

Alexander Mackenzie

Canada's second prime minister

Quick Facts

Term(s) of Office:

- November 7, 1873–October 8, 1878

Born

- January 28, 1822, Logierait, Perthshire, Scotland
- Immigrated to the Province of Canada in 1842 (near present day Sarnia, Ontario)

Died

- April 17, 1892, Toronto, Ontario
- **Grave site:** Lakeview Cemetery, near Sarnia, Ontario

Education

- Public schools at Perth, Moulin and Dunkeld, Scotland

Personal Life

- Married 1845, Helen Neil (1826–1852)
- One daughter (two other children died in infancy)
- Re-married 1853, Jane Sym (1825–1893)

Occupations

- Stonemason
- Building contractor
- 1852–1854 Editor of *Lambton Shield*
- 1866–1874 Major, 27th Lambton Volunteer Infantry
- 1871–1872 MLA Ontario
- Author

Political Party

- Liberal
- 1873–1880 Party leader

Constituencies

- 1867–1882 Lambton, Ontario
- 1882–1892 York East, Ontario

Other Ministries

- 1873–1878 Public Works

Political Record

- Formed the first Liberal administration of the Dominion of Canada 1873
- Secret Ballot 1874
- Founding of Royal Military College 1874
- Creation of Supreme Court 1875
- Creation of the Office of the Auditor General 1878
- Leader of the Opposition 1878–1880

Biography

I have always held those political opinions which point to the universal brotherhood of man, no matter in what rank of life he may have taken his origin.—Alexander Mackenzie, 1875

Canada's second prime minister, Alexander Mackenzie, was a nation builder of a literal sort. When he became Canada's first Liberal prime minister in 1873, he brought with him both his stonemason's skill and his democratic principles. Born in Perthshire, Scotland, he immigrated to the Province of Canada in 1842 to follow his sweetheart, Helen Neil. Trained as a stonemason, he soon found work in the rapidly growing provinces of Canada East and West. One of his first jobs was to build a bomb-proof stone arch at Fort Henry in Kingston. His next task was working on the Beauharnois Canal near Montréal. Many of the monuments raised by Mackenzie still stand in Ontario: the Welland Canal, the Martello towers in Kingston, the Episcopal Church, a bank in Sarnia, courthouses and jails in Chatham and Sandwich.

In order to support his family, Mackenzie had been forced to cut short his formal education at the age of thirteen. But throughout his life he sought to make up for the schooling he lacked by a program of self-education which included the study of literature, history, science, philosophy and politics. In Scotland, Mackenzie had been drawn to the Chartist movement, a political group advocating democratic reform. He was naturally drawn to the Reform party (forerunner of the Liberal party) in Canada. By 1852, Mackenzie was the editor of the Reform newspaper, the *Lambton Shield*, and through it, became friends with the party leader, George Brown. Mackenzie was first elected as a Reform member to the Provincial Assembly in 1861. He was elected to federal Parliament in 1867 and sat in the Ontario Assembly from 1871 to 1872, when dual representation was abolished.

Mackenzie became leader of the Liberal (formerly Reform) party in 1873. That same year, the Liberals uncovered and released to the press evidence of bribery involving the Conservative party and the contractors engaged in building the government's Pacific Railway. In the ensuing scandal, the Conservatives under Sir John A. Macdonald were forced to resign, and Alexander Mackenzie and the Liberals took over. A general election in January 1874 gave Mackenzie the mandate to govern.

It was unusual for a man of Mackenzie's humble origins to attain such a position in politics in an age which generally offered such opportunity only to the privileged. Lord Dufferin, the current Governor General, expressed early misgivings about a stonemason taking over government. But on meeting Mackenzie, Dufferin revised his opinions: "However narrow and inexperienced Mackenzie may be, I imagine he is a thoroughly upright, well-principled, and well-meaning man."

Mackenzie also served as Minister of Public Works and oversaw the completion of the Parliament Buildings. While drawing up the plans, he included a circular staircase leading directly from his office to the outside of the building. This clever addition allowed him to escape the patronage-seekers waiting for him in his antechamber. Proving Dufferin's reflections on his character to be

true, Mackenzie disliked intensely the patronage inherent in politics. Nevertheless, he found it a necessary evil in order to maintain party unity and ensure the loyalty of his fellow Liberals.

In keeping with his democratic ideals, Mackenzie refused the offer of a knighthood three times. His pride in his working-class origins never left him. Once, while touring Fort Henry as prime minister, he asked the soldier accompanying him if he knew the thickness of the wall beside them. The embarrassed escort confessed that he didn't and Mackenzie replied, "I do. It is five feet, ten inches. I know, because I built it myself!"

Under Mackenzie, the Liberal government established the Supreme Court of Canada, reformed the electoral system and introduced the secret ballot, as well as completing the Intercolonial Railway and starting the transcontinental Canadian Pacific line. Unfortunately, the country suffered an economic recession in the mid-1870s, for which Mackenzie's government was blamed and they lost the election in 1878. Mackenzie gave up the leadership of the Liberals in 1880, but remained in Parliament until his death in 1892.

International Relations

Mackenzie favoured free trade and thought the previous government had not tried hard enough to improve relations with the United States. He sent George Brown to negotiate with the American Secretary of State, Hamilton Fish. They reached agreement on a draft reciprocity treaty, but the American senate was close to adjournment and consideration of the treaty was postponed. Because reciprocity had not been accepted, Mackenzie continued a policy of tariffs for revenue purposes.

With the purchase of Alaska and the end of the Civil War, the Americans viewed the region west of Canada for possible annexation. This led Great Britain to favour the purchase by Canada of Rupert's Land and the North-Western territories from the Hudson's Bay Company. The region was renamed the Northwest Territories. Rupert's Land included what is today northern Quebec and Ontario, the entire province of Manitoba, most of Saskatchewan and part of southern Alberta.

The North West Mounted Police was formed in 1873 to rid the Prairies of whiskey traders, to establish good relations with the First Nations in anticipation of increased settlement, and to demonstrate to Americans that the Northwest Territories, acquired in 1869, were indeed a part of Canada.

In the spring of 1874, after recruitment and training, the new prime minister sent the mounted policemen west. These men were successful in fighting the whiskey trade and in securing peaceful relations with the First Nations people. Treaties were signed with the Plains and Wood Cree in 1876 and the Blackfoot Confederacy in 1877.

Anecdote

Romeo gets his feet wet

It was love, not politics that brought Alexander Mackenzie to Canada where he would become our second prime minister. Born in Perthshire, Scotland, he immigrated to the Province of Canada in 1842 to follow his sweetheart, Helen Neil. A stonemason by trade, Mackenzie worked at Fort Henry in Kingston, the Beauharnois Canal near Montréal, and the Welland Canal.

He spent one winter on Wolfe Island in Kingston harbour cutting stone. Every Saturday night he crossed the ice to visit Helen, who was living with her parents in Kingston. One night, Mackenzie knocked on the Neil family's door, half-frozen and soaking wet, having fallen through the ice in the darkness. But this narrow brush with drowning did not deter the ardent Alexander. The next time he fell through the ice, he had a long pole with him to help himself out of the lake!

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