

**Name:** McNair, John Babbitt (Hon.)

**Riding:** York, County of Victoria, County of

**Party:** Liberal

**Date Elected:** GE 27 Jun. 1935. BY-EL 29 Jan. 1940. GE 28 Aug. 1944. GE 28 Jun. 1948.

**Positions Held:** Appointed Attorney General, 16 Jul. 1935 - 8 Oct. 1952. Premier, 13 Mar. 1940 - 8 Oct. 1952. Leader of the Liberal Party, 13 Mar. 1940 - 10 Nov. 1952. Appointed Judge of the Supreme Court of New Brunswick, Appeal Division, 28 Jul. 1955. Appointed Chief Justice of the Appeal Division, 28 Sept. 1955 - 20 Nov. 1964. Sworn in as Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick, 9 Jun. 1965-31 Jan. 1968.

**Cabinet Shuffle:**

**Retired:** Retired from politics following electoral defeat in Sept. 1952. Retired from the Supreme Court due to age in Nov. 1964. Retired as Lieutenant Governor due to ill-health in Jan. 1968.

**Defeated:** GE 20 Nov. 1939. GE 22 Sept. 1952.

**Died:** Died at age 78 on 14 Jun. 1968, at his residence in Fredericton, NB. Buried in the Wilmot section of the Fredericton Rural Cemetery, Fredericton, NB.

**Notes:** Born on 20 Nov. 1889, in Andover, Victoria County, NB. A son of James McNair and Francis Anne Lewis, John Babbitt McNair childhood was one of relative privilege. As a youth he attended Andover Grammar School and Florenceville Consolidated School before enrolling at the University of New Brunswick in 1907. He distinguished himself as a scholar before graduating with his B.A. in 1911, receiving numerous awards including the Lieutenant-Governors Award and served as his class valedictorian. He was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to attend Oxford University, where he further distinguished himself by earning first-class honours, and received a B.A. in 1913 and a B.C.L. in 1914.

Following the outbreak of the First World War, McNair enlisted with the Armed Forces and served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France and Germany. By the war's close he had attained the rank of Lieutenant. Following the outbreak of the Second World War, McNair volunteered once again and served as a Captain in the Royal Canadian Artillery Reserves.

Following his return to New Brunswick in 1919, McNair was admitted to the bar and entered into a law partnership with J.J.F. Winslow at Fredericton. Over the next 15 years he became a leading member of several fraternal, religious and other community organizations. He also became a barrister and solicitor of some note, eventually being appointed a King's Counsel on 16 Jul. 1935.

With an eye for fine detail, McNair had a reputation as an impeccable dresser. According to Arthur Doyle, even on the hottest July afternoons he would wear "a three-piece black wool suit with a white starched shirt and a black tie, without a bead of perspiration." Although quite bald, what hair McNair did have was rarely out of place. In mannerisms, McNair "was the sort of man who kept people at arm's length simply by being himself – dignified." Only his closest friends called him 'John', and it was these few who saw through these stuffy and shy appearances and knew McNair was a jovial companion who placed great value on friendships.

It was during this period that McNair became involved in public affairs. At the Oct. 1932 Liberal Party Convention, McNair ran for the leadership, but lost by a large majority to the longtime Leader of the Opposition, A. Alison Dysart (q.v.). As consolation, the rising Liberal star was offered the Presidency of the New Brunswick Liberal Association. He accepted the position, which he held until 1940, and became a powerful player in the party's backrooms. During the election campaign of Jun. 1935, McNair was instrumental in Dysart's successful election to the premier's office. When, during this campaign, a pamphlet allegedly published by the Ku Klux Klan attacked Dysart's Catholicism, McNair battered Premier L.P.D. Tilley for not taking a strong enough stance condemning the pamphlet. At the same election, the 46 year-old McNair was elected to the Legislative Assembly as a representative for York County.

McNair was appointed Attorney General in Premier Dysart's cabinet on July 16th 1935. He would remain Attorney until his retirement from politics seventeen years later. Although the pair were not intimate friends, a deep, mutual respect ensured that McNair was among the premier's closest advisers, along with F.W. Pirie (q.v.) and Stafford Anderson (q.v.). In the opinion of political scientist Calvin Woodward, this handful of top-tier Liberals formed "an inner-cabinet clique" who exercised "oligarchic control over the party in league with some influential interest group leaders in the province." Veiled comments such as these would cast McNair's longtime, close personal friendships with K.C. Irving and Lord Beaverbrook in an unflattering light. This notion was furthered by his daughter's marriage to Harrison McCain.

Widely regarded as the most able member of Dysart's government, McNair's scholarly education translated well into the roughshod world of politics. In the Legislative Chambers, the new cabinet minister distinguished himself as a gifted speaker. According to R.A. Tweedie, his secretary, "in content, style and literary worth [McNair's speeches] stand alone. They have never been equalled in the long history of the Legislature." McNair composed all his own speeches, throughout his political career. Before an important debate or rally, he could be seen – either at his Fredericton home on Waterloo Row, or at his cabin at Gordon Vale – writing his speech by hand. Meticulously editing his rough drafts, and typing and retyping his speeches until they matched his exacting standards, it is little wonder that, over the course of his career, many dozens of his speeches were published as essays in "Maritime Advocate".

Dysart frequently suffered from ill health and during his many absences from the Legislature McNair served as Acting Premier. Although he was defeated in York County at the general election of 20 Nov. 1939, J.W. Niles (q.v.) resigned and McNair won the ensuing by-election in Victorian County on 20 Jan. 1940. Shortly afterwards Dysart retired from political life, and on 13 Mar. 1940 McNair was sworn in as premier.

Certainly New Brunswick's most intellectually gifted premier, McNair was also a shrewd politician in the legislature and on the hustings. On observing the premier's treatment of the ineffectual Opposition, Dalton Camp said: "McNair treated them very much as though they were not there, save only on occasions when he would wind up a debate, cowing them into silence with the precision of his debating skill and the cutting edge of his wit. Today, it would be considered overkill." One such occasion was at the opening of the 1940 legislative session, when the new Leader of the Opposition, Hugh MacKay (q.v.) made some rather maladroit criticisms of the government in his maiden speech in the house. McNair responded by lecturing and lambasting MacKay in a verbal counter-attack. Even Tweedie conceded that "the only possible criticism that might be levelled at McNair's oratorical forays is that he sometimes continued to fire bullets into carcass already comatose, if not dead." McNair's character, however, was necessary for the roughhouse world of New Brunswick politics of the day, and as Tweedie adds, he was "astute enough to know when to attack and when to massage." Even Hugh John Flemming (q.v.) who would later lead the Opposition noted that McNair ""used to rip the hide off us almost every other day. And then he'd turn around and do us a favor the next day.""

After becoming premier, McNair retained his position as Attorney General and, with a reputation as a hands-on administrator, he also briefly added the portfolios of Labour, Health and Labour, and Lands and Mines to his responsibilities. Governing the province during the war years and through harsh economic times, McNair is credited with introducing a succession of budgetary surpluses, undertaking a massive rural electrification program, improving education in rural areas, expanding the role of the civil service, centralizing the provincial government offices and New Brunswick Electric Power Commission in Fredericton. Following the war, he introduced a variety of social benefit programs, began the modernization of the highway system, and created a Department of Industry and Reconstruction to ensure a smooth economic and social transition for the province from wartime to peacetime.

He was also instrumental in modernizing electoral politics during the Aug. 1944 general election. Upon the advice of Tweedie and C.H. Blakeny (q.v.), McNair hired the Walsh Advertising Company of Toronto. It marked the first time in Canadian politics that "an advertising agency was used fallout to sell a leader, a Government and a party." In an almost flawless campaign, MacKay was branded as a stonehearted millionaire dead-set on dismantling all social services. Following this tremendously successful campaign, the Liberals won all but five seats in the Legislature. After a similar election campaign directed by the Walsh Company in Jun. 1948, McNair's Liberals were returned to office with all but five seats. Under McNair's leadership, in Doyle's words, the Liberal Party "acquired the image of a well-oiled, sometimes ruthless, political machine, while John McNair built his own reputation of competence and integrity." The lopsided majority, however, meant the Conservatives in Opposition

were constantly scurrying from meeting to meeting at a frantic pace. As Flemming would later explain, when they needed a break, the Conservatives would use McNair elocution against him. The Opposition ""just raised an objection that something the government was doing was 'unconstitutional'. This never failed to set [McNair] off for hours on a long speech, thus relieving the pressure on the Conservatives.""

In 1952, McNair's characteristic style, wit and eloquence seemed to abandon him. His election campaign that year paled in comparison to the professional, slick public relations campaign carried out by the Progressive Conservatives. Leading up to the election, McNair's inability to resolve a New Brunswick Electric Power Commission employees strike had hurt his reputation as a friend of the working man, and swung votes to the young and dynamic leader of the Conservatives, Hugh John Flemming. On election day, the Liberals and McNair personally were defeated.

McNair then returned to his Fredericton law practice. In Jul. 1955 he was appointed a Justice of the Appeals Division of the Supreme Court of New Brunswick. In Oct. 1955 he was appointed Chief Justice. He retired from the bench in 1964 on account of age. During his career after politics, McNair was also a member of the Senate for the University of New Brunswick, Chairman of the Selection Committee for the Awarding of the Beaverbrook Scholarships, and a member of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery Board.

In Jun. 1965, at age 76, McNair was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick. He held this position until 31 Jan. 1968 when illness forced him to resign. He died six months later on 14 Jun. 1968.

McNair married Mary MacGregor Crocket on 17 May 1921, and they had three daughters and one son. Not long after McNair assumed the premiership, his wife's health deteriorated in an alarming fashion and she spent much of her time in hospitals. Therefore, in addition to assuming the responsibility for the affairs of the province, McNair also shouldered the heavy responsibility of raising four children. Following the death of his first wife in 1961, McNair married Margaret Jones on 27 Apr. 1963.

Among the many awards the Hon. John B. McNair received in his life were an honorary L.L.D. from the University of New Brunswick in 1938 and an honorary D.C.L. from Mount Allison University in 1951. He was designated a Companion of the Order of Canada on 6 Jul. 1967, but the award had to be presented posthumously as the scheduled ceremony did not take place until 23 Sept. 1968.

Reminiscing in his memoirs, R.A. Tweedie summed up McNair with these words: "[H]e had his faults and weaknesses, but in balance he was a great man – in my judgment the ablest Premier New Brunswick ever had." Even despite his political differences with McNair, Dalton Camp highly respected his former political mentor. In a 1999 newspaper article Camp wrote: "The more I have seen of those who followed him, the more I see Mr. McNair as an original and altogether remarkable public man."

For more information see also: Dalton Camp, ""Gentlemen, Players and Politicians"" (329.971 C186 NB Coll.); Arthur Doyle, ""The Premiers of New Brunswick"" (971.5 D754 NB Coll.); Don Hoyt, ""A Brief History of the Liberal Party of New Brunswick"" (329.9715 H868 NB Coll.); R.A. Tweedie, ""On With The Dance: A New Brunswick Memoir"" (971.503 T971 NB Coll.); Calvin Woodward, ""The History of New Brunswick Provincial Election Campaigns and Platforms 1866-1974""; Dalton Camp, ""A remarkable public man"", Telegraph Journal (Oct. 26 1999); the New Brunswick Pamphlet Collection; and various issues of ""Maritime East"" magazine, in the 1930s and 1940s.

*Last Modified: 2005-06-03*