

Name: Murray, James Alexander (Hon.)

Riding: Kings, County of

Party: Conservative Independent

Date Elected: GE 3 Mar. 1908. GE 24 Jun. 1912. BY-EL 5 Feb. 1914 (By ACCL). GE 24 Feb. 1917.

Positions Held: Appointed Minister Without Portfolio, 16 Oct. 1911 - 17 Jun. 1912. Appointed President of Executive Council, 17 Jun. 1912 - 22 Jan. 1914. Appointed Minister of Agriculture, 22 Jan. 1914 - 4 Apr. 1917. Leader of the Conservative Party, 1 Feb. 1917 - Sept. 1920. Premier of New Brunswick, 1 Feb. 1917 - 4 Apr. 1917. Leader of the Opposition, 4 Apr. 1917 - Sept. 1920.

Cabinet Shuffle:

Retired: Retired from active politics following his electoral defeat in 1920.

Defeated: GE 9 Oct. 1920.

Died: Died at the age of 96 on 15 Feb. 1960 in Sussex, NB. Buried in the United Church Cemetery in Sussex Corner, NB.

Notes: Born on 9 Nov. 1864 in Moncton, NB. Of Scottish-Loyalist ancestry. Murray was educated Moncton and Dorchester public schools, and as a young man moved to Saint John. There, he found employment with the dry goods firm of Daniel and Boyd. Later he returned to Moncton to join the office staff of the manager of the Intercolonial Railway. He also worked with the Montreal-based House of Greenshields Ltd. before starting his own business as a manufacturers' agent in 1896.

Two years after marrying a Kings County woman, Murray settled in Sussex in 1893. With a fervent interest in civic affairs, Murray entered municipal politics. He was elected an alderman-at-large in 1904 and 1905, then was elected mayor of Sussex in 1906 and 1907. In other community affairs, Murray was an honorary life member of the local Kiwanis Club, and an honorary life elder of St. Paul's Church. He was deeply involved with the Red Cross Society, eventually becoming honorary president, and he was a past master of the Zion Masonic Lodge in Sussex.

Murray soon entered provincial politics with his election to the Legislature in 1908, where he became a prominent, and ardent Conservative. He would be re-elected in 1912, 1917 and a 1914 by-election. Murray entered Premier James Kidd Flemming's (q.v.) Executive Council in 1911 without portfolio, then became President of the Executive Council in Jun. 1912.

Murray's name was mentioned as possible successor to Premier Flemming upon the latter's resignation amid charges of corruption and graft. Although Murray was "tougher and more capable," George J. Clarke (q.v.) was chosen because his personal reputation of propriety was without question; Murray's, on the other hand, less so. Nevertheless, Murray became an important member of Clarke's administration. He was, in the opinion of historian Arthur Doyle, "one of the most forceful speakers in the Legislature." As Clarke's Minister of Agriculture, only days after the outbreak of the First World War, Murray made a noble and humanitarian announcement. As part of New Brunswick's contribution to the war effort, the government would purchase about 50,000 barrels of potatoes and ship them to the people of Great Britain and the Belgian refugees. "The Patriotic Potato Gift," as it came to be known, was a public relations smash -the press gave it good coverage and offers of charity rolled in from around the province. Begun with benevolent intentions, the initiative soon got wrapped up in the point-blank partisanship and rampant patronage of the day.

Conservative Party faithful pressured the government to purchase potatoes only from party supporters, not Liberals. As pay-offs and kickbacks abounded, inferior potatoes were purchased, few were shipped overseas, and the majority ended up rotting on piers and in ship holds. The project's budget was wildly exceeded and the government undertook an elaborate effort to cover up the mess. Their efforts worked. Although many suspected the Patriotic Potato Gift smacked of corruption, not even the Opposition knew exactly how high in the

government the scandal reached.

Throughout Clarke's brief tenure as Premier, he suffered ill health. On occasions when Clarke was absent from the House, Murray served as Acting Premier. When Clarke finally resigned from politics in Feb. 1917, Murray was chosen his successor largely because John Baxter (q.v.), a very able member of the government, did not want the job. Few, it seemed, wanted to inherit responsibility for a government on its last legs, and almost certainly to be dismissed at the next election.

Nevertheless, Murray was sworn in as Premier on 1 Feb., and the following day called an election to be held on 24 Feb. 1917. In this brief campaign, Murray canvassed on his new leadership, repeatedly reminding the public that the Liberals lacked a recognized leader. He hailed the government's Prohibition Act, which would come into effect on 1 May 1917, as a proud achievement. Murray also called for the completion of the Valley Railway. Perhaps most bizarrely, Murray espoused the Conservative government's good record. The Liberals, on the other hand, made good use of the potato scandal and Murray's suspected role in the affair, and called for a graft-free government. Their tactic knocked the Conservatives off their policy platform and prodded them into a war of words and bitter insinuations. The federal government's unpopular conscription policy also hurt Murray's efforts. After an acrid campaign, the Conservatives were voted out of office. Of all of New Brunswick's Premiers, Murray held office for the shortest period of time.

After coming to office, the Liberals, under Premier Walter E. Foster (q.v.), appointed a Royal Commission in Sept. 1918 to investigate the handling of the province's wartime potato deal. The McQueen Commission, as it was called, held hearings for several weeks, casting a pall over Murray's reputation. In an attempt to salvage his name, Murray even testified at the hearings. The final report placed the blame for the deal squarely on Murray's shoulders. Furthermore, the report said that the former Premier was undoubtedly guilty of criminal offence including falsifying the public record in order to cover it up. After withholding publication until a politically expedient moment, the Liberals quietly tabled the document on 18 Mar. 1919.

The Foster government then introduced a motion to censure and call for the resignation of John Baxter (q.v.), George B. Jones (q.v.), B. Frank Smith (q.v.) and Murray on 28 Mar. 1919. While the motion was being debated, as Arthur Doyle recalls the incident, Murray "was heartsick with the assault on his pride," and pleaded for the Liberals to spare him the humiliation. Despite Murray's pleas, and some said tears, the motion passed.

At the Conservative Convention held in Nov. 1919, Murray resigned as Leader of the Party. Only hours later, however, after Baxter and Albert Reilly (q.v.) both refused the job, Murray was reinstated. By the time Foster called a provincial election, Murray's prestige and authority was exhausted, and the Conservatives were in disarray. In a 15 Sept. 1920 letter to a Conservative colleague, Murray said: "I have stood about all the criticism I can stand for from within our own ranks and do not propose to take any more of the sort I have been getting. . . without hitting back. I think the best way is to get out." He resigned as Leader of the Conservatives several weeks before voting was to take place. So embittered with his own party was Murray, that he ran as an Independent in the Oct. 1920 provincial election. His attempt to distance himself from the party did not work, and he was defeated at the polls. He subsequently retired from public life.

Following his retirement from politics, he was appointed New Brunswick superintendent of immigration and industry, serving in that position until late in life. He died in Feb. 1960, after years of failing health.

For more information see also: "Prominent People of New Brunswick" (Ref 920 M163); "The Premiers of New Brunswick" (971.5 D754 NB Coll.); "The History of New Brunswick Provincial Election Campaigns and Platforms 1866-1974" (329.023 W899 NB Coll.); "Front Benches & Back Rooms" (320.9715 D754 NB Coll.); and the New Brunswick Pamphlet Collection. Notice of Murray's death appears in the "Telegraph Journal" on 17 Feb. 1960.

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