

The Election Issues in 1921

Managing the economy and being responsible to Canadians in the post-war world emerge as dominant issues.

The debate about free trade and the tariff played a significant role in this election. However, 1921 was not as focused on a single-issue as the 1911 election. Policy issues took a backseat to accusations of government mismanagement and leadership qualities.

The Tariff

The tariff was regarded in different ways in different parts of the country. For western farmers, the tariff meant low prices for their agricultural products and high cost for farm implements. For eastern business interests, the tariff was desirable because it protected Canadian industry and manufacturing.

The debate over the tariff played its most important role before the election, acting as the catalyst for the creation of an independent western political movement in the Progressive Party. Throughout the campaign, the opinions of leaders and their electorate regarding the tariff were already deeply embedded.

Government Mismanagement and Accountability

At the end of World War I, the Canadian economy was starting to decline. The main problems were unemployment and a drop in manufacturing. Party leaders made the faltering economy an issue of government mismanagement. The Union government was blamed with the economic problems facing Canada. Issues such as government waste during the war, the public debt, increased taxes, and the management of public affairs were characterized as shortcomings of the Union government. Old issues, such as support of conscription, were also brought up again to characterize candidates.

<http://www.mapleleafweb.com/voter-almanac/1921-federal-election-canada#historical>

The Liberal Party

The Liberals were faced with rebuilding their party after World War I. The party had experienced many internal divisions after the conscription crisis and the 1917 election. However, they had a solid base of support in Quebec, where the Liberals had remained loyal to the anti-conscriptionists.

The Liberals had been approached by the western farmers' movement to run on the "New National Policy" platform. However, the Liberals were not interested in doing this, because they feared losing support from protectionist Quebec. They entered the 1921 election led by Mackenzie King, who supported Laurier's policies of balancing opposing views. However, this would be difficult because of the radical protestors in the West.

William Lyon Mackenzie King – Liberal Party

Mackenzie King was born on December 17, 1874 in Berlin (Kitchener) Ontario. His grandfather was William Lyon Mackenzie, leader of the 1837 Rebellion in Upper Canada. Mackenzie King was educated at the University of Toronto and University of Chicago, and received his Ph.D. from Harvard. He worked in the civil service and as an author before entering politics. The following are highlights of his political career:

- First elected as a Member of Parliament 1908
- Leader of the Liberal Party 1919-1948
- Leader of the Official Opposition 1919-1921 and 1926
- Prime Minister 1921-1926, 1926-1930, and 1935-1948

National unity was always King's ultimate goal. He wanted to achieve this by accommodating many different viewpoints. Mackenzie King died on July 22, 1950.

Liberal Strategy

Mackenzie King wanted to make the political and economic record of the Union government the prominent issue of the campaign. He wanted to make the voters question the leadership abilities of Meighen and the Conservatives. He focused on the negative aspects of their governance:

- He accused the Union government of securing a victory in the 1917 through corrupt means, by enfranchising voters who supported them through the Wartime Elections Act
- He focused on increased taxes and public debt
- He accused the Unionists of practicing "autocracy and extravagance" in the management of public affairs
- He said that Canadian war efforts could have been handled better
- He blamed the Unionists for indirectly causing the postwar depression

Mackenzie King focused on the downfalls of government to distract attention away from his position on the tariff. He wanted to avoid having to stand behind a specific policy on the tariff (even though the Liberal Platform of 1919 had supported a reduction of the tariff).

The Progressive Party

The Progressive Party had its base of support in western farmers. The number one issue to farmers was free trade, which neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives were willing to put their full support behind. With the economic discontent following World War I, the farmers' movement saw no choice but to start their own political party.

The Progressive Party was unique in that it had no official national leader or policy platform. They relied on the Canadian Council of Agriculture to provide some sort of national organization, but each candidate was free to run on whatever platform he or she chose. They were a decentralized party, focusing on the West and their own constituents.

Thomas Alexander Crerar – Progressive Party

Thomas Crerar was born in 1867 in Huron County, Ontario. His family moved west in 1872 to homestead in Manitoba. Crerar worked as the operator of a sawmill and as a farmer. His political career saw the following highlights:

- President of the Manitoba Grain Growers' Association 1907-1917
- President of the United Grain Growers 1917-1929
- Minister of Agriculture in Borden's cabinet 1917-1920
- Led the formation of the Progressive Party 1921
- Retired from politics in 1922, returning in 1929
- Cabinet member for Mackenzie King 1935-1945
- Senator 1945-1966

Crerar's political focus was always the advancement of western farmers through the abolition of the tariff. He died in 1975.

Progressive Strategy

Crerar supported abolishing the tariff. While this strategy was all he needed in the West, he was faced with a tougher campaign outside of the prairie provinces. To attract votes in other regions, he used the following strategies:

- He refuted the charge that he supported a class-based government
- He emphasized that, above all else, he supported reform and the "spirit of liberalism"
- He said that the real issue wasn't the tariff, but the ability and desire of the government to promote the good of special interests
- He attacked Liberal and Conservative campaigns as corrupt, saying that railway companies and large corporations should not be allowed to contribute to campaign funds

In the initial stages of the election, Crerar had agreed to work with King because they were fighting the same opponents. However, King withdrew his support because he feared that Crerar's western support might prevent the Liberals from winning a majority government.

The Conservative Party

The Conservative Party had committed itself to a Union government in World War I, and as a result came out of the war with a non-partisan focus. That meant they had no solid base of electoral support. They had to rebuild themselves as the Conservatives again, and develop united policy guidelines. The Conservatives were also faced with the blame for rising unemployment and declining industry.

Robert Borden retired from politics in 1920 for health reasons. He was replaced by Arthur Meighen. Meighen had problems gaining the support of French Conservatives, mainly because of his pro-conscription views in the 1917 election. To counter western support of the Progressives and Quebec support of the Liberals, the Conservatives would need to focus on Ontario and the Maritimes to build a base of support.

Arthur Meighen – Conservative Party

Meighen was born in Anderson, Ontario on June 16, 1874. He was educated at the University of Toronto, receiving a degree in mathematics. He worked as a teacher, businessman, and lawyer before entering politics. The following are highlights of his political career:

- First elected as a Member of Parliament in 1908, serving until 1926
- Leader of the Conservative Party 1920-1926 and 1941-1942
- Leader of the Official Opposition 1921-1926
- Prime Minister July-December 1921, and June-September 1926
- Senator 1932-1942

Meighen died on August 5, 1960.

Conservative Strategy

Meighen supported retaining the tariff, but promised not to increase it. He had pretty much conceded the West as hopeless for the Conservatives, and focused on Ontario, British Columbia, and the Maritimes. Meighen realized that all Quebec would remember was his support of conscription during the 1917 election, and would have a hard time winning French votes.

Meighen attempted to emphasize the benefits of retaining the tariff:

- He promised that it would promote the growth and development of the Canadian economy
- He pointed out that the electorate had voted to keep the tariff in 1878 and 1891
- He promoted the traditional National Policy of John A. Macdonald, which focused on East-West trade to develop Canada's economy
- He said that the United States' economy was so superior that it would overtake Canada's economy

Meighen also used personal attacks against Mackenzie King throughout his campaign, accusing him of being arrogant and vague in his promises.