

Name: Foster, Walter Edward (Hon.)

Riding: Saint John, City of Saint John, Riding of Victoria, County of

Party: Liberal

Date Elected: BY-EL 23 Apr. 1917 (By ACCL). GE 9 Oct. 1920.

Positions Held: Leader of the Liberal Party, 16 Feb. 1917 - 1 Feb. 1923. Premier of New Brunswick, 4 Apr. 1917 - 1 Feb. 1923. Appointed to the Senate of Canada, 6 Dec. 1928. Speaker of the Senate, Jan. 1936 - 16 May 1940.

Cabinet Shuffle:

Retired: Resigned from Legislature and as Premier, 1 Feb. 1923.

Defeated: GE 20 Jun. 1912. GE 24 Feb. 1917.

Died: Died at age 73 on 14 Nov. 1947 in Saint John, NB. Buried in Cedar Hill Cemetery, Saint John.

Notes: Born on 9 Apr. 1873 in St. Martins, NB. Of Irish descent. Foster began his career in business at the tender age of sixteen, working as a clerk with the Saint John branch of the Bank of New Brunswick. At 26 he joined Vassie and Company, a merchant firm dealing in general merchandise and dry goods. After marrying the boss' daughter, Foster was named Vice President and Managing Director of the firm. He rose rapidly in Saint John business circles, serving as Vice President of the Saint John Board of Trade in 1906-1907, and President of the board in 1908-1909. Throughout his career he was known for his calm level-headedness, an attribute that would work to his benefit when the federal Department of Labour appointed him Arbitrator and Chairman of the local Conciliatory Board. In this capacity he successfully settled labour disputes between Longshoremen of the Port of Saint John and the Shipping Federation in 1913, 1915 and other occasions.

In politics, Foster had been a lifelong Liberal Party supporter, having been a President of the Young Liberals Club in the past. Like most Liberal candidates, Foster was defeated at the polls in the Conservative landslide of 1912, but his prestige within the party grew. When the Liberal Party placed its leadership in the hands of a seven man committee in Jan. 1916, Foster acted as Chairman. Employing his businesslike calmness, cool personal confidence, and arbitration skills, Foster became the de facto leader of the party. To the electorate, however, the seven man committee system of leadership appeared awkward, and as the 1917 election loomed, the Conservatives made good capital of calling the Liberals leaderless. Although he had been initially resistant, only weeks before the election, Foster finally accepted formal leadership of the Liberal party.

He presented himself to the voters as a non-partisan businessman committed simply to the well-being of his 'native province' during the campaign. He laid stress upon the Conservative government's shifty record of political scandal and upper echelon corruption. Many noted that Foster possessed a "'wooden personality'" and was a less-than-exciting public speaker. Yet, despite being lead by an unseasoned politician, the Liberals swung to victory. For his part, Foster had challenged for a seat in prominent Conservative J.B.M. Baxter Sr's (q.v.) Saint John County stronghold, and had been defeated. When James Burgess (q.v.) resigned in Victoria County, Foster was uncontested in the by-election. Foster became the first to be elected Premier without ever having sat in the Legislature before.

Although he was well into his forties by his election, for his clean-shaven appearance and neatly-trimmed hair, Foster was referred to by the press as the 'Boy Premier.' During his administration, his political success continued to stem from his ameliorative characteristics. Foster was constantly over-shadowed by his more charismatic cabinet colleagues, who were responsible for his government's major initiatives. Dr. William F. Roberts (q.v.) became head of the first Department of Health in the world. P.J. Veniot (q.v.), his Minister of Public Works, was responsible for the establishment of the New Brunswick Electric Power Commission and the modernization of the highway system.

Adopting a 'Chairman of the Board' role, Foster sought more to balance a cabinet of aggressive colleagues rather than rule them. E.S. (Ned) Carter, his personal secretary and one of the most important back room figures in New

Brunswick political history, was not a "member" of government, but his attendance at cabinet meetings was as punctual as the Premier's. It was widely speculated that the tough political decisions of the Foster regime were made by Carter and Veniot.

Nevertheless, Foster enjoyed a strong reputation among his constituents. He kept long hours in his constituency office, addressing the needs, problems, grievances of his electorate. Welcoming men, women, bankers or labourers of all political stripes, Foster's office was open to all who needed government remedies. By cobbling together the support of a number of Independents and some United Farmers, Foster was able to achieve a strong second Liberal mandate in 1920.

Facing serious reversals in his private business, Foster resigned from provincial politics in order to attend to his investments and salvage his personal fortune. Following his resignation he received appointment to the St. Lawrence Great Lakes Waterway Advisory Board, of which he later became Chairman.

He did not remain outside politics for long. In Sept. 1925 he was appointed to Prime Minister Mackenzie King's Privy Council as Secretary of State for Canada. When he stood for federal election, however, he was defeated on 29 Oct. 1925 and 14 Sept. 1926. As a result of his failure to secure a House of Commons seat he was forced to resign from the Privy Council in Nov. 1925.

Foster was appointed to the Senate of Canada by King in 1928. From 11 Jan. 1936 to 8 May 1940, he served as Speaker of the Senate. By this time, his son Walter William Vassie Foster (q.v.) had a political career of his own as an MLA in New Brunswick. Upon his death in 1947, the elder Foster was remembered by his fellow Senators for his charm, integrity and good judgement. It is perhaps further evidence that while earning the staunch respect of his colleagues throughout his career, Foster never seemed to possess the skills to convince voters to agree with the assessment of his peers.

For more information see also: "The Premiers of New Brunswick" (971.5 D754 NB Coll.); "A Brief History of the Liberal Party of New Brunswick" (329.9715 H868 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.

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