High School Essay Contest

DAVID DENHOFF – Glenlyon Norfolk School

Editor’s note: The editors wrote the contest essay question to fit the curriculum of Socials Studies 11, so that graduating students have an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned. No additional research was required of students, although this year’s winner has made excellent use of online resources. David Denhoff is in Grade 12 at Glenlyon Norfolk School in School District 61.

“Which of the following twentieth century events had the greatest impact upon Canadians and why: The Great Depression, World War Two, or the Cold War?”

The Great Depression had the greatest impact upon Canadians of any major historical event during the twentieth century. While the Second World War and the Cold War were by no means insignificant, they simply cannot compare in terms of scope and continued relevance. The Great Depression’s economic and political effects had a more forceful impact on more Canadians than either the Cold War or the Second World War.

The economic consequences of the Great Depression in Canada were apocalyptic. The Great Depression began in 1929, and by 1933 unemployment had reached 30 percent and Gross National Expenditure had fallen by 42 percent.¹ At the outset of the Great Depression, there were few social programs designed to assist the unemployed. In 1930 the new Conservative government created significant public works projects and dramatically expanded programs for the unemployed, such as

welfare. However, Gross National Expenditure fell during the 1929-1933 period, because Prime Minister Bennett attempted to avoid budget deficits by cutting many of the aforementioned programs shortly after their birth. After the western provinces experienced fiscal catastrophes, and unemployment figures began to balloon nationwide, Bennett launched his own version of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’ in 1935, with many of these programs included.\(^2\) One-fifth of all Canadians soon became dependent on some form of government aid or relief after the introduction of Bennett’s ‘New Deal’.\(^3\)

In the 1920s and 1930s, Canada was largely an agrarian and commodities-based economy. Given the global nature of the Great Depression, many of Canada’s key trading partners, such as the United States and Britain, were in dire economic straits of their own, and unable to sustain the previously high demand for Canadian goods. As demand fell, so too did the prices for staple commodities. According to Paul de Hevesy, the 1926-27 average annual price (in “gold Swiss Francs per quintal”) of Manitoban Wheat was 31.2. By the harvest of 1932-33, the price fell to 10.2.\(^4\) This sharp fall in price wreaked havoc in the agricultural sector.

As the Great Depression battered the Canadian economy, the political winds began to shift. In 1932, Canada’s first socialist party, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.) was formed. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) comments, “In the mist of the catastrophic times, labour and socialist groups as well as political activists gathered in a

\(^2\) Struthers, “Great Depression”.
\(^3\) Struthers, “Great Depression”.
Calgary legion hall on July 31, 1932 and formed the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation." The C.C.F. gathered steam quickly, and in the 1945 federal election the C.C.F. won 28 seats in the House of Commons with 15.55% of the vote. The C.C.F. never assumed the role of government at the federal level. CBC’s “Canada: A People’s History” argues, however, that in spite of its electoral shortfalls, the C.C.F. had a distinct impact upon the Canadian political landscape. They note that,

Although the Party never held power nationally, its policies were adopted and implemented by federal governments over the years. Those CCF initiatives include unemployment insurance, family allowance, Medicare and universal old age pensions.

These social policies, born out of a depression-era political party, have become hallmarks of the Canadian social safety net. They have benefited Canadians for decades, and continue to do so. In 1961 the C.C.F. transformed itself into a new political party, the New Democratic Party (NDP). The NDP became the federal opposition in 2011, and has propagated the legacy and ideals of the C.C.F. to the present day.

While the Great Depression shook the economic foundations of the nation and forged a lasting political tradition of social welfare, the Second World War had a myriad of grave,

---


7 “Co-operative Commonwealth Federation”. 
yet conflicting impacts. The Second World War was unmistakably tragic. Over 54,000 were wounded during the war and 45,000 would give the ultimate sacrifice. While the war had its tragedies on a human level, economically it was anything but tragic. Unemployment rates fell dramatically during the Second World War, in fact, “during and after the Second World War, unemployment rates dropped to 3% or less”. The war was a true human tragedy, but it helped to lift the country out of economic depression.

The Cold War had an immense impact on many nations. Events like the Cuban Missile Crisis certainly had undeniably pervasive consequences on both the Soviet Union and the United States. However the impact upon other nations was limited, certainly in Canada’s instance. Simply put, the Cold War did not have the same immediate or residual effect on Canada that the Great Depression did. The Cold War did not give birth to any political legacy as strong as the modern-day NDP. Furthermore, it did not have the tangible effect the Depression had on individuals’ and families’ daily lives.

The Great Depression caused significant trauma for Canadians during its course, and its residuum never fully dissipated, even to the present day. The profound economic destruction dealt by the Depression left a psychological scar on Canadians, which manifested itself in a new branch of thought in mainstream Canadian politics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


