

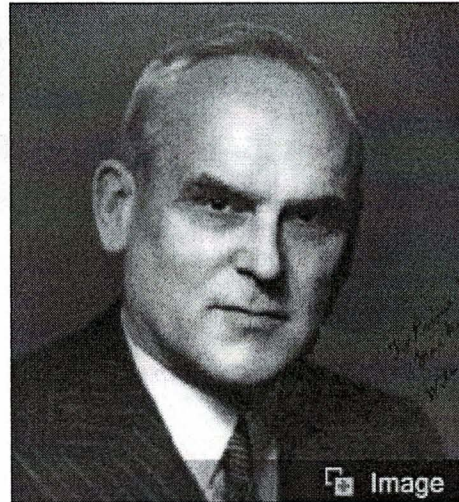
C.D. Howe

Clarence Decatur Howe, born in Waltham, Massachusetts, on January 14th, 1886; died in Montreal, on December 31st, 1960. Engineer and politician.

Nicknamed "the Minister of Everything", he was described as a "fascist, but a nice Fascist", and accused of having set himself up as a virtual dictator. All agreed, however, that Howe was the man that got things done. As minister responsible for transportation, munitions and supplies, he gave Canadians the means that were urgently needed to support the war effort.

C.D. Howe was born in Waltham, in New England. His father was in the construction business, and the family was affluent enough to allow young C.D. Howe to receive a university education. He studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston between 1903 and 1907 and graduated as an engineer.

In 1908 he took up a teaching position in civil engineering at Dalhousie University in Halifax. He was already convinced that any problem could be solved through common sense and hard work. On that basis, and despite the fact that he had no practical experience in that area, he left for the Canadian West in 1913 to supervise the construction of grain elevators for the Canadian Board of Grain Commissioners.



Photograph of C.D. Howe inscribed to Prime Minister King.

National Archives of Canada, C-020113.

In 1916, Howe created his own engineering firm in Port Arthur, Ontario, with a specialty in grain elevators: the C.D. Howe Company Ltd. was to be immensely successful in the 1920s building elevators and bridges in Vancouver, Saskatoon, Churchill, Port Arthur, Toronto and Prescott, and as far as Buenos Aires in Argentina. In the 1930s though, the Depression forced the company to drastically reduce its activities.

While Canada was in the grip of the great economic depression, the Liberal Party of W.L. Mackenzie King asked C.D. Howe to run in the 1935 federal elections. In September, he was elected as Liberal MP for Port Arthur and chosen by Prime Minister King for the double portfolio of Shipping and Railways, to be fused in 1936 in a single department, that of Transportation.

Applying his pragmatic outlook and keen business sense to political issues, Howe launched a reorganization of the Canadian harbour system and a restructuring of the Canadian National Railway to help them regain profitability; he also ensured state control over the airwaves by creating the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC - Société Radio-Canada).

On June 30th, 1937, Howe flew from Montreal to Vancouver on a Lockheed 14H of the Department of Transportation. The 17-hour and 34-minute flight was the first transcontinental connection in Canadian history and the first flight of a new Crown corporation, Trans-Canada Airlines, which would become much later Air Canada.

In 1939, the Department of Transportation was feverishly preparing for the upcoming war. On April 9th, 1940, the Department of Munitions and Supplies was created, with C.D. Howe at the helm. The engineer turned politician was facing a major challenge: to lead the Canadian population and industry through the production changes required by the war effort.

Through the War Measures Act, the Department of Munitions and Supplies enjoyed far-reaching

powers, controlling markets, the allotment of natural resources, production volumes, and the use of specialized manpower. To run this gigantic war production machine, Howe relied on the patriotism of Canada's leading businessmen, asking them to provide their services to the Department of Munitions and Supplies for the duration of the war without compensation. He also surrounded himself with an outstanding management team, which included men such as E.P. Taylor and W.C. Woodward.



Miss Edna Poirier presenting the Honourable C.D. Howe with the 100,000,000th 25-pounder shell produced in Canada. The ceremony took place at the Defence Industries Limited facility in Cherrier, Quebec, September 1944.

Photograph by Jack Long. National Film Board / National Archives of Canada, PA-112908.

Howe himself was not immune from the perils of the war. In December 1940, as he was sailing to Great Britain aboard the *Western Prince*, his ship was torpedoed by a U-boat; Howe spent eight exhausting hours aboard a lifeboat on the icy sea. The possibility of death by exposure or by drowning, or by enemy fire from the submarine that surfaced near his boat, could not abate Howe's determination. Having been rescued by a merchant ship, he resumed his journey to London without any delay and according to plans.

On October 13th, 1944, C.D. Howe was put in charge of a new portfolio, that of Reconstruction. His task was to reorganize Canadian industry back into the free enterprise mode, to ensure employment for demobilized soldiers and, in general, to maintain the wartime level of activity into the upcoming peace era. Industry had to be freed from government control measures and guided through a shift to the production of consumer goods for the welfare of the whole population.

As peace returned, Howe was appointed Minister of Trade and Commerce; he was to keep that portfolio in the government of Louis Saint-Laurent who replaced King as Prime Minister in 1948. He was in charge of armament production programmes during the Korean War and in the earlier stages of the Cold War.

In 1956, a scandal erupted over the financing of a trans-canadian natural gas pipeline and Howe was in the eye of the storm. His intractable attitude and abrupt manners, which could be tolerated from the former "Minister of Everything" in times of emergency, were no longer deemed acceptable in a democratic, parliamentary regime. At the 1957 federal elections, the Liberal government was defeated and Howe lost his seat. After 22 years of uninterrupted good and faithful service, Howe, now 70-year old, retired from political life.

"Since the beginning of the war, it has not been my practice to take part in the debates of the House, apart from giving certain information about my department which seemed to be required in order to allow of decisions being reached. I have been entrusted with the task of mobilizing the activities of industry for war production, and I have concentrated all my time and thought on that particular problem."

C.D. Howe, June 16th, 1942

Suggested Reading:

- R. Bothwell et W. Kilbourn, *C.D. Howe: A Biography*, 1979.
- John D. Harbron, *C.D. Howe*, 1980.

Links:

See "Clarence Decatur Howe, Transforming Canada into a Modern Industrial Nation (1886-1960)" on the site of *Canada's Digital Collections*

Next: Major-General R.F.L. Keller ►