

Historica Canada Education Portal

W.A.C Bennett

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the W.A.C. Bennett biography from [The Canadians](#) series. William Andrew Cecil Bennett was the premier of B.C. for twenty consecutive years in the second half of the twentieth century. He ran the province with a mix of socialist, capitalist, and populist tactics; and his political dynasty transformed the economic, social, and cultural face of B.C.

Aims

By writing opinion pieces and engaging in discussion and debate, students will assess the leadership of W.A.C. Bennett and learn about different political ideologies.

Background

After he had won his first provincial election as premier, W.A.C. Bennett gathered his new cabinet in a local hotel. When the other politicians ordered drinks – scotch and water, rum and Coke – Bennett announced that the drinks would be on him tonight and the drinks that were available were coffee, tea, and Ovaltine. There would be no boozing with Bennett

as the boss.

W.A.C. Bennett would remain the boss for two decades; fighting off all political opponents as British Columbia's economy soared. He ran the province the same way he ran his hardware store in Kelowna: he balanced the books and looked after the pennies.

In the legislature and the offices of the government he let civil servants know that they couldn't make a long distance phone call without permission. When he negotiated the Columbia River Treaty with Lyndon Johnson, the US President complained that Bennett got everything right down to the last twenty-five cents.

When he didn't like his opponent's views in the legislature he simply turned his chair around and spoke with his own backbenchers. He infuriated everybody, but he remained premier of British Columbia for twenty years. He built roads and dams and railroads that connected the interior of the province. A violent anti-socialist, he saw nothing contradictory as he nationalized the ferries and the electric companies.

William Andrew Cecil Bennett created a political dynasty. It faltered in the early 1970's when his nemesis, a young NDP-er named Dave Barrett refused to play Bennett's game. When W.A.C. claimed Barrett was a follower of Marx, Barrett asked "which one, Groucho, Chico or Zeppo?" When the premier claimed that Barrett was part of the left wing Waffle group, Barrett said if he was a waffle then Bennett was a crepe. He made the premier look old. Bennett lost the 1972 election and his world, after twenty years in office, came to an end. His friends said the old man died of a broken heart.

He is remembered now as just another old-fashioned politician who

would never survive in today's political arena, but his legacy is of enormous influence to B.C. and to Canada.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Create a timeline to illustrate the key events of W.A.C. Bennett's political life from 1952 to 1972. Include both his successes and failures during his twenty years as premier of British Columbia.

2. Examine the following statement by T.C. Douglas: *"W.A.C. was a political leader of a political party that took money from the rich and votes from the poor to essentially protect them from each other."*

In a roundtable discussion, use the above statement to clarify the following ideologies: socialism, capitalism, and populism. How did Bennett use these ideologies in his economic and political choices? Do you agree with T.C. Douglas' statement? Why or why not?

3. Write a reference letter praising the successes of W.A.C. Bennett's economic, social, and/or cultural contributions to British Columbia; or, write a letter of complaint citing W.A.C. Bennett's negative impact on British Columbia in these same areas.

4. After the [Columbia River Treaty](#), *Time Magazine* called Bennett a, "... full time politician and a part- time prophet." Create an informal debate on the topic of whether or not Bennett was a political prophet or a master of public spectacle.

Resources

[W.A.C. Bennett Worksheet](#)

Sherman, Patrick. *Bennett*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966.

Keene, Roger. *Conversations with W.A.C. Bennett*. Toronto: Methuen, 1980.

Neering, Rosemary. *W.A.C. Bennett*. Don Mills: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1981.

Mitchell, David Joseph. *W.A.C.: Bennett and the Rise of B.C.* Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1983.

Worley, Ronald B. *The Wonderful World of W.A.C. Bennett*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971.

[W.A.C. Bennett - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[British Columbia - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Socialism - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Populism - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)