

# Sir Charles Tupper

## Canada's sixth prime minister

### Quick Facts

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

- May 1, 1896–July 8, 1896

#### *Born*

- July 2, 1821, Amherst, Nova Scotia

#### *Died*

- October 30, 1915, Bexley Heath, England
- **Grave site:** St. John's Cemetery, Halifax, Nova Scotia

#### *Education*

- University of Edinburgh, Scotland, M.D. 1843

#### *Personal Life*

- Married 1846, Frances Morse (1826–1912)
- Three sons, three daughters

#### *Occupations*

- Physician
- 1867–1870 President, Canadian Medical Association
- Author

#### *Political Party*

- Conservative
- 1896–1901 Party Leader

#### *Constituencies*

- 1867–1884, 1887–1888 Cumberland, Nova Scotia
- 1896–1900 Cape Breton, Nova Scotia

#### *Other Ministries*

- 1857–1860, 1863–1867 Provincial Secretary (Province of Nova Scotia)
- 1870–1872 President of the Privy Council
- 1872–1873 Inland Revenue
- 1873 Customs
- 1878–1879 Public Works
- 1879–1884 Railways and Canals
- 1887–1888 Finance
- 1896 Secretary of State of Canada

### *Political Record*

- Premier of Nova Scotia 1864–1867
- Participant in the Confederation Conferences of Charlottetown 1864, Quebec 1864, and London 1866
- Father of Confederation 1867
- Construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway 1879–1884
- High Commissioner to the United Kingdom 1884–1887, 1888–1896
- Leader of the Opposition 1896–1901

## Biography

*The human mind naturally adapts itself to the position it occupies. The most gigantic intellect may be dwarfed by being cabin'd, cribbed and confined. It requires a great country and great circumstances to develop great men.*—Charles Tupper, 1865

By reason of his personal skills and experience, no one had greater qualification to be prime minister than Charles Tupper. It is one of the strange quirks of fate and Canadian history that he served the shortest term of office of any prime minister.

Charles Tupper was born in Amherst, Nova Scotia in 1821, the son of a Baptist minister. He was educated at Horton Academy in Wolfville and trained as a doctor in Edinburgh, Scotland. After returning to Canada in 1843, Tupper established a practice in Amherst.

He entered politics in 1855 when he ran for the Conservative party in Cumberland riding. To the astonishment of all, the young Tupper defeated the renowned Reform candidate, Joseph Howe. By 1864, he was Premier of Nova Scotia. Tupper supported the Confederation movement and participated as a delegate at the Charlottetown, Quebec and London Conferences. It was primarily through his efforts as a Father of Confederation that Nova Scotia joined the union in 1867, despite the strong anti-Confederation movement in the province. The same year, Tupper ran for the federal Parliament and was the only Nova Scotia member supporting Confederation to be elected.

He turned down a position in Cabinet, knowing that political expediency required Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald to offer ministries to others. In fact, Tupper went so far as to persuade the anti-Confederation supporter Joseph Howe to accept the union and join Macdonald's Cabinet in 1869. Such loyalty and self-sacrifice earned Tupper an unofficial position as Macdonald's right-hand man. In 1870, Tupper became President of the Privy Council, Minister of Inland Revenue in 1872 and by the next year, he was Minister of Customs.

When the Conservatives returned to power in 1878, Tupper became Minister of Public Works and the following year, Minister of the newly created portfolio of Railways and Canals. During this period, he oversaw the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway. In 1884, Tupper resigned from Cabinet, having been appointed Canadian High Commissioner to Great Britain the previous year.

He returned for 16 months in 1887 to serve as Minister of Finance and then resumed his post in London.

To some members of the Conservative party, Tupper was the natural successor to Macdonald when the old chieftain died in 1891. However, he was passed over in favour of John Abbott and then John Thompson in 1892. Upon Thompson's death in 1894, Tupper was once more put forward. The choice resided with the Governor General, Lord Aberdeen, who had the power to appoint a successor if a prime minister resigned or died while still in office. Lord Aberdeen had Liberal leanings and found Tupper too "Conservative" for his liking. Tupper's reputation as a philanderer shocked Lady Aberdeen, whose opinions had considerable influence on her husband. Mackenzie Bowell became prime minister in 1894. The Aberdeens held out against Tupper even during the Cabinet Revolt of January 1896 which attempted to oust Bowell. Lady Aberdeen suggested to her husband that he call upon the Opposition, rather than Tupper, to form a new government. Bowell remained prime minister, but the Conservatives offered Tupper a Cabinet post. A by-election gave him a House of Commons seat from which Tupper effectively led the party. When Bowell resigned in April 1896, Aberdeen appointed Tupper prime minister.

While in Cabinet, Tupper attempted to settle the Manitoba Schools Question, but the Opposition blocked passage of the bill. Time ran out for the Conservatives; their five years in office were up. As soon as Bowell had stepped down, they were forced to call an election. In spite of Tupper's aggressive campaign, the Tories could not win. There had been too many scandals, too many contentious issues and too many prime ministers. The Liberals won a resounding victory. Tupper remained leader of the Conservatives until 1901, having lost his seat in the election the year before.

Tupper's duration as prime minister may have been the shortest, but his marriage lasted longer than any other leader. He married Frances Morse, from a well-connected Amherst family in 1846, and they had six children. When she died in 1912, they had been married 65 years. One of their sons, Charles Hibbert Tupper, also had a distinguished career in politics and served as a Cabinet minister under Macdonald, Abbott, Thompson and Bowell.

## International Relations

Before becoming prime minister, Tupper had served as Canadian High Commissioner to Great Britain, and, as a member of Macdonald's Cabinet in the 1880s, he had worked, unsuccessfully, for free trade with the United States.

## Anecdote

### Who's running this country, anyway?

Well one might have asked in 1896! At this time the governor general's role in Canadian politics is more than ceremonial; it's up to him to appoint a successor when the prime minister resigns while in office. In January 1896, the Conservatives are fed up with Prime Minister Mackenzie Bowell's indecisiveness over the Manitoba Schools Question. A Cabinet revolt tries to force him to resign in favour of Sir Charles Tupper. But Governor General Lord Aberdeen has Liberal leanings and finds Sir Charles too "Conservative" for his liking. Furthermore, Tupper's reputation as a philanderer is too much for Lady Aberdeen, whose opinions have considerable influence on her husband. Lady Aberdeen suggests to her husband that he call upon the Opposition leader rather than Tupper, to be the new prime minister.

To prevent this disaster, the Tory Cabinet revolt is called off and Bowell hangs on as prime minister. Tupper takes a Cabinet post and effectively leads the party from his seat in the House of Commons, which Bowell, as a Senator, cannot do. In April, Lord Aberdeen finally accepts Bowell's resignation and appoints Tupper prime minister. But by this time, the Conservatives have to call an election, which they subsequently lose. Thanks to Lady Aberdeen, Sir Charles Tupper serves the shortest term in office of any Canadian prime minister!

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