

# Alberta Historical Review



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*Cover Illustration:* Autumn was the time of year when men with threshing outfits travelled from farm to farm doing custom work. The cover photo shows an outfit near Endiang in 1913. Emil Kammerle is on the roof, while the others, left to right, are: Gil Morrow, Charles Smyth, Shorty Craven, Clem Hoover, Dad Stanley, the cook, Mrs. Armstrong, and Don Johnson.

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# Stability and Change in Alberta Provincial Elections

by  
THOMAS FLANAGAN

Few political events generate more interest and excitement than elections, and Alberta provincial elections have been as colourful as any in Canada.

Alberta is generally thought to be a province where politics are subject to occasional volcanic upheavals alternating with long periods of stability. This is certainly a correct description of the history of political parties in the province. There have been three great eras of provincial politics, marked by three critical elections, and we may now be at the beginning of a fourth such era. In each period in the past, a single party dominated the legislature. There has never been a minority government in office. The opposition, furthermore, has generally been weak and often splintered among several parties. The most spectacular feature of this history has been the thrice-repeated downfall of governing parties with a long tenure in office, and the failure of such

parties to make a comeback. No party in Alberta, having held office and having been once defeated, has ever returned to power.

The first era was that of Liberal domination, lasting from the achievement of provincial status in 1905 until the Liberals' defeat in 1921. This sixteen-year reign was brought to an end by a combination of factors. In the post-war depression, the price of grain sagged badly. Farmers were driven to the edge of desperation by grasshoppers and drought. Ottawa showed its usual indifference by dissolving the national wheat-marketing apparatus. And farmers had gotten out of the habit of voting Liberal because of the federal Union government in the war years. In these hard times, the

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United Farmers of Alberta, who had been in existence under that name since 1909, decided to get into politics, with overwhelming success. They won 46 percent of the popular vote and 38 of 61 seats in the legislature. The Liberals, reduced to 15 representatives, never recovered from this disaster.

The U.F.A. in turn ruled for fourteen years, until in 1935 they were unseated even more abruptly than they had ousted the Liberals. This time the new party was William Aberhart's Social Credit League. With 54 percent of the popular vote and 57 seats of 63, Mr. Aberhart's triumph was complete. The U.F.A., winning only 11 percent of the vote and no seats at all, ceased to be a force in provincial politics.

The Social Credit League went on to repeat their victory eight more times in a row. First under Mr. Aberhart and then under Ernest Manning, their control of the province was not seriously challenged until 1971. In that year Peter Lougheed's resurgent Progressive Conservatives won an upset victory unexpected by most observers. This time there seems to have been no easily identifiable cause for the electoral change, other than the retirement of Mr. Manning in 1969 and the hard work of the Conservatives.

On this showing, Alberta certainly seems to merit its reputation for dramatic changes. However there is another side to provincial politics which needs to be considered. Although parties come and go, the people of the province remain. Human geography changes, but generally over decades and

generations. Immigration brings alterations in the composition of the population, but immigrants also adjust to the beliefs and preferences of older residents. And if human geography changes relatively slowly in relation to the ups and downs of political parties, the rate of change of physical geography is far slower. Hence it would be surprising if, behind the shifting kaleidoscope of party politics, there were not a pattern which is more enduring, corresponding to the relative permanence of Alberta's human and physical geography.

When Alberta achieved provincial status in 1905, the Liberals had one immense advantage in the party struggle. With the federal Liberals in power in Ottawa, their Alberta compatriots could influence the distribution of federal patronage. Furthermore, the provincial administration was handed over to the Liberals in order to organize the first election, so the party got a head-start on provincial patronage. But even without these advantages, the Liberals undoubtedly would have been strong in Alberta in this period, as they were in the other prairie provinces. The Liberals were known in the West as the party of the farmer, of free trade, and of the great immigration boom. The Conservatives were more closely identified with urban manufacturing and financial interests. In the 1906 census, the combined population of Calgary and Edmonton was only 12 percent of the Alberta total. The Liberals were in their own milieu in such a rural province.

It is not surprising that the Liberals were able to win four elections in a row. As Table

	Liberals		Conservatives		Other <sup>1</sup>	
	% vote	seats	% vote	seats	% vote	seats
1905	61	22	33	3	6	0
1909	61	37	33	2	6	2
1913	49	38	45	18	6	0
1917 <sup>2</sup>	49	34	42	19	9	3

<sup>1</sup>"Other" means Independent, Socialist, Non-Partisan League (in 1917).

<sup>2</sup>Totals for 1917 ignore the non-partisan votes of soldiers and nurses.



Shortly before dissolution of the Alberta legislature in 1921, the members posed for this historic photo. In the election a few weeks later, the Liberals were swept out of office by the United Farmers of Alberta.

I shows, their victories were by substantial margins, even after the railroad scandal of 1910 led to the resignation of Premier Rutherford and dimmed the party's reputation for honesty.

Yet the Conservatives and Socialists were not without pockets of strength. The areas in which their support was located were the result of human and physical geography. The Conservatives were noticeably stronger in the rural ridings south of Red Deer than they were in the rural ridings north of that town. The Liberals were not exactly weak in the southern part of the province, but in a relative sense their support was not as great.

Why a line at Red Deer? A combination of factors must be called upon for explanation. The Red Deer River is the approximate line of division in the province between prairie and parkland. South of Red Deer the treeless open land was suitable for ranching, particularly where warm Chinook winds cleared the snow from the grass. This part of the province was settled relatively early by ranchers, particularly with completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885. These early settlers, many of

them American cattlemen, entered Alberta under the federal Conservative administration. In the manner of new settlers, they tended to support the party in power, for that party could help to solve their immediate and pressing problems. The local influence of the CPR, which at that time was allied with the Conservatives, helped to maintain their allegiance.

North of Red Deer, settlement took place more slowly, chiefly after Clifford Sifton's immigration policy went into effect in 1898. The new settlers were farmers, not ranchers. Many of them were from Central and Eastern Europe, while still others were French-Canadians from Quebec, often by way of the United States. Ethnically they were far more diverse than the earlier population of southern Alberta. Above all, they immigrated when the Liberals were in office in Ottawa. Thus factors of geography and history combined to produce distinct political colorations in the northern and southern halves of the province.

A second area where a party other than the Liberals had a basis of support was in the coal-mining communities of the mountains and in mining or railroad towns like

Lethbridge and Medicine Hat. In these constituencies Socialist candidates often ran strongly, seldom winning, but at least putting up a respectable showing.

The third area of relative Liberal weakness was the two major cities of Calgary and Edmonton. Here as expected the Conservatives found voters, as did the Socialists in working-class neighbourhoods. Initially, Calgary was Conservative while Edmonton was Liberal. The first leader of the Alberta Conservative party was Calgary lawyer R. B. Bennett, whose law partnership with James Lougheed did a lucrative business with the CPR, the telephone company, and other corporations. But after the great national reciprocity fight of 1911, which clearly stamped the Liberals as a rural and the Conservatives as an urban party, the latter also improved their position in Edmonton to equal that in Calgary. In 1913 there was only one Liberal out of six representatives from Calgary and Edmonton, a proportion duplicated in 1917.

Thus even in the earliest period of Alberta politics, there were clearly distinguishable regions of the province. There were differences between the south and the north, between the cities and the countryside, and between the mining areas and the rest of the province. With only one significant alteration, these factors have continued to govern elections down to this day. As

we will see, the dividing line between "north" and "south" has moved northward along with settlement in the province. There has continued to be a political "north", but since 1921 the line marking it off has had to be drawn through Edmonton rather than Red Deer. Otherwise the fundamental electoral cleavages have continued very much the same, although different parties have appeared from time to time to collect the votes.

The United Farmers of Alberta, elected to office in 1921, held to a particular theory of government which in turn affected their participation in elections. This doctrine, advanced by Henry Wise Wood and William Irvine, is generally called the theory of "group government". According to it, the United Farmers were not a political party in the normal sense of the term, that is, the representative of many different groups in society. The U.F.A. claimed to represent only one group, the farmers. According to their philosophy, all other groups should have organized themselves in a similar way to elect delegates to the legislature. Such delegates could take clear positions and not have to submit to the compromises of party politics. Then they could go to Edmonton to carry on businesslike government, avoiding the evils of the old party system.

In line with this theory, the U.F.A. did not normally put forward candidates in the

TABLE II

Results of Alberta Provincial Elections 1921-1930.

	U.F.A.		Liberals		Conservative		Other	
	% vote	seats	% vote	seats	% vote	seats	% vote	seats
1921	46 <sup>3</sup>	38	34	15	6 <sup>4</sup>	1	14	7
1926	41	43	27	7	23	4	9	6
1930	39	39	25	11	14	6	22	7

<sup>3</sup>This figure is often mistakenly given in the historical literature as 28 percent. The error comes from a misinterpretation of the electoral system used in the election. Each voter in Calgary and Edmonton voted for five candidates on a long list, while the Medicine Hat elector voted for two. Certain authors, apparently having misunderstood the system, have failed to divide this portion of the total vote by the appropriate number when comparing it to results from the rest of the province. Since the UFA ran no candidates in Calgary and Edmonton, and only one in Medicine Hat, this error leads to under-estimation of the U.F.A. percentage.

<sup>4</sup>Many Conservatives ran as Independents in 1921 since their party had become so unpopular in the West following the Union government.

metropolitan centres of Calgary and Edmonton, in the smaller mining and transportation centres of Lethbridge and Medicine Hat, and in the mountain ridings of Rocky Mountain and Edson. One exception to this rule was in Edmonton in 1926 and 1930, when solicitor J. F. Lymburn ran for the U.F.A. Lymburn had been brought directly into the Cabinet in 1925 as Attorney General when Mr. Brownlee was elevated from that position to Premier. The U.F.A. also entered into informal coalitions with the Labour party in some urban or industrial ridings, but it was always made clear such candidates were not members of the farmers' movement. Because of the philosophy of the U.F.A., the cleavage between agrarian parts of the province and the urban or industrial areas, which was already present before 1921, was made even more visible.

There also continued to be a division between north and south in the province but with the line of demarcation moving farther to the north. Above Edmonton, the U.F.A. were not overwhelmingly successful as they were in the south. In the rural ridings south of Edmonton, Farmer candidates were almost never defeated, usually garnering 60 percent or even 70 percent of the vote. But north of the capital, the races were consistently much closer, and the Liberals won occasional victories. Liberal strength persisted in ridings with large numbers of French-Canadian or Ukrainian citizens. These were groups which the U.F.A. perhaps could not reach as readily, due to differences of language and religion. A majority of Ukrainians, and almost all French-Canadians, were Roman Catholics, whereas many of the leaders of the United Farmers, as of the Progressives generally, were protestant clergymen or lay preachers.

This difference between north and south might have been predicted by an acute observer in 1921 when the U.F.A. made their decision to enter provincial politics, for a similar line of cleavage had appeared in the prohibition referendum of 1915. In his book *Booze*, James Gray has pointed out many aspects of the temperance movement on the prairies: but he has not mentioned that the Alberta referendum of 1915 was in cer-

tain respects the prototype of all provincial elections held in 1921 and after. In the plebiscite, almost every riding south of Edmonton went "dry," many by enormous margins like 70 percent to 30 percent. Practically the only exceptions in the south were the mountain and mining ridings with strong labour union influence (Edson, Rocky Mountain, Lethbridge City). The Alberta Federation of Labour opposed prohibition because the act allowed the rich man to import out-of-province liquor while the poor man was confined to two percent temperance beer, that being all he could afford. But north of Edmonton the story was quite different. Out of a dozen constituencies only two voted "dry". The ethnic factor was particularly noticeable. Ukrainian and especially French-Canadian ridings were unrepentantly "wet" (e.g. 74 percent "wet" in St. Paul, 71 percent in St. Albert). The results were reminiscent of the national referendum on prohibition conducted by Sir Wilfrid Laurier in 1898, when all English provinces and territories voted "dry" while Quebec went heavily "wet".

But in Alberta it was not solely Catholic "foreigners" who were against prohibition. Opposition votes were cast throughout the north. Probably the lonely, cold, and masculine life of the northern frontier was not as conducive to prohibition as the more settled life in the south. This difference in political geography between north and south corresponded to facts of physical geography. The boreal forest covers most of the country above the North Saskatchewan River, except for belts of open parkland in the Peace River country. This fact, plus the colder climate and its general remoteness, meant that the north was settled after more desirable lands were taken in the south. This later settlement implied that a larger proportion of Ukrainian and French-Canadian immigrants would settle there, for it was precisely these groups who were coming when those lands were being opened up.

This geographical division of the province, which was so obvious in the prohibition referendum, carried over into party politics because the United Farmers of Alberta were the strongest backers of prohibi-

tion, like farmers' organizations in the other prairie provinces. Hence it was not surprising to see the same pattern emerging in 1921 as in 1915. The U.F.A. were not hopelessly weak north of Edmonton; on the contrary, they won a majority of races. But they were *relatively* weaker than in their southern heartland.

Once again the geography of Alberta had asserted itself over the shifting labels of political parties. Most importantly, the division between north and south, first revealed in the 1915 plebiscite, became an enduring part of Alberta politics, and it still exists today. Thus it may be asserted that since 1921, "only the names have been changed." The general shape or pattern of Alberta provincial elections has remained roughly constant since the great debate about temperance and prohibition divided the province.

Between 1935 and 1967, the Social Credit League won nine successive elections. The results are summarized in Table III. The overall picture in this era was one of striking similarity with electoral patterns in the preceding years of U.F.A. dominance. The Social Credit League seems largely to have inherited that support which previously was given to the U.F.A. Where the Farmers had been strong, Social Credit was invincible; and where the Farmers had had difficulties, Social Credit was relatively weaker.

The line of division at Edmonton was maintained. In 1935, the Social Credit sweep left only one MLA from a rural constituency who did not belong to the League, a French-Canadian from remote Grouard. In subsequent years, Social Credit lost seats in its southern heartland in only the merest handful of cases (16 of 272 in the elections from 1935 through 1967). In the same period there was more than double the proportion of rural MLA's elected north of Edmonton who were not Social Crediters (18 of 122). Two groups were easily identifiable. One was the Liberal MLA's with French-Canadian names elected from constituencies like St. Albert, St. Paul, Beaver River, and Grouard. The other was a smaller number of Ukrainian MLA's bearing the CCF label from ridings in the Ukrainian belt east and north of Edmonton. But regardless of the details of party affiliation, the north was clearly a bit out of step with the larger southern region. The average vote for Social Credit in the north was generally six percent or more lower than the average figure in the southern ridings.

A second area of Social Credit weakness was the mountains. In spite of a clever gerrymander, Social Credit has generally run weaker in the constituencies in the Rockies than in the grain-growing or ranching areas south of Edmonton. In the provincial reapportionment which was performed for the 1940 election, the govern-

TABLE III

Results of Alberta Provincial Elections 1935-1967.

	Social Credit		Liberals		Conservatives		CCF/NDP		Other	
	% vote	seats	% vote	seats	% vote	seats	% vote	seats	% vote	seats
1935	54	57	23	4	6	2	—	—	17 <sup>b</sup>	0
1940	43	36	1	1	—	—	11	0	45 <sup>b</sup>	20
1944	52	51	—	—	—	—	25	2	23	4
1948	56	51	18	2	—	—	19	2	7	2
1952	56	52	22	4	4	2	14	2	4	1
1955	46	37	31	15	9	3	8	2	5	4
1959	56	61	14	1	24	1	4	0	2	2
1963	55	60	20	2	13	0	9	0	3	1
1967	45	55	11	3	26	6	16	0	2	1

<sup>a</sup>Includes 11% for the U.F.A.

<sup>b</sup>Including many coalition candidates of former Liberal, Conservative and U.F.A. allegiance.

ment broke up the old riding of Rocky Mountain, which had included the inhabited parts of the mountains. The pieces of Rocky Mountain were then attached to adjoining stretches of prairie or parkland to make the two new constituencies of Banff-Cochrane and Rocky Mountain House. This attempt to dilute the mountain vote worked in the case of Rocky Mountain House, where the colourful Alf Hooke held sway from 1940 through 1967; but Banff-Cochrane has been a maverick constituency, often sending Independents to Edmonton. Farther to the north, the mountainous riding of Edson several times chose MLA's who were not Social Crediters; while in Pincher Creek-Crowsnest Pass a member of the NDP was elected at a bye-election in 1966. Otherwise Social Credit emerged victorious in these districts, but often by lower margins than elsewhere.

Following the U.F.A. model, one would also expect Social Credit to have been weaker in the major cities. This actually was the case, but a word of comment is necessary. There was nothing in the Social Credit philosophy to inhibit the League from running candidates in the cities. Social Credit claimed to represent the will of the people as a whole (excluding the financiers, brokers, and "Fifty Big Shots") rather than any specific group as the U.F.A. had done. Hence Social Credit always fielded a full slate of candidates in the cities. On the whole the League did not do poorly there, but its urban performance was relatively weaker than in the southern heartland ridings. The urban vote for Social Credit typically lagged behind the average in the heartland by 10 to 14 percent. During the years 1935 to 1955, when a system of proportional representation prevailed in Calgary and Edmonton, this relative weakness was enough to allow the other parties to survive in the cities by sharing about half the urban seats among themselves. In 1959, when the quota system was abolished and single-member constituencies were introduced, Social Credit won all the urban seats but one, a feat they repeated in 1963. Yet even in these years of nearly total domination of city races, Social Credit did not gather as high an average percentage of the

vote as in the heartland. It was the fragmentation of the opposition which, as much as anything, allowed Social Credit so many urban victories.

Another feature of urban politics also deserves comment. In Alberta's cities, as in most cities with prevailing westerly winds, choicer neighbourhoods are located on the west side, away from industrial air pollution. Generally speaking Social Credit has done better on the east side. This can be established with certainty for the years 1959 and after, when single-member constituencies were introduced. In 1967, for example, when the Conservatives finally made an urban breakthrough, winning three seats in Calgary, while the Liberals also took one in that city, all four were in prosperous neighbourhoods in the city's west. Conversely, in 1971 when Social Credit's urban strength was reduced to a mere four seats in Calgary, these four were all in low or lower-middle income districts. Statistical analysis of the 1971 election performed by an M.A. student at the University of Calgary shows a strong negative correlation within Calgary and Edmonton between average income level and percentage of the vote cast for Social Credit. These results are also compatible with the survey data collected for the province as a whole by two University of Lethbridge political scientists in the 1960's. Their results showed that people who reported that they voted Social Credit in 1967 had lower incomes than those who voted Liberal or Conservative.

Perhaps it is premature to think that a fourth era in Alberta politics began in 1971. But if indeed this is the case, it is important to note that the electoral forces still closely resemble those of the past. The agrarian heartland of the province south of Edmonton and east of the Rockies is still pitted against the "peripheral" areas of the province: the mountains, the north, and the big cities. But if the forces are still the same, their balance has shifted. Calgary and Edmonton now constitute half the population of Alberta, while the north has also grown in relation to the south. It is no longer possible, even with the aid of a gerrymander directed against the cities, for a party to



control the province by dominating voting in the heartland.

This general description is borne out by the election results. North of Edmonton the Conservatives won 12 of 16 seats (and the NDP one) in 1971; in the mountains they took two of three; and in the metropolitan areas they were victorious in 25 of 29 races. But in the agrarian heartland, their success was much more limited, with only 10 of 27 seats. South of Calgary they did not win any seats at all. A similar picture of cleavage would be produced by looking at voting percentages instead of electoral victories. The average Social Credit vote was 49 percent in the heartland ridings, but only 38 percent in the big cities, 37 percent in the mountains, and 38 percent in the north.

If the lines of cleavage in provincial elections did not change from 1967 to 1971, why did Social Credit suffer such a stunning defeat? One factor has been mentioned already, namely the shifting balance of population among the different regions and particularly the explosive growth of Calgary and Edmonton. But the urbanization of Alberta has been proceeding rapidly since World War II; why were its effects so obvious in 1971, but not in 1967 or 1963? Evidently other causes were also at work. One of two very important factors was the dissolution of the provincial Liberal party, which received 20 percent in 1963, 11 percent in 1967, and a miserable 1 percent in 1971. The decline of the Liberals brought an end to the fragmentation of the opposition vote which has always been the curse of Social Credit's opponents in Alberta. In 1971 opposition votes were not harmlessly scattered but were concentrated on Conservative candidates. The second factor was the entry of new voters into the system as reflected in increasing turnout ratios. In 1963 only 56 percent of those on the voters' list bothered to cast their ballots. In 1967 there was an increase to 64 percent and in 1971 another jump to 72 percent. Particularly in Calgary and Edmonton, this turnout was positively correlated with support for the Conservatives. Apparently people in the cities who before had not bothered to vote were attracted by Mr.

Lougheed's resurgent party.

During the long years of Social Credit power, rapid urbanization connected with the resource boom gradually changed the balance of voting power among the provincial regions, even though the regions themselves remained identifiably the same as in 1915 or 1921. The retirement of Premier Manning, the utter collapse of the Liberals, and the aggressive leadership of Peter Lougheed made it possible for this new balance of social forces to receive political expression. By attracting new voters and former Liberal supporters, the Conservatives were able, for the first time since the U.F.A. victory in 1921, to break the domination of the agrarian heartland over provincial politics.

#### APPENDIX

This article is meant for an audience not particularly concerned with technical details. The interested reader may consult the following sources for further and more detailed information:

- L. G. Thomas, *The Liberal Party in Alberta* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1959);
- J. A. Long and F. Q. Quo, "Alberta: One Party Dominance", in Martin Robin (ed.), *Canadian Political Politics* (Prentice Hall, Scarborough, Ontario, 1972) pp. 1-26;
- T. E. Flanagan, "Ethnic Voting in Alberta Provincial Elections 1921-71", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 3, (December, 1971) pp. 139-164;
- T. E. Flanagan, "Political Geography and the United Farmers of Alberta," in S. M. Trofimenkoff (ed.), *The Twenties in Western Canada* (Mercury Series, History Division, Paper No. 1; National Museum of Man; Ottawa, 1972), pp. 138-169;
- T. E. Flanagan, "Electoral Cleavages in Alberta during the Social Credit Reign 1935-1971", a contribution to a volume of essays on Alberta politics presently under preparation by J. A. Long and F. Q. Quo of the University of Lethbridge.

An extensive survey of the 1971 provincial election was conducted by David Elton (Lethbridge) and Richard Baird (University of Alberta) with the support of the Canada Council.