

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

## Activity 5: Prime Ministers in the 1930s

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### Overview

In this activity, you will read about the prominent figures in Canadian political life during the 1930s, in particular, William Lyon Mackenzie King, a man who was Prime Minister of Canada for 21 years!

### Lesson

#### *Prime Minister Mackenzie King*



William Lyon Mackenzie King was Prime Minister of Canada for most of the 1920s. He and the Liberal party won the 1926 election against Arthur Meighen and the Conservatives.

An election must be called at least every five years in Canada, and Mackenzie King decided to call the election in 1930. King believed that the economic depression was a temporary happening. He thought that the economy would improve by itself, so he did little.

#### *King and the 1930 Election*

Mackenzie King kept the federal budget balanced. When you keep your personal budget balanced, it means that you do not spend more than you take in, for example, from wages, allowance or investments. In other words, you do not go into debt.

King (and many others) thought it would be wrong for the country of Canada to go into debt, so he did not spend money to help industries that were in trouble, or to help the workers who were unemployed. In a 1930 speech that landed him in trouble, King said that he would not give “a five-cent piece” (nickel) to any provincial Conservative government to help out with unemployment.

For many voters, Mackenzie King did not offer solutions to the problems of the Depression.

#### **Prime Minister R. B. Bennett**



After Arthur Meighen’s loss in the 1926 election, the Conservative Party selected a Calgary millionaire named Richard Bedford (R. B.) Bennett as their new leader.

Bennett said that he would use tariffs “to blast a way into the markets” of the world. What he meant was that he would raise tariffs against any country that increased tariffs against Canada. He thought that his threat would force countries to trade more with Canada.

In the 1930 election campaign, Bennett also promised to give money to the

provinces, so that they could help the unemployed. Bennett was energetic, confident, and was a good speaker on radio.

In the July, 1930 election, Bennett and the Conservatives won 137 seats in Parliament while King and the Liberals won only 88.

### ***Money, Money, Money!***



Like William Lyon Mackenzie King, R. B. Bennett was concerned about keeping a balanced budget. He did not want the country to go into debt by borrowing money for large government projects (such as roads, parks and bridges) to put the unemployed back to work.

This approach was being tried in the United States by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his program called the "New Deal". The idea was that, if the

unemployed went back to work (on government projects), they would receive money. With this money they would buy clothes, food, and houses. In turn, the people who produced these things would now be called back to work. In this manner, a positive "multiplier effect" would kick into action.

Bennett provided some relief for the unemployed. Money for poor families was provided by city governments at welfare offices. Sometimes, they almost had to beg for this money. Single unemployed men were expected to go to relief camps. They worked 44 hours a week on a government project and were paid 20 cents a day with an additional 2 cent allowance for tobacco. There were plenty of complaints about the strict discipline and the food.

### ***Prime Minister R. B. Bennett Speaks***

"I believed in hard work. Working 16 hours a day, six days a week, was not unusual for me. Work made me a millionaire, and work made me Prime Minister of Canada. I did not drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or gamble. I did eat a good deal - five meals a day. I was a life-long bachelor."

"As soon as I became Prime Minister in 1930, I sent \$20 million to the provinces to help those out of work. I was at my desk until late each evening, answering letters sent to me by ordinary Canadians. I was very touched by their stories of hardship. Out of my own pocket, I sent them money - in total, \$25,000 a year."

"I created the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) and the Bank of Canada so that Canadians would have more control."

"Frustration set in because I was not able to solve the Depression. I raised tariffs, but trade did not increase. Jobs continued to disappear. Crops continued to fail. Factories continued to close. People thought I was arrogant and cold-hearted. Frankly, I was not amused when people called their horse-pulled cars 'Bennett buggies' and called newspapers 'Bennett blankets'. I did my very best in my five years as Prime Minister."

Some people, who could not afford the gasoline and upkeep of their cars, took out the motors and pulled them with horses. To make fun of the Prime Minister, these contraptions were called Bennett Buggies.



### ***King Comes Back***

In 1935, Bennett tried to copy the "New Deal" of US President Roosevelt, but his effort was too little, too late. In the election of that year, the Canadian people kicked out the unpopular Bennett and brought back William Lyon Mackenzie King and the Liberals.

King was able to reduce tariffs somewhat, but he was unable to end the Depression. It was the increased spending associated with Canada's entry into World War II in 1939 that finally stopped unemployment and the economic slump.

King won the 1940 election (and another in 1945) and stayed on as Prime Minister until 1948.

## **Assignment**

1. Explain two reasons why Prime Minister Mackenzie King did very little to stop the Depression in 1930.
2. In four sentences, describe the character of Prime Minister R.B. Bennett.
3. What is a "Bennett Buggy" and why is it called by that name?
4. Describe conditions in a 1930's Relief Camp.
5. Explain the economic reasoning behind United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's program called the New Deal.