

John George Diefenbaker

Canada's thirteenth prime minister

Quick Facts

Term(s) of Office:

- June 21, 1957–April 22, 1963

Born

- September 18, 1895, Neustadt, Ontario

Died

- August 16, 1979, Ottawa, Ontario
- **Grave site:** Beside the Diefenbaker Canada Centre, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Education

- University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, B.A. 1915, M.A. Political Science and Economics 1916, LL.B. 1919

Personal Life

- Married 1929, Edna Brower (1901–1951)
- Re-married 1953, Olive Palmer (1902–1976)
- One stepdaughter

Occupations

- 1916–1917 Lieutenant, 105th Saskatoon Fusiliers
- Criminal lawyer (called to the Saskatchewan Bar in 1919)
- 1936–1938 Leader, Saskatchewan, Conservative Party

Political Party

- Progressive Conservative
- 1956–1967 Party Leader

Constituencies

- 1940–1953 Lake Centre, Saskatchewan
- 1953–1979 Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

Other Ministries

- 1957 Secretary of State for External Affairs
- 1959 Secretary of State for External Affairs (Acting)
- 1962–1963 President of the Privy Council

Political Record

- Leader of the Opposition 1956–1957
- Appointed Ellen Fairclough first woman Cabinet minister
- Canadian Bill of Rights 1958
- Appointed James Gladstone first Aboriginal senator 1958
- Franchise extended to all Aboriginal peoples, 1960
- Royal Commission on Health Services 1961

- Agricultural Rehabilitation and Development Act 1961
- Created the National Productivity Council (Economic Council of Canada) 1963
- Leader of the Opposition 1963–1967

Biography

I am the first prime minister of this country of neither altogether English or [sic] French origin. So I determined to bring about a Canadian citizenship that knew no hyphenated consideration....I'm very happy to be able to say that in the House of Commons today in my party we have members of Italian, Dutch, German, Scandinavian, Chinese and Ukrainian origin—and they are all Canadians.

—John Diefenbaker, March 29, 1958

While previous prime ministers had concerned themselves with the reconciliation of French and English culture in Canada, John Diefenbaker aspired to include those of other ethnic extractions in the national identity. Furthermore, he drew attention to the rights of Canada's indigenous population, who had also been left out of the "two founding nations" equation. Under his prime ministership, Canada's Aboriginal peoples were allowed to vote federally for the first time, and James Gladstone, a member of the Kainai First Nation (Blood Tribe) was the first Native person appointed to the Senate.

Diefenbaker's political career is a lesson in determination and tenacity. He met with failure and opposition many times in his life, but never let it prevent him from pursuing his goals. John George Diefenbaker was born in Neustadt, Ontario in 1895; his parents were of German and Scottish descent. His family moved to Fort Carlton, north of Saskatoon in 1903 where they homesteaded. John's father taught school and encouraged his sons to read. At a young age, Diefenbaker read a book about Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier and decided that someday he also would lead Canada.

Diefenbaker attended the University of Saskatchewan, graduating with a general B.A. in 1915 and an M.A. in political science and economics in 1916. He enlisted in the army in 1916 and served briefly in Britain, before being invalided home the following year.

Returning to university to study law, he graduated with an LL.B. in 1919. He set up a law practice in Wakaw, near Prince Albert. Diefenbaker quickly established himself as a successful criminal lawyer. Over his 20-year career, he defended 18 men from the death penalty.

Diefenbaker had not forgotten his political ambitions. However his attempts to enter politics at any level initially met with failure. He ran for a seat in the House of Commons in 1925 and 1926, but lost. He tried the provincial legislature in 1929 and 1938, with no luck. His attempt to run for mayor of Prince Albert in 1933 also failed. Diefenbaker was elected leader of the Conservative party

of Saskatchewan in 1936, but the party won no seats in the 1938 election. Finally in the 1940 election, he won a Commons seat in the Opposition.

The Conservatives remained in Opposition throughout the King and St. Laurent governments. It was here that Diefenbaker began his campaign for the average Canadian and ethnic minorities. In 1942, he criticized the government's treatment of Japanese Canadians. He even opposed his own party in his crusades; in 1948 he blocked a Conservative campaign to outlaw the Communist party.

Diefenbaker stood as a candidate for leadership of the party in 1942 and in 1948, but lost both times. He finally succeeded in 1956. As Opposition leader, he harried the Liberals throughout the Pipeline Debate and discredited them in the eyes of the electorate. In the 1957 election, Canadians saw for the first time Diefenbaker's remarkable campaign style. Part circus barker, part vaudeville actor, Diefenbaker's theatrical delivery entertained Canadians, and his appeal to the farmer, store owner and factory worker won their hearts and their votes. He became "Dief, the Chief."

The Conservatives won a minority government in 1957 and the following year they were returned with, at that time, the greatest majority of seats in Canadian history. But Diefenbaker's policies were radical and often contrary to traditional Conservative values. The fact that the party had been out of office for 22 years added to their problems.

In 1957, Ellen Fairclough became the first woman to serve as a federal Cabinet Minister when she was appointed Secretary of State. Diefenbaker championed the Canadian Bill of Rights in 1958 and gave all Aboriginal people the right to vote in 1960. Agriculture was one of the few sectors not to benefit from the post-war boom; therefore the federal government introduced in 1961 the Agricultural Rehabilitation and Development Act, which was one of the first explicit attempts to create a national program for rural economic development. Diefenbaker undertook a massive northern infrastructure development program, which included airports, highways, and icebreakers.

But high unemployment, the devaluation of the dollar and the cancellation of the Avro Arrow project eroded the Tories' popularity. They were reduced to a minority government in 1962 and lost to the Liberals in the election the following year. Diefenbaker's radical policies eventually alienated his party. A leadership review was called and he lost to Robert Stanfield in 1967. Nevertheless, he continued to represent his riding in the Commons. He won his last election in 1979, three months before his death on August 16.

Sir John A. Macdonald was Diefenbaker's hero, and he was determined to have a state funeral as grand as that which had honoured Canada's first prime minister. A special train bore the Chief's body back to Saskatoon where he was buried.

International Relations

As a staunch supporter of human rights, Diefenbaker was repulsed by apartheid, but he did not want to see South Africa leave the Commonwealth. But at the 1961 Commonwealth conference, when it became clear that South Africa was intransigent about apartheid, he threw his support behind the African and Asian members, the only white leader to do so. As a result South Africa withdrew its application, bitterly blaming Diefenbaker for the result. However, Diefenbaker's stand was praised in Canada and abroad as being the right thing to do.

In 1961, a wheat-trading agreement was signed with China. This paved the way for diplomatic relations between the two nations, when the Trudeau administration formally recognized China in 1970. The agreement was regarded unfavourably by the Americans since China was supporting Vietnam in the war.

Shortly after Diefenbaker took office, the North American Air Defence Agreement (NORAD) was announced. The new prime minister took the advice of the Canadian military and agreed to the integration of Canadian and American air-defence forces. But there were some problems with the arrangement. When the Cuban missile crisis occurred in October 1962, the fact that the two governments had to agree on any action proved difficult. The United States went on standby alert as soon as the crisis became apparent, but Diefenbaker delayed for several days, angering the Kennedy administration and many people in Canada.

Under NORAD, Canada had agreed to have missiles on its soil, but Diefenbaker did not want these to be armed with nuclear warheads. When the United States began pressuring him to accept the nuclear warheads, he vacillated. Also, his Cabinet was divided; Minister of Defence Douglas Harkness wanted the warheads, while the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Howard Green, was opposed. Diefenbaker's stumbling on this matter led to a Cabinet revolt, which contributed to the defeat of his government in the election of April 1963.

Anecdote

Prime minister to the rescue

In 1959, animal lovers throughout Canada were horrified to hear that the 250 wild ponies of Sable Island had been declared "surplus" by the Crown Assets Disposal Corporation in Ottawa. What was going to happen to them? The media were full of rumours that they were to be shot and turned into dog food! Was it possible that the government could do such a cruel and heartless thing? Not only was it inhumane, it was also destroying part of our natural heritage; the wild horses had been on Sable Island for at least 200 years!

Prime Minister John Diefenbaker was inundated with hundreds of letters from school children, pleading with him to spare the ponies. The prime minister was an animal lover himself; furthermore

he could see that the issue was a potential public relations disaster for the government. Cabinet reversed the Crown Assets decision in June 1960. Diefenbaker announced in the House of Commons that not only would the horses be spared, but the government would also ensure that the herd was protected and preserved.

Once again, the prime minister was flooded with letters from the children, this time thanking him for saving Sable Island's ponies.

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