

The Prime Ministers of Canada

Grades 4-8

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The Prime Ministers of Canada



Sir John A. Macdonald (1815 - 1891) Prime Minister: 1867 - 1873, 1878 - 1891

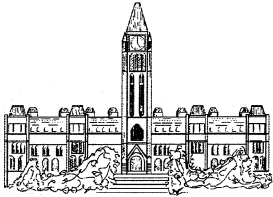
John Alexander Macdonald was born January 10, 1815, in Glasgow, Scotland. He moved to Kingston, Upper Canada with his parents when he was five years old. His father, Hugh Macdonald, had failed at business ventures in Scotland and he was not very successful in Upper Canada. It was largely through the efforts of his mother, Helen, that John received a good education. At the age of ten, he was sent to the Midland Grammar School in Kingston and later to a small school operated by a Scottish clergyman. When he was fifteen, he articulated to become a lawyer with George MacKenzie.

In 1835, at the age of twenty, he opened his own law office. He soon earned a reputation for flair and ingenuity in his legal work and entered corporate law in 1840, becoming the solicitor for companies such as the Commercial Bank of the Midland District and the Trust and Loan Company of Upper Canada. By 1842, his law office had become one of the busiest in Canada.

Macdonald had a lively mind and an enormous range of knowledge. He read widely and added to his speeches funny references from his reading. When he was depressed or when his affairs were in disarray, he sometimes got drunk, although he was not a chronic drinker. Sometimes he drank in a spirit of companionship with his friends.

Macdonald entered politics in 1844, when he was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada as the Conservative member for Kingston. In those early years, he opposed a Canadian government that was responsible to itself, rather than the monarchy, and he disagreed with allowing more people to vote. He felt that these would weaken the authority of the government. He opposed the power of the Family Compact, a group of royalists who dominated the power in the Government of Upper Canada. He helped to build a more moderate group, the Liberal-Conservatives, and became Receiver General in the government in 1847. However, the government was defeated over the King's College Endowment Bill. Macdonald was one of the few Conservatives who were returned to the Legislative Assembly after the Reformers won the majority of seats.

From the opposition side of the government, Macdonald worked to increase his influence among the Conservatives and to broaden the boundaries of the party to allow more people to become members. He was willing to work with the French Canadian politicians of Lower Canada, especially his rival, Georges-Étienne Cartier. This alliance allowed him to rally French Canadian support for the coalition government of the mid-1860s. The Great Coalition Government of 1864



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was supported by three of the four political parties of the united Province of Canada: the Bleus of Canada East and the Conservatives and Reformers of Canada West. Their aim was to form a confederation of the British North American colonies.

Macdonald did not initially support the idea of Confederation, but once he did, he pushed it forward. He took the lead at the Charlottetown, Quebec, and London conferences and was responsible for writing the Canadian Constitution.

Macdonald as Prime Minister

When Confederation was formed in 1867, John A. Macdonald became the first Prime Minister of Canada. He was also awarded a knighthood by Queen Victoria and was now Sir John A. Macdonald. During his first term of office from 1867-1873, he continued the work of building the new nation. In 1868-1869, he arranged better terms of union for Nova Scotia, bought the Hudson Bay Company's land, and added Manitoba and the Northwest Territories to Canada in 1869-1870, added British Columbia in 1871, created the Northwest Mounted Police in 1873, and brought Prince Edward Island into Confederation in 1873.

Macdonald fell from power in 1873 as a result of the Pacific Scandal. This centered around large amounts of money that the leading Conservatives had accepted as campaign funds from the railway promoters, who were competing for the rights to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. Macdonald claimed that he had not used any of the money personally, but his government was forced to resign in November of 1873. He tried to resign as leader of the party, but his supporters would not allow him to do so.

Macdonald was returned to power in the elections of 1878 and remained there for three terms until 1891. His major achievements during this time were the National Policy and the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The National Policy was a program introduced in 1879 which was designed to promote Canadian industry by taxing imported goods.

Macdonald remained in politics despite his age. He won his last election in 1891 at the age of 76. He had introduced younger people into the government as the older members retired. One of his proudest moments was when he escorted his son, Hugh John Macdonald into the House as a new member of Parliament on April 29, 1891. The elder died of a stroke on June 6, 1891, still prime minister of Canada. Sir John A. Macdonald is known as the father of Confederation and is recognized as the father and founder of Canada.

Name _____ Date _____

Points to Ponder

1. What qualities did John A. Macdonald possess that enabled him to succeed in his law practice?

2. What ideas was he opposed to when he first entered politics? Why?

3. Why did Macdonald decide to join forces with French Canadian politicians?

4. Make a list of the accomplishments of Sir John A. Macdonald during his terms as prime minister.



Explore History



1. What were the first uniforms of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police?
2. What was the Pacific Scandal?
3. What was the importance of the National Policy?
4. Why was John A. Macdonald given a knighthood by Queen Victoria?