

# Sir Mackenzie Bowell

## Canada's fifth prime minister

### Quick Facts

#### *Term(s) of Office:*

- December 21, 1894–April 27, 1896

#### *Born*

- December 27, 1823, Rickingham, England
- Immigrated to Belleville, Upper Canada (Ontario) in 1832

#### *Died*

- December 10, 1917, Belleville, Ontario
- **Grave site:** Belleville Cemetery, Belleville, Ontario

#### *Education*

- Apprenticed as a printer with *The Intelligencer*, Belleville, Ontario 1834
- Teaching diploma from Sydney Normal School, Hastings, Ontario 1841

#### *Personal Life*

- Married 1847, Harriet Moore (1829–1884)
- Four sons, five daughters

#### *Occupations*

- Printer, editor and later owner of *Belleville Intelligencer*
- 1858–1865 Ensign, Belleville Rifle Company
- 1867–1872 Major, 49th Hastings Battalion
- 1870–1878 Grandmaster of Orange Order of British North America

#### *Political Party*

- Liberal-Conservative (forerunner of the Conservative party)
- 1894–1896 Party Leader

#### *Constituencies*

- 1867–1892 North Hastings, Ontario

#### *Other Ministries*

- 1878–1892 Customs
- 1892 Militia and Defence
- 1892–1894 Trade and Commerce
- 1894–1896 President of the Privy Council

#### *Political Record*

- Trade mission to Australia and promotion of submarine cable link between North America and Australia 1894
- Attempted to re-establish a separate school system in Manitoba 1895
- Senator 1892–1917
- Leader of the Government in the Senate 1893–1896
- Leader of the Opposition in the Senate 1896–1906
- The second prime minister to lead the country from the Senate

## Biography

*I am quite convinced from the utterances made by most of the Brethren in the press and on the platform, that they do not understand the question, nor draw the distinction which exists between this matter and the Jesuits' Estates Act.*—Mackenzie Bowell, on Protestant sentiments regarding the Manitoba Schools Question, March 1895

As all prime ministers do at some point in their careers, Mackenzie Bowell found himself promoting a policy that was completely contrary to his personal opinions and public platform. Such is the nature of governing Canada. The Manitoba Schools Question was one of the most divisive issues in Canadian history, pitting Catholics against Protestants, English against French, West against East, provincial government against federal, Liberals against Conservatives, church against state. Since each of these groups overlapped the other, the shifting loyalties of all involved in the Manitoba Schools Question created a quagmire in which Prime Minister Mackenzie Bowell floundered. He bears the unfortunate stigma of being the only prime minister in Canadian history who was forced to resign by his Cabinet.

Mackenzie Bowell was born in Rickingham, England in 1823 and emigrated with his family in 1832. The Bowells settled in Belleville and young Mackenzie apprenticed with the printer of the local newspaper, *The Intelligencer*. By 1848, Bowell had become the newspaper's owner and editor, with a brief interlude for schooling at Sydney Normal School in Hastings County. In 1858, Bowell joined the Belleville Rifle Company, a militia company of 65 men and served with them, guarding the border of Upper Canada (Ontario) during the American Civil War.

At the age of 19, Bowell joined the Orange Order, a Protestant fraternal society, of which he eventually became Grand Master for British North America in 1870. Nevertheless, his association with extreme Protestantism did not always colour Bowell's politics. In 1863, he ran as a Conservative in Hastings County. The Liberals were campaigning against Roman Catholic rights, a position Bowell refused to take, and he subsequently lost the election. He won in 1867 and held his House of Commons seat in 1874, when the Conservatives lost as a result of the Pacific Scandal. In 1878, Bowell became Minister of Customs, charged with imposing the protective tariffs of the new National Policy. He was Minister of Militia in 1892 and under Prime Minister Thompson, he was minister of the newly created portfolio of Trade and Commerce. During this time he led a trade mission to Australia and organized a colonial conference. By all accounts, Bowell served well in his ministerial duties, but with his elevation to prime minister upon the death of John Thompson, he was promoted beyond his level of competence. Certainly, the Manitoba Schools Question was more than he could handle.

A system of Protestant and Catholic Schools had been established in Manitoba upon its creation as a province in 1870, based on a provision in the British North America Act ensuring minority education rights. In 1890, the Manitoba government abolished public funding for Catholic schools. The law was challenged and overturned by the Supreme Court of Canada, and the decision was

reversed again by the Privy Council in England. By 1895, passions in Canada were inflamed over the issue and Parliament had to decide whether or not to override Manitoba's law. Quebec staunchly supported Roman Catholic rights, Manitoba defied the federal government to interfere with its laws and Protestant Ontario supported Manitoba. These divisions prevailed within Bowell's Cabinet, making decisions impossible. As a Senator, Bowell was further hindered because he could not take part in House of Commons debates, and had no reliable minister to represent him there. The day-to-day business of government ground to a halt.

Despite his own religious beliefs, Bowell supported legislation drafted in June 1895 to force Manitoba to reinstate Catholic schools, acknowledging their rights under the British North America Act. However, opposition within Cabinet and his own indecisiveness caused him to postpone the issue for six months. By January 1896, the Cabinet felt Bowell was not competent to lead. Seven ministers resigned in order to force the prime minister to step down. They prevented Bowell from appointing replacements and a government crisis ensued. Ten days later, the situation appeared resolved when six ministers were reinstated and Charles Tupper joined the Cabinet. The governor general had intervened on Bowell's behalf, but Tupper assumed virtual control of the party. At the end of the session, Bowell resigned in favour of Tupper.

Despite his ignominious defeat as prime minister, Bowell remained a Senator, serving as the Senate Leader of the Opposition after the Conservatives lost the 1896 election. He continued in this position until 1906 and remained in the Senate until his death in 1917.

## Anecdote

### "A nest of traitors"

This is what Prime Minister Mackenzie Bowell called his Cabinet ministers when they tried to force him to resign. The relationship between prime minister and Cabinet can be stressful at the best of times, but at the worst of times, it can lead to serious confrontation. Mackenzie Bowell has the dubious honour of being the only Canadian prime minister forced from office by his Cabinet.

Bowell was appointed prime minister by the governor general in December 1894, after the sudden death of Prime Minister Sir John Thompson. By this time, the nation and the government were seriously divided over the Manitoba Schools Question concerning Catholic education rights. Bowell's attempts to remedy the situation were hampered by his own indecisiveness and conflicting loyalties within Cabinet. Because he was a Senator, Bowell could not argue for his policies in House of Commons debates.

By January 1896, he had lost the confidence of his Cabinet and a plot was hatched to replace him with Charles Tupper, who was High Commissioner to Britain at the time. Seven ministers resigned and picketed any possible successors upon their arrival in Ottawa. All government activity was halted. The governor general intervened on Bowell's behalf and gained him a three-month reprieve. In April 1896, he submitted to the "nest of traitors" and resigned in favour of Tupper.

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