

# Arthur Meighen

## Canada's ninth prime minister

### Quick Facts

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

- July 10, 1920–December 29, 1921
- June 29, 1926–September 25, 1926

#### *Born*

- June 16, 1874, Anderson, Ontario

#### *Died*

- August 5, 1960, Toronto, Ontario
- **Grave site:** St. Mary's Cemetery, St. Mary's, Ontario

#### *Education*

- University of Toronto, B.A. Mathematics 1896

#### *Personal Life*

- Married 1904, Isabel J. Cox (1882–1985)
- Two sons, one daughter

#### *Occupations*

- 1897–1898 Teacher, Caledonia, Ontario
- Lawyer (called to the Manitoba Bar in 1903)
- Businessman
- Author

#### *Political Party*

- Conservative
- 1920–1926, 1941–1942 Party Leader

#### *Constituencies*

- 1908–1921, 1925–1926 Portage la Prairie, Manitoba
- 1922–1925 Grenville, Ontario

#### *Other Ministries*

- 1913–1917 Solicitor General of Canada
- 1917 Secretary of State of Canada
- 1917–1920 Interior and Superintendent General of Indian Affairs
- 1919–1920 Mines
- 1920–1921, 1926 Secretary of State for External Affairs
- 1926 President of the Privy Council
- 1932–1935 Minister Without Portfolio

#### *Political Record*

- Creation of the Canadian National Railways 1919
- Prominent in ending the Winnipeg General Strike 1919
- Argued successfully against the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance 1921

- Trade Agreements with France and the West Indies 1921
- Armistice Day Act 1921
- Leader of the Opposition 1921–1926
- Senator 1932–1942

## Biography

*One great secret of successful debate: when you have a man under your hammer, never be tempted into doubtful ground and give him a chance to digress. How often I witnessed men in the House who had a case, and who really had their opponents cornered, doddle off into other ground and give the enemy a chance to change the subject and come out not too badly worsted.*—Arthur Meighen, 1943

By all accounts, Arthur Meighen was the finest debater and orator ever to speak in the House of Commons. As member of Parliament, opposition leader and prime minister, he annihilated the arguments of his political opponents with his unassailable logic and eloquent reasoning. As Solicitor General and Cabinet minister under Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden, he proved indispensable in the drafting of crucial legislation. Yet his formidable intellectual skills were not enough to keep him in power as prime minister. Those other components in the mysterious recipe of successful leadership—luck, loyal followers and personal charm—eluded him and kept his time in office unfortunately brief.

Arthur Meighen was born in Anderson, Ontario in 1874, the son of a farmer. He studied mathematics at the University of Toronto and graduated in 1896 with a B.A. Meighen tried his hand as a teacher and a sales clerk before moving to Winnipeg where he began articling with a local law firm. In 1902, he moved to Portage la Prairie, to take over an established law practice. He was called to the Manitoba Bar in 1903.

Meighen had joined the Young Men's Conservative Club upon arriving in Portage la Prairie and campaigned on behalf of the local member in the 1904 election. In 1908, he ran himself and was elected to the House of Commons. Meighen's debating skills quickly came to the attention of his party leader, Robert Borden, as well as his aptitude in analyzing legislation and knowledge of parliamentary rules. It was the latter ability that proved particularly useful to the Conservatives in the debate over the Naval Aid Bill. The Liberals were prolonging debate to prevent its passage. Meighen introduced the strategy of closure and forced the bill through the House of Commons. In 1913, he was made Solicitor General and four years later Secretary of State. Following the election, Meighen became Minister of the Interior. He was instrumental in drafting the Military Service Act (conscription), the Wartime Elections Act, and the bills that nationalized the railways and created the Canadian National Railways. As acting Minister of Justice, Meighen was involved in ending the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919.

Because of his abilities as a politician and hard work on the prime minister's behalf during the war, Meighen succeeded Borden when he retired in 1920. However, there were party members who were uncertain about the choice. Meighen was a shy man whose reticence, combined with his intellectual reputation made him appear cold and aloof to all but a few close friends. Those who knew him well were acquainted with a droll wit and self-effacing sense of humour, but this aspect of his personality was not seen by many Conservatives, let alone the general public.

Facing the 1921 election, the Tories were in a difficult position. They had been in power for ten years, on their own or as part of the Union government, and they were associated with the unpleasant experiences of the war. Many of their policies had been distinctly unpopular, in particular, high tariffs and conscription. Nor was Meighen's association with the Winnipeg General Strike in his favour. The Conservatives lost the election and Meighen became opposition leader.

Over the next four years, Meighen worked hard at rebuilding the party and the Conservatives regained considerable support. In the election of 1925, they won a majority of 116 seats. Nevertheless, the Liberals retained power by forming an alliance with the new Progressive party, giving them a total of 129 seats. By June 1926, however, the government was threatened by a vote of no confidence. King asked Governor General Byng to dissolve Parliament. Byng refused and King's government resigned. Instead of calling another election, Byng asked Meighen to form a new government. But four days later, the Conservatives lost a vote in the House of Commons. Meighen had no choice but to ask the governor general to dissolve Parliament and call an election.

However eloquently he appealed to their minds, Meighen could never appeal to people's hearts. In the King-Byng affair, it appeared that fate was against him. He resigned from the party the following year and joined a Toronto investment company. In 1932, he was appointed to the Senate.

Meighen attempted a political comeback when he resumed leadership of the party in 1941. His efforts to gain a seat in the House of Commons in a 1942 by-election failed and Meighen retired from politics.

Sir Robert Borden had tried to pass on his electoral luck to his successor. In 1921, he sent to Meighen his 'lucky sprig' that had carried him successfully through two elections.

## International Relations

Meighen attended the Imperial Conference of 1921, a joint consultation between the British Empire and its Dominions. At this conference, he recommended against renewing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, because he felt it would alienate the United States. The alliance was abandoned and eventually replaced with a treaty between Britain, the U.S., Japan and France in the Washington Conference of 1922.

## Anecdote

### The absent-minded prime minister

Arthur Meighen, Canada's ninth prime minister, was by all accounts a brilliant man. His capacity to recall facts and figures astounded his political colleagues. His skill at parliamentary debate and his ability to destroy opponents with unassailable logic and eloquent argument impressed all who heard him speak in the House of Commons. Meighen was passionate about language and literature. Shakespeare was his favourite author and a tribute he once gave to the greatest English author included 150 lines of quotation, all delivered from memory.

Although Meighen could remember quotes from *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, things like umbrellas, overshoes and dinner invitations constantly escaped him. He once arrived in the House of Commons still wearing his bedroom slippers!

Fashion was completely inconsequential to Arthur Meighen. He wore an old green overcoat for so many years that a group of colleagues decided they could look at it no longer. The threadbare garment was stealthily thrown off the train, while Meighen and some fellow members of Parliament were travelling to Ottawa. The coat was found by a railway worker and noting Meighen's name on the inside; he returned it to the owner. Unaware that the coat was even missing, Meighen received it with delight and continued to wear it for several more years, much to the bewilderment and dismay of those who had conspired to overthrow the overcoat!

## Bibliography

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