

# Richard Bedford Bennett

Canada's eleventh prime minister

## Quick Facts

### *Term(s) of Office:*

- August 7, 1930–October 23, 1935

### *Born*

- July 3, 1870, Hopewell Hill, New Brunswick

### *Died*

- June 26, 1947, Mickleham, Surrey, England
- **Grave site:** Village churchyard, Mickleham, Surrey, England
- The only prime minister not buried in Canada

### *Education*

- New Brunswick Provincial Normal School, Fredericton, 1886
- Dalhousie University, LL. B. 1893

### *Personal Life*

- Bachelor

### *Occupations*

- 1886–1888 Teacher, Irishtown, New Brunswick
- 1888–1890 School principal, Douglstown, New Brunswick
- Lawyer (called to the New Brunswick Bar in 1893)
- 1896 Town Councillor of Chatham, New Brunswick
- 1898–1905 Member of the Assembly of the Northwest Territories
- 1909–1911 MLA Alberta
- 1910–1920 President, Calgary Power Company

### *Political Party*

- Conservative
- 1927–1938 Party Leader

### *Constituencies*

- 1911–1917 Calgary, Alberta
- 1925–1939 Calgary West, Alberta

### *Other Ministries*

- 1921 Justice and Attorney General of Canada
- 1926 Minister Without Portfolio
- 1926, 1930–1932 Finance and Receiver General
- 1926 (Acting) Mines, Interior, Superintendent General of Indian Affairs
- 1930–1935 Secretary of State for External Affairs, President of the Privy Council



### *Political Record*

- Director-General of National Service 1914–1917
- The Relief Act 1932
- Creation of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (forerunner of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) 1932
- Creation of the Bank of Canada 1935
- Creation of the Canadian Wheat Board 1935
- Leader of the Opposition 1935–1938
- Member of the House of Lords (United Kingdom) as Viscount Bennett 1941–1947

## Biography

*I propose that any government of which I am the head will at the first session of Parliament initiate whatever action is necessary to that end, or perish in the attempt.*—R. B. Bennett, June 9, 1930, on the elimination of unemployment

The severe economic conditions of the Depression brought the downfall of more than one government and Canada was no exception. In his campaign speech of 1930, Bennett had little idea of the disasters to come, nor were his Conservative policies capable of dealing with them. By 1935, he realized that only radical political and social reform would have any effect in alleviating Canada's economic misfortunes. But it was too little, too late. Not only did the government "perish in the attempt," but the fortunes of the Conservatives and Bennett's leadership of the party perished as well.

Richard Bedford Bennett was born in Hopewell Hill, New Brunswick in 1870, the son of a shipbuilder. After finishing Grade 8, he went to Normal School and trained as a teacher. By the age of 16 he was teaching near Moncton and two years later, became school principal in Douglastown. At the same time, he began articling part-time in a law office. By 1890, Bennett had saved enough money to study law at Dalhousie University. He graduated in 1893, and joined a local law firm. In 1897, he moved to Calgary and became the law partner of Conservative Senator James A. Lougheed.

His first foray into politics had been as alderman in Chatham, New Brunswick in 1896. In 1898, he won a seat in the Assembly for the Northwest Territories. An attempt to enter federal politics in 1900 failed, as did efforts to win a seat in Alberta's new Provincial Assembly in 1905. Nevertheless, his legal business prospered, which with wise investment, made him a wealthy man.

In 1909, Bennett won a Conservative seat in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. Two years later, he was elected to the House of Commons. Disappointed at not being made a Cabinet minister, Bennett did not run in the 1917 election. In 1921, Prime Minister Arthur Meighen asked Bennett to be Minister of Justice. His return to politics was short-lived however; Bennett lost in the 1921 election. He won in 1925 and served as Minister of Finance in Arthur Meighen's very brief

government in 1926. In 1927, the Conservative party held its first leadership convention and Bennett was elected leader.

The first signs of the Depression were evident by the 1930 election, when he campaigned on a platform of aggressive measures to combat it. Upon winning the election, Bennett was true to his promise and immediately allocated \$20 million towards helping the unemployed.

Unfortunately, the Depression brought hardship that neither he nor any other politician was equipped to handle. Conservative politics did not condone government interference in business practices or social welfare. Bennett did attempt to strengthen Canadian trade by initiating preferential tariffs, but this did nothing to help declining exports. By 1932, unemployment was so high that Bennett brought in the Relief Act which established camps to provide unemployed single men with a subsistence living. Relief for unemployed families was administered on a municipal level. Attempts by Bennett to coordinate welfare on a federal and provincial level were rejected by the provinces.

By 1933, the Depression was at its worst and Bennett's government appeared indecisive and ineffectual. He became the butt of jokes such as "Bennett buggies," cars pulled by horses or oxen because the owners could no longer afford gasoline. Dissension was widespread throughout the party and Cabinet due to Bennett's inability to delegate authority. He held the portfolios for finance and for external affairs, and his failure to consult with Cabinet angered his ministers. One in particular, Henry Stevens, openly rebelled. His insistence that the Conservatives adopt a radical platform of political and social reform caused a rift in the party. Stevens eventually resigned and formed a new, but short-lived political entity, the Reconstruction party.

Influenced by American President Roosevelt's "New Deal," Bennett proposed a new platform of government policy in 1935, announced to the nation in a series of radio broadcasts. Abandoning his previous policies, Bennett advocated minimum wage, health and unemployment insurance, government regulation of banking and trade, and other social reforms. But it was too late; Bennett and his party were too closely associated with the hardships of the Depression. In the October 1935 election, the Liberal party won under the leadership of Mackenzie King.

Bennett remained Opposition leader until 1938. Despondent over his rejection by voters and the conflicts in the Conservative party, he emigrated to Britain where he was made Viscount in 1941 and sat in the House of Lords. He died in Britain in 1947 and was buried near his estate in Mickleham, Surrey.

Bennett was a generous man; he gave \$25,000 a year to numerous charities. Throughout the Depression, many of the hundreds of letters he received requesting help were answered with aid and money from his own pocket.

## International Relations

Bennett was a strong supporter of the British connection. He led the Canadian delegation to the Imperial Conference of 1930. In 1932, he hosted the Imperial Economic Conference in Ottawa, where several agreements were made to stimulate trade between Commonwealth countries. For example, Canada agreed to lower some tariffs on British goods while raising them on non-British imports, and Britain agreed not to impose duties on foodstuffs from countries of the Empire. Bennett hoped that these measures would combat the effects of the Great Depression, but they helped in only a few areas.

During Bennett's term, the British government passed the Statute of Westminster on December 11, 1931. This made the dominions fully independent, except in areas where they chose not to be. In Canada's case, for example, after consultations between the federal government and the provinces, it was agreed that the authority to amend the British North America Act would remain with the British parliament, a situation that continued until the Canadian constitution was patriated in 1982.

## Anecdote

### The desperate plea of a penniless farmer's wife

*September 28, 1933*

*Dear Prime Minister R. B. Bennett,*

*It is with a very humble heart I take the opportunity of writing this letter to you, to ask you if you will please send for the underwear in the Eaton's order, made out and enclosed in this letter. My husband will be 64 in December and his neuritis is very bad. We have had very few crops for the last three years, not enough at all to pay taxes and live, and this year's crops are a complete failure. My husband is drawing wood on the wagon for 34 miles. It takes two days for a trip and he has to sleep out under the wagon. It is cold and windy. I am writing this in the hope that you will send for this underwear for him, as we have no money ourselves. I have patched and darned his old underwear for the last two years, but they are completely worn out. We have never asked for anything of anybody before. If I can only get this underwear for my husband, I can manage for myself, as I can stay in the house over the winter.....*

Prime Minister R. B. Bennett was very wealthy and had never experienced poverty. Canada, like the rest of the world, was in the midst of a devastating Depression, a situation neither he nor any other politician could solve. He was inundated with letters from destitute Canadians pleading for help.

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