

Maurice Le Noblet Duplessis

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Maurice Duplessis, politician

Duplessis was known as "le Chef" in recognition of his strong though controversial leadership of Québec (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/C-9338).

Maurice Le Noblet Duplessis, prime minister and attorney general of Québec 1936–39 and 1944–59 (born 20 April 1890 in Trois-Rivières, QC; died 7 September 1959 in Schefferville, QC). Duplessis father, Nérée Le Noblet Duplessis, was a fervently Catholic and Conservative MLA for Trois-Rivières 1886–1900 and an unsuccessful federal Conservative candidate before being named a superior court judge by Sir [Robert L. Borden](#) in 1915. Duplessis' mother was of part Scottish and Irish descent

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He helped mayor [Camillien Houde](#) of Montréal ease out Arthur Sauvé as leader of the provincial Conservatives in 1929 and Duplessis deposed Houde after the electoral débâcle of 1931, in which the Conservative Party, led by Houde, was routed. Confirmed as leader of the Québec Conservative Party in 1933, Duplessis wooed disgruntled reform Liberals and Nationalists who had become disillusioned with the arch-conservative Liberal government of [Louis-Alexandre Taschereau](#) and had formed a movement styled [Action libérale nationale](#), and two weeks before the 1935 election he united with them to form the [Union nationale](#), with the rather unworldly [Paul Gouin](#) as ostensible coleader.

Taschereau was returned in 1935, but Duplessis forced him out in June 1936 with a sensational performance before the Public Accounts Committee exposing corruption and profligacy in the regime, accompanied by a filibuster in the Assembly. He also dispensed with Gouin and outmaneuvered his other Action libérale nationale allies, defeated the hapless [Joseph-Adélar Godbout](#), and won a landslide victory in August 1936, ending 39 years of Liberal rule.

Duplessis's first term was a disappointment. Except for his successful farm credit scheme, his Fair Wages Commission (effectively minimum wages) and provisions for destitute mothers and the blind, there was little significant legislation. The administration was prodigal. Duplessis himself lived riotously (he was a lusty and somewhat alcoholic bachelor in these times, and never did marry), and he blundered disastrously in September 1939 by calling a snap election on the issue of participation in the war effort.

The Québec federal ministers, including [Ernest Lapointe](#), Arthur Cardin and [C.G. Power](#), threatened to resign, leaving Québec defenceless against a conscriptionist English Canada if Duplessis was re-elected, and pledged that they would prevent [conscription](#) if Duplessis was defeated.

Though he was personally re-elected, his government lost badly to Godbout. In opposition Duplessis's health collapsed, and, after months in hospital in 1941-42 fighting pneumonia and diabetes, he never drank again, campaigned strenuously for 2 years, and was narrowly re-elected in 1944 over Godbout, the nationalist [Bloc populaire canadien](#) led by [André Laurendeau](#) and [Jean Drapeau](#) and supported by [Henri Bourassa](#). The Union nationale was re-elected in 1948, 1952 and 1956 and successfully intervened in other elections, especially in the defeat of Mayor Drapeau in Montréal in 1957 and in the election of 50 [Diefenbaker](#) Conservatives in Québec in 1958.

His 15-year second term saw Duplessis assert the authority of the Québec state over that

of the Church; wrestle part of the concurrent jurisdiction over direct taxes back from the federal government after WWII; and introduce social legislation, including Canada's most generous minimum wage and home ownership assistance Acts. His government produced enormous public works, highway, hospital, school and university construction projects and ambitious hydroelectric power schemes, extending electrification throughout rural Québec.

Duplessis became equally known for dealing harshly with striking unions, especially at Noranda, [Asbestos](#), Louiseville and Murdochville; and for disdaining most contemporary concepts of civil liberties, particularly in litigation over the anticommunist [Padlock Act](#), overruled by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1957, and the [Roncarelli](#) case, in which Duplessis was personally ordered to pay damages of \$46 132 by the Supreme Court in 1959.

Apart from his jurisdictional gains, Duplessis presented a number of symbolic nationalist measures, such as the adoption of the Québec flag. Duplessis developed a very powerful political machine. The patronage system reached legendary proportions, yet Duplessis presided over a period of unprecedented prosperity, economic growth and investment in which Québec was for the first time by almost any social or economic yardstick gaining on Ontario.

A modernizer except in political methodology, Duplessis perfected the techniques of the past in exalting the Québec state to an unprecedented position of strength in relation to the church, the federal government and the Anglo-Saxon Montréal business establishment. His system depended upon employing the clergy at bargain wages to do what was really secular work in schools and hospitals, while reducing the episcopate to financial dependence; reducing taxes, balancing budgets and persuading the conservatives and nationalists to vote together (for "autonomy" as he called it).

His system crumbled after his death with the demise of his successors [Paul Sauvé](#) and [Daniel Johnson](#) and the triumph of the [Quiet Revolution](#). Maurice Duplessis was an enigmatic and picturesque character, the public demagogue at some variance with his urbane, elegant and witty private personality. For much of his career he was almost universally known as "le Chef" in recognition of his strong, though controversial leadership of Québec.

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