Dear Mr. Prime Minister

As Canada’s economic crisis deepened in the early 1930s, Prime Minister R.B. Bennett appeared to show little sympathy for the plight of his fellow Canadians. Bennett’s government failed to come up with any far-reaching policy to alleviate the suffering caused by the Great Depression. In fact, many of his policies only bred more contempt for his government. However there was another side to Mr. R.B Bennett.

Though he seemed a tough, and sometimes harsh politician, he had a far different private face. Bennett was a kind and generous man who donated $25,000 a year to numerous charities. And during the darkest days of the Depression, Bennett’s compassion and humanity shone through.

During his time in office, the Prime Minister received hundreds of letters from desperate Canadians requesting help. Alone in his seventeen-room suite at the Chateau Laurier Hotel in Ottawa, Bennett worked through the night, trying to keep up with an endless chorus of heartbreak and despair.

In the following pages, you will read several letters that were sent to R.B Bennett during the early days of the depression, and you will also see how he responded.

Directions:
1. Read the letters provided, along with their responses. Read them carefully and take note of who is writing them
2. Answer the questions provided at the end of the activity.
Letters from the Depression

During the Depression, many people wrote letters to Prime Minister Bennett asking for help. The letters express some of the shame and despair people felt.

Ottawa
March the 4th 1932
Dear Sir,
I am just writing a few lines to you to see what can be done for us young men of Canada. We are the growing generation of Canada, but with no hopes of a future. Please tell me why is it a single man always gets a refusal when he looks for a job. A married man gets work, & if he does not get work, he gets relief. Yesterday I got a glimpse of a lot of the unemployed. It just made me feel downhearted, to think there is no work for them, or in the future, & also no work for myself. Last year I was out of work three months. I received work with a local farm. I was told in the fall I could have the job for the winter; I was then a stable man. Now I am slacked off on account of no snow this winter. Now I am wandering the streets like a beggar, with no future ahead. There are lots of single men in Ottawa, who would rather walk the streets, & starve, than work on a farm. That is a true statement. Myself I work wherever I can get work, & get a good name wherever I go. There are plenty of young men like myself, who are in the same plight. I say again what is to be done for us single men? do we have to starve? or do we have to go round with our faces full of shame, to beg at the doors of the well to do citizen. I suppose you will say the married men come first; I certainly agree with you there. But have you a word or two to cheer us single men up a bit? The married man got word he was going to get relief. That took the weight of worry off his mind quite a bit. Did the single man here anything, how he was going to pull through? Did you ever feel the pangs of hunger? My idea is we shall all starve. I suppose you will say I cant help it, or I cant make things better. You have the power to make things better or worse. When you entered as Premier you promised a lot of things, you was going to do for the country. I am waiting patiently to see the results. Will look for my answer in the paper.
Yours Truly
R.D. Ottawa

Passman, Sask.
16 Oct. 1933
Dear Sir,
I am a girl thirteen years old and I have to go to school every day its very cold and I haven’t got a coat to put on. My parents can’t afford to buy one. Would you be so kind to sent me enough money so that I could get one.

My name is
Edwina Abbott
[Reply: $5.00]
Dear Sir,
I am writing to see if there is any help I could get.
As I have a baby thirteen days old that only weighs one pound and I have to keep in cotton Wool & Olive Oil, and I haven't the money to buy it, if there is any help I could get their will be two votes for you next election
Hoping to hear from you soon
Yours Truly,
Mrs. Jack OHannen
Murray Harbour, PEI

Reply,

Her letter to the Prime Minister was Mrs. Jack OHannens last hope. When he received it, Bennett opened his wallet and sent the young mother five dollars - enough money to cover groceries for about a month.

Dear Mr. Bennett,
I am a little boy eight years old and I'm in Grade III at school. I've wanted a little red wagon to hitch my dog to for so many years, but daddy has no money. Please, Mr. Bennett would you send me enough money to buy my wagon. Thank you so much.
Your very good friend,
Maurice Stanley

Reply,

Dear Mr. Bennett,
Thank you very much for the money. I'm going to get the wagon.
Mamma said I could.
Ardath Sask
Aug 31, 1935

Dear Prime Minister RB Bennett,
It is with a very humble heart that I take the opportunity of writing this letter to ask you if you will please send for this underwear for my husband from the Eaton catalog. I can manage but my husband has arthritis very bad at times in his arms and shoulders. I have patched and darned his old underwear for the last two years, but they are completely done now. If you can't do this I really don't know what to do.
Mrs. Thomas Perkins
Kingdom Saskatchewan
Sept 28, 1933

Prime Minister RB Bennett
dear Sir received your kind favour of underwear for my husband. We wish to thank you very much for it. We sure are thankful for your kindness
Mr and Mrs. Thomas Perkins
Kingdom, Saskatchewan
Nov 15 1933

Dear Mr. Bennett,
I believe you to be good as well as a great man therefore I am appealing to you to save my home.
Picture yourself, through no fault of your own, homeless with sons willing, but unable to provide for you. Please help me or tell me what I can do.
Yours Sincerely and hopefully,
Laura Bates.
Toronto Sept 3, 1933

Reply,

Dear Madam,
I am certainly willing to help you and if you will be good enough to let me know what company holds the mortgage on your home I will look into the matter and see if anything can be done to straighten out your difficulties.
yours faithfully,
Dear Sir,
Three little baby boys were born to Mr. and Mrs. Samuels in our vicinity. Like many others they have had some very bad luck. The parents are a very fine type, not the kind with the hand out for help. We hope you will feel toward these unfortunate people the way we do.
Yours truly,
Elizabeth Ratray
Welsley Ont,
Sept. 27, 1933

Reply,

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Samuels,
I am enclosing herewith a 20 dollar bill, which I trust may be of some little service to you during the Christmas season. I learned the other day that one of the triplet boys had passed away and I extend to you my sincerest sympathy,
With best wishes, believe me I am yours faithfully
RB Bennett Ottawa
Oct 13, 1933

Source: http://www.cbc.ca/history/EPISCONTENTSE1EP13CH2PA3LE.html
Canadian History 1202: 4.2 Activity-Letters to R.B. Bennett

1. These letters contain some grammatical and spelling errors. What does this say about the people writing them?

2. Who are the authors of the letters? What does your answer suggest about the types of people who were most affected by the Depression?

3. a) List one problem from each letter that people expressed to the Prime Minister.
   b) What types of emotions are being expressed from the people who wrote these letters?
   c) How did Prime Minister Bennett respond to the letters?

4. Why would a woman who wrote Bennett beg him not to mention her name?

5. What help would be available today for a woman who gave birth to a one pound baby compared to the help given during the Great Depression? Do you think it was the duty of the government to help her? Why?

6. If Canada entered another Depression today do you think people would write to Stephen Harper like they did with Bennett? Would they have to?

7. Unable to solve the economic problems of Canada; do you think it was Prime Minister Bennett’s duty to help as many Canadian individuals as he could? Why?