westminster of 1931.

With the stock market crash of 1929 and the resulting economic depression of the 1930s, many people were out of work and unemployment insurance did not exist yet. Therefore Canadians didn't want new immigrants to take jobs away from them, so the government took steps to reduce immigration and even deported those immigrants that no longer had jobs. At that time, Canada did not have a clear policy on refugees, a subject eventually addressed at the Evian Conference of 1938.

When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, Canada declared war against the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy and Japan) independently of Great Britain's declaration. During the war, more than a million Canadians served in the armed forces. King hosted two conferences at which the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, and the American president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, met on Canadian soil, in Quebec City, in 1943 and 1944.

In December 1941, after Japan attacked the Americans at Pearl Harbor, Canadians of Japanese descent were sent to forced-labour internment camps for the duration of the war. Because they were viewed as enemy aliens, Japanese Canadians had their property and businesses confiscated. After the war, internees were given the choice of moving east of the Rocky Mountains or to Japan. They became enfranchised citizens again in 1949, but new immigrants from Japan were barred from entering Canada until 1967, when the immigration points system was introduced.

When fascist Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940, the War Measures Act allowed the government to designate Italian Canadians and Canadian fascist sympathizers as enemy aliens.

By October 1940, many were sent to internment camps and the Office of the Custodian of Alien Property was authorized to confiscate their properties.

King signed the United Nations Charter on behalf of Canada, in San Francisco, June 26, 1945.

In 1946, King appointed the Minister of Justice, Louis St. Laurent, to be Secretary of State for External Affairs, the first time this position had been held by someone other than the prime minister.

In part due to the participation of Chinese immigrants who enlisted to fight for Canada in the Second World War, the Chinese Exclusion Act was revoked in 1947. When the Canadian Citizenship Act came into effect January 1, 1947, the Chinese immigrants were finally recognized as Canadian citizens and allowed to vote.

Anecdote

Will the *red*/Mackenzie King please stand up?

For no other leader in Canadian politics was the dichotomy between public and private self more striking than with William Lyon Mackenzie King. His public image, the one for which so many Canadians repeatedly voted, was a dull, mild-mannered conciliator. Against “thunderers” like R. B. Bennett and the relentlessly logical Arthur Meighen, King was a quiet, safe and comfortably vague alternative.

Yet King led Canada for 22 years, through half the Depression and the whole of the Second World War. Such an accomplishment required political acuity, decisiveness and occasionally ruthlessness, all of which King was capable! And behind the image of the stuffy bachelor, King was a spiritualist. Caught up in the fad of spiritualism in the 1920s, King continued to hold séances throughout his life. With a few close friends and sometimes a medium, King regularly communicated with the spirits of his mother (to whom he was excessively devoted), his grandfather (the leader of the 1837 Rebellion, William Lyon Mackenzie), his predecessor Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the great 19th-century British Liberal Prime Minister Gladstone, as well as the saints Luke and John, all of who advised him on his career and politics!

While King was alive, of course, few had any inkling of this other side of his life. However, he kept a diary in which he recorded his activities with those of this world and the next.

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