

Sir Robert Laird Borden

Canada's eighth prime minister

Quick Facts

Term(s) of Office:

- October 10, 1911–July 10, 1920

Born

- June 26, 1854, Grand Pré, Nova Scotia

Died

- June 10, 1937, Ottawa, Ontario
- **Grave site:** Beechwood Cemetery, Ottawa, Ontario

Education

- Acacia Villa Academy, Horton, Nova Scotia

Personal Life

- Married 1889, Laura Bond (1863–1940)

Occupations

- 1868–1872 Teacher, Horton, Nova Scotia
- 1872–1874 Teacher, Matawan, New Jersey
- Lawyer (called to the Nova Scotia Bar in 1878)
- 1924–1930 Chancellor, Queen's University
- 1928 President, Crown Life Insurance
- 1929 President, Barclay's Bank (Canada)
- 1930 President, Canadian Historical Association
- Author

Political Party

- Conservative
- 1901–1920 Party Leader
- 1917–1920 Union Government (A coalition of pro-conscription Liberals and Conservatives)

Constituencies

- 1896–1904, 1908–1917 Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 1905–1908 Carleton, Ontario
- 1917–1920 King's County, Nova Scotia

Other Ministries

- 1911–1917 President of the Privy Council
- 1912–1920 Secretary of State for External Affairs

Political Record

- Leader of the Opposition 1901–1911
- Led Canada as prime minister throughout First World War 1914–1918
- War Measures Act 1914
- Income War Tax Act 1917
- Military Service Act 1917



- Wartime Elections Act 1917
- Principal author of Resolution IX of the 1917 Imperial War Conference
- Franchise extended to women 1918
- Leader of Canadian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference 1919

Biography

It can hardly be expected that we shall put 400,000 or 500,000 men in the field and willingly accept the position of having no more voice and receiving no more consideration than if we were toy automata.

—Sir Robert Borden, January 4, 1916

Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden began his political career as a staunch Imperialist, and during his years as Leader of the Opposition he frequently criticized Sir Wilfrid Laurier's policies concerning Britain. But once in power, Borden saw the necessity of an independent position for Canada within the Empire. With the advent of the First World War and the sacrifice of Canadian lives in Europe, Borden insisted on an autonomous voice for the nation in Imperial and international affairs. Through his efforts during the nine years he was prime minister, Canada won greater independence from Britain and acquired the reputation as a neutral entity in international affairs.

Robert Laird Borden was born in Grand Pré, Nova Scotia in 1854. His father owned a farm and worked as the local stationmaster. Young Borden was educated at the local school, Acacia Villa Academy. So promising were his intellectual abilities, that he became an assistant school master at the Academy at the age of 14. At 19, Borden was offered a teaching position in Matawan, New Jersey. He returned to Nova Scotia two years later and began articling with a Halifax law firm, not having the means to study law at university. Borden was called to the bar in 1878, and proceeded to establish himself as a successful lawyer in partnership with Charles Hibbert Tupper, son of the future Conservative prime minister, Charles Tupper.

It was through the Tupper family that Borden was drawn into politics. He was elected to the House of Commons in 1896 and succeeded Tupper as leader of the Conservatives in 1901. The Tories had been in disarray since the death of Sir John A. Macdonald in 1891 and were badly beaten in the elections of 1896 and 1900. Borden spent his ten years as Leader of the Opposition rebuilding the party. He had none of Laurier's oratorical mastery or charisma. His talents included a methodical efficiency and a remarkable capacity for work. But even within his own party, Borden's skills were sometimes overlooked; his attempts to reconcile the varying opinions of his colleagues were often interpreted as indecisiveness.

Borden's leadership ability was most thoroughly tested during the First World War. The demands made on the workings of government, the economy as well as the social structure of the nation were acute. When war was declared in August 1914, just three years into Borden's term as prime minister, he realized the nature of the crisis that had been so suddenly imposed. Not only was there to be an army enlisted, trained and armed, but also a whole nation to be reorganized in order to procure

equipment and manpower, to regulate industry, agriculture and transportation, to raise funds and safeguard currency, all essential to the war effort.

Borden was in Europe in 1915 and visited Canadian soldiers at the front and in hospitals in Britain. He was horrified at the suffering they had endured. He was even more appalled to learn of the incompetence of the British High Command and, as a result, demanded that Canada have more say in the Allied planning. Borden was also determined that the efforts of Canadian soldiers in France would be supported by adequate reinforcements. In the face of dwindling enlistment, he proposed conscription.

The issue of conscription instantly divided the nation and Borden's Cabinet. His Quebec ministers refused to support it. Borden proposed a coalition government of Liberals and Conservatives for the duration of the war. The Liberal party was split over conscription; some accepted Borden's invitation to join his Cabinet. The Union government won the election of 1917, but not without a cost. The province of Quebec was completely alienated and without representation in Cabinet. Borden had also imposed the Wartime Elections Act which unjustly deprived many Canadians of Germanic descent and other foreign backgrounds of their right to vote. In addition to the demands of wartime governing, Borden had to fire his Minister of Militia and Defence, and deal with scandals involving graft and wartime profiteering. When the centre block of Parliament burned in February 1916, Borden escaped, singed and in his shirtsleeves; his office and its contents were completely destroyed by the fire.

Although the war ended in 1918, Borden's work continued in the aftermath. He insisted that Canada have an independent delegation at the Paris Peace Conference and he participated in the establishment of the League of Nations. By 1920, after so many years of relentless work, Borden's health was suffering and he resigned as prime minister. His retirement proved restorative and he was active with his business concerns, lecturing and writing until his death in 1937.

International Relations

In 1912, the Borden government brought in the Naval Aid Bill, through which Canada would provide up to \$35 million to the British for the acquisition of three Dreadnoughts. The Liberals opposed. The Conservatives used closure to get the bill passed, but then the Liberal-dominated Senate voted it down.

Also in 1912, Borden, in addition to being prime minister, took the title of Secretary of State for External Affairs. Canadian prime ministers after him also took this title, until 1946, when Prime Minister Mackenzie King appointed his Minister of Justice, Louis St. Laurent, to the External Affairs post.

In 1914, Borden and his government were involved in the *Komagata Maru* incident, named for the ship that brought immigrants from India via Hong Kong to Vancouver challenging the Continuous Passage Act. They were ultimately refused entry into Canada and forced to return to India.



When Great Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, Canada was automatically at war. However, the Canadian government had little say in where and how its soldiers were deployed. That changed at Vimy Ridge in April 1917. It was the first time all four Canadian divisions had fought together. Not only was the victory the first major success of the allies in the long war, it proved what Canadians fighting together could achieve. Anglophone, Francophone, Black, First Nations, Métis and Asian soldiers: the victors of Vimy took the Ridge as Canadians.

Now at war, the Canadian government viewed people of German-descent and immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian Empire with suspicion. They were labelled enemy aliens and placed under police surveillance or in internment camps. Some lost their jobs, while many German-language schools, churches and newspapers were closed.

In 1919, Borden led the Canadian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, and insisted that Canada be permitted to sign the Treaty of Versailles and become a member of the League of Nations, thus acquiring international status.

Anecdote

"The nightmare is removed"

In 1911, Sam Hughes is the Minister of Militia and Defence. He is an able politician and a loyal supporter of the prime minister, Sir Robert Borden, but Hughes is also boastful and unpredictable. When war is declared in 1914, the question is: will it bring out the best or the worst in Sam Hughes? The answer is both. Within three months of the start of war, Hughes raised, trained, and armed 33,000 Canadian soldiers and accompanied them to Britain, which was a remarkable achievement. But the rifle he insists they use is faulty. It frequently jams in the field and it costs men's lives. Hughes' role with regard to the British army is limited, but he insists on meddling with the chain of command. The Canadian army is his empire and Hughes is the Emperor! Borden has to weigh carefully the value of this man. His behaviour is erratic and troublesome, yet Hughes is a popular figure in the eyes of the public. His dismissal would reflect badly on the government. Borden continues to give him more rope....

The final straw comes in September 1916 when Hughes disregards the explicit instructions of the prime minister. His duties are immediately given to two other ministers. When Hughes protests angrily to Borden, he receives a letter demanding his resignation.

You must surely realize that I cannot retain in the government a colleague who has addressed to me such a communication. I regret that you have thus imposed upon me the disagreeable duty of requesting your resignation as Minister of Militia and Defence.

As one of Hughes' Cabinet colleagues remarked, "the nightmare is removed."

Bibliography

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