

Canada's History Through the Prime Ministers

Prime ministers have been the head of the Canadian government since 1867. The prime minister's office was adapted from that which was used at that time in Britain. There are no restrictions on the length of term in office. Some prime ministers were in office for less than a year, some for 10+ years.

Here is a list of the Canadian Prime Ministers from 1867–2020.

1. Sir John A. Macdonald (1867–1873)
2. Alexander Mackenzie (1873–1878)
3. Sir John A. Macdonald (1878–1891)
4. Sir John Abbott (1891–1892)
5. Sir John Thompson (1892–1894)
6. Sir Mackenzie Bowell (1894–1896)
7. Sir Charles Tupper (1896)
8. Sir Wilfrid Laurier (1896–1911)
9. Sir Robert Borden (1911–1920)
10. Arthur Meighen (1920–1921)
11. William Lyon Mackenzie King (1921–1926)
12. Arthur Meighen (1926)
13. William Lyon Mackenzie King (1926–1930)
14. R.B. Bennett (1930–1935)
15. William Lyon Mackenzie King (1935–1948)
16. Louis St. Laurent (1948–1957)
17. John George Diefenbaker (1957–1963)
18. Lester B. Pearson (1963–1968)
19. Pierre Elliot Trudeau (1968–1979)
20. Joseph Clark (1979–1980)
21. Pierre Elliot Trudeau (1980–1984)
22. John Napier Turner (1984)
23. Brian Mulroney (1984–1993)
24. Kim Campbell (1993)
25. Jean Chretien (1993–2003)
26. Paul Martin (2003–2006)
27. Stephen Harper (2006–2015)
28. Justin Trudeau (2015–Present)

Looking a little closer at each prime minister will give a better indication as to how they affected Canada during their terms.

Sir John A. Macdonald (1867–1873)

Sir John A. Macdonald's time in the office of prime minister is most known for the increase of the territory of Canada to include Manitoba, British Columbia, and Prince Edward Island, despite the issues with the Red River Rebellion.

The government was accused of taking bribes in the Pacific Scandal which led to his resignation in 1873.

Alexander Mackenzie (1873–1878)

As prime minister, Alexander Mackenzie began The Dominion Elections Act which brought in laws for a secret ballot along with other reforms to the election process. He also created the Supreme Court of Canada and established the office of Auditor General. While in office, the Intercontinental Railway was completed, but because of the economic turmoil and depression grown from the Panic of 1873, his time in office was difficult and things were not completed as he would have liked.

Mackenzie resigned in 1878.

Sir John A. Macdonald (1878–1891)

During his second term as prime minister, Macdonald applied the trade protectionism policy. The Pacific Railway was also completed during his final term.

He died in office and will be remembered as showing his loyalty to the British Empire by saying, "A British subject I was born; a British subject I will die."

Sir John Abbott (1891–1892)

John Abbot accepted the office of prime minister when Macdonald died. After taking office, an economic recession began again, and he faced a scandal: the McGreevy-Langevin scandal. His term in office was more about taking care of the things left from Macdonald's death. This included reform of the civil service and criminal code changes.

Although he tried many times to turn the office of prime minister over to Sir John Thompson, it was not until his health failed that he was able to resign and let Thompson take control.

Sir John Thompson (1892–1894)

After Abbot's retirement, Thompson assumed the office of prime minister. The major concerns during his term in office were the fear that Canada would be annexed by the United States, the Bering Sea tribunal, trade tariffs, school system issues in Manitoba and the North West Territories.

In 1894, while serving as prime minister of Canada, Thompson suddenly died of a heart attack.

Sir Mackenzie Bowell (1894–1896)

As the most senior Cabinet minister when Thompson died, Bowell was appointed prime minister of Canada. When Bowell was brought into office, the Manitoba school question was still in dispute.

His indecision in regards to this dispute led his cabinet to force his resignation due to his inability to lead. He resigned in 1896.

Sir Charles Tupper (1896)

The oldest person to become prime minister, Tupper was 74 when he was sworn into office. He is also the prime minister with the shortest term.

His inability to make appointments as prime minister led him to resign in 1896 after only 68 days in office.

Sir Wilfrid Laurier (1896–1911)

Laurier's first act as prime minister was to find the solution to the Manitoba Schools Question with the Laurier-Greenway Compromise. During his term, he sent a volunteer force to help the British in the Second Boer War. Saskatchewan and Alberta entered the Confederation during his time in office as well. He also enacted the Naval Service Act which brought the first navy to Canada.

After calling an election to settle the reciprocity issue with the United States, Laurier was defeated in 1911.

Sir Robert Borden (1911–1920)

Borden was prime minister during World War I and created the War Measures Act, Military Service Act, and Conscription Crisis. His hope that Canadian soldiers would not be split into

British divisions led him to the creation of the Canadian army. During his term, he was also active in equal suffrage for women, introducing a bill for equality in 1918.

Borden retired from office in 1920.

Arthur Meighen (1920–1921)

Meighen's first term as prime minister was short; the Winnipeg General Strike and farm tariffs made his term short.

He was defeated in 1921.

William Lyon Mackenzie King (1921–1926)

Mackenzie King's first term as prime minister was focused on lowering wartime taxes. He also passed the Chinese Immigration Act. He is remembered most, however, for his work in the planning and development of Ottawa as the national capital of Canada.

King called for an election in 1925 and was defeated after scandals were uncovered.

Arthur Meighen (1926)

Meighen's second term in office was only three months because of attacks and issues following the King-Byng Affair.

He was defeated in the federal election and resigned.

William Lyon Mackenzie King (1926–1930)

King took office again in 1926 after his defeat of Meighen. During his second term in office, the Balfour Declaration and Statue of Westminster were instituted. He also expanded the Department of External Affairs and put the governments of Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan under the ownership of the crown.

In 1930, during the Great Depression, he was defeated by R.B. Bennett.

R.B. Bennett (1930–1935)

The misfortune of taking office during the Great Depression was apparent in Bennett's term. His policies for increased trade and tariffs for imports were not successful. Later, his Imperial Preference policy failed as the economic crisis was dominating. His Unemployment and Farm

Relief Act was passed in 1931, but it was too late as the economic crisis was out of control. In 1934, Bennett's New Deal was considered a failure as it was "too little, too late."

In 1935, Bennett was defeated.

William Lyon Mackenzie King (1935–1948)

King began his 3rd Parliament term as the Great Depression was beginning to make a turn for the better. Over his 13-year term, many changes were made. He passed the Reciprocal Trade Agreement, National Housing Act and National Employment Commission. He also started the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Trans-Canada Airlines, and the National Film Board of Canada. King also transferred the Bank of Canada into a crown corporation.

Many of his reforms were similar to Bennett's New Deal. Some of the major reforms put in place by King were The Federal Unemployment and Agricultural Assistance Act, the Youth Training Act, subsidies for medical services and farmers, Federal Home Improvement Plan, National Housing Act and Vocational Training Co-Ordination Act.

During World War II, King built the Royal Canadian Air Force and obtained the British Commonwealth Air Training Program to train the airmen. His National Research Council of Canada became a leader in the NRX reactor and other wartime development. His Canadian Citizenship Act created a difference between British subjects living in Canada and now Canadian Citizens.

After the war, King helped found the United Nations but soon after began to dismantle wartime controls. His social programs helped the eventual entry of Newfoundland to join Canada.

At the end of his term, the Cold War began, and a few years later King retired.

Louis St. Laurent (1948–1957)

When King retired, St. Laurent was selected as the new prime minister. St. Laurent expected hard work and was a hard worker himself. He worked for unity in the nation and liberty for politics. He helped with the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and helped during the Korean War and Suez Crisis. He was active with social and industrial policies including the establishment of the Canada Council. While in office, the Trans-Canada Highway, St. Lawrence Seaway, and the Trans-Canada Pipeline were completed.

St. Laurent served well for his 9 years but was defeated in the 1957 election.

John George Diefenbaker (1957–1963)

During his term, Diefenbaker introduced the [Canadian Bill of Rights](#) and worked toward creating a “One Canada” policy. He was looked on as a hero in foreign policy during the South African deadlock at the Prime Ministers’ Conference. He also worked with the United States to create NORAD.

Later in his career, he began to be unfavored and eventually was defeated by Lester Pearson.

Lester B. Pearson (1963–1968)

Pearson was elected in 1963 and worked for social programs. Some of the programs he was instrumental in were universal health care and Canada Student Loans. He also signed the Canada-United States Automotive Agreement. During his term, he started the Royal Commission on the Status of Women and the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism.

Shortly before his retirement, he oversaw the centennial celebrations in Canada.

Pierre Elliot Trudeau (1968–1979)

During his term as prime minister, Trudeau continued work on Pearson’s Bilingualism and Biculturalism commission with the Official Languages Act making French and English the official languages of the government. His public stand during the October Crisis and his attempts to increase the international profile of Canada were controversial.

Trudeau’s poll numbers began to decline, and he was defeated in the election of 1979.

Joseph Clark (1979–1980)

Clark was the youngest Canadian prime minister to take office at 39 years of age. Early in his term, Clark introduced the Freedom of Information Act. Clark’s gasoline tax and refusal to work with the Socreds (Social Credit Party of Canada) led to his fall in the Canadian government.

In 1980, an election was held to replace Clark. He was defeated by Trudeau.

Pierre Elliot Trudeau (1980–1984)

Trudeau was re-elected in 1980 and began with initiating involvement in the Quebec referendum. He also introduced the National Energy Program and implemented the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#), The Canada Act, and Constitutional Act.

In 1984, Trudeau decided not to run again in the election and instead to retire from politics.

John Napier Turner (1984)

Turner had taken a break from politics but decided to re-enter after Trudeau retired. Once elected, Turner never had the chance to sit in parliament as Prime Minister.

He stepped down as prime minister in September, a little over 2 months after his election.

Brian Mulroney (1984–1993)

Mulroney began his term in office with the cancelation of the National Energy Program. He then attempted to lower the deficit and create national unity. His relationship with the United States led to the elimination of tariffs between Canada and the United States.

During the economic recession, he introduced the Goods and Services Tax due to what he called an “emergency situation.” He also added many new national parks and passed the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act and Canadian Environmental Protection Act.

Mulroney’s popularity continued to decrease, and his retirement from office was made in 1993.

Kim Campbell (1993)

Campbell is the first woman and, thus far, only woman to hold the office of Canadian prime minister. She spent her time in office reorganizing the cabinet but never faced a parliament.

Campbell was defeated in the 1993 election by a landslide.

Jean Chretien (1993–2003)

After his appointment as prime minister, Chretien began to establish a centralized government. When he took office, the national debt was out of control. He introduced plans for economic growth by increasing exports and taking on globalization and free trade. When the debt continued, he agreed to cut back on government spending. He worked to bring Quebec to sign the Canadian constitution. In 1999, the Social Union Framework Agreement was signed between Ottawa and 9 out of the 10 provinces; Quebec would not sign the agreement. He later passed the Clarity Act. Chretien introduced the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

Later in his term, controversies began to rise, and although his approval rating stayed high, in 2003 he decided to retire.

Paul Martin (2003–2006)

Upon Chretien's retirement, Martin took over as prime minister. Although he opposed the bill, the Civil Marriage Act was passed while he was in office. He worked to improve health care and establish early learning and childcare programs.

Martin was defeated in the 2006 election and stepped down as prime minister.

Stephen Harper (2006–2015)

After his election as prime minister, Harper emphasized economic management, accountability, security, debt reduction and lower taxes. His recognition of Quebecois as a nation helped win the favour of Quebec. He passed an initiative to end public subsidies for political parties. Canada joined the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Canada–EU free trade agreement promoted the labour movement and foreign investment.

Harper was defeated by Trudeau in the 2015 election.

Justin Trudeau (2015–Present)

Trudeau was elected in 2015 and is still in office today. So far he has legalized the recreational use of marijuana and joined the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement regarding trade.

Holding office now, we will see what he will do with the remainder of his time as prime minister.

Want More History?

Go to [Canada's History For Kids](#) for their online games, contests and virtual events and see the lesson plans on their main site [Canada's History](#) for elementary through high school learning resources.