

# Canada's New Premier Is a Minority Choice

## Successor to Borden, Not Particularly Wanted, Finds Problems of Great Importance on Hands

By J. A. STEVENSON

THE passing of another Dominion Day, July 1, saw the beginning of a political crisis at Ottawa which has provided Canada with a change of premiers. Sir Robert Borden had enjoyed the distinction of being the only man who remained premier of a belligerent country from the start to the finish of the war. But the strain of these trying years told upon his health and at the conclusion of the Peace Conference he found himself, in a sense, one of the casualties of the conflict. In the autumn of 1919 he had a bad breakdown and decided, on the pressing advice of his physicians, to retire from political life. But his colleagues and party were unable to agree upon a successor and at their urgent request he agreed to suspend his resignation, remain as titular premier and take a complete rest from active work.

After a voyage to the West Indies and England with Lord Jellicoe and a prolonged holiday at various southern resorts, he returned to Ottawa in May and resumed his duties. But he soon discovered that the restoration of his health was more apparent than real and that his physical strength was quite inadequate to the duties of the premiership. So, when Parliament ended July 1, a full meeting of the members of the House of Commons and Senate, who still adhered to the Coalition formed in 1917, was called and Sir Robert, after making a frank statement about his health, asked them to accept his resignation in such terms as to preclude any attempt to urge his retention of office.

Sir Robert Borden, who is now in his sixty-seventh year, entered Parliament in 1896 and was elected leader of the Conservative party in 1900. After suffering two defeats at general elections he was returned to power in 1911 on the issue of the Reciprocity Treaty and has held the premiership ever since. A lawyer by profession, he has shown himself essentially conservative in domestic matters and decidedly liberal in foreign affairs. His internal statesmanship was often feeble and has been marked by no great constructive measures but he has rendered consistently good service to his country in the realm of international affairs. He has secured a great advance in her national status and at London and Paris played no small part in the wider politics of the British Commonwealth. On more than one occasion he resisted ill-timed encroachments of the British Imperialists. He gave Canada cautious guidance during the war years and perhaps his special qualities of patience and industry were more useful for the times than meteoric genius which he could not claim to possess. He will never have the same place in Canadian history as Sir John Macdonald or Sir Wilfrid Laurier, but he leaves office in good standing with the mass of his fellow countrymen and if his health recovers may have some useful years of public work in another sphere.

A year ago his obvious successor would have been Sir Thomas White who had served as Finance Minister since 1911 and often deputized as acting premier during Sir Robert's absences in Europe. But he resigned from the cabinet at the end of July, 1919, and announced his intention of abandoning politics. In default of him the obvious successor to Sir Robert was the Honorable Arthur Meighen, Minister of the Interior. But the government party is a Coalition composed of Conservatives and Liberals who supported conscription and Mr. Meighen, who had been a bitter Conservative partisan prior to 1917, was not *persona grata* to many of his colleagues. The caucus at their meeting was unable to agree upon a successor and they were also unwilling to leave the choice to the cabinet. So a curious method of selection was devised. Each member of Parliament was asked to write a confidential letter to Sir Robert Borden giving his views upon the leadership and naming alternate choices. Under the British constitutional system the governor-general of Canada has the right of selecting the prime minister but he always asks the retiring premier to nominate his successor. Sir Robert agreed to be guided in his recommendation by the contents of the letters sent to him, though not necessarily by the majority opinion therein. It is understood that a preponderating majority of the votes were cast for Mr. Meighen, since it was understood that Sir Thomas White was not a candidate. However most of the cabinet expressed a preference for Sir Thomas and it was decided to try and bring him back to public life. The secretary of the governor-general was sent to bring him from the wilds of Muskoka where he was holidaying and receive the offer of the premiership but before boarding the train at Toronto he issued a statement to the effect that reasons of health and the state of his private affairs (he had found himself in the same plight as Mr. McAdoo) made impossible any reconsideration of his decision to abjure politics and office and that he was only proceeding to Ottawa to lend his counsel. He thus achieved the record of being the first man to refuse the premiership of Canada.

With his elimination there was no serious obstacle to Mr. Meighen. Of the other possible candidates Sir George Foster was much too old and Sir H. Drayton lacked the necessary experience. So on July 7, Sir Robert Borden announced that his resignation would take effect on July 10 and he would recommend Mr. Meighen as his successor. His selection constitutes an-



HON. ARTHUR MEIGHEN

other record, for he is the youngest premier that Canada has ever known, being in his forty-fifth year.

He was born of Scot-Irish Protestant stock in 1876 at St. Mary's, in the County of Perth in Western Ontario, the son of Joseph and Mary Meighen and like most eminent men on this continent was raised on a farm. He received his education at the local school, at St. Mary's Collegiate Institute and Toronto University where he graduated as B. A. in 1896. For a few years he followed the profession of teaching school, but only as a stepping-stone to the law. Taking Horace Greeley's advice, he went West at the beginning of the century and after serving his apprenticeship in a Winnipeg law office was admitted to the bar of Manitoba in 1903. He settled down to practice in the little town of Portage La Prairie, the center of an old established settlement 60 miles west of Winnipeg. He married in 1904 and is now the happy father of two sons and a daughter. Before he had time to build up a large practice politics claimed him and has held him ever since. In 1908 he was nominated as Conservative candidate for the riding of Portage La Prairie and was elected after a bitter fight. His party was then fighting a hard battle in opposition and was in serious need of able recruits, so that a man of his ability was gladly welcomed. He soon made his mark as a speaker and showed frequent signs of independence in advocating causes which his party chieftains frowned upon. He was re-elected in 1911 when his party came into office and continued to gain in parliamentary stature. In 1913 he was appointed solicitor-general without a seat in the cabinet but this promotion came to him two years later when he was also made a privy councillor. By this time Sir Robert Borden had found him an invaluable adjutant and threw upon him a large burden of work in the shape of the piloting of legislation necessary to further the country's war effort. He also proved himself the most able apologist for the performances of the government to Parliament and the country and his services were continually needed. He gained a most varied experience as solicitor-general and became recognized as one of the strong figures of the government. So it was no surprise that when the cabinet was reorganized in 1917 to meet the circum-

stances of the Coalition, he was given the ministry of the interior, the third most important portfolio. Its duties have occupied him continually ever since and he has been largely responsible for the scheme of soldier settlement now in operation. He was also entrusted with the negotiations and legislation which led to the taking over of the Grand Trunk Railway last year and with many other measures. Whenever the government found itself in a tight corner in the House, he was put up to save the situation and it was a bad case for which he could not put up a presentable defense.

So by reason of his ability, experience and long party service he has earned his title to the premiership. But he comes to office in troublous times and under difficult circumstances. He must know that a large number of his colleagues opposed his selection up to the last minute and full mutual confidence will be difficult even if he decides to retain the malcontents. Mr. N. W. Rowell, the virtual leader of the Liberal-Coalitionists, will under no circumstances continue in office and Mr. Martin Burrell, the secretary of state, is retiring to become parliamentary librarian. Mr. Meighen can keep or discard just as many of his old cabinet as he chooses, but in any event he is bound to bring in some new ministers. These have to go to their constituencies for re-election as soon as they accept office and if the by-elections of the past year are any guide they will find the electorate in a singularly truculent mood. During that period the government has lost to opposition parties five seats out of seven which they fought and some recent incidents have not improved their position. If the new ministers are defeated, a general election will be inevitable and Mr. Meighen may find himself leader of the Opposition instead of premier, for it is hard to see how he can secure a majority.

In taking office as the head of an unpopular government he assumes a difficult task but he has never lacked for courage and is a tireless worker. He is a student and a man of retiring disposition, hating social functions and advertisement. His mentality is distinctively conservative and he has little belief in the practice of democracy in government. There is in him a strong strain of Bismarckian politics; he would go far on the path of collectivism, having strongly advocated the national railway system, but he would also go to great lengths in using the power of the state for purposes of repression and his attitude during the great Winnipeg strike of 1919 has earned him the hostility of Labor.

Yet he is equally unpopular with the powerful financial interests of Montreal, one of whose leading figures lately designated him as a "dangerous Socialist." So it is not a conservative of the normal type who has become premier of Canada. He is a clear and forceful speaker but popular audiences sometimes find his style too academic. In Parliament, however, he is most effective and has few equals in the Anglo-Saxon world as a political advocate. At times he has a very bitter tongue and if he is to keep harmony in his party and not weld his various opponents together, he would do well to repress his gifts of sarcasm. But taken all round he is no unworthy successor to an office which many great men have held.

At the same caucus where Sir Robert Borden resigned, the Coalition decided to pass out of existence but most of the elements composing it at once resolved themselves into a new organization which will bear the sonorous title of the "National Liberal and Conservative" party. The flower of the Coalition-Liberals had already seceded to the Liberal and Farmer parties since the end of the war and others are declining to join the new party. So its majority in the House of Commons will not exceed twenty, and four-fifths of its strength will be Conservatives. It was also provided on the date of its birth with a ready-made platform which is understood to be a political legacy of Sir Robert Borden. Under the necessity of conciliating divergent interests, it could not avoid being colorless and vague and is only definite and purposeful on one point, to wit, the necessity of maintaining the existing protectionist system which the organized farmers are attacking. It endorses the League of Nations and the British connection subject to the maintenance of Canada's full rights of self-government. It also advocates the perpetuation of the national system of railways and their complete freedom from political control. Hopes are held out for a variety of other reforms but it is observed that they are mostly hedged in with cautious reservations. In the eyes of the party managers the platform has probably the same merit as the new party title that it can be available for different interpretations in different localities.

For the next three weeks the favorite diversion at Ottawa will be cabinet-making and then will come a miniature general election which will decide the possibility of the government's holding on to office till the end of its term in 1922. Till then the situation cannot be considered as clarified and political unrest will not abate till the country has the opportunity of choosing a new Parliament. Canada has been provided in one single week with a new premier, a new party, and a new political platform and a new House of Commons should follow as an indispensable corollary.