

Hon. Thomas H. Johnson

By Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

If ill health had not forced his retirement from political life in 1922, Thomas H. Johnson may well have found himself occupying the premier's office. As it was, he became the most influential member of the cabinet in the administration of T.C. Norris and was at the centre of one of the most progressive governments in the history of Manitoba.

Thomas Herman Johnson was born in Iceland on February 12, 1870 and immigrated to Canada with his parents when he was nine years old. He was raised in Winnipeg and Baldur, Manitoba. After graduating from Normal School in 1888, he taught public school in the Argyle district for eight years while furthering his own education. He graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College in 1895, after which he entered the law school at the University of Manitoba. He was graduated from the University of Manitoba and was admitted to the Manitoba Bar in 1900, becoming the first Canadian lawyer of Icelandic descent. He was a partner in the firm Loftus and Johnson and then Howard and Johnson until 1908, when he helped form Rothwell, Johnson and Bergman. He was chief legal counsel for the Hudson's Bay Company in Manitoba and also a legal advisor to Lord Strathcona.



Johnson began his political career as a member of the Winnipeg School Board from 1904 until 1907. He was first elected to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba for Winnipeg West in 1907, as a Liberal, and served for fifteen years. (He represented Winnipeg Centre from 1914 until 1920 and the multi-member riding of Winnipeg from then until his retirement.) He resigned in 1922 due to declining health.

Johnson was noted as "an exceedingly good debater." When the Conservative government of Sir Rodmond P. Roblin introduced supplementary estimates to support the construction of a new legislative building, increasing the projected cost of the project by more than fifty percent, Johnson's suspicions were aroused. Between sessions, he scrutinized the documentation that had been tabled by the

government with the keen eye of a lawyer and concluded that the facts suggested extensive corruption on the part of both the contractor and members of the government. When the legislature resumed sitting in 1915, Johnson and his legislative colleague Albert B. Hudson pressed the matter in the Public Accounts Committee. On the last day of March, Hudson moved a resolution calling for a Royal Commission to examine the project, alleging negligence in construction and the fraudulent expenditure of public funds. While the Roblin government was able to defeat the measure with its legislative majority, the Liberals had also presented a petition to the Lieutenant Governor, Sir Douglas Cameron, who insisted that the premier either appoint a Royal Commission or tender his resignation. When the Royal Commission presented its report in early May, finding the opposition's charges to be true, Roblin resigned as premier and Liberal leader T.C. Norris was invited to form a government.

The Norris government was one of the most progressive administrations in the history of the province. The government established a Civil Service Commission to shield government employment practices from political interference; it extended the vote and the right to hold public office to women, among other reforms to the electoral process; it legislated compulsory elementary education; it introduced an act to provide for direct legislation through referendums, although this was later overturned by the courts; and bowing to pressure from the temperance movement, it enacted prohibition, albeit with some interesting loopholes.

Thomas Johnson was named Minister of Public Works in the new administration, which meant that he assumed ministerial responsibility for overseeing the completion of the legislative building. Unlike his Conservative predecessor, he maintained an arm's length relationship with the new contractor that had been retained to complete the project. He was the first person of Icelandic heritage to hold a cabinet portfolio anywhere in Canada. In 1917, he was named Attorney-General and also Minister of Telephones and Telegraphs, serving until 1922.

An advocate of social reform, Johnson played a central role in extending the vote to women in 1916, when Manitoba became the first Canadian province to enfranchise women. The leading advocate for women's suffrage in the Liberal caucus, he moved third reading of the legislation on January 27 of that year, in his capacity as Acting Premier. He was also responsible for the reorganization of the Bureau of Labour, the overhaul of the Workmen's Compensation Act and a massive amount of other labour legislation. In 1916, Johnson established the Fair Wage Board, which set an annual compensation schedule for all public works

projects and adjudicated labour disputes. By regulating wages for work on government projects, the board enhanced compensation throughout the building trades. Over time, he developed a reputation for principled impartiality in his dealings with labour and management. His particular gifts in labour relations were recognized by the federal government in 1920 when Johnson was the Canadian representative to the League of Nations Labour Organization meeting in Geneva, Switzerland.

As Attorney-General, Johnson represented the province before the Supreme Court when Thomas Kelly, the contractor at the centre of the legislative building scandal, appealed his conviction and sentence. Although Kelly's conviction and sentence were upheld, and the contractor went on to a successful career in the United States following his imprisonment, the province recovered only \$30 thousand of the \$1.2 million in restitution that had been ordered by the courts. Johnson also represented the province in advocating the transfer of control over natural resources from the federal government to the province. While agreement in principle was reached, the transfer was not actually accomplished until 1930.

Johnson was active in many community endeavours beyond politics. He was president of the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba in 1913 and 1914. As honorary president of the Falcon Hockey Club, he was an enthusiastic booster of the team that put Winnipeg on the map in when it won the gold medal at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp, Belgium. He was a faithful member and patron of First Lutheran Church throughout his adult life.

Thomas Johnson served on the committee charged with establishing a private Icelandic high school in Winnipeg. When the Jón Bjarnason Academy finally erected its school building in 1923, at 652 Home Street near Sargent Avenue, Johnson pledged to contribute one-tenth of the construction cost – one of many gifts to the school. Following his untimely death four years later, the academy received a portion of his personal library to add to its own collection. As early as 1902, Johnson had advocated the establishment of an Icelandic chair at the University of Manitoba, a vision that was finally realized when instruction commenced fifty years later, in the fall of 1952.

When Johnson became Attorney-General in 1919, he was also named King's Counsel, as was customary. In 1925, the government of Iceland awarded him the Grand Knight Cross of the Order of the Falcon. The following year, he was named to the Order of St. Olaf by the Kingdom of Norway. Otherwise, he received relatively few formal honours for someone with such a distinguished career in public service, perhaps because he died at such a young age.

When he died in May 1927, the *Free Press* eulogized him by commenting, "Mr. Johnson was one of the most admirable public men that this province has produced. He was combative and courageous at a time when the province had great need of those qualities."

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