

Sir John Joseph Caldwell Abbott

Canada's third prime minister

Quick Facts

Term(s) of Office:

- June 16, 1891–November 24, 1892

Born

- March 12, 1821, St. Andrews, Lower Canada (now Saint-André-d'Argenteuil, Quebec)

Died

- October 30, 1893, Montréal, Quebec
- **Grave site:** Mount Royal Cemetery, Montréal, Quebec

Education

- University of McGill College, B.C.L. 1854

Personal Life

- Married 1849, Mary Bethune (1823–1898)
- Four sons, four daughters

Occupations

- Lawyer (called to the bar of Canada East in 1847)
- 1853–1876 Professor of Law, McGill
- 1855–1880 Dean of Law, McGill
- 1862 President, Canada Central Railway
- 1862–1884 Raised and commanded the Argenteuil Rangers
- 1885–1891 Member, Board of Directors, Canadian Pacific Railway
- 1887, 1888 Elected Mayor of Montréal

Political Party

- Liberal-Conservative (forerunner of the Conservative party)
- 1891–1892 Party Leader

Constituencies

- 1867–1874, 1881–1887 Argenteuil, Quebec

Other Ministries

- 1862–1863 Solicitor General (Province of Canada)
- 1887–1891 Minister Without Portfolio
- 1891–1892 President of the Privy Council

Political Record

- Chair, House of Commons Banking Committee 1867–1874
- Senator and Leader of the Government in the Senate 1887–1893
- The first prime minister to lead the country from the Senate

Biography

I hate politics, and what are considered their appropriate methods. I hate notoriety, public meetings, public speeches, caucuses, and everything that I know of that is apparently the necessary incident of politics—except doing public work to the best of my ability. —Sir John J. C. Abbott, June 4, 1891

Unusual sentiments for a man who was to become prime minister twelve days later. Sir John A. Macdonald died June 6, 1891; just three months after the Conservatives had won an election. Although it would be five years before they had to face the electorate again, replacing the old chieftain was no easy task. The Conservative party was in a shambles, corrupt after so many years in power and rife with personal, religious and ethnic divisions. John Joseph Caldwell Abbott took over as prime minister with great reluctance, acknowledging that he was there "because I am not particularly obnoxious to anybody."

Abbott was born in St. Andrews, Lower Canada (Quebec), in 1821, and educated by his father, an Anglican missionary. At 17 he went to work in the dry-goods business, where he learned accounting and bookkeeping. In 1843, he started law school at the University of McGill College, and joined the law firm William Badgley when he was called to the bar in 1847. He became the dean of law in 1855 and taught at McGill until 1876. Wilfrid Laurier, the future Liberal prime minister, was one of Abbott's students.

In addition to his career as a teacher and commercial lawyer, Abbott established himself as an able businessman, owning shares and holding directorships in a number of successful Montréal businesses. His greatest commercial endeavour was railways. As company president and engineer respectively, Abbott and his brother, Henry, built the Canada Central Railway, a key link in the transcontinental line.

Abbott was also legal advisor to Sir Hugh Allan, president of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), and helped him secure the contract and funding for Macdonald's ambitious railway construction. By this time, Abbott was the member of Parliament for Argenteuil, and his involvement with both the CPR and the government led to a conflict of interest. He was at the centre of the Pacific Scandal; it was from Abbott's office that the incriminating documents were stolen and handed over to the Liberals.

Abbott lost his seat in Parliament in 1874 as a result of the scandal, but was re-elected in a by-election in 1881. He continued his work on the CPR, but abstained from all discussions or votes on the subject of railways in the House of Commons. In 1887, Abbott was appointed to the Senate, from which he served as a Cabinet minister and later as prime minister. From 1887 to 1888, he was also mayor of Montréal.

In addition to his associations with the Pacific Scandal, Abbott had another embarrassment that his opponents never let him forget. He signed the Annexation Manifesto in 1849. This was a document

drawn up by a group of Montréal businessmen, advocating that the Canadian colonies relinquish their ties with Britain and join the United States. The manifesto was prompted by an economic recession, and Britain's removal of tariffs preferential to colonial products. The threat of annexation on the part of Canadians was used more for the purpose of extracting concessions from Britain than for seriously proposing to merge with the United States. In this case, the annexation movement had little support beyond the Montréal business community, and waned as the economy recovered. As a young entrepreneur, Abbott had supported annexation, along with other prominent figures, all of whom soon regretted their actions. Abbott himself later confessed that they had "no more serious idea of seeking annexation with the United States than a petulant child who strikes his nurse has of deliberately murdering her." But to atone for his youthful error, he raised 300 militia recruits in response to the Trent Affair of 1861 and maintained the regiment at his own expense.

Though reluctant to accept the office of prime minister, Abbott proved himself to be a capable leader, despite the Langevin scandal exposed during his term. He dealt with the backlog of government business awaiting him after Macdonald's death. Reform of the civil service, revisions of the criminal code, and a Reciprocity Treaty with the United States were just a few of the issues initiated by Abbott. During his 17-month term, there were 52 by-elections, 42 of which were won by the Conservatives, increasing their majority by 13 seats—an indisputable acknowledgement of Abbott's abilities as prime minister.

Failing health forced him to resign in November 1892, handing his position over to John Thompson, the young Cabinet minister whom Abbott had always felt should have succeeded Macdonald. He died in Montréal the following year.

In his private life, Abbott supported the Art Association of Montreal and helped establish an institution for the handicapped. His hobbies included raising orchids, and his collection was reputed as one of the best in Canada. He married Mary Bethune in 1849 and they had eight children. The actor Christopher Plummer counts among the many Abbott descendants.

International Relations

Abbott sent his Minister of Justice, John Thompson, to the United States to discuss many issues, including the renewal of the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854, which ended in 1866, but no agreement was reached.

Anecdote

Was Canada's third prime minister a traitor?

John J.C. Abbott became prime minister after the death of Sir John A. MacDonald in 1891. But what scandals lurked in his past? In 1849, Abbott had signed the Annexation Manifesto. This document, advocating union with the United States, had been drawn up by a group of Montréal businessmen ruined by an economic recession and by Britain's removal of tariffs beneficial

to colonial products. The supporters of the manifesto were more interested in blackmailing Britain into trade concessions and economic support than really joining the United States. Like other entrepreneurs who later became prominent public figures, Abbott signed the document and soon regretted his actions. He later confessed that they had "no more serious idea of seeking annexation with the United States than a petulant child who strikes his nurse has of deliberately murdering her."

But what about the Pacific Scandal? Abbott was at the centre of that too. He was a Conservative member of Parliament *and* the lawyer for the president of the CPR, who funded the Conservative (Tory) election campaign in exchange for a contract to build the transcontinental railway.

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