

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

## Activity 6: Political Protests 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

#### *The On-To-Ottawa Trek*



Many of the single men in the relief camps were very unhappy with their situation. In 1935, over 1,000 relief camp workers decided to take their complaints to Prime Minister Bennett in Ottawa. Starting in Vancouver, they hitched rides on freight trains headed eastward. This became known as the "On-To-Ottawa Trek".

The trekkers were stopped in Regina, Saskatchewan by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Eight leaders were allowed to continue on to Ottawa. There, they asked the Prime Minister for real work and a minimum wage of 50 cents per hour. Bennett rejected their requests.

When the leaders returned to Regina, they organized a peaceful demonstration. When RCMP constables with baseball bats tried to break up the demonstration, a two hour riot broke out. The trekkers returned home with no better conditions.

**Some groups decided to protest by forming new political parties. Three new political parties that formed during the Depression were:**

1. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF)
2. The Social Credit Party
3. The Union Nationale Party

#### *The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF)*



In 1933, farmer and labour organizations came together to create the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in Regina. The CCF saw the institution of capitalism, or free enterprise, as the root cause of the Great Depression.

Capitalism is a system in which banks, factories, and land are privately owned. In the eyes of the CCF, capitalism favoured the rich over the poor in an unfair way. The CCF proposed democratic socialism. In this system, the rich are pulled down and the poor are raised up

by government programs. It is democratic, because people are invited to vote in favour of these programs.

Among other things, the CCF called for a minimum wage, unemployment insurance, old age pensions, child support payments, and government medical care. Each of these programs would help the weaker members of society. Each of these programs would, in part at least, be funded by the stronger members of society. Therefore, each of these programs could be called “socialist”.

Some Canadians confused the CCF with communism, and thus rejected the party. Communists also believe in achieving more equality in society, but are willing to use undemocratic means, such as violence, terror, and intimidation, to achieve this goal. The CCF always spoke in favour of democracy, individual freedom, and individual rights.

James Shaver Woodsworth was elected as the first leader of the CCF. He had been a Methodist minister, longshoreman, and a leader of the Winnipeg General Strike. Woodsworth had been a Member of Parliament since 1921, but in the 1935 election, only 7 CCF candidates were elected to the House of Commons. The party did become the government of the province of Saskatchewan in 1944 - the first socialist government in North America.

Over the years, most of the socialist proposals presented by the CCF in 1933 were adopted by various Canadian governments.

### ***The Social Credit Party***



William Aberhart, a Calgary, Alberta high school principal, was the creator of the Social Credit Party. He believed that the ongoing cause of the Depression was that people did not have enough money to buy products. His solution to the lack of buying power was to give each adult in Alberta a monthly cheque, or “social credit”, of \$25. “Bible Bill” Aberhart was well known in Alberta because he preached on a radio program. In the 1935 provincial election, the newly created Social Credit Party won, and Aberhart became the Premier of Alberta.

Once in power, Aberhart attempted to bring in his \$25 payment idea. However, the courts ruled that only the federal government could issue money, and thus Aberhart’s idea was declared illegal, yet the Social Credit Party struck a chord with Alberta voters, and it governed the province until 1971. Despite its name and its \$25 payment idea, Social Credit should not be considered a socialist party. For the most part, the party favoured free enterprise capitalism.

### ***The Union Nationale***



During the Depression years in Quebec, the anger of the French-speaking unemployed workers turned against the businesses that were owned by English-speaking Canadians and Americans.

Maurice Duplessis, a lawyer and life-long bachelor, helped to form the Union Nationale Party as an expression of Quebec nationalism. This meant that the

Union Nationale strongly defended the French language, culture, and religion against the economic strength of the English in the province of Quebec.

The Union Nationale, with Duplessis as leader, rode to power in Quebec in 1936 and, with the exception of 5 years, they stayed in power until 1959.

## Assignment

1. What was the purpose of the On-The-Ottawa trek?
2. What are the forms of protest discussed in this lesson?
3. Which form of political protest do you believe is the most effective? Explain why you believe so.
4. What did the CCF see as the root of the Great Depression? What did they see as the solution to the Great Depression?
5. What did “Bible Bill” see as the cause of the Great Depression? What was his solution?