

# CHC2P Unit 2: 1920s-1930s: Growth and Sacrifice

## Activity 1: Politics and Life in the 1920s

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### Overview

In this activity, you will investigate a variety of important issues related to politics and life in the 1920s.

### Lesson

#### *Agnes MacPhail*



In the federal election of 1921, for the first time, all Canadian women over the age of 21 were allowed to vote (women related to soldiers had been allowed to vote in the 1917 "conscription" election). Agnes MacPhail was the first female elected to Canada's parliament in 1921.

*Read her story:*

"Like famous Canadians Billy Bishop and Nellie McClung, I was born in Grey County. I went to Teachers' College in Stratford, Ontario and taught school for a time. I was very familiar with farm life, and a new political party, the United Farmers Party, asked me to be their candidate in the 1921 election. My father, who was an auctioneer, had made the MacPhail name well-known in Grey County, and this fact helped me to win that 1921 election."

"Although I was in love with a man named Bob Gardiner, I decided not to marry and have a family, so that I could devote myself to politics. I usually wore a black coat, hat, and scarf, and I was known as a "no-nonsense" person. People often made fun of my "school teacher" image, but I did not care about their jokes, and devoted my energy to helping the poorer members of society. I found that prisoners lived in terrible conditions, and were sometimes beaten with belts until they bled. I worked hard to make Canadian prisons places of dignity. I also worked for pensions for old people, better pay for women and better policies for farmers."

"Prime Minister Mackenzie King tried to get me to join the Liberal government by offering me a position in his cabinet, but I decided to stay true to my ideals and to remain a member of a political party that worked for the "little people." In the 1930s, I helped in the founding of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) party, the forerunner of the NDP."

In the 1920s, women became at the same time more independent and more equal members of Canadian society. Women were allowed to participate at the Olympic Games for the first time in 1928 at Amsterdam. Fanny "Bobbie" Rosenfeld won a silver and a gold medal. In the same Olympics, Canada's Percy Williams won gold medals in the 100 and 200 meter races.

## ***Federal Politics in the 1920s***



Arthur Meighen was Prime Minister from 1920-1921. He took over as Prime Minister when Robert Borden resigned as leader of the Conservative Party.

In the 1921 election, the Liberal Party, led by William Lyon Mackenzie King, defeated the Conservative party, led by Meighen. King would be Prime Minister of Canada for most of the '20s. After the 1925 election, King held on as Prime Minister for a time, but was forced to step down because the Liberals did not have a majority of seats in Parliament. Meighen became Prime Minister again for three months in 1926, but he lost the 1926 election to Mackenzie King.

## ***Consumer Products***

The decade of the 1920s saw new consumer products or goods arrive in Canada. Consumer goods are goods that are bought by people for their personal use. They are different than tractors or machines that are used by businesses and factories.

Two of the most popular new consumer goods of the 1920s were the automobile and the radio. Both of these products were widely sold for the first time in the 1920s. People could afford to buy these products because wages were increasing and the price of the products was decreasing.

A new Model T Ford car could be bought for \$450.00. This may sound like a great price today, but remember that many workers were earning around \$40.00 a week. People were encouraged to buy the car "on time." After a small down payment, people would pay for the car with weekly payments over a period of two or three years until the full price - plus interest - was paid off.

Cars and radios came down in prices during the 1920s because they were mass-produced on assembly lines. An assembly line involves the use of a moving belt on which a product such as a car is assembled in a factory. As the product moves down the line, parts are added to the product at various points by workers. In the United States, Henry Ford perfected the assembly line for cars, and eventually was able to produce a Model T Ford every 24 seconds!

## ***Automobiles in the 1920s***



By the middle of the 1920s, Canada had become the second largest automobile producer in the world. Many different brands of cars were manufactured in Canada, such as the following:

- McLaughlin in Oshawa
- Gray Dort in Chatham
- Frontenac in Toronto
- Hupmobile in Windsor
- Studebaker in Hamilton
- London Six in London

All of these car manufacturers have since disappeared. For the most part, the large United States companies such as General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler bought them out. The smaller Canadian businesses found it hard to compete with the large American companies.

The United States companies also set up branch plants in Canada. Branch plants are businesses in Canada that are owned by foreign owners.

For example, Chrysler set up a branch plant in Windsor, and General Motors set up a branch plant in Oshawa. At both plants, American cars were produced by Canadian workers. Most of the profits from the plants went to the United States. Most of the important decisions were made by the American owners.

In the 1920s, American companies also took over most of Canada's oil business, as well as its electrical and rubber industries. It was also during the 1920s that American entertainment, in the form of movies and radio programs, started to flood into Canada.

### ***Prohibition in the 1920s***

Another interesting aspect of life in the 1920s was prohibition. The word prohibition comes from the verb "prohibit," meaning "prevent." Prohibition refers to the fact that in most of Canada, people were prevented from buying or selling alcoholic beverages. In Canada, the laws against alcoholic beverages were passed by the various provincial governments. "Temperance" groups wanted people to stop using alcoholic beverages. Church groups and women's groups, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), wanted prohibition, and encouraged the provincial governments to pass laws against alcohol. Both groups were aware of the many ruined lives created by alcohol abuse.



Laws in Canada allowed for the making of alcohol, but not its sale in Canada. In the 1920s, much of the alcohol produced in Canada was sold to the United States, where there was a law against making alcohol. However, the Canadian-made alcohol needed to be smuggled into the United States because it was not legal to bring "booze" into the U.S. This led to the practice of "rum running", or secretly moving the booze across the border.

Although it was difficult for the police to enforce the prohibition laws, drunkenness and associated crimes declined significantly. Many people made illegal home-brewed "moonshine" or booze.

Bootlegging (the illegal sale of alcohol as a beverage) rose dramatically, as did the number of unlawful drinking places, known as "speakeasies" or "blind pigs." One way to drink legally was to be "ill." If you were "ill", a doctor could give you a prescription for alcohol to be filled at a drugstore. Especially during the Christmas holiday season, there were long line-ups at drugstores to get liquor prescriptions for "ill" people.

In the United States, prohibition lasted from 1920 until 1933. In Quebec, it only lasted two years. In Ontario, it lasted from 1916 to 1927. All four of the Western provinces had stopped prohibition by 1924. Prohibition caused a good deal of law-breaking, as citizens used illegal means to get alcoholic drinks. The

provincial governments in the 1920s also saw that they could make tax money from alcohol. As prohibition disappeared, provincial governments started to set up "control" boards and stores to sell liquor, wine, and beer.

## Assignment

1. What political party did Agnes MacPhail help to create in the 1930s?
2. Who was the Prime Minister of Canada for most of the 1920s?
3. Consumer goods are goods that are bought by people for their personal use. The car and the radio were new consumer products in the 1920s. What are some new consumer goods made available in your lifetime? What is one of your favorite consumer products today? Explain why.
4. Name four Canadian cars in the 1920s.
5. In the 1920s, the United States influenced Canadians in the areas of industry and entertainment. Explain how the United States influences Canadians today. Give some specific examples. Give your opinion of American influence.
6. In the 1920s, governments in Canada and the United States decided to prohibit the use and sale of a certain product – namely alcohol. Today, the government of Canada prohibits or limits the sale of certain products. What are these products, and why are they prohibited or limited in their use and sale?