

Check Forward ➔

You will read more about the War Measures Act in Chapter 15.

The War Measures Act

In 1914, the Canadian government passed the War Measures Act to help it respond to the war. The act gave the government the power to pass laws without the approval of Parliament while Canada was at war. It could also overrule provincial laws, censor the news media, tell manufacturers and farmers what they must produce, imprison people without trial, and label some people enemies of Canada.



Figure 6–24 The Castle Mountain Internment Camp in Alberta was one of many similar camps across Canada. Most of those interned in Castle Mountain were Ukrainians. What details in the photograph tell you about conditions at Castle Mountain?

Up for Discussion

Is suspending people's rights a reasonable response to war?

Enemy Aliens

In the years before World War I, the Canadian government had actively campaigned to attract immigrants from Europe. This meant that, by 1914, more than a million people from regions that were part of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires lived in Canada. Some were recent immigrants, but others were descended from immigrants who had arrived long before.

Some people feared that these immigrants could become spies who might sabotage the war effort. As a result, the government used the power of the War Measures Act to label more than 800 000 people **enemy aliens** — people who had come from an enemy country — and to restrict their rights.

Many so-called enemy aliens were forced to carry identification cards and report regularly to authorities. They were not allowed to publish or read anything in a language other than French or English, and they could not leave the country without permission.

More than 8500 people, mostly of Ukrainian and German heritage, were placed in internment camps and forced to build roads and railways, work in mines, and clear land. The internees at Castle Mountain Internment Camp in Alberta, for example, helped develop Banff National Park.

At the time, the 400 000 Canadians of German heritage were the third-largest ethnic group in Canada, after the English and French. But schools and universities were not allowed to teach the German language, German-language newspapers were banned, and some German Canadians were fired from their jobs. In Montréal and Winnipeg, rioters destroyed German-owned shops, and the town of Berlin, Ontario, renamed itself Kitchener, after Britain's war minister, who had died when his ship hit a German mine.

Historical Perspective: Despite their treatment, thousands of Canadians of Ukrainian and German heritage enlisted in the Canadian Forces. Think about Canadian identity and nationhood, and explain what might have motivated them to respond to their situation by signing up.

The War Zone Comes Home

Halifax was a busy port during World War I. On the morning of December 6, 1917, two ships, the *Mont-Blanc* and the *Imo*, collided in the harbour. The *Mont-Blanc* was loaded with about 2400 tonnes of explosives and began to burn.

Just before 9:05 a.m., the *Mont-Blanc* blew up. The massive explosion flattened much of the city and was heard more than 300 kilometres away. Two thousand people died and 9000 were injured. Thousands more were left homeless. The explosion brought the horrors of war to the home front.

Women's Changing Roles

In 1914, many women worked outside the home, but their job choices were often limited. Ideas about appropriate work for women restricted many to low-paying jobs, such as teaching, domestic work, and low-skilled factory work.

But when men signed up, many more women stepped in and ran their family farms and businesses. And when the war effort needed workers to make the supplies, ships, tanks, bombs, guns, and ammunition the Canadian forces needed, women accepted these jobs.

Conditions were not easy for these women. At first, labour unions resisted because they wanted to protect jobs for men. Many women found themselves doing the same jobs as men for a fraction of the pay.

Most employers did little to help women employees. Sometimes, not even separate washrooms were provided. In addition, working conditions were sometimes dangerous. In munitions factories, for example, fumes from the materials could damage workers' lungs and turn their skin bright yellow. Accidental explosions were also a risk.

Women's new jobs were often considered temporary. When the men returned from Europe, they would take back their jobs. But many women would no longer be satisfied to play only their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and domestic workers.

Ethical Dimension: Was it fair that women — productive workers during the war — were removed from their jobs because men had returned from the battlefield? Explain your viewpoint.

Women and the Right to Vote

In 1914, voting was not considered a right for everyone. Some Canadian women, for example, could vote in municipal elections, but they were not allowed to vote in provincial or federal elections.

Women had been fighting to change this since the early 1870s. In the early 20th century, this cause was taken up by women such as Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy.

In 1916, the Manitoba government gave some women the right to vote in provincial elections, and, by 1917, women in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia could also vote in provincial elections. But it would take a wartime conscription crisis in 1917 to get them the federal vote.

Figure 6–25 Nellie McClung fought for women's rights, including the right to vote. In 1921, she was elected to the Alberta legislature, where she continued to champion the cause of women. Without feminists like McClung, what would Canada be like today?



Conscription and the Vote

Prime Minister Robert Borden knew that the conscription law had stirred up a hornet's nest. So with a general election looming in late 1917, he introduced measures to improve his government's chances of winning re-election.

To begin, Borden brought in the Military Voters Act, which gave all members of the military, male and female, the vote. In addition, it allowed the government to assign the vote of soldiers who did not specify a riding to any constituency the government wished.

Borden thought that women with relatives fighting in the war were likely to support him and the policy of conscription. So the Wartime Elections Act gave the vote to close women relatives — wives, widows, mothers, sisters, and daughters — of men serving in the armed forces. This act also took away many people's right to vote. Those barred from voting included all enemy aliens, as well as conscientious objectors — people who did not believe in war.

In addition, Borden promised to extend the franchise to even more women. And when he realized that many Anglophone farmers opposed conscription because they believed they could not leave their farms, he granted farmers' sons an exemption from conscription, which he then revoked after the election.

Borden's election campaign was designed to appeal to women's patriotism and to fear. One leaflet, for example, suggested, "Before you cast your vote, think what the Kaiser [the German emperor] would like it to be." Posters and editorial cartoons portrayed the possibility of Germans invading Canada and attacking women and children in their homes.

Borden and his supporters easily won the election, and conscription went into effect. But the debate had been divisive and left a legacy of bitterness between Francophones and Anglophones. Borden did keep his election promise to women, and in 1918, women who were older than 21, who were not alien-born or Aboriginal, and who met provincial property-ownership requirements had the right to vote in federal elections.

Figure 6–28 In 1917, these Canadian military nurses — often called Bluebirds because of the colour of their uniforms — voted at a polling station set up at their field hospital in France. Why would these women have the right to vote while other women did not?



Recall... Reflect... Respond

- Many Canadian women won the right to vote in federal elections because of the political tactics Prime Minister Robert Borden used to ensure his re-election. An old saying — the end justifies the means — suggests that questionable methods are justified if the outcome is positive. Did the positive outcome for women in 1917 justify Borden's tactics? Explain your response.
- Think about the responses to war of Canadians at home and identify the two you believe had the greatest long-term impact for Canadian society, politics, or identity.

Give reasons for your choices. Share your decisions and reasons with a partner.

- Some people believe that Canadians who did not enlist in the armed forces benefited greatly from World War I. Develop three pieces of evidence you could use to argue in favour of, or against, this position. Share your ideas with a classmate. After your discussion, identify the arguments that most effectively support your position.

Thinking Historically: Historical Perspective

Changing Attitudes About Women

There is a world of difference between the Canada of a hundred years ago and our Canada today. Societal norms and attitudes have all changed. So when we attempt to understand people from the past, we should avoid judging them as if they lived in our own era. The period of World War I was a period of transition in views about women's role in society. Some people held "old-fashioned" opinions, while others were more forward looking. If the opinions below seem odd or even objectionable, ask yourself how the passage of time offers an explanation.



In the early 20th century, **STEPHEN LEACOCK** was not only a teacher, political scientist, and serious author but also the best-known humorist in the English-speaking world. He wrote this comment in an essay called "The Woman Question."

The women's vote, when they get it, will leave women much as they were before. . . . The world's work is open to [woman], but she cannot do it. She lacks the physical strength for laying bricks or digging coal. If put to work on a steel beam a hundred feet above the ground, she would fall off. For the pursuit of business her head is all wrong. Figures confuse her. She lacks sustained attention. . . . Women could never be a team of anything.



MARIE-JOSEPH DEMERS, member of Parliament for St. Johns–Iberville, Québec, made these remarks in the House of Commons in May 1918.

[W]e all recognize [women's] sublime mission; that is to say, the moral and intellectual development of our children. I believe that it is a dangerous experiment to take them away from our homes.



NELLIE MCCLUNG, author and advocate for women's rights, wrote this in her 1915 book, *In Times Like These*.

No person denies a woman the right to go to church, and yet the church service takes a great deal more time than voting. . . . But the wife and mother, with her God-given, sacred trust of moulding the young life of our land, must never dream of going round the corner to vote. "Who will mind the baby," cried one of our public men, in great agony of spirit, "when the mother goes to vote?"



Homesteader **IRENE PARLBY** was Alberta's first female cabinet minister and one of Canada's Famous Five.

If politics mean . . . the effort to secure through legislative action better conditions of life for the people, greater opportunities for our children and other people's children . . . then it most assuredly is a woman's job as much as it is a man's job.

Explorations

- Choose a speaker whose opinion seems odd or unacceptable to you. Think about the values and beliefs that were the norm in early 20th-century Canada. Does that help you understand, if not approve of, the opinion? Why or why not?
- Which speakers do you think were likely criticized for their views in the early 20th century? What opinions today might be viewed as odd or unacceptable 100 years from now? Explain your choices.