

The Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship
Teachers' Workshop
Identity Charts
“William Lyon Mackenzie King”

William Lyon Mackenzie King (1874-1950), prime minister of Canada 1921-26, 1926-30 and 1935-48. Leader of the Liberal Party 1919-48, and prime minister for almost 22 of those years, King was the dominant political figure in an era of major changes (photo courtesy Library and Archives Canada/C-27645).



Leader of the Liberal Party 1919-48, and prime minister for almost 22 of those years, King was the dominant political figure in an era of major changes. As Canada's longest-serving prime minister, King steered Canada through industrialization, much of the Great Depression, and the Second World War. By the time he left office, Canada had achieved greater independence from Britain and a stronger international voice, and had implemented policies such as unemployment insurance in response to industrialization, economic distress, and changing social realities.

A modernizing technocrat who regarded managerial mediation as essential to an industrial society, he wanted his Liberal Party to represent liberal corporatism to create social harmony. King worked to bring compromise and harmony to many competing and feuding elements, using politics and government action as his instrument. He led his party for 29 years, and established Canada's international reputation as a middle powerfully committed to world order. King's biographers agree on the personal

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characteristics that made him distinctive. He lacked the charisma of such contemporaries as Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, or Charles de Gaulle. He lacked a commanding presence or oratorical skill; his best writing was academic, and did not resonate with the electorate. Cold and tactless in human relations, he had many political allies but very few close personal friends. He never married and lacked a hostess whose charm could substitute for his chill. He kept secret his beliefs in spiritualism and use of mediums to stay in contact with departed associates and particularly with his mother, and allowed his intense spirituality to distort his understanding of Adolf Hitler.

Early life, family, and religion

King was born in Berlin, Ontario (now known as Kitchener), to John King and Isabella Grace Mackenzie. His maternal grandfather was William Lyon Mackenzie, first mayor of Toronto and leader of the Upper Canada Rebellion in 1837. His father was a lawyer, and later a professor at Osgoode Hall Law School. King had three siblings. He attended Berlin Central School (now Suddaby Public School) and Berlin High School (now Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School). Tutors were hired to teach him more politics, science, math, English and French.

His father was a lawyer with a struggling practice in a small city, and never enjoyed financial security. His parents lived a life of shabby gentility, employing servants and tutors they could scarcely afford, although their financial situation improved somewhat following a move to Toronto around 1890, where King lived with them for several years in a duplex located in a then-respectable neighbourhood, Beverley Street, while studying at the University of Toronto.

King became a lifelong practising Presbyterian with a dedication to applying Christian virtues to social issues in the style of the Social Gospel. He never favoured socialism. After studying at the University of Chicago and working with Jane Addams at her settlement house, Hull House, King proceeded to Harvard University. He earned an M.A. in political economy from Harvard in 1898. In 1909, Harvard granted him a PhD for a dissertation on "Oriental Immigration to Canada". It was a report he had written while he was Deputy-Minister of Labour in 1908. In it he argued against the immigration of Asians, saying:

That Canada should desire to restrict immigration from the Orient is regarded as natural, that Canada should remain a white man's country is believed to be not only desirable for economic and social reasons but highly necessary on political and national grounds.

In 1937, King visited Germany and met with Adolf Hitler. Possessing a religious yearning for direct insight into the hidden mysteries of life and the universe, and strongly

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influenced by the operas of Richard Wagner (who was also Hitler's favourite composer), King decided Hitler was akin to mythical Wagnerian heroes within whom good and evil were struggling. He thought that good would eventually triumph and Hitler would redeem his people and lead them to a harmonious, uplifting future. These spiritual attitudes not only guided Canada's relations with Hitler but gave the prime minister the comforting sense of a higher mission, that of helping to lead Hitler to peace. King commented in his journal that "he is really one who truly loves his fellow-men, and his country, and would make any sacrifice for their good". He forecast that "the world will yet come to see a very great man—mystic in Hitler ... I cannot abide in Nazism – the regimentation – cruelty – oppression of Jews – attitude towards religion, etc., but Hitler ... will rank some day with Joan of Arc among the deliverers of his people."

Although they discussed many topics, King did not bring up the Nazi party's anti-Jewish policies during the meeting. There was widespread discrimination against Jews even in Canada, and the country's immigration policy at the time was influenced by anti-Semitic views.

In late 1938, during the great crisis in Europe over Czechoslovakia that culminated in the Munich Agreement, Canadians were divided. Francophones insisted on neutrality, as did some top advisers like Oscar D. Skelton. Imperialists stood behind Britain and were willing to fight Germany. King, who served as his own secretary of state for external affairs (foreign minister), said privately that if he had to choose he would not be neutral, but he made no public statement. All of Canada was relieved that the British appeasement at Munich, while sacrificing the rights of Czechoslovakia, seemed to bring peace.

Under King's administration, the Canadian government, responding to strong public opinion, especially in Quebec, refused to expand immigration opportunities for Jewish refugees from Europe. In June 1939 Canada, along with Cuba and the United States, refused to allow entry for the 900 Jewish refugees aboard the passenger ship *MS St. Louis*.

Controversy and Legacy

Mackenzie King has continued to intrigue Canadians. Critics argue that his political longevity was achieved by evasions and indecision, and that he failed to provide creative leadership; his defenders argue that King gradually altered Canada, a difficult country to govern, while keeping the nation united.

The above information is found at:

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/william-lyon-mackenzie-king/>

Article by Blair Neatby. Revised by Tabitha Marshall. **It can also be found at:**

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lyon_Mackenzie_King