R.B. Bennett reconsidered: A long-overdue “remarkable and head-turning portrait”


Review by Bob Plamondon

A sign of a good book, especially one that stretches to more than 500 pages, is that you don’t want it to end. John Boyko has achieved that distinction in a long-overdue book on R.B. Bennett.

The popular wisdom, to the extent such a quality exists, suggests that Bennett was a prig: an aristocratic and uncaring captain of industry who, whenever he left his posh suite at the Château Laurier in top hat and tails, spewed capitalist rhetoric at those who complained of such minor inconveniences as hunger or a lack of a roof over their heads during the Great Depression. If Bennett offered up a reformist stance late in his mandate, say his critics, it was a desperate and phony campaign to cling to office by mimicking FDR’s compassion and penchant for experimentation. In other words, Bennett made a deathbed conversion only when his ideological leanings left him in political ruin. Whatever the origin of the expression “Tory times are hard times,” many portray “Iron Heel Bennett” as its poster child.

Such sentiments about Bennett have endured for generations, in large part because the hundreds of tenured university professors of Canadian political history have not bothered to study Bennett in any great detail. But along comes John Boyko, dean of history and social sciences and director of Northcote Campus at Lakefield College, to give us a remarkable and head-turning portrait of a man who turns out to be one of the most important and influential prime ministers in Canadian history. Boyko shows Bennett to be a transformational prime minister who established many important national institutions that remain the cornerstone of Canadian life today. We are left to scratch our heads over why Professor John English claims, as he does in the foreword, that Bennett was not a great prime minister. Most readers of this Bennett biography will conclude otherwise.

Boyko avoids the cheap dime-store psychology that entraps many political biographers and delivers a compelling and comprehensive review of what R.B. Bennett did, what he said and what it has meant to Canada, then and now. With his book going to press during a period of economic peril and uncertainty, Boyko’s timing could not have been better.

That Bennett had a lifelong addiction to work is not much of a surprise. And there is nothing new on Bennett’s widely acknowledged business acumen. We see Bennett as a man of few foibles, other than an obsession with work and accomplishment, whose wealth was neither flaunted nor consumed for selfish satisfaction. For example, Bennett drove a car only once in his life and bought his first house only after leaving office. He did not take vacations or consume alcohol or tobacco.

When the promised economic turnaround was slow to materialize, Bennett’s political demise was easy to predict. The most intelligent, the hardest-working and the most able, Bennett became known as the leader of a one-man government, a dictator. The label, combined with his dour demeanour and an economy in ruins, made Bennett a doomed political figure.

What Boyko convincingly reveals is Bennett’s generosity and his instinct to side with the interests of the common man over the desires and inclinations of his wealthy friends. His compassion was genuine and broad,
but reserved. As a man of the Gospel, he was inclined to keep anonymous his acts of charity to make them sincere and heartfelt, rather than self-serving or to be used for political advantage. His instinct was to suppress his emotions, a trait that many would later characterize as uncaring and heartless. This conflict was evident during the First World War when he wrote to a friend, “The loss of these men leaves me absolutely heartbroken, in so far as it is possible for a man on my type and temperament to be heartbroken about anything.”

Boyko also reveals that Bennett’s views on government intervention in the economy were not a response to troubled economic times or to the prospect of political defeat, but were long-held. He was as comfortable in union halls as he was in boardrooms. When addressing striking labourers in 1902 he said, “So long as I live I will give my best efforts to any labour organization which endeavours to hold upright causes.”

R.B. Bennett never had much of a family life. His interest in women was limited; he preferred the company of his sister Mildred, who was 19 years his junior and who served as a regular travelling companion throughout his political career. Hints that Bennett suffered a medical condition that made intimacy uncomfortable are raised, as they are in other less detailed portraits of Bennett, but there is no evidence presented one way or the other on this account.

Plucked from New Brunswick at the age of 26 to become the law partner of Senator James Lougheed, future grandfather of an Alberta premier, Bennett would have thrived in any environment. Lougheed predicted great things for his protégé: “Bennett can solve any problem he puts his mind to...Some day Bennett will be called upon to solve the greatest problems in Canada. Some day Canada will turn to him to get the country out of its difficulties.”

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Bennett had a prodigious memory and the long-forgotten politician’s skill of being able to quote long passages from the classics without pause or error. A skilled debater, Bennett was loath to admit error and could always cleverly draw upon some fact or statistic to support his position.

Upon entering the House of Commons in 1911, Bennett cast himself in the mould of what today we would call a Red Tory: “In my judgment, in this complex civilization of ours, the greatest struggle of the future will be between human rights and property interests; and it is the duty and function of government to provide that there shall be no undue regard for the latter that limits or lessens the other.”

The theme of Bennett as Red Tory is one that Boyko returns to throughout his tome. One reviewer, an academic, was irked by the apparent contradiction between Red Toryism and the moniker given to Bennett in the book’s title as a “rebel.” The professorial review suggests Boyko’s book would not have passed muster as a doctoral dissertation because it did not prove the thesis that Bennett was a rebel. Thankfully the book is far more relevant, useful and enjoyable than most dissertations. It seems the academic community has yet to catch on that a book’s title is designed to attract interest and sales rather than meet the staid standards of peer review.

It was with Red Tory leanings that Bennett first spoke about bringing monetary policy under government control in 1913, some 30 years before he would be in a position to act upon his convictions: “The vital question is whether or not a few capitalists shall control the action of this Parliament... The Bank Act of 1913 is a Bank Act of twenty years ago without any change, without any single step forward or one motion towards progress and reform.” At the time such a notion was likely rebellious, at least insofar as the well-heeled banking community was concerned.

From his earliest days in politics Bennett preferred principle over populism. “Let us begin right...and not be deterred from our duty because the action which that duty lays upon us seems temporarily unpopular.” Tell that to Prime Minister Harper.

Bennett was certainly an able minister to Robert Borden, but his convictions and principles were simply irrepressible and he lacked the temperament to follow.

He was a man of ego, hardly a distinction among politicians, claiming he could not easily surrender to the views of others. This led to inevitable clashes with party leaders Robert Borden and Arthur Meighen. It was a foregone conclusion that Bennett would use his immense wealth and talent to lead the Liberal-Conservative Party. But the question remained whether he had the political skills to become prime minister. He had neither the charm nor the wit of Macdonald, but his intelligence and will to win were second to none.

Bennett used his organizational abilities to great advantage and became a key architect of the modern...
political machine. As a political strategist and overt partisan he readily and ruthlessly exploited Mackenzie King’s unwillingness to admit to the severity of the Depression or to do much about it. As the ravages of the Depression were taking hold, King’s fate was sealed after he famously declared he would not give even five cents to any provincial government led by a Tory.

Boyko ably takes us step by step through Bennett’s Depression-era administration to reveal how policy was developed and implemented. He shows how Bennett’s inclination to action and intervention was often thwarted by constitutional limitations. The country was in the throes of sorting out the limits on federal spending power, especially at it related to social and economic policy. Pierre Trudeau must have admired Bennett because of the way he stood up to the provinces in his attempts to implement unemployment insurance and in asserting federal control over broadcasting.

On becoming prime minister, Bennett burdened himself with high expectations, saying he would fix the economy and blast his way into foreign markets or perish in the attempt. When the promised economic turnaround was slow to materialize, Bennett’s political demise was easy to predict. The most intelligent, the hardest-working and the most able, Bennett became known as the leader of a one-man government, a dictator. The label, combined with his dour demeanour and an economy in ruins, made Bennett a doomed political figure.

Boyko makes frequent reference to the intersection of an able bureaucrat named Lester B. Pearson with R.B Bennett. The pair often travelled together to conferences, where Pearson got to know well his prime minister: “I got to know Bennett better than I had known Mr. King...He was also an easier man to get to know. He was more out-going, more straight forward...His storms were rough, but they were usually of short duration and often cleared the air.”

Like his American counterpart, Franklin Roosevelt, Bennett was an innovator and a man of action and intervention. His decision to seize government control of the airwaves and to establish and support a public broadcaster was a policy that has endured to this day. Boyko reveals that Bennett overruled his cabinet when, in his absence, it approved American programming on newly created radio stations. He was ahead of his time in advocating for the St. Lawrence Seaway and for free trade with the Americans. He stood up to the big banks and appropriated their gold to establish the Bank of Canada.

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One of Boyko’s reviewers was highly critical because of a few errors in the text. In my view these errors are few and inconsequential, and do not in any way diminish what is a powerful and complete portrait of Bennett. Such errors should be the subject of a note to the publisher or author for correction in a subsequent edition.

What is really of no consequence is that John Boyko is from Lakefield College rather than the University of Toronto; that he has a masters’ degree rather than a PhD.

Don’t let the academic or snobbish reviews mislead you: this is a magnificent book that deserves to be read by anyone who takes seriously contemporary politics or Canadian history. Boyko offers a favourable but fair-minded review of Bennett’s life, and an enjoyable book as well.

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Bob Plamondon FCPA, FCA, ICD.D is a consultant, independent board member and author. He has expertise in strategic planning, organizational transformation, performance and risk management, finance, public policy, communications and Canadian history. Bob currently serves on the board of OPTrust, a defined benefit pension plan that holds $20 billion in assets that funds and administers the pension plan for Ontario’s unionized public servants. He also sits on the advisory board of the Digital Academy of the Canada School of Public Service, which deals with issues around digital transformation, cy Bob Plamondon. Chartered Accountants Masters of Management Studies. Bob Plamondon is a consultant in the fields of performance management, transformation, and public finance. Subscribe. Please subscribe to access the full content.