

POLITICAL CARTOONS OF CANADIAN PRIME MINISTERS THROUGH THE AGES

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The beginnings of Canada as a nation coincide quite closely with the emergence in this country of political cartooning as a professional activity. The first Canadian journal to publish political cartoons on a regular basis was *Punch in Canada*, founded in 1849. It was soon followed by a whole slew of illustrated political and literary journals, both in English and in French, in which politically themed cartoons and caricatures featured prominently. The foundations had been laid for what would become a rich tradition of Canadian political cartooning.

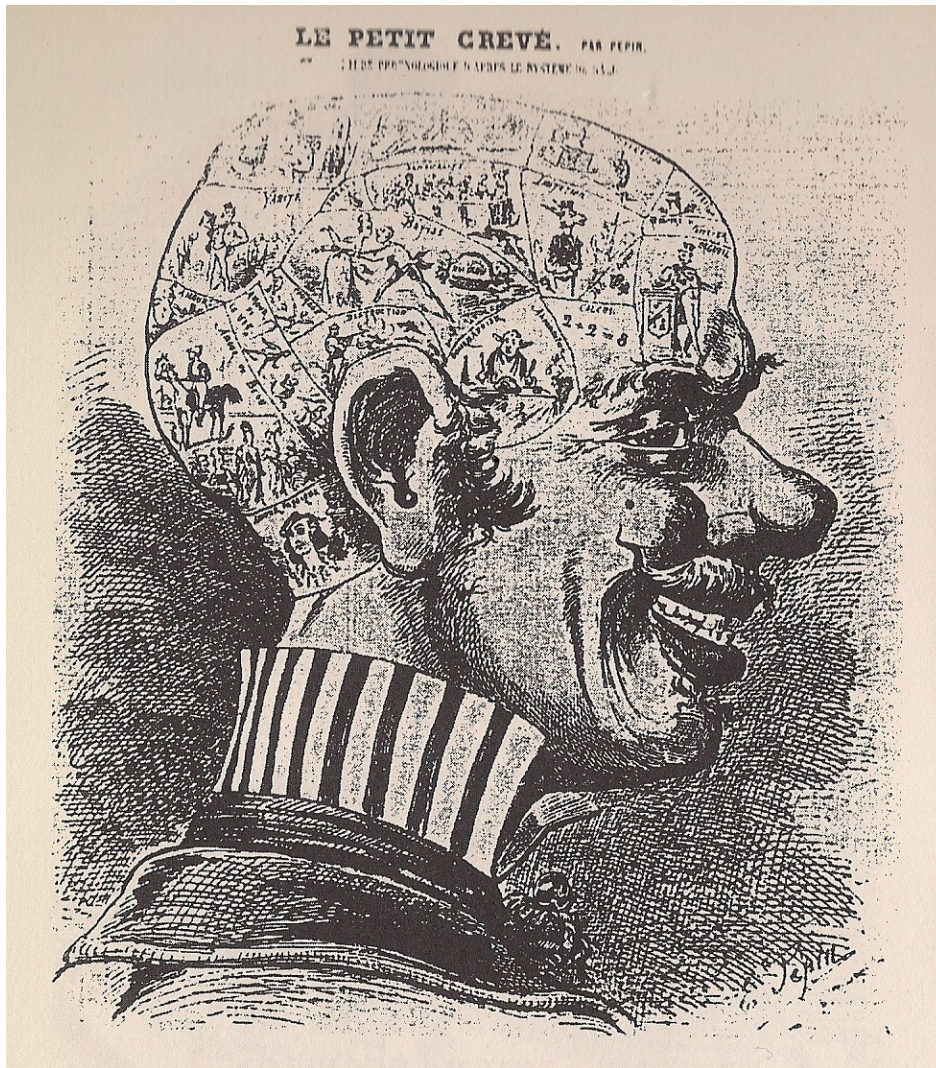
The parliamentary nature of the Canadian political system and the strong influence of regional politics on federal affairs have meant that, during any given era in our country's history, the Canadian political scene has presented a wide array of human targets for the cartoonist's pen. Not surprisingly, however, sitting Prime Ministers have constituted the primary focus of political caricature, and in some sense have even tended to provide the yardstick by which a cartoonist's satirical abilities are measured. Naturally, there have historically been Prime Ministers whose personality and physical appearance have lent themselves more or less readily to caricature, and it may even be possible to trace alternations between periods of great brilliance in political cartooning and other seemingly less inspired eras to corresponding variations in the satirical potential of our national leaders.

John Bengough (1851-1923).

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The first major figure in the history of Canadian political cartooning was John Bengough (1851-1923), the founder and sole illustrator of the extremely popular satirical magazine *Grip*, which, in its heyday, may have had a circulation of close to 50,000 readers.¹ *Grip*'s publication period (1873-1894) coincides fairly neatly with the career of John A. Macdonald (1815-1891) as this country's first Prime Minister. Bengough was a lifelong supporter of the progressive Liberal Party, and a fervent critic of Macdonald (1815-1891), of whom he was the unequalled caricaturist. The fact that there was no comparably skilled Tory-sympathizing cartoonist during this time has led to a rather one-sided retrospective view of the politics of the period, although, from another perspective, Bengough's caricatures of Macdonald can be seen as balancing out the many idealizing official images of our first Prime Minister as a Washington-like father-of-the-nation that we are all familiar with from paintings and statues, not to mention the ten-dollar bill.²

In this instance, Bengough uses the phrenology chart as a means of setting up a multi-faceted skewering of the Prime Minister's character. Like many satirical illustrations of the time, it was meant to work at two levels: there is an obvious visual joke intended to provoke an immediate chuckle, and a whole series of humorous details that the nineteenth-century reader, with his generally far greater attention span when compared to his modern-day counterpart, would have then taken the time to peruse at his leisure.



Pepin, *Le Petit Crevé*, 1871.

<http://m.renneville.free.fr/?p=450>

Bengough often took his inspiration for his illustrations from the works of other cartoonists. In this case he was likely referring to this image by the French artist Pepin (pseudonym of Edouard Gillaumin, dates unknown).³



I Would Na Strike Ye When Ye're Down, But I'll Just Cap Ye Over With Your Big Sins.

G. Gascard.

Canadian Illustrated News, February 7, 1874.

Photolithograph, 23 x 25.7 cm.

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 2894515.

<http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2894515>.

John A. Macdonald did not reign uninterruptedly as Prime Minister from Confederation until his death in 1891. For a period of six years between 1873 and 1879, he was Leader of the Opposition during Canada's first Liberal government under Alexander Mackenzie. The "big sins" that Mackenzie is referring as he covers Macdonald over with a funnel are primarily those relating to the Canadian Pacific Railway corruption scandal, which had led to the demise of the first Conservative government. Mackenzie (1822-1892) was born and raised in Scotland, and often appears in cartoons from this era in a Scottish highland bonnet or in plaid clothing symbolizing his country of origin. Depicted as Hercules in this cartoon by G. Gascard (active c. 1873-1874), who was likely inspired by a series of sketches of Canadian politicians in the guise of ancient Greek and Roman heroes produced by Edward Jump (c.1831-1883) in the early 1870s, the Liberal Prime Minister's Scottish origins are nonetheless referenced in the spelling of the speech caption, which is meant to recall a thick Scottish brogue. The *Canadian Illustrated News* was published in Montreal between 1869 and 1883.



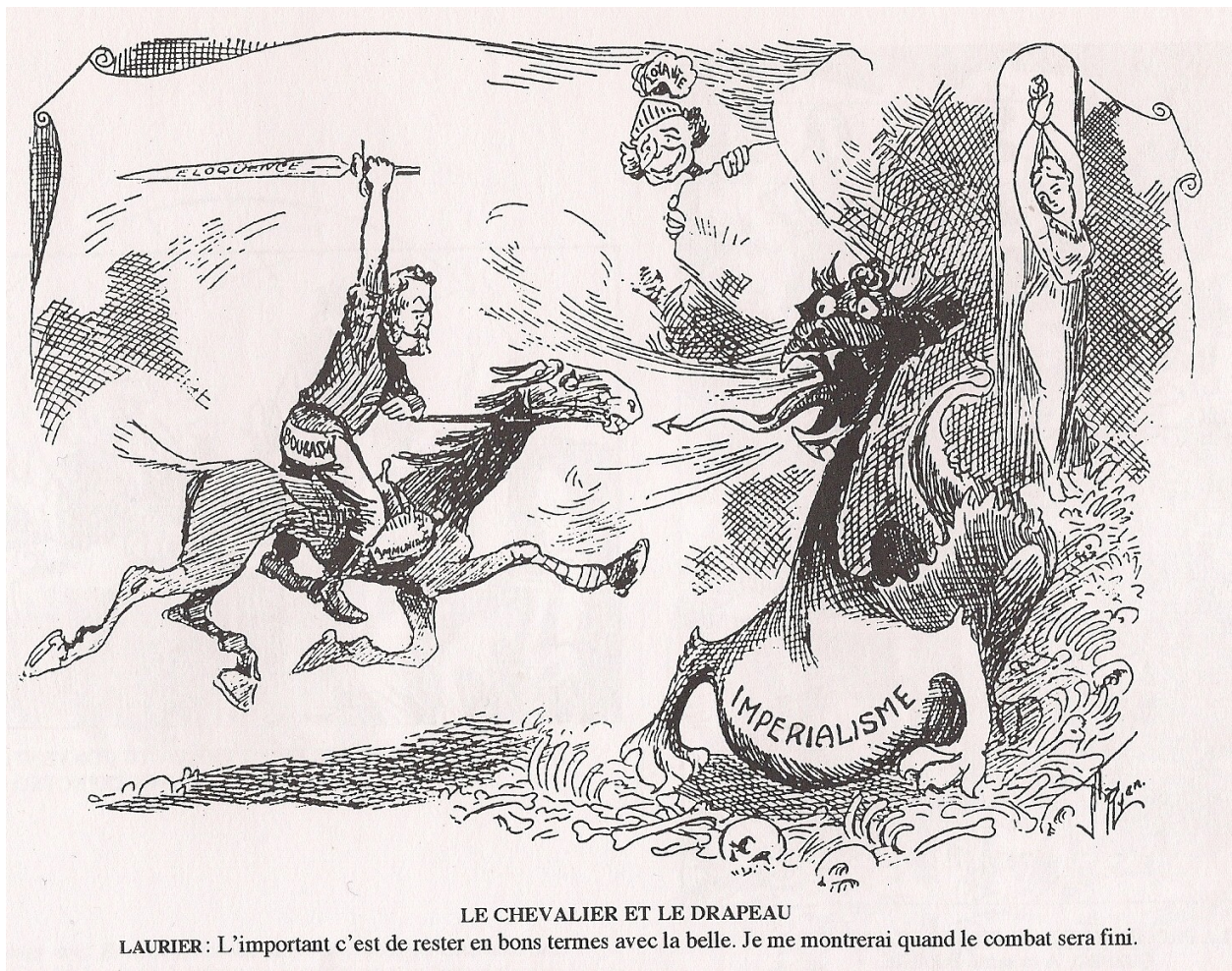
The Darwinian Theory Exemplified.

James G. Mackay.

Canadian Illustrated News, August 1875.

http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/cin/001065-119.01-e.php?&nl_id_nbr=662&&PHPSESSID=qepjmot1uqp653bd5ohqjvd4u6

Cartoonists of the era often played on the oppositeness in character between Mackenzie and Macdonald, one perceived as straight-laced and dour, the other as crafty and unscrupulous. Here, the contrast between them is cast in evolutionary terms, with Mackenzie descending from the Scottish terrier, and Macdonald from one of the animals the terrier has been bred to hunt, the sly and wily fox. James G. Mackay (1847-1885), a native of Hamilton, Ontario, contributed many drawings to the *Canadian Illustrated News* in the 1870s and 1880s.



Le chevalier et le drapeau, Le Canard, 1901.

Alonzo Ryan (1868-?).

<http://archive.org/details/caricaturepoliti00ryan>

Like Pierre Trudeau nearly a century after him, Sir Wilfrid Laurier (1841-1919) was a charismatic individual known for his elegance and urbanity, a French-Canadian Prime Minister who sought to reconcile the nationalist interests of French and English speaking Canadians. His principal identifying characteristics in political caricature appear to have been his full, upturned lips, his long neck, for the most part enveloped in a high collar, and especially his two abundant shocks of white hair projecting sideways from his otherwise bald head. In this drawing by the Quebec caricaturist Alonzo Ryan (b. circa 1868) we see the Prime Minister looking on with covert approval as Henri Bourassa (1868-1952), the influential French-Canadian nationalist, charges to the rescue of the damsel Canada from the clutches of the dragon of British imperialism. Laurier was personally opposed to Canada's participation in the Boer War, but was anxious not to appear lacking in loyalty to the British Empire—thus the inscription on the feathers above his knight's helmet.



William of Orange as St. George 1577.

Marcus Gheeraerts The Elder (c.1520-c.1590).

Print Room, Amsterdam.

The image of the knight rescuing the damsel in distress from the dragon, ultimately derived from the Christian legend of St. George, has a long history in political cartoons, as we can see in this Dutch engraving from 1577, in which the knight represents William of Orange, the damsel Belgium, and the dragon Spanish tyranny. Time-honoured iconographical scenes such as these have the advantage of presenting the viewer with an immediately recognizable storyline and moral interpretation.⁴



Macpherson/Toronto/Star/1958

“Let them eat cake.”

“Let Them Eat Cake,” The Toronto Star, 1958.

Duncan MacPherson (1924-1993).

http://www.prime-ministers.ca/diefenbaker/bio_5.php?context=b

Around the turn of the twentieth, owing to technological advances that greatly facilitated image reproduction, the daily newspaper replaced the illustrated magazine as the most important vehicle for the dissemination of political caricatures.⁵ This cartoon was created only a few months after the arrival of Duncan MacPherson at *The Toronto Star*, and was immediately recognized as a classic. The reference is to the decision by Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker (1895-1979) to eliminate Canada's Avro Arrow military jet program in favour of buying US-built aircraft. Interestingly, MacPherson apparently agreed with Diefenbaker's decision in this instance, but took issue with the offhand manner with which the Prime Minister had expressed it: "even though he was correct, his attitude was wrong. If a man is correct but his attitude is wrong, pick on his attitude."⁶ Diefenbaker went on to become the favourite target of MacPherson's caricatures, in which he developed ever more prominent buckteeth and crazed-looking eyes.



“Now for my next act” The Toronto Star, 1965. Duncan Macpherson (1924-1993).

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=180640&back_url=%28%29&&back_url=%28%29

Of Diefenbaker’s successor, the Liberal Lester B. Pearson (1897-1972), MacPherson lamented that, “he doesn’t have a good face. No excesses that a cartoonist can take apart.”⁷ In this he echoes the complaint voiced by John Bengough, another cartoonist who came to be strongly associated with his caricatures of a particular Conservative Prime Minister, in the cartoon below concerning John A. MacDonald’s successor, John Abbott (1821-1893).



The New Sir John.

Fine man, but hasn't so good a face as the old
Sir John.

John Bengough (1851-1923), *The New Sir John*, Grip, 1891.

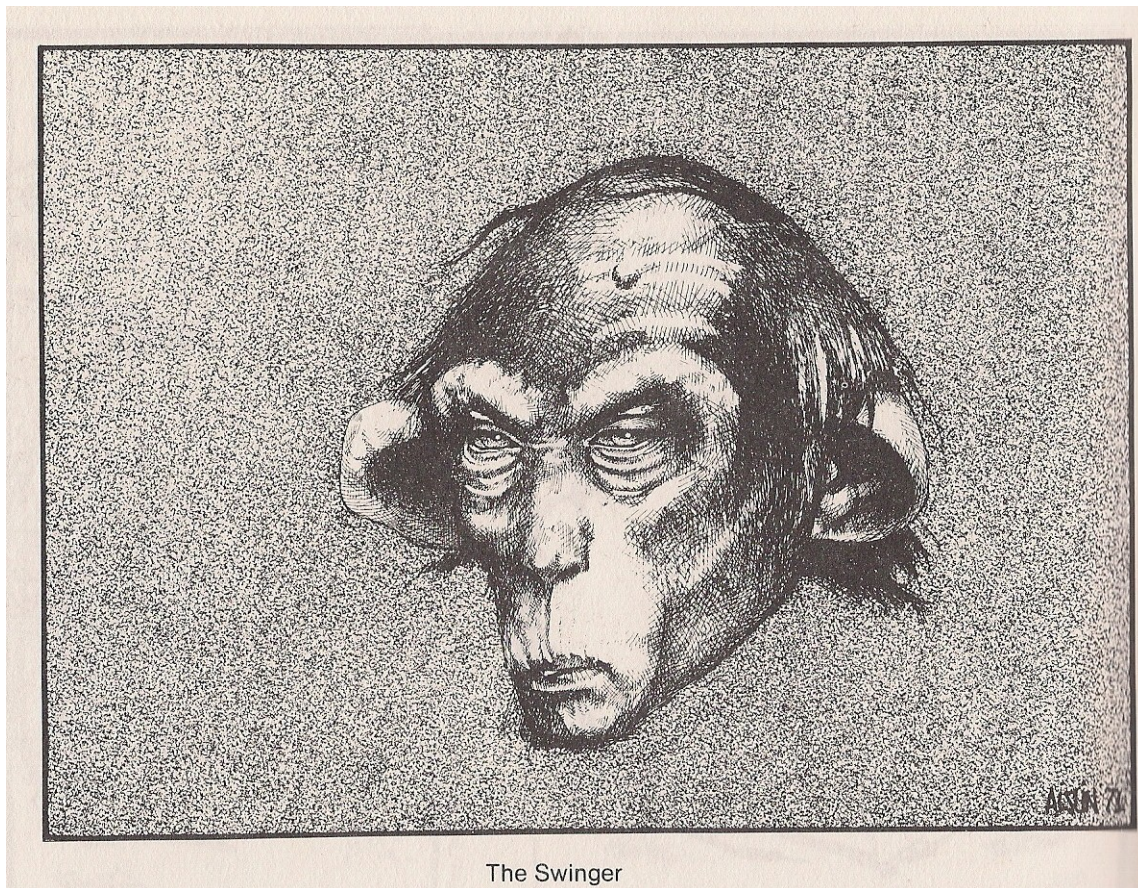
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Honoré Daumier (1808-1879), *Mlle Etienne-Joconde-Cunnégonde-Bécassine de Constitutionnel...*, 1834.

<https://bir.brandeis.edu/handle/10192/4724>

More so than most Canadian cartoonists of his time, Duncan MacPherson was keenly aware of the history of political caricature as an art form, and was inspired by some of its early master's such as Thomas Rowlandson and James Gillray.⁸ In depicting Diefenbaker as Marie-Antoinette, he may well have had in mind this caricature by Honoré Daumier depicting Charles Etienne, editor of the conservative paper *Le Constitutionnel*, as a stuffy *Ancien Régime* grande dame.



The Swinger

The Swinger, The last Post, 1971.

Aislin (Terry Mosher) (1942-).

http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/webclient/StreamGate?folder_id=0&dvs=1354218538

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Pierre Trudeau (1919-2000) was most often caricatured as a strutting, cocksure dandy, but in this drawing, Aislin (pseudonym of the Montreal cartoonist Terry Mosher, b. 1942) takes a very different approach, and seems to betray a deep-seated animosity. The art of caricature may well have taken some of its initial inspiration from the pseudo-scientific principles of physiognomy, of which one tenet was the existence of a correlation between a human resemblance with certain animals and specific character traits.⁹ Aislin's cartoon proves that such visual comparisons continued to provide a useful tool for caricaturists in the twentieth century. By depicting the Prime Minister in the guise of a chimpanzee, often viewed as mankind's direct evolutionary inferior, he seems to be ascribing to him a base, animalistic nature, an association which is reinforced by the play on words, which may reference a perceived contrast between Trudeau's strong defence of civil liberties and his invocation of the War Measures Act during the October crisis of 1970. This decidedly unflattering portrait first appeared in the Montreal political publication *The Last Post*, which was strongly critical of Trudeau's handling of this affair.



Giambattista Della Porta (c. 1535-1615), *Physiognomic Comparison*. From *De humana Physiognomia*, 1586.

http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/historicalanatomies/porta_home.html

Giambattista Della Porta was a Neapolitan polymath and playwright. His treatise on physiognomy influenced the Swiss pastor Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801), who popularized the pseudoscience of physiognomy in the late eighteenth century.

NOTES

¹ Library and Archives Canada, *John Bengough* <<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/confederation/023001-6000-e.html>>.

² Carman Cumming, *Sketches from a Young Country: The Images of Grip Magazine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) 23.

³ Cumming, 14.

⁴ E. H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse, and Other Theories on the History of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1963) 133.

⁵ Edward J. Lordan, *Politics Ink: How America's Cartoonists Skewer Politicians, From King George III to George Dubya* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) 30.

⁶ Peter Desbarats and Terry Mosher, *The Hecklers: A History of Canadian Political Cartooning and a Cartoonist's History of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979) 149.

⁷ Desbarats and Mosher, 152.

⁸ Desbarats and Mosher, 147.

⁹ Gombrich, 134.

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Political Cartoons of Canadian Prime Ministers Through the Ages Lesson Plan

Background Information for Teachers: Cartoon caricature has played an important role in Canadian political discourse since the country's inception. In any given era, the Prime Minister has naturally constituted the primary target for the cartoonist's pen. Although the drawing styles and senses of humour on display in these cartoons has varied greatly throughout the century and a half since Confederation, the basic principles of visual caricature—the exaggeration of prominent physical features and the codification of emblematic visual signifiers—has not. This lesson will provide both an introduction to the history of caricature in this country and an opportunity for students to try their hand at creating political caricatures themselves.

Target Grade Level: 7-11 in Canadian history or visual arts classes.

Objectives: After completing the lesson, students will be able to:

- Visually identify several historically significant Canadian Prime Ministers
- Analyze the process of creating a caricatural image
- Create their own caricatures of historical Canadian Prime Ministers, or of Present-day politicians

Lesson Procedures:

- Present a sampling of political caricatures of John A. MacDonald, Alexander Mackenzie, Wilfrid Laurier, John Diefenbaker and Pierre Elliott Trudeau. It might be a good

idea to preface each set of drawings with a photographic portrait of the Prime Ministers being caricatured.

- Ask students to try to identify the recurring emblematic physical characteristics or other visual elements by which these Prime Ministers are identified in caricature: e.g. Laurier's high collar, MacDonald's frizzy hair, Diefenbaker's eyebrows.

- Present the chart below, depicting schematic caricatures of the five Prime Ministers in question, and explain that each one has been created by the addition of only three visual elements, deemed to be particularly emblematic of these figures' caricatural depictions.

- Ask them to try to identify what these three elements are for each Prime Minister (MacDonald: Bulbous nose, frizzy hair, wide mouth; Mackenzie: Wavy beard, high sunken cheekbones, Highland bonnet; Laurier: Projecting tufts of white hair at temples, upturned lips, high collar; Diefenbaker: Upright curly hair, "wild" eyes, buckteeth; Trudeau: slit-shaped eyes, high cheekbones, nose).

- Ask the students to attempt their own quick caricatures of each Prime Ministers, integrating the three visual elements identified above into each.

- Next ask the students to draw a caricature of one or more of these Prime Ministers in the guise of an animal or an inanimate object (e.g. Diefenbaker as an elephant, Mackenzie as an airplane), using the three visual elements identified above, as well as any other elements that they feel would render their drawing more recognizable as a depiction of the particular Prime Minister they have selected.

- Another possibility is to bring in some photographs of prominent contemporary politicians from the provincial, federal, or international scene. Students would then be asked to

attempt to identify the most prominent physical characteristics of some of these figures, and proceed to caricature them accordingly.



Chart: Schematic caricatures of MacDonald, Laurier, Mackenzie, Diefenbaker and Trudeau.