

John Napier Turner

Canada's seventeenth prime minister

Quick Facts

Term(s) of Office:

- June 30, 1984–September 17, 1984

Born

- June 7, 1929, Richmond, Surrey, England
- Immigrated to Rossland, British Columbia in 1932

Education

- University of British Columbia, B.A. 1949
- Oxford University, Rhodes Scholar, B.A. Jurisprudence, 1951, B.C.L. 1952, M.A. 1957
- University of Paris 1952–1953

Personal Life

- Married 1963, Geills McCrae Kilgour (b. 1937)
- One daughter, three sons

Occupations

- Lawyer (called to the Quebec Bar in 1954, to the Ontario Bar in 1968)
- 1976–1984 Practised law in Toronto

Political Party

- Liberal
- 1984–1990 Party Leader

Constituencies

- 1962–1968 St-Laurent-St-Georges, Quebec
- 1968–1976 Ottawa-Carleton, Ontario
- 1984–1993 Vancouver Quadra, British Columbia

Other Ministries

- 1965–1967 Minister Without Portfolio
- 1967 Registrar General of Canada
- 1967–1968 Consumer and Corporate Affairs
- 1968 Solicitor General
- 1968–1972 Justice and Attorney General of Canada
- 1972–1975 Finance

Political Record

- Criminal Code Amendment (hate propaganda) 1970
- Appointed Bora Laskin first Jewish Justice of the Supreme Court 1970
- Creation of the Law Reform Commission 1971
- Leader of the Opposition 1984–1990

Biography

Any country that is willing to surrender economic levers inevitably yields levers politically and surrenders a large chunk of its ability to remain a sovereign nation. I don't believe our future depends on our yielding those economic levers of sovereignty to become a junior partner in Fortress North America to the United States.—John Turner, October 12, 1988

Not the words one would expect to hear from a former company director on the subject of free trade. But despite his many years in business, John Turner's vision of Canada went beyond mere dollars and cents. He understood the risks associated with free trade so he tried to convince Canadians not to vote for the Progressive Conservatives who supported the idea.

John Napier Turner was born in 1929 in Richmond, Surrey, just outside of London, England. Turner might have grown up British had his father not died when John was only three years old. Turner's mother, Phyllis, was Canadian, and she returned to her hometown of Rossland, British Columbia after her husband's death. The following year, she was offered a job with the Tariff Board in Ottawa. Phyllis Turner began her distinguished career as a civil servant and her children grew up in Ottawa.

Turner attended Ashbury College and St. Patrick's before his mother married Frank Mackenzie Ross, a wealthy Vancouver businessman. The family moved west and Turner enrolled at the University of British Columbia. He studied political science, economics and English, and excelled in track and field. When he graduated in 1949, he won a Rhodes Scholarship, so he studied law at Oxford. Turner then went to Paris to work on a doctorate at the University of Paris. In 1953, he came back to Vancouver to study for the Canadian bar. Turner moved to Montréal to join the law firm of Stikeman and Elliott. He was called to the Quebec Bar in 1954.

Turner was lured into politics by Liberal Cabinet minister C.D. Howe. In 1957, Howe asked him to help in the election campaign. Three years later, Turner was invited to speak at a Liberal conference in Kingston. More contacts with the party ensued, and in 1962, Turner was persuaded to seek nomination in the riding St-Laurent-St-Georges. He was nominated as a candidate and won the election in June.

Once in Ottawa, Turner joined a group of vocal young Liberals advocating reforms in party policy. The media dubbed these outspoken backbenchers "The Young Turks." Despite his rebel stance, Turner joined Prime Minister Lester Pearson's Cabinet in 1965 as Minister without Portfolio. By 1967, he was Minister of the newly created portfolio of Consumer and Corporate Affairs.

When Pearson resigned in 1968, Turner entered the leadership race, but lost to Pierre Trudeau. In the newly returned government, he was made Minister of Justice. During his four years at this post, Turner reorganized and updated the department. He abandoned the long tradition of party patronage in the appointment of judges, oversaw a number of Criminal Code reforms, set up the

Law Reform Commission and directed the department under the War Measures Act invoked during the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) crisis.

In 1972, he became Minister of Finance. Because of the Liberal minority government, the budgets he introduced had to be acceptable to at least one of the Opposition parties. He succeeded in 1973, but the following year, his budget was voted down by the New Democratic party and an election called. Turner continued as Minister of Finance after the 1974 election, a position he was beginning to like less and less. Seeing no other alternatives in Cabinet, he resigned as Finance Minister in 1975 and left politics the following year. He returned to law, joining the Toronto firm of McMillan Binch. When Trudeau resigned from politics in the wake of the Liberal election defeat in 1979, Turner had no interest in running for leader. The Conservatives were soon defeated in the House of Commons and Trudeau was asked to resume party leadership.

When Trudeau ultimately retired in 1984, many Liberals considered Turner a natural successor. With strong support in the party, he was elected leader and therefore prime minister. However, Turner inherited serious problems; Trudeau's departure left a vacuum in Liberal policy and after almost 16 years of governing had disillusioned the electorate. Turner gambled on his new popularity as leader and called an early election. But the party was exhausted and disorganized after the convention, and although Turner attempted to disassociate himself from Trudeau's policies, they both made patronage appointments that offended voters. The Liberals suffered a severe defeat in the 1984 election.

Rebuilding the party was a difficult process, although Turner took advantage of the numerous scandals and difficulties plaguing the Conservatives. His finest moment as Leader of the Opposition came in the 1988 election campaign with his condemnation of the Free Trade Agreement. Unfortunately, his efforts failed to topple the Conservatives. After two electoral defeats, Turner resigned from politics in 1990 and took up his legal career once again.

Anecdote

A future prime minister rescues a former prime minister

The winter of 1965: a young Liberal member of Parliament (MP) and his wife are vacationing in Barbados. Staying at the same hotel is a venerable Progressive Conservative politician who is leader of the Opposition and a former prime minister of Canada. While on the beach one morning, the MP's wife notices that the Opposition leader has gone out for a swim, but appears to be in trouble. The surf is rough that day; there is a strong undertow and the elderly leader is not a strong swimmer. She anxiously alerts her husband to the situation.

The young MP was a competitive swimmer in his university days and without hesitation, he plunges into the surf. Grasping the leader in a life-saving hold, he struggles against the undertow and finally

makes it back to shore. Once on the beach, the Liberal is about to start artificial respiration on the Opposition leader, when the rescued man comes round.

The rescued Progressive Conservative leader and former prime minister was John Diefenbaker. The life-saver and Liberal MP was John Turner; 19 years later he too became prime minister of Canada. Had events turned out otherwise that day in Barbados, Canada's history might have been drastically different!

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