Joseph Jacques Jean Chrétien
Canada’s twentieth prime minister

Quick Facts

Term(s) of Office:
- November 4, 1993–December 12, 2003

Born
- January 11, 1934, Shawinigan, Quebec

Education
- St. Joseph Seminary, Trois-Rivières, B.A. 1955
- Laval University, LL.L. 1958

Personal Life
- Married 1957, Aline Chainé (b. 1936)
- One daughter, two sons

Occupations
- Lawyer (called to the Quebec Bar in 1958)
- 1962–1963 Director, Bar of Trois-Rivières
- 1986–1990 Lawyer
- Author

Political Party
- Liberal
- 1990–2003 Party Leader

Constituencies
- 1963–1968 St-Maurice-Laflèche, Quebec
- 1968–1986 St-Maurice, Quebec
- 1990–1993 Beauséjour, New Brunswick
- 1993–2003, St-Maurice, Quebec

Other Ministries
- 1967–1968 Minister Without Portfolio
- 1968 National Revenue
- 1968–1974 Indian Affairs and Northern Development
- 1974–1976 President of the Treasury Board
- 1977–1979 Finance
- 1980–1982 Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Minister of State (Social Development) and Minister responsible for constitutional negotiations
- 1982–1984 Energy, Mines and Resources
- 1984 Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for External Affairs
Political Record

- Creation of ten national parks 1968–1972
- White Paper on Indian policy 1969
- Berger Commission 1972
- Entrenched the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms into the Constitution Act 1982
- Appointed Bertha Wilson first woman justice of the Supreme Court of Canada 1982
- Leader of the Opposition 1990–1993

Biography

The art of politics is learning to walk with your back to the wall, your elbows high, and a smile on your face. It’s a survival game played under the glare of lights. If you don’t learn that you’re quickly finished. It’s damn tough and you can’t complain; you just have to take it and give it back. The press wants to get you. The Opposition wants to get you. Even some of the bureaucrats want to get you. They all may have an interest in making you look bad and they all have ambitions of their own.—Jean Chrétien, 1985

One of Jean Chrétien’s greatest assets as Canada’s 20th prime minister was his long years of experience in Parliament and Cabinet. In government or in Opposition, he had served with 6 prime ministers, held 12 ministerial positions and sat in Parliament for a total of 27 years.

The 18th child of a paper mill machinist, Joseph Jacques Jean Chrétien was born in Shawinigan, Quebec on January 11, 1934. He studied law at Laval University where he joined the campus Liberal Club. He was called to the bar in 1958 and set up his law practice in the working-class district of Shawinigan North.

In 1963 Chrétien was elected as the federal Liberal candidate for St-Maurice-Laflèche. Chrétien spent his first two years in Ottawa as a backbencher, improving his English. By 1965, his enthusiasm and capacity for hard work had come to the attention of Prime Minister Lester Pearson; Chrétien was made a parliamentary secretary and worked under Finance Minister Mitchell Sharp.

After the 1968 election, he served under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in the following portfolios: National Revenue; Indian and Northern Affairs; Treasury Board; Industry, Trade and Commerce. In 1977, he became Minister of Finance (the first French Canadian to do so).

In 1980, Chrétien became Minister of Justice and appointed Bertha Wilson as the first woman justice to the Supreme Court of Canada in 1982. When the province of Quebec held a Referendum in May 1980, Chrétien supported the “No” side on the question of whether Quebec should pursue a path towards sovereignty. He helped to draft the 1982 Charter of Rights and organized passage of the patriation of the Constitution.
When Trudeau announced his intention to resign as prime minister in 1984, Chrétien ran for the leadership of the Liberal party. He came in second to John Turner. Chrétien served as Deputy Prime Minister in the Turner administration, and also as Secretary of State for External Affairs. He resigned from politics in 1986, returning to the practice of law.

After losing to the Conservatives, John Turner resigned in 1990. At the Liberal leadership convention, Chrétien won on the first ballot defeating Paul Martin. Chrétien set about rebuilding the Liberal party, which had become divided and demoralized after two electoral defeats. The Liberals succeeded in winning a majority government and on November 4, 1993, Jean Chrétien was sworn in as prime minister. For the first time since Confederation the Liberals faced a new official Opposition party, the Bloc Québecois.

One major achievement of his administration was the balancing of the federal budget, after many years of running deficits. This was done by numerous measures including steep reductions in the transfer payments to the provinces and deep cuts to the federal public service, as well as the fact that the Goods and Services Tax was bringing in huge amounts of revenue.

In October 1995, Quebec held a second sovereignty referendum and the “No” side won by a very slim margin, 50.6 percent. The Chrétien government then launched a major national unity campaign.

Chrétien led the Liberals to majority governments again in the elections of 1997 and 2000. In 2003 he stepped down as prime minister and was succeeded by Paul Martin.

**International Relations**

Chrétien’s early foreign policy was shaped by two factors, trade and national unity. He changed the name of the Department of External Affairs to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), and the Secretary of State for External Affairs became the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Using “foreign” instead of “external” signalled the downplaying of Canada’s historic relationship with Commonwealth countries and he showed Canadians he was determined to pursue an effective foreign policy during a period of fiscal restraint.

Two weeks after his election, Chrétien travelled to Seattle and met President Bill Clinton at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum. During his election campaign, Chrétien had promised to renegotiate NAFTA but he quickly dropped the idea when the Americans threatened to walk away from the deal. He later led several “Team Canada” trade missions to Asian-Pacific and Latin American countries.

During the second Quebec sovereignty referendum in 1995, the Canada–United States relationship was positive, with President Clinton affirming that America, while uninvolved, preferred working with an undivided Canada.
After naming Lloyd Axworthy as Foreign Affairs Minister in 1996, the focus of Canada’s foreign policy was on human security. Chrétien supported Axworthy in his campaign against anti-personnel land mines and also his efforts to create an International Criminal Court. Both these campaigns were quite successful.

Canada sent peacekeepers to many parts of the world, including Rwanda. Militarily, Canada supported the NATO bombing in Kosovo in 1999, a campaign that was NATO’s first aggressive action taken against a sovereign state.

Relations with the United States became strained when President George W. Bush was elected in 2000, so John Manley was named Foreign Affairs Minister. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States, Canada moved swiftly to introduce an anti-terrorism bill and increased spending on domestic security. Despite these measures, the United States continued to criticize Canada for not doing enough.

Canada responded quickly in sending troops to Afghanistan to join the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. But when U.S. President George W. Bush began preparations to attack Iraq, because of the belief that the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, had weapons of mass destruction that were a threat to the western world, Chrétien announced Canada would not act unless there was proof from the UN weapons inspectors.

Chrétien took a renewed interest in foreign policy in his remaining months of leadership, focussing on aid and development. He increased foreign aid by contributing $50 million for vaccine and research to fight AIDS in Africa.

In December 2002, Canada adhered to the Kyoto Protocol to the U.N. Convention on Climate Change and at the G8 meeting in Kananaskis, Alberta he made Africa a central part of the agenda.

**Anecdote**

**Sir John A. and Jean**

At first glance, Canada’s first prime minister and 20th prime minister don’t appear to have much in common. They were both born in different centuries. Sir John A. Macdonald was an immigrant Scot and Jean Chrétien is Québécois. One was an Anglophone Conservative; the other is a Francophone Liberal.

Yet there were similarities, starting with birthdays—both celebrated January 11th as their birthday. Both worked in politics for many years prior to becoming prime minister. Macdonald had been Cabinet minister in a number of portfolios in the provincial government before Confederation. Chrétien’s Cabinet experience before prime ministerial office included 12 ministries.
Both prime ministers faced separatists in Parliament. In Macdonald’s day they were Nova Scotian separatists, while Chrétien’s Official Opposition included the Bloc Québécois. Both Chrétien and Macdonald believed in a united Canada, held together by a strong central government. And our first and 20th prime ministers both enjoyed consecutive majority governments, Chrétien won three and Macdonald won four.

In Canadian politics, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

**Bibliography**


