

Name: King, George Edwin (Hon.)

Riding: Saint John, County & City of

Party: Liberal

Date Elected: BY-EL 15 Oct. 1867. GE 29 Jun. 1870. GE 4 Jun. 1874.

Positions Held: Appointed to Executive Council as Minister without Portfolio, 2 Mar. 1869. Sworn in as Premier, 9 Jun. 1870 - 21 Feb. 1871. Appointed Attorney General, 9 Jun. 1870 - 3 May 1878. Sworn in as Premier, 5 Jul. 1872 - 3 May 1878. Appointed Justice of the Supreme Court, 10 Dec. 1880 - Sept. 1893. Appointed to the Supreme Court of Canada, 21 Sept. 1893.

Cabinet Shuffle:

Retired: Retired from provincial politics, 4 May 1878.

Defeated:

Died: Died at age 61 on 7 May 1901 in Ottawa, ON. Buried in Fern Hill Cemetery, Saint John, NB.

Notes: Born on 8 Oct. 1839 in Saint John, NB. Of Scottish-Loyalist ancestry. King was born into a prosperous shipbuilding family. As a member of the Wesleyan Methodist community, young King was sent to Mount Allison Wesleyan Academy in Sackville. He later attended Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, from where he received his B.A. and M.A. in 1859 and 1862 respectively. He then returned to Saint John, where he articulated in R.L. Hazen's (q.v.) law firm. Admitted to the bar as an attorney in 1863 and as a barrister in 1865, King established a law practice in Saint John. He was appointed a Queen's Counsel in 1872.

In an Oct. 1867 by-election, King was returned to the Legislature. His political affiliation is often confusing: quite often he is referred to as a Conservative, but he referred to himself as Liberal. Ideologically, he supported the liberal and Methodist values of civil liberty and social improvement. He called for universal male suffrage, sought to remove all property restrictions for voters, and later even promoted universal female suffrage. The first major bill he wrote and ushered through the legislative process in 1869, pioneered judicial review of electoral proceedings in Canada.

At the age of twenty-nine King was appointed to A.R. Wetmore's (q.v.) Executive Council as a Minister without Portfolio. In the estimation of historian T.W. Acheson, King was "'a man of broad intelligence, highly organized, with a powerful will and a commanding public presence, [and] rapidly became a leader in the administration, increasingly setting its agenda and steering its policies through the legislature.'"

King's politics were highly influenced by Ontario school reformer Egerton Ryerson, and New Brunswick's Lieutenant Governor Lemuel Allan Wilmot (q.v.), who had led a significant reform movement in the province in years gone by. As such, from the moment he arrived in the Legislature, King was dedicated to education reform. Between 1868 and 1870 King drafted a bill to create a single public school system for all children funded by the province's taxpayers. He introduced the extremely controversial bill in early 1870 but quickly withdrew it when it was clear it would not pass. He hoped that he could garner enough support at the coming general election to implement the bill at the following session.

Wetmore had left the premiership in Jun. 1870 to assume a federal appointment, and King succeeded him as the province's first minister. At the age of thirty, King was New Brunswick's youngest premier. In inheriting the office, King had also inherited a great deal of opposition. At the general election in Jun. 1870, the government was returned with the shaky support of about half the assemblymen. George L. Hatheway (q.v.), a wily, seasoned veteran of the Opposition took advantage of the new Premier's youth and political inexperience. Tactfully manoeuvring behind the scenes, Hatheway consolidated opposition to King's administration.

When the 22nd Legislature opened on 16 Feb. 1871, Hatheway had gathered enough support to oust the Premier with a vote of non-confidence. On the third day of the session King and his government resigned. Negotiations

between King and Hatheway were initiated - apparently at the behest of Lieutenant Governor Wilmot - and a new administration was formed with Hatheway as Premier and King as Attorney General. With a mixture of King and Hatheway supporters in cabinet, the new government dedicated itself to passing King's common schools legislation.

On 12 Apr. 1871 King re-introduced the schools bill to the house. Debate over the Common Schools Act, 1871, was long and often bitter. When a provision was added on 5 May 1871 calling for the new schools to be non-denominational, the debate became increasingly divided along Catholic and Protestant lines. As a direct result of this provision, Hatheway was able to gather enough support to have King's law passed on 17 May 1871. The legislation came into effect on 1 Jan. 1872, and the controversy surrounding it continued to dog King for many years.

In the spring of 1872 John Costigan (q.v.) and T.W. Anglin (q.v.) lead vocal opposition to the schools legislation in the federal House of Commons and attempted to have the bill disallowed. After Hatheway's death on 5 Jul. 1872, King had once again become Premier - making him the only New Brunswick first minister to be Premier on two separate occasions - and responsibility to defend the government's position fell to him, a task he disposed of with vigour and zeal. The furor reached such a pitch that by 1873-74, the property of Catholics refusing to pay their school taxes was being seized. The 1874 general election was contested on the issue with only a handful of Acadian and Irish Catholic dissenters being elected. Finally in 1875, King's Provincial Secretary and a leading Conservative, John James Fraser (q.v.) negotiated a compromise, allowing Catholic schools to exist within the public system and putting an end to the controversy.

Over the course of his administration, King introduced policies to attract immigrants to the province, and subsidized a railway up the Saint John River valley to compete with the North Shore's Intercolonial Railway. According to historian Arthur Doyle, the Premier ""was an impressive, commanding figure - a hard-boiled, cunning politician with a tough aggressive personality."" With the 1878 general election approaching, the thirty-eight year old King resigned the premiership.

At the federal election of 1878, King ran with his mentor Samuel Leonard Tilley (q.v.) as a Liberal-Conservative. Many Conservatives had been in opposition to the free schools and were still smarting from the controversy. Tilley barely retained his House of Commons seat and King was defeated. King remained out of public life until 9 Dec. 1880, when he was appointed to the New Brunswick Supreme Court. He gained a reputation as a judge of the highest quality. He served on the bench for thirteen years and also lectured at the Saint John Law School in 1892-1893. King received an honorary LL.D. from the University of New Brunswick in 1886, and an honorary D.C.L. from Mount Allison University in 1893. He was called to the Supreme Court of Canada on 21 Sept. 1893. He retained this position until his death in 1901.

King's reputation in his life was such that Tilley apparently saw the youthful former premier as his heir as New Brunswick's most capable tribune in the federal arena. James Hannay, a historian and a contemporary of King's, contends that had King been elected to the House of Commons in 1878 he would have become a great politician. In Hannay's estimation: ""There was a pugnacity and aggressiveness in Mr. King's make-up which stamped him as a leader of men, and he is so many-sided in his views and sympathies that he can take an interest in a horse race...as well as in some problem of legislation or in a great moral movement."" Hannay even suggests King would have eventually succeeded Sir John A. Macdonald as Prime Minister instead of John Sparrow Thompson.

For more information see also: ""Dictionary of Canadian Biography"", Volume XIII (Ref 920.071 D554); ""Premiers of New Brunswick"" (971.5 D754 NB Coll.); ""The History of New Brunswick Provincial Election Campaigns, 1866-1974"" (329.023 W899 NB Coll.); James Hannay, ""The Premiers of New Brunswick Since Confederation,"" Canadian Magazine, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Jul. 1897); Dr. Murray Young, ""Political Labels,"" The Officers' Quarterly (Summer 1996)

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