

Times of Transformation

The 1921 Canadian General Election

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Introduction

THE ELECTION OF December 6, 1921, marked the beginning of a new era. For the first time since Confederation, three major parties contested the election, and the Liberals, who would go on to form the new government under Mackenzie King, fell just short of a majority. The presence of a third party made a minority government possible for the first time.

For Quebec, the 1921 election delivered vengeance. That province's anti-conscriptionists had been sidelined in the 1917 wartime election, but now, with anglophone votes across the country split between three substantial parties, Quebec emerged as the arbiter. Its solid Liberal bloc of seats would thereafter loom large in the political calculations of the new government. Throughout the country, the conscription question had dissolved traditional political allegiances in 1917, and in 1921 those who had earlier broken their accustomed partisan habits did not inevitably return to former loyalties.

Women were now eligible to vote and stand for election on the same basis as men. Female relatives of male servicemen, and women who were themselves in wartime service, had won the federal vote as a temporary expedient in 1917, and 1918 legislation conferred the vote on women twenty-one and over who met their province's

property requirement. The 1920 Dominion Elections Act removed any property qualification, granting the federal vote on terms equal to men. A handful of women ran as candidates in 1921, and one was victorious: Agnes MacPhail, a Progressive parliamentarian who represented Grey Southeast, Ontario.

MacPhail also represented another change: she was part of the new wave of agrarian politicians who transformed Canada's political landscape. The Progressive Party produced the country's first-ever post-Confederation minority government. Population growth in the West enabled farmers to form an effective partisan bloc to oppose the protectionist National Policy tariffs that traditionally benefited eastern-based industry. The election of 1921 was a contest over trade policy, a confrontation that would not be seen so starkly again until 1988. Tariff policy was only one agrarian grievance, however. In December 1921, the month of the election, wheat prices that had reached a high of \$2.63 per bushel for the 1919 crop under the temporary protection of the Wheat Board fell to \$1.11, almost the same level as 1908, but in a climate of rampant inflation where farmers were forced to pay inflated prices for manufactured goods made more expensive through tariffs.¹ Higher regional railway freight rates had also long rankled in the West.

Given the demonstrable grounds for Western discontent, some speculated that Conservative prime minister Arthur Meighen sought the election call before the decennial redistribution bill gave the Prairies even more parliamentary seats. If that was a motive, the strategy did not save him. Under Meighen, the Conservative Party was reduced to third place, winning fewer seats than the upstart Progressives – fifty to the latter's sixty-four.

For many Progressives, however, the entry into politics was about more than the admittedly important pragmatic questions of tariffs, wheat prices, and freight rates. The rise of the Progressive Party was part of a wider drive to remake political life, a quest to purify and transform the sordid clientelist partisan atmosphere of the past. The

ideas espoused by some Progressives, such as “direct democracy” and the non-partisan movement, were heavily influenced by American reform notions and experiments.

Labour issues also figured more prominently than ever in 1921, a legacy of 1919’s summer of strikes and ongoing discontent among workers. Mackenzie King’s background in industrial negotiations helped earn him support among delegates to the Liberal leadership convention held a few weeks after the collapse of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. Occasional MPs before 1921 had claimed to represent labour, but 1921 saw the strongest result yet, with two Canadian Labour Party MPs elected and a third, Independent member who supported Labour. Labour leader James Shaver Woodsworth made his first foray into federal politics, where he would serve until 1942; by the early 1930s, he was leader of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF).

The wider world was changing after the searing dislocation of the Great War. A further cataclysmic loss of life in the flu pandemic that followed added to the general zeitgeist of disillusionment and impatience with traditional authority. A surging number of divorces was a barometer of social change: the spring 1921 parliamentary session passed a record 113 divorce bills, compared with 610 in the entire fifty-four years since Confederation.² Transformation was even seen in women’s clothing styles, with higher hemlines and looser-fitting, straighter, more androgynous garments. The inter-war years saw an international wave of experimentation – socially, ideologically, economically, and politically. George Orwell observed “a wave of revolutionary feeling” in England, a “revolt of youth against age, resulting directly from the war.” The old had been “sternly patriotic in safe places while their sons went down like swathes of hay before the German machine-guns.” By the war’s end, “the mood ... was extended into a general revolt against orthodoxy and authority.”³ In “The Second Coming,” published in 1921 amid the Irish War of Independence, William Butler Yeats famously

captured the spirit of the age: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”⁴

Even amid the disavowal of tradition, there flourished a spirit of hopefulness that the world could be rebuilt in a better way. The American president Woodrow Wilson (1913–21) tried to use his voice at the Paris Peace Conference to lay the groundwork for a new era of peace through the League of Nations. “It was easy to mock Wilson,” Margaret MacMillan observes, “and many did.” But many in 1919, “and not just in the United States, wanted to believe in his great dream of a better world ... Wilson kept alive the hope that human society, despite the evidence, was getting better, that nations would one day live in harmony.”⁵

The principle of national self-determination, as espoused by Wilson, offered Irish nationalists a supportive doctrine to buttress their quest for independence. On the very day of Canada’s election, the world looked on hopefully as the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, creating an independent Irish Free State. The treaty specified that “the position of the Irish Free State in relation to the Imperial Parliament and Government and otherwise shall be that of the Dominion of Canada” and would follow its “constitutional usage.”⁶ Admirers of Canada’s Dominion status saw in it an ideal of “liberty and loyalty, self-government and Empire unity, prosperity and absolute control of its own resources and interests,” predicting that Ulster would eventually emulate Quebec and find freedom within a larger union.⁷ Disagreements over acceptance of the treaty and Northern Ireland’s continued status as part of the United Kingdom soon embroiled Ireland in civil war. In Canada, as around the world, Irish events were closely watched.

Some transformative ideas had already been circulating before the war. The Social Gospel movement, which began in the late nineteenth century, prompted Christians to work to achieve the Kingdom of God on earth. Formerly, Christian religions had emphasized the regeneration of individuals – spiritual rebirth. Now, for many

Protestants, the focus was on wholesale regeneration of society through the elimination of social ills like poverty, drunkenness, and prostitution. The Great War–era prohibition on the sale of alcohol seemed to many social reformers to be a step in the right direction, and they hoped it would continue in peacetime. Feminism was also part of the drive for transformation, driven by the conviction that a more public role for women would purify public life and prevent tragedies such as war. “The hand that rocks the cradle does not rule the world,” Nellie McClung scoffed. “If it did, human life would be held dearer and the world would be a sweeter, cleaner, safer place than it is now!”⁸

Mackenzie King himself had been deeply committed to the Social Gospel movement. The conventional Presbyterianism at the heart of his family’s social world gave way to a more ardent Christianity in the future prime minister. During his days at University College, Toronto, King reported that he “saw a little of the darker side of the world” and encountered the “great evils to be conquered in the city.” He resolved to become “more earnest in my work for the Master[;] it will not do to be half hearted.” King vowed to “lift up the fallen” and expressed a wish to make his life “a pure and holy one devoted to Christ alone.” He expended some of his energies in the cause of downtrodden prostitutes. His later diary entries confessed shame and self-reproach over his “sin” and “weakness,” often recorded after an evening “stroll” – and suggest a struggle with temptation. Historical treatments of King after the 1950s aired these prurient details and offered readers a more complex image of an outwardly dull prime minister.⁹ While doing graduate work in Chicago, King lived briefly at Hull House, where earnest young people ministered to their disadvantaged immigrant neighbours, surrounded by what he described as “misery and wretchedness, vice and degradation, abomination and filthiness.”¹⁰ King’s sense of mission shaped his later ambitions: he would come to believe that his rise to the prime minister’s office was part of a divinely ordained plan.

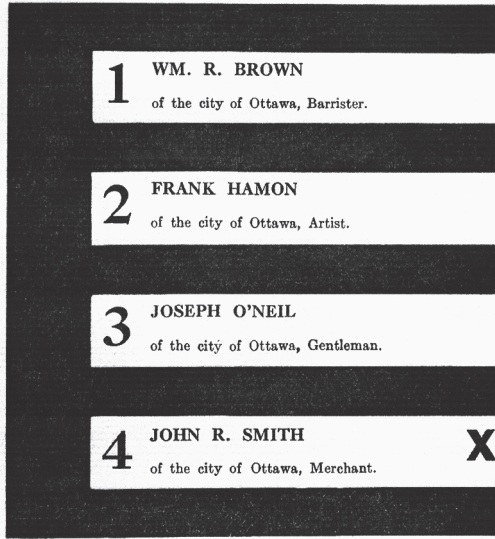
The transformative change of the 1921 election was a long time in the making. The chapters that follow will examine the results of that election but will also establish the important historical context that is necessary to a full understanding of the result. They will consider the long-germinating developments in agrarian organization that would flower into partisan activity; the context of American tariff policy – so important to Canada, whose trade was increasingly concentrated there; the rising power of organized labour; the decades-long struggle for women’s votes; and the determinative impact of Quebec. The 1921 election was indeed a turning point, but the apparently sudden political upheaval was the product of decades.

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The 1921 Results

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS of the 1921 election? The answer is not as straightforward as might be imagined. A greater fluidity in partisan affiliations makes a seat count for each party less than precise. In an era when party discipline is near-absolute, it can be difficult to recapture the political culture of a time when individual parliamentarians exercised greater independence and, even when allied with a party, felt able to oppose the party line on key policies. Voters were expected to vote for the candidate who would represent their constituency, rather than thinking only in terms of a national party leader.

Not until the 1972 election did party affiliations appear on the ballot.¹ By contrast, the 1920 Dominion Elections Act dictated only that ballots would include the candidate's name, occupation, and city.² In 1940, Mackenzie King explained in the House of Commons that, under the election law, "no political party is recognized as such ... The responsibility of ascertaining the party affiliations of the candidates is that of the voter himself." A special temporary provision was made during the wartime elections of 1917 and 1940 to provide candidate party affiliations for those serving overseas.³



Sample ballot, 1920 | Schedule 1, Form 24, appended to *An Act respecting the Election of Members of the House of Commons and the Electoral Franchise*, 1920 (10–11 Geo V), c 46, *Acts of the Parliament of Canada*, 13th Parliament, 4th Session, Chapter 1–73, 265

Today, of course, the tendency is clear for voters to cast their ballots for a party leader, with less heed to whom they will actually be sending to Parliament.⁴

Because of this ambiguity over party affiliations, historical accounts of the 1921 results vary, and the method of counting can make the difference between a minority or majority for the new Liberal government led by Mackenzie King. In a 235-seat House of Commons, some accounts give the Liberals 118 seats, a precarious majority. Others, however, calculate the Liberal seat count at 117 or 116, making the 1921 result a minority government. The seat count for Progressives ranges from a low of 58 to a high of 65. This caveat must be also borne in mind in any discussion of seat counts by party in individual provinces.⁵

Any nuanced consideration of party totals must be informed by particular local circumstances and the subsequent behaviour and voting patterns of individual MPs, something that will be considered in later chapters. Farmer MPs were especially apt to look to the perceived interests of their individual ridings and not to the dictates of a central party organization. Equally important is the question of whether one of the three main parties opted to run an opposing candidate in an individual riding. Mackenzie King was canny in his response to the Progressive threat, often avoiding direct confrontation with the farmers, hopeful that by keeping the door open he might ultimately win their support. In practice, this meant a highly localized decision about whether Liberal candidates and farmer politicians would face off against one another. The issue was further complicated by Labour party candidates, especially in British Columbia and Manitoba, some of whom cooperated with Progressives and whom the Progressives often declined to oppose, and by the unwillingness of many farmer politicians in Alberta to cooperate with Liberals. In Ontario, there were twenty-eight ridings (of eighty-two) without a Liberal-Progressive contest, and some candidates in Ontario and the Maritimes labelled themselves Labour-Progressive, Progressive-Labour, or Farmer Labour.⁶ King continued to court the Progressives after the election, a strategy that helped sustain his government.

Party election standings, however imprecise, demonstrate a new phenomenon in 1921: the rise of a cadre of parliamentarians devoted to the interests of agriculture and a small group devoted to the interests of labour. Thus, it makes sense to include in the “Progressive” tally other farmer MPs, and to differentiate avowed Labour MPs from the “other” category.

The determination of whether or not King possessed a majority after the 1921 election must, in the end, be based upon how many votes he could rely upon in the House of Commons. For that reason, the number of Liberal seats won in 1921 should be reckoned at 116,

making King's government a minority. Two nominal Liberals elected in Manitoba who are sometimes included in a tally of 118 Liberal seats – A.B. Hudson and Arthur-Lucien Beaubien – did not predictably support King, even on confidence measures, and were opposed in 1921 by other Liberal candidates in their constituencies. Hudson has been listed in the “other” category, as an Independent, but Beaubien, who decidedly avowed his support for the Progressive Party and later ran as a Progressive, has been included in the Progressive tally.⁷ Joseph Tweed Shaw of Calgary West, who had the endorsement of both Labour and the Progressives, is best considered an Independent and is also listed in the “other” category.

The following totals, then, are the most faithful to true party allegiances:

- Liberal – 116
- Progressive and farmer MPs – 64
- Conservative – 50
- Labour – 2
- Other – 3

The 1921 election was a complete rout for the Conservative government of Arthur Meighen. Six provinces did not elect a single Conservative candidate: Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Quebec returned a solidly Liberal bloc of MPs. Even in Ontario, the Conservatives won only thirty-six of eight-two seats, or thirty-seven if the sole “Independent Conservative” is included. The Conservatives dropped to third-party rank.

Observers agree that the 1921 election was an election of regions: just as the Liberals won all sixty-five Quebec seats, the concentration of Progressive votes in the West gave that party a strong seat count. Farmers won ten of twelve seats in Alberta, eight of whom were Progressive and two standing with the United Farmers of Alberta. Progressives and farmer candidates captured twelve of

fifteen seats in Manitoba, and fifteen of sixteen in Saskatchewan. The election launched what Robert Wardhaugh calls the Liberal Party's "never ending quest to defeat the region's tendency toward third party alternatives." At the same time, aspects of the prairie social reform movement matched King's own ideals.⁸

A Systemic Shift in Canadian Politics?

After the 1921 election, the federal Liberals would go on to enjoy decades of political domination. R. Kenneth Carty points to a pervasive view of the Liberals as a "big-tent" party whose success has been attributable to its ability to broker divisions of region, language, and economic interests. The party has been "remarkable" in the "sheer length of time that it dominated Canada's national electoral politics," a function of its ability to rebuild and reshape itself.⁹ The nineteenth century was the era of John A. Macdonald and his Conservative successors, broken by Wilfrid Laurier's successful creation of a winning formula that enabled the Liberal Party to hold power between 1896 and 1911. After 1921, except for a few brief weeks in 1926 when the Conservatives under Meighen returned to power after the famous King-Byng clash, and the Depression-era R.B. Bennett interlude in 1930–35, the Liberals would govern until the Diefenbaker era. That said, both Bennett in 1930 and especially Diefenbaker in 1958 won decisive majorities; the Liberal hold on Parliament under King in the 1920s was never as assured.

Political scientists have made a number of observations about what happened in 1921. Carty, William Cross, and Lisa Young describe the 1921 election as "the first party-system collapse in Canadian history." The "era of the historic parties of Confederation ended and a new, more democratic, more regionalized, party politics emerged." The clientelistic system of the old Canada gave way to what they characterize as a new party system of regional brokerage, a system that lasted until about 1960. They also note that this and other party-system collapses in subsequent Canadian

federal electoral history were presaged by Conservative landslides – that of Robert Borden in 1917, John Diefenbaker in 1958, and Brian Mulroney in 1984.¹⁰ Mulroney’s Conservatives, of course, also won a majority, albeit reduced, in 1988, the election immediately preceding the party debacle of 1993 that saw them reduced to only two seats in the House.

Reginald Whitaker observed that Canadian politics have often been understood as essentially pragmatic, driven by a “practical appreciation of what will work.” To a great extent, this is accurate, he conceded, but he believed “the great upheaval in Canadian politics at the end of the First World War” represented something different. It was a “startling example of the power of class politics in this country,” a factor he argued that historians have underappreciated.¹¹

David Laycock situates the rise of the Progressive Party within a wider Prairie “populist” phenomenon, tracking developments from early twentieth-century farmers’ organizations through the later rise of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the advent of Social Credit. He rejects a narrow “journalistic” explanation of populism as simply “any folksy appeal to the ‘average guy,’” noting that such a definition goes “to the opposite extreme of the class-reductionist approach.” At the core of populism is a “meaningful challenge to the power structure.” The focus is usually on a “single policy issue” and a moral message.¹² Cas Mudde and Cristóbel Rovira Kaltwasser observe that the populist label is “seldom claimed by people or organizations themselves” and generally carries a negative connotation, associated with charismatic strongmen and xenophobia. But the malleability of the concept is not a reason to reject it, they assert; the concept by necessity involves an invocation of the general will and the rejection of an elite agenda. “Populism almost always appears attached to other ideological elements” and can take different shapes.¹³

It is useful to think about the broad trends that can be detected in particular changes, as political scientists do. At the same time, a necessary historical analysis delves into specific circumstances and emphasizes context. In the case of the 1921 election, the shift to what can arguably be characterized as a different party system and an emerging populist tradition can also be understood as the product of distinct circumstances. Some of the changes were permanent – among them the growth of the West and the entry of women into electoral politics. Other changes were unique to 1921, the confluence of reactions to events at the time, and deep context is necessary to understand both.

The rise of a new political party, the Progressives, with regional power enabled agrarian interests, within the existing political system, to break the prevailing two-party pattern and elect a controlling minority of members to the House. There was nothing in the parliamentary system in place since Confederation that specified that two major parties should be the norm. The consolidation of parties in the decades surrounding Confederation – the Liberal-Conservative embrace of Quebec *Bleus* and the consolidation of Clear Grit Reformers with elements of the Parti rouge and others into a new Liberal Party – left Canada with two dominant parties. But there was nothing systemic dictating that this should be so. David E. Smith warned against a tendency to see third parties in Canadian politics as “aberrations” from the norm, “the plots of spoilers or the misguided.”¹⁴

Pragmatic considerations strongly shaped the events of 1921. Progressive Party leader Thomas Crerar denied that farmers were motivated by class antagonisms, charging instead that major industrialists who enjoyed the tariff protection that had been in place since the 1879 National Policy were the real beneficiaries of “state socialism.” But the growing population of the West and the demands of the agricultural sector made demands for redress politically

significant. Crerar's focus was inevitably on practical remedies.¹⁵ William Irvine, author of *The Farmers in Politics* (1920), who was elected in 1921 as a Labour MP, similarly rejected class antagonism. He noted that the farmer "is both capitalist and laborer. He knows that production is not furthered when war is going on between the two."¹⁶ It was, nonetheless, a staple weapon in the arsenal of opposing parties to portray the Progressives as class warriors, and this characterization was likely to be especially resonant given its context in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution. Mackenzie King characterized the Conservatives as the forces of "reaction" but also warned about the Progressive rise: "to experiment with class in matters of government is to invite the unknown."¹⁷

Lack of Candidate Diversity

Regardless of any major shift, there was continuity in some aspects of the election: the list of candidates reveals a persistent lack of ethnic diversity, a reflection of Canadian demographics. Of 635 candidates, more than half shared in common a dozen first names, names that signalled British and French heritage. In 2016, by contrast, Justin Trudeau boasted that his federal cabinet had more Sikhs than that of Narendra Modi in India.¹⁸ In 1921, some 355 candidates were named either William (65, with one Guillaume), John (52), Joseph (42), Thomas (36), James (26), Robert (25), George (19), Henry (18, with variants Harry and Henri), Charles (17), Edward (15), Arthur (13), or Hugh (11). In fact, all major party leaders in the fourteenth Parliament elected in December 1921 bore names from the list of the top dozen. The new Liberal prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, had the most common first name among candidates, and the given name of his Conservative predecessor, Arthur Meighen, also appears in the list of the top dozen, as do those of Thomas Crerar, Progressive Party leader, and James Shaver Woodsworth, who led Labour. The listed occupations of candidates also suggest homogeneous social class: there is a

preponderance of barristers and farmers, with journalists and physicians also common, although there were a handful of outliers – occupations such as roofer, plumber, carpenter, machinist, and labourer.

The Prime Ministers

While it is true that the electoral process in 1921 placed greater importance on individual candidates, whose names appeared unaffiliated on the ballot and who tended to exercise greater parliamentary independence than is customary today, an unpopular leader still had the potential to do grave harm to his party's prospects. Incumbent prime minister Arthur Meighen, who succeeded Robert Borden in July 1920, was a man of great brilliance and an utter political liability.

In the era of the Great War and after, Meighen was the Conservative Party workhorse, architect of a host of unpopular policies, and especially a scapegoat in Quebec. With Borden often absent in Europe during the protracted peace process, Meighen was the focus of all enmity. Finance Minister Sir Thomas White was the congenial parliamentary spokesman for fiscal questions, but almost everything else fell to Meighen. (Sir Henry Drayton, White's successor, had the unpopular task of delivering unpalatable budgets.) When Meighen became leader, long-time Liberal parliamentarian Chubby Power recalled, "added to his own sins were all those of the Borden government." Meighen aroused feelings of fear, "respect for his ability, and at the same time a certain dislike – I might almost say hatred." He attracted few friends and his aptitude for work left no one else an opportunity to shine. But Power readily acknowledged that Meighen's thorough grasp of questions before the House eclipsed that of any other.¹⁹

Meighen earned an Honours BA in Mathematics from the University of Toronto, studied at the Ontario College of Pedagogy, and briefly taught school. He trained in various Winnipeg law firms

before being called to the bar in Manitoba and establishing his own practice in Portage la Prairie. He constantly strove for self-improvement, read voraciously, and was quick to seize on any opportunity. Meighen, biographer Roger Graham explained, “liked nothing better than a vigorous dispute” that allowed him to draw upon reserves of “supreme, almost arrogant, self-assurance.”²⁰

Arthur Meighen exemplifies the Biblical adage that the race is not to the swift. First elected to Parliament to represent Portage la Prairie in 1908, Meighen was a skilled and dangerous parliamentarian – cool, analytical, and articulate, with a good line in scorn. “Borden has found a man,” Laurier remarked when Meighen first spoke in the House.²¹ In 1913, while still a backbencher, Meighen was the first to propose “closure,” termination of parliamentary debate, during the contentious discussion of the Conservatives’ bill to allocate \$35 million in aid to Britain to support the purchase of Dreadnoughts. The issue went beyond naval defence: Canada’s very tie to the Empire was under debate. Before their electoral defeat in 1911, the Liberals had begun the creation of a separate Canadian navy. Britain’s Parliament provided for closure, and Borden appointed a four-member committee to consider the procedure and draft rules for its use. Meighen, with less than five years of parliamentary experience, explained the procedure in the House. The Liberals fumed as he presumed “to lay down the law like a new Moses, even to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, who had been a cabinet minister before Meighen was a school boy! They could not gainsay his ability but how they resented it!” Borden decided that very night that he would make Meighen solicitor general.²² Meighen’s triumph was tempered by the defeat of the Naval Aid Bill in the Liberal-dominated Senate a short time later.

Meighen’s unrivalled “dialectic skill” made young Liberal parliamentarians “extremely wary of tangling with him,” Power observed. He displayed “no sentiment,” and made “little endeavour to persuade,” relying on supercilious irony and “frigid contempt.” By



Arthur Meighen in 1912 | Photographer William James Topley, National Archives of Canada, PA-026987

contrast, Power admitted, Mackenzie King's speeches tended to be "long-winded and often, I am obliged to say, puerile."²³ Michael Bliss maintains, however, that Meighen's abilities have been exaggerated by his admirers. "His speeches lacked any semblance of wit, breadth of learning, or rhetorical eloquence. They were fact-filled, earnest, logical, intense, and arrogant, much like their author."²⁴ Slim and of erect stature, Meighen stood with his hands on his hips, fingers outstretched, occasionally pointing at his opponent. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, another gifted parliamentarian and prairie lawyer, who admired Meighen, later seems to have adopted elements of his oratorical style. Meighen's speeches gave the impression of improvisation but were carefully formulated, almost academic in style:

“first the major and the minor premises, and finally the almost irrefutable conclusions, which, however unpalatable, were usually clear, concise, and easy for anyone to understand.” His apparent unconcern about winning the agreement of his hearers, Power suggested, may explain Meighen’s lack of appeal with popular audiences.²⁵

The pleasure of besting one’s opponents comes at a price. It is tempting to wonder whether, in his wide reading, Meighen ever read the famous autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, with whom he had some things in common. Both were intellectually superior men dedicated to a lifelong quest for self-improvement. Yet Franklin learned from an early age to modify his tactics to achieve success. The American polymath recalled that in his youth he “grew very artful and expert in drawing people” into concessions in arguments, “entangling them in difficulties out of which they could not extricate themselves,” and obtaining victories in debate. But Franklin learned that it was more profitable instead to express himself “in terms of modest diffidence,” recognizing that a positive dogmatic manner creates opposition.²⁶ In Meighen’s case, demonstrable superiority did not win him supporters.

One defect clearly hampered him as a politician: he dreaded social occasions, once confessing that he would rather spend six hours in a cabinet meeting than one hour at a dance.²⁷ Just before his thirtieth birthday in 1904, Meighen married Isabel Cox, a schoolteacher from Birtle, Manitoba. The couple had two sons – the elder named Theodore Roosevelt O’Neil, “Ted,” in honour of the admired American president, and the younger named Max – and one daughter, Lillian. While Isabel was sociable and fun-loving, Meighen was apt to retreat to work, even while guests had gathered at the family home.²⁸

In 1921, Meighen bore the heavy freight of all the controversial measures that had been put in place to secure a pro-conscription electoral result in 1917. Quebec signalled its displeasure in 1921 in

the strongest possible terms, with Mackenzie King's French Canadian colleagues able to capture the province and hold it. Meighen also earned the enmity of labour through the Criminal Code amendments he hastily brought before the House of Commons to clamp down on the perceived forces of sedition during the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike.

He never shrank from taking unpopular actions. "What was popular, easy or non-controversial was not necessarily right," Graham explains. "The truth was sometimes unpalatable but it had to be swallowed and digested." He was fearless in facing disapproval. He "strode up the great bare staircase of his duty, as he saw it, uncheered and undismayed," Eugene Forsey observed.²⁹

Meighen's moral courage is admirable. Despite his considerable skills, however, he lacked an essential talent: the ability to win elections. It was a more forgiving era in party organizations: although Meighen suffered blistering party defeat in 1921 and even narrowly lost his own seat, he retained the Conservative leadership. (An obliging Conservative MP stepped down to enable him to successfully contest the riding of Grenville, Ontario, in a January 1922 by-election.) Meighen went on to win his previous Portage la Prairie seat in the October 1925 election, but lost it again in September 1926, at a time when he was incumbent prime minister. Only with this second personal defeat and the formation of another Liberal government did he resign the leadership. In common with the Liberals in 1919, the paucity of party representatives in the House for a number of provinces made it necessary to hold a Conservative Party convention to select Meighen's successor, rather than relying on the caucus alone. In 1926, there would be only four Conservative Party MPs from Quebec and four from the Prairies.³⁰ Businessman and long-serving parliamentarian R.B. Bennett, who would go on to form the government in 1930 in the fraught days of the Great Depression, was the party's choice. Remarkably, the party called Meighen back from the Senate as party leader in 1941,

after a stint by Robert Manion, whose base of support was eroded by his anti-conscription stance. But Meighen's luck had not turned: he was defeated in a February 1942 by-election in York South and once again resigned as party leader later that year.

Meighen's defeat in his own riding was by no means unique for a party leader. Indeed, both in October 1925 (in York North) and in June 1945 (in Prince Albert), Mackenzie King, then prime minister, lost in the constituency he contested and had to subsequently seek a seat in a by-election.

William Lyon Mackenzie King, who became prime minister in 1921, represented a new era in the Liberal Party. He was born in Berlin (Kitchener), Ontario, in December 1874, just a few months after Meighen. The grandson of William Lyon Mackenzie, a leading figure in the 1837–38 Upper Canadian rebellions, King, known to his parents and siblings as “Willie,” opted to be called “Mackenzie” while at university, and in later years would do much to promote an idealized version of his grandfather's history. He earned a BA in Political Science at the University of Toronto in an era when even high school diplomas were a minority attainment. He completed a law degree at Toronto and, ultimately, a PhD at Harvard, achievements that placed him among a rarefied educational elite. His doctoral dissertation research involved an investigation of labour conditions in the garment industry. King contemplated an academic career, but instead entered the civil service and in 1900, at not quite twenty-six, was named to the very senior post of deputy minister in the newly created Department of Labour. In 1908, he entered politics, securing the riding of Waterloo North in that year's federal election, and was named minister of labour by Laurier the following year.³¹ The Liberals were toppled and King personally defeated in the 1911 election, and in 1914 he was lured to the Rockefeller Foundation to investigate how labour relations might be improved after violent clashes with strikers in the Colorado coal mines. But

he kept a foot in each country, retaining his Ontario residence and securing a promise that he would be granted leave from the Rockefeller Foundation if he were elected to the House of Commons. He supported Laurier and ran as an “Opposition” candidate in York North in 1917, but was defeated in this riding, from which he was often absent. Perhaps anticipating his famous “not necessarily conscription, but conscription if necessary” position during the Second World War, King claimed in 1917 that he did not oppose conscription *per se*, but objected to the particular bill, worrying about the threat to national unity.³²

For King, hard-headed career calculation was juxtaposed with a deeply held sense that his life was, as biographer Allan Levine puts it, “guided by the hand of destiny.” It is now known that, through much of his lifetime, King was a devoted spiritualist and regularly talked to the dead through mediums. His spiritual practices may invite incredulity today but are perhaps more understandable in context. In short succession, during the Great War years, King lost his beloved sister Isabel as well as his father and mother. His gravely ill mother had insisted that King should continue campaigning in 1917, and he found it hard to forgive himself for being away from her deathbed. She died the day after his defeat. This series of family deaths left King deeply distressed. The physician’s diagnosis, “neurasthenia,” would probably be labelled anxiety and depression today. Amid this battering bereavement, King sought a sense of connection to the world beyond and consulted with mediums to contact those he had lost.³³ It was a consolation he had in common with many in this era. “The mass death of the trenches, which fell disproportionately on the young, left thousands of families grieving and seeking closure,” Tim Cook explains. “Spiritualism, in a sense, was a denial of death, or a denial of the permanency of death.”³⁴ King’s brother Max, who died three months after the 1921 election, was another source of consolation from beyond the grave. King believed he

detected the spirit of his lost mother in his beloved Irish terrier, Pat, and a succession of terriers – each named Pat – would help to comfort him while he awaited a heavenly reunion with his favourite pet.³⁵ Posthumous communications were not restricted to family members. King drew upon the advice of St. John, who assured him that “long ago I wanted to tell you that God had chosen you to shew men & nations how they should live.” George V, dead British aristocrats, the late Laurier, and other prominent individuals also provided valued counsel.³⁶

King would prove to be Canada’s longest-serving prime minister, in that role from 1921 to 1926, resuming office after a brief interruption that year and remaining prime minister until 1930, and then returning to lead the country from 1935 until 1948. Because his years in office extended into the mid-twentieth century, it seems surprising to recall that King was Sir Wilfrid Laurier’s immediate successor as Liberal leader. After all, Laurier began his career in federal politics in 1874, the very year in which King was born, led the party for thirty-two years from 1887, and served as prime minister from 1896 to 1911.

Early in his career, Laurier had set the Liberal party on a path that would capture wide appeal and, as Hugh Thorburn observed, “beat the Tories at their own game.”³⁷ The Liberals became a party of moderation and compromise, leaving behind the stubborn Grit reform agenda of the past and the prickly undertone of anti-British sentiment of earlier leader Edward Blake. In a landmark 1877 speech in Quebec early in his career, Laurier set out a definition of Canadian Liberalism that would capture the loyalty of generations of adherents. He sought to demonstrate that political Liberalism was compatible with the Roman Catholic faith, to which almost all of French Canada adhered, distancing himself from the nineteenth-century anti-clerical *Rouge* element. The Liberal Party, Laurier asserted, was the defender of liberties and the institutions that were

precious to French Canadians, including the Church. Laurier simultaneously avowed his love of the “great English Liberal Party” and the English constitution that had made the British the “freest people and the most prosperous and happy of Europe.”³⁸ As Canada grew, Laurier’s brand of Liberalism sought to reconcile and incorporate the interests of the West.

After fifteen years as prime minister, the 1911 election loss and the defection of pro-conscription Liberals in 1917 left no evident mark of “bitterness or rancour” on Laurier, Chubby Power marvelled: “In private conversation he talked freely of his former associates, but largely with a full understanding of their reasons for leaving his side.” His parliamentary performances remained “suave and courteous,” and he never gave a hint of any recrimination. As leader, Laurier was disinclined to offer directions or orders. Rather, Power noted, he “suggested or advised,” and the admiration, respect, and affection he engendered made others eager to follow his lead. Laurier had the “gift of being loved.” His charm and tact were legendary. He endeared himself especially to younger party members with his readiness to chat with them over a smoke. “Thousands of now grown men and women will tell you that their parents shed bitter tears of sorrow on that night in September 1911” when Laurier’s government suffered electoral defeat.³⁹

It is tempting to contrast the smooth, easy popularity of Laurier with the evident social deficits of his successor. Mackenzie King “had none of Laurier’s gifts,” Power admitted. He had “a manner of his own in meeting people,” was stiff, socially awkward, and “needlessly polite.” In fact, when meeting people individually, “he was always careful to agree with them even in their most extravagant thoughts and views.” If they had complaints, Power remembered, King “always found some means of shifting the burden of it on someone else ... We were never, I think, much impressed by his sincerity.” King himself once explained to Power that he avoided

intimate friendships so he would not be accused of creating “cliques or coteries,” although he later came to envy those who could “easily join in company and spend a convivial evening.”⁴⁰

King’s approach to contentious decisions was the antithesis of Meighen’s. He preferred to follow public opinion rather than to lead it and never acted until the solution seemed clear to all. During the 1921 campaign, his dominant strategy was to attack the policies of the government while being evasive about his own.

IN THE WEEKS LEADING up to the 1921 election, pundits proved unable to accurately prognosticate, although a minority government was usually forecast. There were too many “wild cards” to use the past as any guide. “Women as well as farmers and labour made the hand impossible to call with any certainty,” Terry Crowley explains.⁴¹

This era does not offer the sort of granular polling data upon which analysts today rely. It is not possible to recapture, for example, the exact impact of women’s votes, or to measure by opinion polls the popularity of party leaders. Then, as now, it is impossible to determine whether the electorate cast votes *for* a party or *against* one. It is, however, possible to retrace the historical developments that help to explain the shift that occurred in 1921.

The break from political tradition can best be understood by considering the long-building changes that the following chapters will explore. An undeniable change was in the air – a willingness to embrace new ideas and untried experimentation after the searing disillusionment of the Great War. The zeitgeist of 1921 was reflected in the election.

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