Interwar Years: Government Responses to the Depression

**Concept(s)** Ethical Dimensions of History

**Prepared for Grade(s)** 10, 11, 12

**Province** BC

**By** Krista Marrs, Lesley Scowcroft, Liam Kelliher, Lindsay Gibson, Mr. Ryan Mansley with editorial help from Graeme Stacey, Tom Morton

**Time Period(s)** 1900-present

**Time allotment** 1 x 80 minutes

**Brief Description of the Task**

*Which Prime Minister had the Best Response to the Great Depression and was the Response Adequate?*

The ethical question behind this lesson is the extent to which a government is responsible for assisting the people in times of dire need. To provide a clear focus and to personalize the question, this lesson asks students to decide which Prime Minster (Mackenzie King, or R.B. Bennett) best responded to the Depression and whether that response was adequate. In answering this question, students should take into account the historical context and perspectives.

EndFragmentEndFragment

**Objectives**

**Objectives for Historical Thinking**

Ethical Judgement:

Students will consider the historical context and perspectives while making a judgement on government responses to the Great Depression.

**Required Knowledge & Skills**

To complete this task students will need to have:

•    A basic understanding of the political spectrum and the overall general differences between liberal and conservative parties and politicians.

**Detailed Instructions**

**Recommended Resources:**

[http://history.cbc.ca/history/?MIval=EpisContent.html&series\_id=1&episod...](http://history.cbc.ca/history/?MIval=EpisContent.html&series_id=1&episode_id=13&chapter_id=2&page_id=3&lang=E)

This site has examples of the letters that were written to R.B. Bennett during the depression and his responses.

[http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id\_nbr=7997&interval=25&&PH...](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=7997&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=2epgk109nraciu6rlmlnamu1p6)

[http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id\_nbr=7996&&PHPSESSID=gbp0...](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=7996&&PHPSESSID=gbp0h7bleefpepk2ci7fsdrvk1)

Both of these pages give very good detailed descriptions of how the two Prime Ministers of Canada responded to the Great Depression.

<http://canadaonline.about.com/cs/primeminister/a/pmrole.htm>

Gives a very brief description of the role of Prime Minister.

**Required Materials:**

•    Photocopies of **ATTACHMENTS** indicated below.

•    Access to a DVD Player and the DVD, *Canada A People’s History: Episode 13, Harsh Times*

Lesson Sequence

1.    Open the Lesson by showing the short clip from *Canada A People’s History, Episode 13 Hard Times*, “Calls For Help” and/or read actual letters to the class in **ATT 1**.  The clip talks about the letters that R.B. Bennett received from the people of Canada asking for help during the Great Depression and how he personally answered them and even gave some of them $5 of his own money.  Ask the students whether this surprises them, and why?  Is this the way we expect a Prime Minister to act?  Is this an appropriate response to an economic depression? (10 minutes)

2.    Introduce the purpose of the lesson -  to decide which Prime Minister had the better response to the economic crisis of the 1930s or whether any of their responses were any good-  and outline the sequence of the lesson. (5 minutes)

3.    Decide on criteria for judging the actions of Bennett and King. Possible criteria might include

* Purpose: were the actions of the government designed to achieve a valued purpose, such as protection of the environment, justice or a better standard of living for all?
* Process: did the actions show some positive qualities such as boldness, sacrifice, innovation, or involvement of diverse groups of citizens?
* Result: did the response to the Depression result in short term relief? In long term stability?

4.    The teacher may also want to give a brief lecture on what the reactions of the Mackenzie King and Bennett governments were to the Great Depression.  The students should also be aware of how the US President FDR differed in his approach to dealing with the crisis (the New Deal). (5-10 minutes)

5.    Explain the concept of historical perspective and the process of taking the perspective of people in the past without imposing our present-day beliefs and ideas. The Historical Thinking web site (<http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-perspectives>) gives a brief description of the concept and explains some of the challenges.

This lesson requires that the students pass judgment on what occurred in the past; however, in order for them to come to a fair judgement, they need to realize that these politicians were working in a different time, and environment. The previous depression after World War One was over quickly without much government intervention.  In addition, Keynesian ideas such as providing economic stimulus through government spending would have been unorthodox. Government’s were much more likely to hear an economist stress balancing the budget, which only hurt the economy. Other ideas such as unemployment insurance and a minimum wage were in the air, but seen as radical at the time. Later in the Depression, the Roosevelt administration made these and other ideas more acceptable.

Students should also understand that the responsibilities and limitations of the Prime Minister as explained in **ATT 4** were also important factors in the decisions of King and Bennett. (15 minutes)

6.    Next, pass out the handouts **ATT 2 Biographies of Mackenzie King and R.B. Bennett** and **ATT 4 Which Prime Minister had the Best Response to the Great Depression and was it Adequate?**  Students need to read both biographies describing what each Prime Minister did to try and assist the country during the Depression and fill out the T-chart with what King and Bennett did.  At this point they only need to decide who had the best response, not if either of them responded appropriately (which is a possibility). (20 minutes)

7.    To give students some practice in judging the actions of King and Bennett, introduce the three political cartoons in **ATT 3**. To interpret the first cartoon, remind students that King was the Liberal federal leader but many provincial governments were Tory or Conservative.

With the class, discuss the following:

•    Who is presented in the cartoon?

•    What is happening in the cartoon?

•    What is the message or opinion of the cartoonist about the Prime Minister?

•    What criteria is the cartoonist using to criticize the Prime Minister: the purpose, the process, or the result (or some other criteria)?

 (15 minutes)

8.    The final part of this lesson will require a short paragraph response.  They must take the knowledge they gained from the previous activities and declare which Prime Minister had the best response to the Depression, and they must also decide if the PM they chose responded adequately to the depression. (15-20 minutes)

**Outcomes**

**Prescribed Learning Outcomes for Social Studies 11 (British Columbia):**

Skills and Processes of Social Studies

•    Applying critical thinking skills, including: comparing, questioning, summarizing, drawing conclusions, defending a position.

•    Demonstrate effective research skills, including: assessing information and evaluating data.

•    Demonstrate effective written and oral skills.

**Society and Identity**

•    Assess the development and impact of Canadian social policies and programs related to the welfare state.

•    Explain economic cycles with reference to the Great Depression and the labour movement in Canada, specifically through the effects of and various responses to the Great Depression (government intervention).