

Family evictions like this one were a familiar sight during the Depression.

families wrote to Prime Minister R.B. Bennett asking for help. There was nothing else they could do. People were **desperate**. Canadians had never experienced such bad economic times! During the boom years, no one had thought this would ever happen.

How did the Depression affect single men and women?

Single men and women could not apply for relief. As a result, many single men wandered all over the country by jumping on the railcars when no one was looking. They would “ride the rods” and jump off the trains wherever they thought they might find work. They took jobs anywhere, doing anything. Single women had very few choices; the poorer they became, the less chance they had of getting a job.

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A LETTER TO PRIME MINISTER BENNETT

Hamilton, Ontario 1934

Dear Sir:

I am writing you as a last resource to see if I cannot, through your aid, obtain a position and at last, after a period of more than two years, support myself and enjoy again a little independence.

The fact is: this day I am faced with starvation and I see no possible means of counteracting or even averting it temporarily . . . I have



These women are mending and patching clothing for families that were desperate.

The government tried to help people by giving them work. These men are working on road construction as part of a relief project.

received a high-school and Business-college education and I have had experience as a Librarian. My business career has been limited to Insurance, Hosiery, and Public Stenography, each time in the capacity of Bookkeeper and Stenographer-briefly, General Office work. . . .

When the Sanderson-Marwick Co., Ltd., went out of business I had saved a little money and there being no work there for me I came to Hamilton. Since then I have applied to every position that I heard about but there were always so many girls who applied that it was impossible to get work. So time went on and my clothing became



very shabby. I was afraid to spend the little I had to replenish my wardrobe. Always the fear was before me that I would fail to get the position and then I would be without food and a roof over my head in a short time. Many prospective employers just glanced at my attire and shook their heads and more times than I care to mention I was turned away without a trial. I began to cut down on my food and I obtained a poor, but respectable, room at \$1 per week.

First I ate three very light meals a day; then two and then one. During the past two weeks I have eaten only toast and drunk a cup of tea every other day. In the past fortnight I have lost 20 pounds and the result of this deprivation is that I am so very nervous that I could never stand a test along with one, two and three hundred girls. Through this very nervousness I was ruled out of a class yesterday. Today I went to an office for an examination and the examiner just looked me over and said; "I am afraid Miss, you are so awfully shabby I could never have you in my office." . . .

Day after day I pass a delicatessen and the food in the window looks oh, so good! So tempting and I'm so hungry!

Yes I am very hungry and the stamp which carries this letter to you will represent the last three cents I have in this world, yet before I will stoop to dishonour my family, my character or my God I will drown myself in the Lake. However, I do not hint that I have the slightest intention of doing this for I am confident that you will either be able to help me find employment or God will come to my aid. But in the meantime my clothing is getting shabbier and I am faced with the prospect of wearing the same heavy winter dress, that has covered me all winter, during the coming summer.

Oh please sir, can you do something for me? Can you get me a job anywhere in the Dominion of Canada? I have not had to go on relief during this depression but I cannot get relief even here. Moreover it is a job I want and as long as I get enough to live I shall be happy again. I have tried to get work at anything and everything from housework up but I have been unsuccessful and now I am going to starve and be in debt to my landlady. I wouldn't mind if I could just lay down and die but to starve, oh its terrible to think about. . . .

From the Bennett Papers

How did the Depression affect recent immigrants?

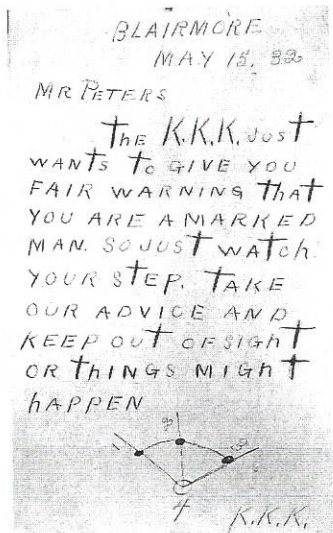
Most Canadians were of British or French descent. Many feared that people who spoke different languages and practised other religions would weaken British and French culture. They thought that too many immigrants were being allowed to come to Canada. Even before the Depression, some felt that immigrants took jobs from other Canadians. They demanded that the government change its immigration policies. The government responded by **restricting** and **excluding** certain groups of people, such as Asians and Jews.

Throughout Canada in the 1920s, even though times were good, groups sprang up to protest **against** the arrival of "foreign" immigrants.

As one Toronto suburban newspaper put it,
"The taxpayers have enough to do to look after their needy citizens and should be protected against foreigners coming here to seek relief — Deport them at once!"

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1 A threatening letter from the Ku Klux Klan.



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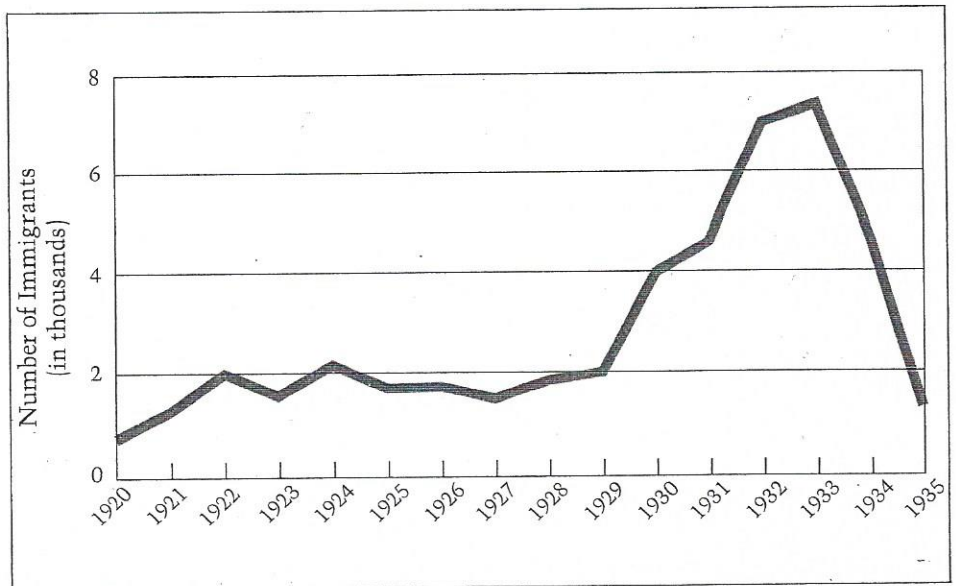
2 Members of the Ku Klux Klan in Kingston, Ontario, 1927.

Some political organizations with **anti-immigrant** ideas were established in parts of Canada; for example, the **Ku Klux Klan (KKK)** specialized in anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, and anti-immigrant ideas; the **Fascists** and the **Nazis** were mostly anti-Semitic. None of these groups received much support from Canadians. But their presence meant trouble.

While few Canadians joined these groups, many listened to their ideas and **approved** of what they heard. Canadians who disapproved of these organizations sometimes came into conflict with those who supported them. There were **riots** in several Canadian cities. These anti-immigrant feelings continued into the Depression. When money became tight, people's worries and fears increased even more.

Immigration fell to very low levels during the Depression. Those who did come faced the same difficulties as everyone else. If they could not support themselves, they did not **qualify** for relief. They were **deported** instead.

Figure 3.2 Number of immigrants Deported, 1920-1935



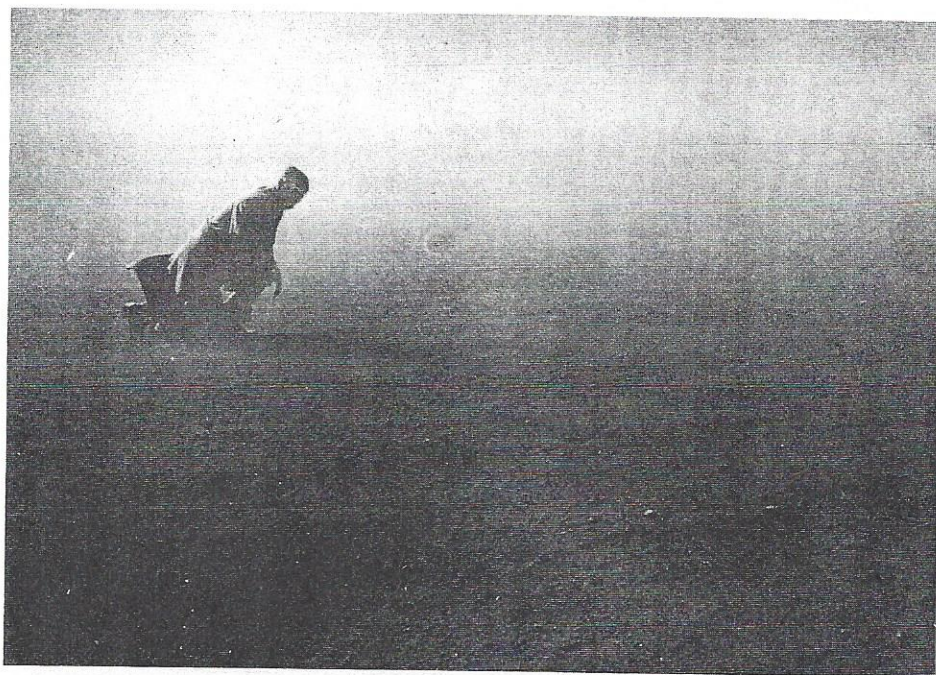
Source: Roberts, B. *Whence They Came: Deportation from Canada, 1900-1935*. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 1944).

You look out and you see this great cloud of dust coming and then you're in it and you can hardly see twenty feet ahead. The grit gets into your nose and mouth and into the houses, drifting under the doors and windows.

A prairie farmer

But grasshoppers. Trillions. They would black out the sky and when they passed, nothing would be left. I've seen an ordinary kitchen broom leaning up against the side of a granary where we were crushing oats and when the hoppers were finished, all that was left of that broom was the handle and you couldn't tell it had been a handle because it was so chewed up except for the metal band which kept the bristles held together. Grasshoppers didn't eat machinery, but by God, I've seen them eat the leather off the seat of a John Deere tractor.

A prairie farmer



QUESTIONS

- a. Why were some Canadians worried about new immigrants coming to Canada?
 - b. How did these worries affect the Canadian government's immigration policy?
 - c. Why did the number of deportations increase during the Depression?
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How did the Depression affect farmers?

Farmers on the southern prairies suffered most of all. In addition to low grain prices, the people faced **natural disasters**. For most of the 1930s, the Prairie provinces suffered severe **drought**. It was dry. Very little rain fell; when it did fall, it was not during the growing season. The land dried up and the soil cracked. The wind blew the dry soil into black dust storms. These storms were so severe that many people were trapped inside their homes. Then, another natural disaster appeared — **grasshoppers**. Large grasshoppers ate many of the plants that had managed to grow.

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The drought and the grasshoppers did not help the price of wheat. There was too much wheat on the world market. Prices fell from \$1.60 a bushel in 1929 to 38 cents a bushel in 1933. The average income in Saskatchewan fell from \$478 to \$135. By April, 1933, 1.5 million Canadians were on relief. People were frustrated and angry; others lost hope.

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"There had not been a drop of rain ... this year and practically a drought for two and a half years.... The farmers in these areas are already in desperate circumstances. I find that only about half of them have seeded and

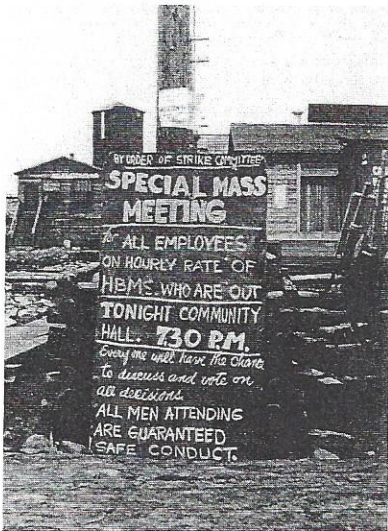
a considerable portion of that seed has blown out. The soil has drifted completely over fences and to a depth of two feet on one road that I travelled last year." A.C. Stewart

How did the Depression affect workers?

Workers during the Depression faced factory closings, layoffs, and pay cuts. Wages were low, and working conditions became unsafe. Women were paid less than men. Wages were cut. Conditions were terrible. 38

Because getting a job was hard, many Canadians did not want to join unions. It was dangerous for workers to complain or strike because companies could replace them easily. Union membership decreased in the early 1930s. People joined unions and went on strike only if working conditions were very bad and wages very low. Then, employers would use the police to keep the businesses open and hire unemployed workers to replace strikers. Workers tried to protect themselves in hard economic times through unions, but employers and governments opposed them. 39

Some workers tried to form very large unions of workers in the same industry, even if they worked for different companies. They hoped that these unions would be strong enough to fight for workers' rights to **minimum wages** that employers must pay. They also hoped to prevent employers from having so much control over workers' lives. Industrial unions slowly organized in the mining, forestry, electrical, and automotive industries. 40



Workers in Flin Flon, Manitoba, took a risk when they went on strike during the Depression.

"We got 15 cents an hour painting those broom handles and the minimum wage ... was 35 cents an hour. Here we were making 15 cents. There were about 300 men working for Mohawk at the time and they wanted to go on strike, they wanted the difference between what they were getting and what they should have got by law. The directors called a meeting about this strike business and the superintendent told them, 'Let 'em all quit! I can replace 'em all by tomorrow morning if they do.'"

A worker during the Depression.

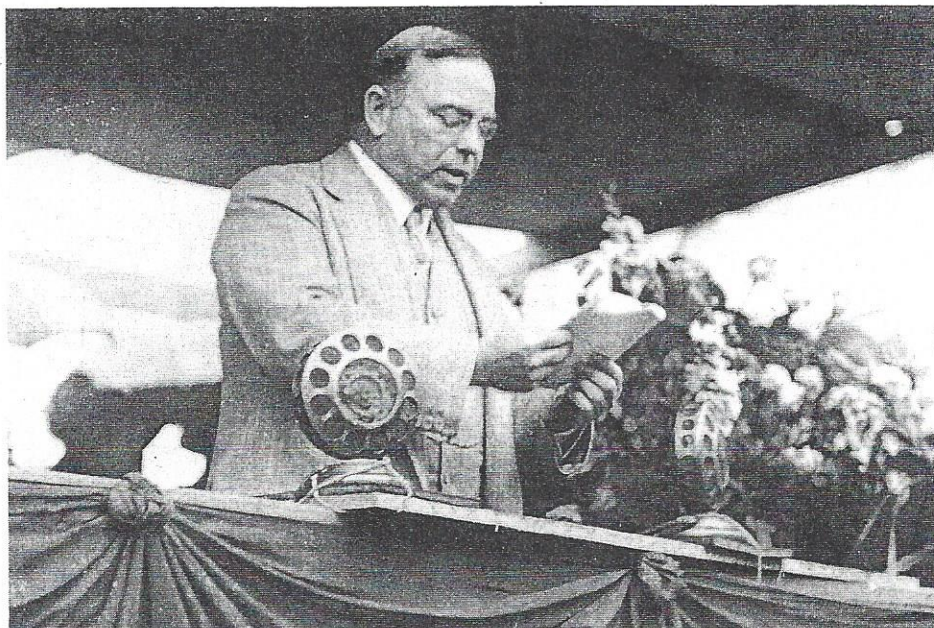
QUESTIONS

- Why did employers feel that they needed to cut wages during the Depression?
 - Why didn't people join unions to protect themselves?
 - What is the minimum wage in your province today?
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What were the political effects of the Depression?

The Depression caused many people to turn to the government for help. When the government did not help them, many people started to think differently about the government and the existing political parties. This was a time of great political change in Canada. 41

William Lyon Mackenzie King giving a speech at an election rally.



1930 FEDERAL ELECTION RESULTS

Conservative	137
Liberal	91
Progressive	12
Other (Labour)	5
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How did the government try to help Canadians?

William Lyon Mackenzie King was prime minister for most of the 1920s. Like other Canadians, he had not seen The Great Depression coming. Even when world stock markets crashed in October 1929, King did not believe the problem was serious. It was normal for the Canadian economy to slow down in the winter, and every winter workers were laid off. King thought the winter of 1929 was no different from other years. 42

Many municipal governments asked King for help with relief payments. He refused. He told the cities to ask their provincial governments for help. He called an election for July 28, 1930. King and the Liberal Party expected to win. The voters surprised them. Canadians wanted a change in government; they wanted a government that would pay greater attention to their problems. 43

Richard Bennett and the Conservative Party promised to give the provinces \$20 million toward relief payments for unemployed workers and their families. They won the election. They raised protective tariffs against foreign products to the highest levels. They hoped that this would get Canadian companies and farms producing and selling more goods. They started trade negotiations with other friendly countries. Then, the Bennett government waited. Bennett believed that the economy would fix itself. 44

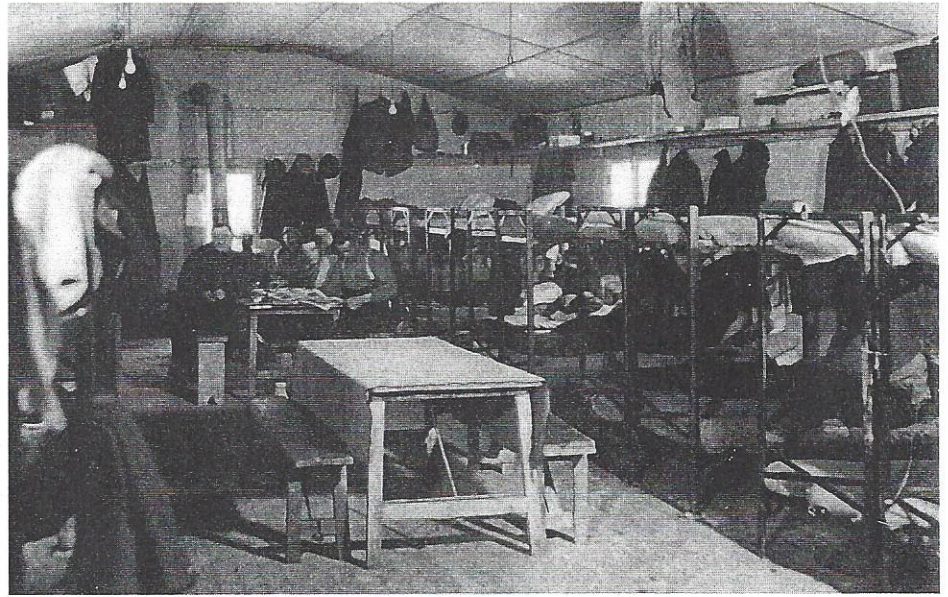
The economy needed help; it did not fix itself. It continued to shrink and fall. Bennett tried to increase trade with Britain. He believed that if Canada could resume exporting products, companies would resume production, and employment and spending would increase. But the changes had little effect. A Canadian government had never experienced a depression as severe as this one. It did not know what to do. The Bennett government tried to help the provinces provide food, shelter, and clothing for the unemployed. 45



Richard Bedford Bennett was Prime Minister of Canada from 1930-35.

Q. What was the chief complaint you had about the camps?

A. The isolation. The feeling of being a forgotten person. You'd never be able to have any money, or a job, or a home. No music, no entertainment. Just a diet and a bunk to sleep in. Every day the same. *Witness before the Royal Commission*



The Bennett Buggy. People could not afford gasoline so they used oxen or horses to pull their cars.



In October 1932, the Department of National Defence opened **camps** for single, unemployed, and homeless men. By 1935, more than 200 camps housed 170 000 men. Often the living conditions were crowded and dirty, but each man received a set of workclothes, soap and a towel, a bed, three meals a day, and the use of a shower, toilet, and a place to do laundry. But the camps did not provide what Canadians really wanted — jobs. The men worked, but it was unnecessary work created to keep them busy. People became **impatient** and frustrated. Canadians wanted change.

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QUESTIONS

- Who was the prime minister of Canada from 1925 to 1930? What did his government do to solve the effects of the Depression?
 - Why did Canadians want change in the government? How do we know they wanted change?
 - Who was the new prime minister? What did his government do to solve the effects of the Depression?
-

What new political parties did Canadians form?

The Communist Party had started in Canada in the 1920s. It had little success during the boom years. In the depression the Communists tried to organize workers into unions. They also organized unemployed workers. They held strikes, marches and demonstrations. This activity upset the government and some Communist leaders, including Party Leader Tim Buck, were arrested in 1931. Other leaders, who were born outside Canada, were **deported**. These tough government actions seriously weakened the Communist Party in Canada.

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The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.) was a new political party that was started in 1932. Some farmers, workers, and **intellectuals** blamed big business for the depression. They said that the government should control business and the economy for all Canadians and not just for those who were rich. Workers and farmers should be paid as much as they needed to live. They said it was wrong that some people were rich when other people were unemployed and hungry. The C.C.F. believed in **socialism**. James S. Woodsworth was elected as the party's first leader. The C.C.F. had some support in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, British Columbia and Ontario.

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The Social Credit Party also started in Western Canada. William "Bible Bill" Aberhart led the party. He was a Calgary school teacher who also taught Christian Sunday school on the radio. Aberhart was shocked by the low prices farmers received for their crops. He blamed the big companies, banks, and railways from Central Canada for the farmers' problems, saying that they charged farmers too much money for their services. Aberhart said that the government should give every man and woman \$25 a month to help them live. No one knew how the government would pay for this program. Some did not care; they were desperate by 1934.

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William J. Aberhart

August 22, 1936 photographed at a picnic on St. Georges Island, in honour of the anniversary of the first election of the Social Credit Government in Alberta.

In the province of Quebec, the depression was hard on farmers and small business owners who were mainly French-speaking. In the towns and cities, large companies were owned by English-speaking people and fewer English-speakers were laid off. The Liberal provincial government had been in power a long time and did not have any new ideas about how to deal with the depression. Some young Liberals who wanted to make changes joined with Maurice Duplessis and the Quebec Conservative Party to create a new political party, the Union Nationale. Duplessis promised to pass laws to control big business, tax the rich and share the wealth of the province with all the people. The Union Nationale won the 1936 provincial election and Maurice Duplessis became Premier of Quebec. Once in power Duplessis promoted French Canadian culture, the Roman Catholic religion and farming. He made peace with the big companies, refused to help workers and blamed the federal government in Ottawa for Quebec's problems. Duplessis was very successful at winning elections in Quebec and was premier for 19 out of the next 23 years until

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his death in 1959. The Union Nationale party continued until the 1970s when it was replaced by the Parti Québécois as the second major party in Quebec.

Another new Party was the Reconstruction Party. It was started by H.H. Stevens in 1935 after he had left Prime Minister Bennett's Conservative government. He invited small business people, shop owners, and farmers to join his new party. He said that big companies treated everyone unfairly. Big companies paid low prices to producers and low wages to workers. They drove small stores out of business. The Reconstruction Party was the last of the new parties to join the 1935 election.

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How did some unemployed show their desire for change?

In 1935, the unemployed began a protest in the camps of British Columbia. The single men were **fed up** and frustrated with the **boring** life in the camps. The government, they thought, had forgotten about them. They wanted real jobs that paid real wages, not just soap and three meals a day. A strike was organized. About 1800 men left the camps to demonstrate in Vancouver.

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The strikers prepared a list of demands. First, they wanted a 50-cent-a-day minimum wage. Second, they wanted safer working conditions. Third, they demanded that the government start a system of unemployment insurance. Last, they wanted a guarantee that the men in the camps could keep their voting rights. The government ignored their demands. In **desperation**, about 1200 men jumped on freight trains going east. "On to Ottawa!" they yelled. They were **determined** to take their demands to Prime Minister Bennett.

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These unemployed men are receiving food in the early stages of the relief program.



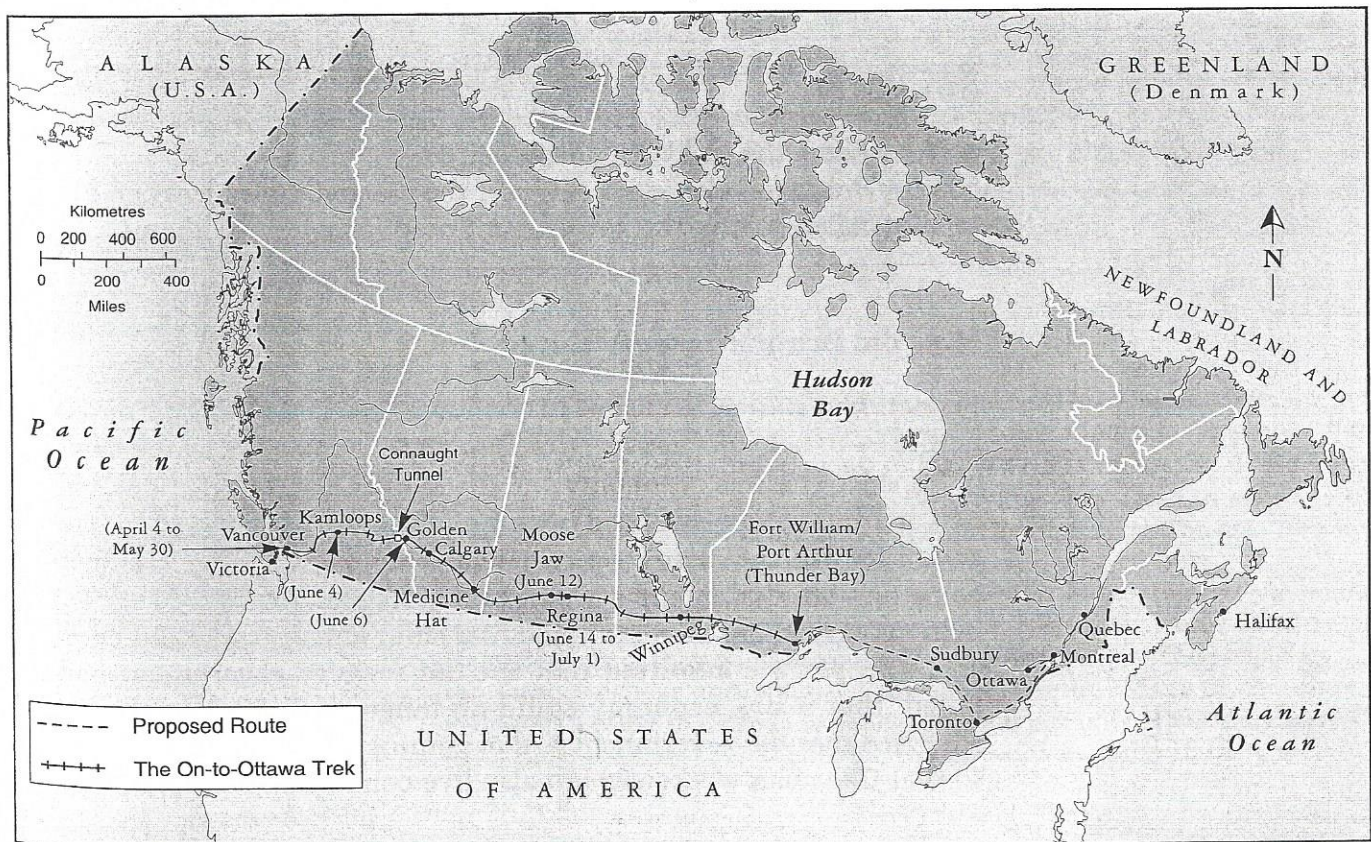
Men from unemployment relief camps climb aboard the CPR to start the On-to-Ottawa trek.



The men were well-organized. Many Canadians supported them in towns along the railway line, giving them food and wishing them success in Ottawa. It was called the "On-to-Ottawa-Trek." Bennett was afraid that more men would join the "trekkers." He ordered the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to stop them in Regina,

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Figure 3.3 Route of the "On-to-Ottawa" Trek





Saskatchewan. Eight men were invited to meet him to present their demands. Bennett rejected the demands and refused to make changes.

On July 1, 1935, the RCMP were ordered to arrest the leaders. When the trekkers reached Regina, 500 police attacked them. One police officer was killed, and 39 were injured; 39 trekkers were injured, 120 were arrested, and 8 were sent to jail. Most of the men returned to British Columbia. Canadians were tired and frustrated by the Depression. The On-to-Ottawa trekkers did what many Canadians wanted to do — march on the government and demand changes.

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QUESTIONS

- a. What were the trekkers' demands?
 - b. Why did many Canadians support the On-to-Ottawa trekkers?
 - c. Why do you think the government used force against them?
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How did Bennett react to the country's frustration?

Bennett had started to change his policy in 1934. He had introduced new laws to help farmers sell their products and had set up the Bank of Canada. The weak economy and the rise of the protest groups and new political parties worried him. He felt that he had to take some action to win the next election. What plan could his government come up with that would get him back Canadians' support?

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In January 1935, Bennett made five radio broadcasts to the Canadian people. He **admitted** that the old style of government had failed; that a sick economy could no longer look after itself. He admitted that the government had to control some parts of business so that Canadian workers could also live comfortably. He promised

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that the government would make laws to control big business, increase taxes on the rich, and lower farm debts. He also promised to introduce minimum wages, the eight-hour workday, unemployment insurance, and better old age pensions. These were the demands of the On-to-Ottawa trekkers and more! He called his plans "The New Deal" after the slogan used by the American President, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

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Canadians were shocked. Did Bennett, the millionaire, now care about average workers? Or was he just making wild promises that he never really meant to keep so that he could win the next election? It did not matter. Canadians were **determined** to change the government, and now knew that change in government was possible. Their demands for change had forced the political parties to think about the average person's real needs.

How did Canadians react to Bennett's promises?

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In the 1935 election, Canadian voters said "No" to Bennett and the Conservatives. However, a majority of voters did not believe in the new political parties and their promises. They voted for William Lyon Mackenzie King and the Liberals. His government did increase spending on **public works projects** and prepared an unemployment insurance system. The economy began to improve a little. But the Depression did not end until the beginning of World War II. Prosperity finally returned in the 1940s. But with it came new horrors.

1935 FEDERAL ELECTION RESULTS

Liberal	171
Conservative	39
Social Credit	17
Other	11
C.C.F.	7
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QUESTIONS

- What did Bennett promise in the election?
- What did the Canadian people learn in the Depression years?
- What has happened to the five political parties that were started or became active in the Great Depression?

CASE STUDY

Jews in Canada

Jews have had a long history in Canada. The first Jews settled here during the years of French colonial rule. Jewish immigration remained slow but steady. In 1901, there were about 16 000 Jews in Canada. By 1931, their number had increased to about 155 000. While they lived in all parts of Canada, most were located in the larger cities of central Canada. Toronto was home to 45 000 Jews.

Jews faced hardship and prejudice in their new home. But, unlike many immigrant groups, this was not new to them. Most immigrants came from countries where they were the cultural majority: most of the people spoke the same language and practised the same religion. Many of the immigrants who came to Canada experienced prejudice only when they arrived in Canada. Jews, on the other hand, were never a majority in the countries



Three concentration camp survivors show the numbers that the Nazis branded on their arms for identification purposes.

In this town, the Nazis killed 2 500 people because they considered them inferior.



they had left. Although the situation was better in Canada than in some countries, anti-Semitism was common in Canada, too.

Unfortunately for Jews, anti-Semitism was at its peak in Canada when Jews most needed to escape from Europe. After 1933, the German leader, Adolf Hitler, and the Nazi Party began to persecute Jewish people. Hitler wanted all Jews out of Europe. In Germany and other parts of Europe, Jews had no rights. Many thousands of Jews applied to Canada and other countries. Few countries, however, would accept them.

The Depression and the anti-immigrant feelings that went with it made newcomers unpopular. The Department of Immigration refused to let Jews into Canada, even though they knew that in Germany Jews suffered many forms of discrimination. The head of the Canadian Department of Immigration, Frederick Blair, was an anti-Semite. He knew he was within the rules of the Canadian government to restrict Jewish entry to Canada. He was also confident that the government and people of Canada would support his decision.

Blair did not stop there. The Department of Immigration made up new rules that made it harder for Jews to get into Canada. In the end, very few Jews were allowed into the country. Between 1933 and 1945, fewer than 5 000 were admitted. World War II started in 1939, and Jewish immigration stopped. In 1941, Hitler decided to get rid of all the Jews in Europe: he started a program of mass murder in all the countries where the Germans were in power. We call this terrible event the Holocaust, which means "a huge fire that destroys everything." Six million Jews were murdered. Canadian Jews waited in fear and frustration for word about their friends and relatives.

After the war, when it was too late for many, Canadian immigration rules were relaxed. Many people in Europe had no home to return to, and they were allowed to enter Canada in large numbers. Many of them were Jews.