

Adventurers and Opportunists:
The Social Credit Party in the Saskatchewan election of 1938

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By

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Abstract

Throughout the course of Canadian political history, many prairie populist movements have developed in an attempt to address the concerns of western Canadians. Two examples of these populist movements are the Social Credit Party, which was predominantly successful in forming government in Alberta, and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the precursor of today's New Democratic Party and well-known for its implementation of Medicare under Saskatchewan CCF premier Tommy Douglas.

However, there are elements of western populist movements that are not well known and have not been documented to a significant extent. The Social Credit Party, for example, is known for its charismatic leader, William Aberhart, and his landslide victory in Alberta's 1935 election; however, Social Credit's appeal beyond Alberta has not been well documented. In the Saskatchewan general election of 1938, Social Credit swept into the province in an attempt to gain power and implement its monetary reform policies, believing that Saskatchewan, like Alberta, would be a good fit for Social Credit as both provinces were suffering from the Great Depression. This thesis will examine Social Credit and the 1938 Saskatchewan provincial election. It will also discuss why Social Credit did not have success in this election, and the factors that contributed to this lack of victory. It will also examine the other political actors during this election campaign, and why the Liberal Party was able to achieve re-election.

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Introduction

Adventurers and Opportunists: The Social Credit Party in the Saskatchewan election of 1938

In 1938, fresh from its spectacular success in the Alberta provincial election, the Social Credit Party swept into neighbouring Saskatchewan, hoping to topple another sitting government in Depression-era Canada. Social Credit was a populist political movement which entered the Saskatchewan election of 1938 believing that because it was popular in Alberta, it would be popular in Saskatchewan as well. Saskatchewan was not alone in receiving the attention of the Social Creditors; in fact, Social Credit ran candidates in both Manitoba and British Columbia, beginning in the 1936 and 1937 elections, respectively, where it found limited success. Clearly, Social Credit's expansion outside of Alberta was a concerted effort, and it made sense to party leaders that Social Credit would find success in neighbouring western provinces, all of whom were struggling with the effects of the Great Depression, especially Saskatchewan.

The Social Credit movement was founded in the early 1930s in Alberta in an effort to pull the western provinces of Canada, and Alberta in particular, out of the Great Depression. It has been described as “the first radical reform administration in the history of Canada.”¹ It promised to “end poverty in the midst of plenty”, primarily by using government as a tool to regulate credit, enact price controls and prevent mortgage foreclosures.² Its leader, William Aberhart, was a teacher who later became pastor of the Bible Institute Baptist Church in Calgary.³ In an effort to stimulate the economy, Aberhart and Social Credit also promised Albertans “that the application of Social Credit

¹ Lewis H. Thomas, *William Aberhart and the Social Credit in Alberta* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1977), 9.

² Thomas, *Aberhart and Social Credit*, 70-71.

³ Thomas, *Aberhart and Social Credit*, 16-17.

principles would permit the payment of \$25.00 per month to each citizen as a dividend”.⁴ The strength of these ideas allowed Social Credit to sweep the governing United Farmers of Alberta from office. With this success, Aberhart believed that the winning conditions which had been present in Alberta also existed in Saskatchewan, and Social Credit proceeded to begin organizing in Saskatchewan and preparing for the next general election in that province.

But the Social Credit Party was rejected, winning only two seats, while the Liberal Party under Premier William Patterson remained in government. The question is why? Social Credit believed that the winning conditions were all present in Saskatchewan, much like they had been in Alberta just three years earlier in 1935. Additionally, Social Credit had already found success in the Canadian federal election of 1935, winning not only the bulk of the seats in Alberta (fifteen) but also two in Saskatchewan. The Social Credit movement in Saskatchewan, largely running on the same policies as the Alberta branch of the Social Credit movement, is an integral element in understanding the political culture in Saskatchewan and the nature of prairie populist political movements in general during the 1930s. This thesis will examine why the Social Credit Party ran candidates in the 1938 Saskatchewan provincial election (even though the Social Credit Party was an Albertan creation), how and why it fared in that election, and most importantly, why the Social Credit involvement is treated today as little more than an aberration or footnote in Saskatchewan political history. This thesis will use ask the analytical tool of “failure” to further demonstrate why Social Credit was not successful in this election.

⁴ Thomas, *Aberhart and Social Credit*, 61.

Literature which is critical to understanding Social Credit's appearance in Saskatchewan includes political scientist David Smith's *Prairie Liberalism: The Liberal Party in Saskatchewan, 1905-71*. In his book, Smith argues that "Social Credit was eminently suited to damage the CCF's fortunes. Competition with another party or league (as its supporters insisted on calling it) having a full slate of candidates was unlikely to help a struggling new party at any time but in this instance it was particularly harmful because Social Credit appealed to many farmers".⁵ Significant parallels can be drawn between Alberta and Saskatchewan at this stage in Canadian political history. Both were dealing with the Great Depression, and both were looking for political options that would help them get out of the Depression. Social Credit became widely popular in Alberta due to its populist message of prosperity directed at suffering Albertans; indeed Smith notes that "because of William Aberhart's victory in Alberta in the summer of 1935, Social Credit appeared to have every claim to the title of a successful western protest party."⁶ For this reason, Social Credit organizers thought that the movement would be popular in Saskatchewan, a province dealing with similar concerns.

Political scientist Denis Smith's *Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker* discusses the election itself in limited detail: "three parties dominated the contest: the governing Liberals, the CCF, and Social Credit. Only the Liberals nominated a full slate. Social Credit came closest to that, with forty-one candidates, and the CCF named thirty-one."⁷ Indeed, just by looking at these numbers one can see that Social Credit was going to play a large role in the campaign. Another example of a published

⁵ David E. Smith, *Prairie Liberalism: The Liberal Party in Saskatchewan, 1905-71* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 225.

⁶ Smith, *Prairie Liberalism*, 225.

⁷ Denis Smith, *Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker* (Toronto: MacFarlane, Walter and Ross, 1995), 97.

work that discusses the election is Dick Spencer's *Singing the Blues: The Conservatives in Saskatchewan*, which argues that "the wild card in the 1938 election was the new – and in Saskatchewan largely unknown – Social Credit Party, an oddball import from Alberta."⁸ In addition, Spencer lays out the idea that William Aberhart, Premier of Alberta, personally spearheaded the decision for Social Credit to contest the election, and indeed led the campaign himself, with thousands of people listening to his message at impassioned rallies all across Saskatchewan.

However, as Spencer goes on to argue, "Premier Patterson's Liberals fought back, likening the Social Credit invasion to German and Italian fascist tactics. British democracy was endangered, they warned, matching Social Credit hyperbole with hot jingoist gusts of their own."⁹ Spencer implies that Social Credit was framed by the Liberals as a threat not only to democracy but also to the Saskatchewan way of life. Two factors contributed to the governing Liberal's successful repulsion of Social Credit: first, the fact that they successfully branded Social Credit as being frightening due to its radical economic theory during the Great Depression, and secondly, that it was painted as being dangerous fascist invaders. A side-note that Spencer mentions is that in branding Social Credit as dangerous, Premier Patterson's Liberals used the same kind of rhetoric Social Credit was using.

Some excellent general histories include Bill Waiser's *Saskatchewan: A New History*. In it, Waiser argues that Social Credit portrayed itself in the election as a force that would free the province from the Great Depression: "fresh from its overwhelming victory in the 1935 Alberta election and its impressive success in the 1935 federal

⁸ Dick Spencer, *Singing the Blues: The Conservatives in Saskatchewan* (Regina: University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2007), 76.

⁹ Spencer, *Singing the Blues*, 77.

election, the party moved into Saskatchewan with its seductive monetary theory, portraying itself as a force that would liberate the province from the shackles of the Great Depression.”¹⁰ Waiser also supports Spencer’s view on how Social Credit was characterized by the other parties, particularly the governing Liberals, as “both the Liberals and CCF responded [to Social Credit] by characterizing Alberta premier William Aberhart as a despot intent on ruling the province from Edmonton.”¹¹

Additional scholarly journal articles include Kenneth Andrews’ “‘Progressive Counterparts’ of the CCF: Social Credit and the Conservative Party in Saskatchewan, 1935-1938”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*. Andrews argues that Social Credit’s role in Saskatchewan politics is critical in fully understanding the political character of the province at the time. Andrews writes that “Saskatchewan politics in the 1930s was frequently a complicated and confusing scene. At the time, a variety of political parties vied for pre-eminence as the major opposition to the governing Liberal Party.”¹² Andrews largely echoes what other historians have written on the subject of Social Credit in Saskatchewan. He further goes on to state that

Social Credit became subject to the political fracture of ‘progressive’ sentiment in the province. Saskatchewan was not an open political field; the origins and dynamics of political protest had evolved much differently there than in Alberta. The result was that Social Credit had to compete on a different set of terms. Once Social Credit decided to enter Saskatchewan, it found itself competing against established ‘progressive’ political forces in the province. From these it could never entirely disassociate itself.¹³

Andrews argues that Saskatchewan developed differently than Alberta due to political factors. He especially puts forward the idea that the rise to power of the United Farmers

¹⁰ William Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (Calgary: Fifth House, 2005), 324.

¹¹ Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History*, 324.

¹² Ken Andrews, “‘Progressive’ Counterparts of the CCF: Social Credit and the Conservative Party in Saskatchewan, 1935-1938” *Journal of Canadian Studies* (17, no.3 1982), 58.

¹³ Andrews, “‘Progressive’ Counterparts of the CCF”, 59.

of Alberta (UFA) political movement in 1921 caused a major disruption to Alberta politics which Saskatchewan did not undergo until later.¹⁴ Saskatchewan voters instead stuck with political stability and traditional parties until the CCF won the 1944 election and changed the province. This idea supports the theory that Social Credit had a much different political environment to deal with when it first attempted to expand into Saskatchewan; Alberta voters were more used to radical change already, whereas Saskatchewan voters were far more likely to stick with the dominant Liberal Party.

Further materials that have contributed to this thesis include Jared Wesley's *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies*. In this work, Wesley focuses largely on the campaigns themselves. However, he does talk about broader issues; he puts forward the idea that Premier Patterson's Liberals were largely supportive of centralization of government in order to serve as a check to the perceived threat that Social Credit was attempting to "usurp" the power of the federal government.¹⁵ Wesley provides a different kind of approach to looking at politics than other scholars. He views political 'cultures' as being critical to understanding why Alberta and Saskatchewan developed differently. He likens Alberta political culture to "cowboy individualism", while Saskatchewan's political culture can be seen to speak to the values of "co-operation, community and equality."¹⁶

It is highly unlikely that one who believes in the spirit of 'cowboy individualism', as Wesley puts it, would vote for a party espousing the ideas of a social security net or universal health care. Wesley builds on the work of scholars such as Andrews by trying

¹⁴ Andrews, "'Progressive' Counterparts of the CCF", 22.

¹⁵ Jared J. Wesley, *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 122.

¹⁶ Wesley, *Code Politics*, 18.

to nail down the differences between Alberta and Saskatchewan in explaining why the two provinces developed the way that they did. He further expands his analysis to immigrant patterns on the prairies, stating that “over time, British-born Labourites rose to prominence in Saskatchewan, and American frontier liberals gained authority in Alberta.”¹⁷ Lewis Thomas’ *William Aberhart and Social Credit in Alberta*, meanwhile, focuses on discussing William Aberhart and Alberta specifically, and on Aberhart’s conflicts with the authority of the federal government.¹⁸ However, he does discuss Social Credit monetary policy, such as the ‘prosperity certificates’, a form of scrip (currency substitute) issued by the government.¹⁹

As David Smith argues, discussing the aftermath of the 1938 election in *Prairie Liberalism*, “Social Credit was vanquished, being able to elect only two of its forty-one candidates, although it received nearly 16 percent of the total vote.”²⁰ Instead, the political party that found itself ascendant was the CCF. It emerged from the election strong, while Social Credit seemed to be more of a spent force.²¹ Smith sums up the next six years from 1938 to the next election in 1944 in a way which makes it easy to understand: “In six years the CCF had carved out a role for itself in the opposition. Compared to the *blitzkrieg* of Social Credit in Alberta, socialism in Saskatchewan may have appeared unspectacular, even unsuccessful. But the differences between the two provinces was so great as to make comparisons difficult and misleading.”²² It would be the CCF, not Social Credit that would be a factor in Saskatchewan politics from that

¹⁷ Wesley, *Code Politics*, 34.

¹⁸ Thomas, *Aberhart and Social Credit*, 88-89.

¹⁹ Thomas, *Aberhart and Social Credit*, 88.

²⁰ Smith, *Prairie Liberalism*, 240.

²¹ Smith, *Prairie Liberalism*, 241.

²² Smith, *Prairie Liberalism*, 241-242.

moment forth. Indeed, in 1944, the CCF “won forty-seven of fifty-two seats and 53 per cent of the popular vote. Patterson, who retained his seat by just six votes, was one of only five Liberals in the new legislature, while the Conservatives were once again shut out.”²³

These accounts discuss the Social Credit in Saskatchewan in largely general terms. Scholars of the history of the Social Credit movement tend to focus more on the successful Alberta and British Columbia wings of the Social Credit movement. Historians have also largely ignored local and regional trends across Saskatchewan, and how they factor into the 1938 election’s outcome. It is especially important to look at areas of the province where the Social Creditors found success. The most prominent example of Social Credit success was the riding of Melville, one of only two that elected a Social Credit candidate. The documentation that covers the nomination process and subsequent election in this riding is considerably more detailed than for any other riding in the province. Indeed, the records indicate a healthy, competitive nomination process with full vetting of the candidates. It is also worth noting the fact that the German community was particularly active in politics at the time. Other scholars have not previously discussed any possible Social Credit link with German farming communities.

In the thesis that follows, the Social Credit’s involvement in the Saskatchewan election of 1938 will be divided into three parts. The first chapter will discuss the years leading up to the election, from 1935 to 1938. Here, analysis will focus on the Social Credit victory in 1935 in Alberta and why Aberhart and the Social Creditors believed that success was within their grasp in Saskatchewan. This section will also focus on organizational efforts on the part of Social Creditors in Saskatchewan, including the

²³ Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History*, 342.

political pedigrees of new party members in Saskatchewan, many of whom were from other parties. The second chapter will discuss the election itself. Key elements of this chapter include telling the story of a new, rather green political machine that was not particularly well-oiled. In addition, infighting plays a significant role in the conduct of the Social Credit campaign. Several different groups of people emerge during the course of the campaign claiming to be the legitimate Social Credit organization, which caused a rapid breakdown of party unity. The third chapter assesses the aftermath of the election. Specifically, this chapter will analyze Aberhart's decision to personally intervene in the campaign and suspend the organizational leadership in Saskatchewan, deploying trusted right hand man Ernest Manning to run the campaign. This chapter will debate the merits of this decision, and discuss why this move may have played a role in Social Credit's inability to find success in the province in the future.

This thesis will not compare and contrast Alberta and Saskatchewan but instead take Alberta as a starting point for Social Credit and then place it into the context of Saskatchewan in 1938. The most important primary source in reconstructing the events before, during and after the election of 1938 are consequently the Social Credit party documents, available at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. These materials are crucial to this work as they include party correspondence, in particular political strategy. These papers reveal much about the internal struggle within many elements of Social Credit at the time. As Social Credit was a relatively new political force, many of the letters included in this collection mention the fears between different members of the party. One fear in particular was that new members may or may not have been loyal to the Social Credit cause, and simply may have been in it for themselves. Additionally, the

CCF papers, available at the Saskatchewan Archives Board, are necessary to look at the CCF's position as the official opposition. In this particularly extensive collection, a common theme of co-operation between progressive parties to take down the Liberals can be found.

Next, the Conservative papers, available at the University of Saskatchewan's Special Collections, while less extensive, are particularly useful. In these documents, a number of Conservative insiders discuss the reality, from their perspective, that a large percentage of Social Credit supporters were former Tories who had jumped ship to the Social Credit Party in an opportunistic attempt to win power. Another reason why the Conservative papers play a key role is because of John Diefenbaker's position as leader of the Conservative Party at the time. It is therefore possible to glean information about the election that may be otherwise impossible if one only looks at the election from the perspective of party pamphlets and internal campaign documents. Last but certainly not least, the Liberal Party papers are crucial because of the Liberal Party's status as the governing party. Throughout this set of records, Liberal politicians seem largely unconcerned about the possible impact of progressive opposition parties on their hold on power.

The Social Credit movement in Saskatchewan, largely running on the same policies as the Alberta branch of the Social Credit movement, is an integral element in understanding the political culture in Saskatchewan and the nature of prairie populist political movements during the 1930s. It must be stressed that this research is important to understanding the nature of the political culture of both Alberta and Saskatchewan. One might have expected the Social Credit movement to have appeal in Saskatchewan

because it had success in Alberta, but it did not turn out that way. This thesis will determine if this incident supports the idea that the politics of these two provinces are really fundamentally different despite the fact that the provinces were created in 1905 and both governed by Liberal governments for much of the first few years.

Chapter One

Social Credit before the election: A Study in Political Infighting

In the years preceding the Saskatchewan general election of 1938, many unique political developments were occurring on the prairies. Saskatchewan, like the rest of the developed world, was well into the Great Depression, with little to no end in sight. The people had given both the Conservatives and the Liberals opportunity to form government in separate elections in 1929 and 1934, respectively, and both had largely failed to provide comprehensive relief. As a result, many people believed in the lead-up to the election of 1938 that it was now time to look at other options for political leadership. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), a socialist, grass-roots organization, had a new leader in George Williams who wished to have his party place “greater emphasis on a planned economy”.¹ This movement of agrarian socialism had been around for some time, and was a real option for thousands of Saskatchewanians.

Others wished to return the Conservatives to power. They had a new leader in young John Diefenbaker, a lawyer from Prince Albert. However, the newest and for many the most appealing option was William Aberhart’s Social Credit Party. Aberhart, a gifted orator well known for his ‘Back to the Bible’ radio broadcasts in Alberta, swept to power in the Alberta general election of 1935 and inspired many people in Saskatchewan who looked to his leadership and policies as a way out of the Great Depression. His Social Credit movement became an example, along with the CCF, of a western populist movement, focussed on new economic solutions to the Depression. Indeed, many westerners felt as though they were being left behind in confederation. The greatest

¹ William Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (Calgary: Fifth House, 2005), 323.

challenge that Aberhart faced in gaining support for his movement in Saskatchewan was to overcome the perception, real or imagined, that he was intent on effectively controlling the province from Alberta. Fortunately for Aberhart, Saskatchewan was largely devoid of political leadership at this juncture of its history, with Premier William Patterson largely being dictated to from Ottawa by former premier Jimmy Gardiner. As a result, it was necessary in the years between 1935 and 1938 to build up an organization in the province that could present itself as a legitimate, principled choice for government over the tired Liberal Party, the significantly weakened Conservative Party, and the largely untested CCF. This process will be the primary focus of this chapter, concentrating on Social Credit's preparations for the election.

Social Credit began organizing for the Saskatchewan election of 1938 shortly after they had found success in Alberta in 1935. There were many people interested in seeing a new political alternative succeed in governing Saskatchewan where others, it was believed, had largely failed. Shortly after the federal election of 1935 in which Social Credit elected two representatives to the House of Commons from Saskatchewan, E.W. Hinkson, a Regina lawyer and Social Credit organizer, wrote to William Aberhart on December 7, 1935 requesting his assistance. He explained that the Saskatchewan branch of the Social Credit league was in debt \$600 and asked if he would be able to give a lecture to help raise funds.² Aberhart responded "it is very difficult for me to suggest stopping off in Regina at this time as I do not know just when we will be through, and of course I am anxious to get back to Edmonton just as soon as possible as there are very

² *Provincial Archives of Alberta* [hereafter *PAA*], Premier's Papers, 1093, E. Hinkson to W. Aberhart, 7 December 1935.

many governmental matters to deal with.”³ It was evident as early as 1935 that Aberhart was insistent that, at this juncture, he was quite busy with matters in Alberta and that he had little time to campaign for or assist the Social Credit movement in other provinces. Hinkson, however, was insistent that Aberhart come to Saskatchewan and assist in organizational matters. He quickly wrote another letter after Aberhart’s earlier response, restating his opinion that Aberhart’s assistance was desperately needed and expressing, in his opinion, what the need for Saskatchewan was:

The position here is that the organization that was set up for the federal election has disintegrated and I am left with only a very faithful few who are unable to assist me in meeting a large deficit. I have already made arrangements to borrow enough money to meet most of the deficit on the understanding that this would be repaid out of the proceeds of a lecture that you would deliver on your return trip from Ottawa.

Perhaps it was presumptuous on my part to suggest such arrangements but I was so certain that you would be only too glad to assist the cause of Social Credit here out of the predicament in which I am placed that I took the only course that seemed left open to me. It’s the old story of the man grasping at a straw.⁴

Clearly, Social Credit in Saskatchewan was in a difficult position. It is curious to note that at this stage much of Social Credit’s support had eroded after the end of the federal election campaign. Political movements rely on strong organizations, and a lack thereof between elections can be disastrous. This issue would continue to prove to be a significant problem for the Social Credit movement.

Another endemic issue that would prove to become a recurrent theme was the prominence of several individuals wishing to organize on behalf of Social Credit with no mandate or official sanction to do so. On March 27, 1937, Hinkson wrote another letter to Aberhart updating the premier of the situation in Saskatchewan. He expressed concern

³ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart to E. Hinkson, 10 December 1935.

⁴ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, E. Hinkson to W. Aberhart, 13 December 1935.

that separate organizations that did not have the official sanction of the Social Credit League of Canada were operating within the province of Saskatchewan and portraying themselves as legitimate. Hinkson tried to set the record straight:

I notice by the press that Harold Crawford is in Edmonton and in order that you may understand that he has no connection with Social Credit in Regina I am writing you. As you remember he acted as Chairman of your meeting here at my request and immediately thereafter he proceeded to organize a separate organization which he did and practically killed the Social Credit movement here as well as himself in the process.⁵

Other personalities appearing in correspondence between Saskatchewan Social Credit organizers and Premier Aberhart's office are portrayed as being incompetent or simply incapable of organizational matters. Lorne Smith, a director of the Social Credit league, wrote to Aberhart on May 2, 1938 to discuss the presence of such individuals:

As a director of the Sask. Social Credit league I am writing to you regarding the stand I have heard you have taken regarding the action taken by our executive in dismissing Mr. [Malcolm] Haver and appointing Mr. McGinnis as organizer and Mr. Crawford as secretary... I was one who supported Mr. Haver at the convention last fall but when I saw that his secretary work was a complete failure, that he did not have the personality to make an organizer I saw that I had made a mistake... As far as Mr. Crawford is concerned frankly I am not pleased with his appointment but he is not in a position of authority and there has to be some one to do the work which Mr. Haver utterly failed to do.⁶

It was at this point that members of Aberhart's cabinet began to get concerned about the situation in Saskatchewan. Lucien Maynard, the Minister of Municipal Affairs, wrote in a letter dated May 23, 1938 to Aberhart that a man by the name of Miller had wished to receive the Social Credit nomination for Gravelbourg after failing to be nominated by any of the other parties. Maynard suggested that Miller was "only an opportunist".⁷

⁵ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, E. Hinkson to W. Aberhart, 27 March 1937.

⁶ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, L. Smith to W. Aberhart, 2 May 1938.

⁷ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, L. Maynard to W. Aberhart, 23 May 1938.

Overall, the correspondence between the Premier's Office and the organizers of the Saskatchewan Social Credit League indicate a seemingly perpetual state of chaos and disorganization. Much of this trouble seems to have centred around Malcolm J. Haver. Acting as general secretary and organizer, Haver presented himself as a loyal and dedicated supporter of Social Credit in his correspondence with Premier Aberhart. He wrote Aberhart on April 22, 1938 to discuss his concerns about a recent executive meeting of the Social Credit League, in which he felt directors had abused the powers entrusted to them at the most recent party convention:

The convention minutes, stated that the central executive of five, had the power to add directors in constituencies that were not represented. But in spite of my protests and pointing out that fact, the Vice-President, Mr. Clark, rose and moved that any one present be added to the directorate provided two of the Directors would vouch that he was an active Social Creditor. As fast as they were added, the new Directors vouched for their friends. The entire twenty-five [visitors] were added. Social Credit destinies were thus entrusted to a faction that had been inactive as far as advancing Social Credit is concerned, and some of whom have even been advocating unity with other parties. The President, Mr. Needham himself, had just attended another unity meeting in Wilkie, where he pledged support to a fusion candidate.⁸

Naturally, the concern that some of these people were not fully committed to the Social Credit cause would be a serious issue for Aberhart. The overall tone of the communications between Aberhart's office and the Saskatchewan Social Creditors is largely one of confusion and uncertainty over who was in charge and who could be trusted. The presence of men such as Needham attending meetings in which they expressed support for unity between Social Credit and other political organizations was seen as cause for concern.

On the other hand, others within the Social Credit League portrayed Malcolm Haver as a turncoat. John Hilton, secretary of the Social Credit Party in Saskatchewan,

⁸ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, M. Haver to W. Aberhart, 22 April 1938.

wrote to Aberhart on May 13, 1938 to inform him that Haver had been supporting a Conservative candidate in the Rosthern riding.⁹ A summary of the Social Credit Regina meeting on April 9, 1938 indicates clearly that a motion was carried: “that Mr. Haver be removed from the office of Sec. Organizer”.¹⁰ Additionally, clause three of the summary stated that the executive was to be organized as follows: Joseph Needham and O.B. Elliot, Presidents; Fred Clarke, Vice President; H.W. Arnold, organizer; and John H. Hilton, secretary.¹¹ In response to this meeting, the Saskatoon branch of the Social Credit League sent an inter-office communication to the provincial executive in which they expressed grave concern:

We do not consider it a good policy to attempt the re organization of the Saskatchewan Social Credit League at this time, in view of the fact that an election is imminent.

Some of the names mentioned in clause three of the memo have not been noticed in (action) in Social Credit circles for a number of years.

After due consideration by a joint meeting of a number of the Provincial Executive and the Saskatoon Executive and Directors, that a unanimous motion was shown in favor of this memo be rejected. And that the carrying [sic] on of the Social Credit organization work be carried on by the 100% Social Creditors to a successful conclusion.

Further we suggest that all proposals of cooperation with other party leaders be rejected, as we consider it to be detrimental to the best interests of Social Credit, and the advancements.¹²

Serious splits within the party’s organizations were becoming more pronounced at this point. Premier Aberhart, however, had been largely absent from dealing with the difficulties that had arisen. Eventually, he wrote Lorne Smith about the problems with the Saskatchewan organization:

⁹ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, J. Hilton to W. Aberhart, 13 May 1938.

¹⁰ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, Summary of Executive meeting, 9 April 1938.

¹¹ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, Summary of Executive meeting, 9 April 1938.

¹² PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, Inter-office communication, Saskatoon Executive to Provincial Executive, 16 April 1938

I am of the opinion that it is in the interests of all concerned to settle difficulties that arise by amicable discussion. Any decisions regarding activities of your organization would have to be based on a knowledge of its Constitution, and the full details of the situation. I do not consider that I would be in a position to advise in the present circumstances. The success of any organization depends upon hard work by men of integrity and ability. The only suggestion I can make from this distance is that those who are interested in the success of your movement in the best possible hands, and support the Executive Constitution... As I say above, however, it would be exceedingly difficult to form a clear picture of the situation from this distance.¹³

Even by this date, Aberhart remained unwilling to intervene in the affairs of the Saskatchewan branch of the Social Credit movement. Most of the provincial organization remained divided and in chaos, with members uncertain who was truly with Social Credit and who could be trusted.

Social Credit was able to organize effectively in only a few ridings. Maynard wrote to Aberhart that “I believe Melville has the best organization up to date. We have two or three people in Melville who are looking after this zone and they have done marvellous work.”¹⁴ Constituency members put a considerable amount of thought and work into the process to nominate a suitable candidate for the upcoming election. The primary piece of evidence suggesting that Melville was well-organized is a report of the Advisory Board of the Social Credit Melville constituency, which includes the results of a vote between the five candidates who put their name forward for consideration, drawing 133 total ballots. Mr. F. Herman was elected with 86 of the first-choice ballots.¹⁵ Included in this report were the dossiers of all five candidates for the Social Credit nomination. These dossiers were extensive in the recording of the various candidates’ family, political, and work history. Part of Herman’s dossier, for example, listed him as

¹³ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart to L. Smith, 1 April 1938.

¹⁴ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, L. Maynard to W. Aberhart, 23 May 1938.

¹⁵ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, Report of Advisory Board of Melville, 25 May 1938

being “Born in Ontario, German, English extraction”, and stated his political history, in part, as being “C.C.F. candidate Wolsely Qu’appelle in 1935, sympathetic to Social Credit while such”.¹⁶ This report, of course, could not be fully conclusive of an individual candidate’s suitability to run for the Social Credit party, but it is important to note that the Melville advisory board made this report. This fact becomes especially critical when noting that, throughout the extensive examination of Premier Aberhart’s papers in preparation for writing this thesis, the Melville report is the only one to do so. One can only conclude that in the lead-up to the Saskatchewan election of 1938, the Social Credit League of Saskatchewan remained a party with significant difficulties in organizational skills and a considerable amount of infighting.

Insight into the state of the governing Liberal Party in the lead-up to the Saskatchewan election of 1938 can be found in the Jimmy Gardiner fonds, located in the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan. Gardiner, who had previously been premier of Saskatchewan, had left Saskatchewan politics in 1935 and moved into the federal cabinet, serving as Minister of Agriculture under Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King. However, he retained a considerable amount of influence over the events playing out at the provincial level. Indeed, even with Gardiner busy in his federal role, he would remain a significant presence in Saskatchewan politics. Political scientist David E. Smith writes in his book, *Prairie Liberalism: The Liberal Party in Saskatchewan, 1905-71*:

The virtual duplication of the old cabinet in the new and the temperament in Patterson himself suggested to some observers that Gardiner’s influence would remain as potent as ever in provincial politics despite his absence in Ottawa. Assertions to this effect became a constant theme of the CCF and Conservative parties in Saskatchewan for two decades, and eventually it was to do considerable harm to the provincial Liberals... the composition of the new government was part of Gardiner’s legacy, and from this past

¹⁶ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, Report of Advisory Board of Melville, 25 May 1938

experience... the former leader continued to exert his influence over events in Saskatchewan.¹⁷

Clearly, having a sitting premier largely seen as subordinate or even taking orders from Ottawa cannot be overlooked as a factor in the lead-up to the election. This fact is reflected in the research materials; no independent premier's papers detailing Patterson's communications exist, and historians must rely on Gardiner's communications with organizers in Saskatchewan to gain some perspective of the Liberal Party in years before the 1938 election.

Discussion about preparations for the 1938 election in the provincial Liberal Party source material is rather limited. It strikes one that the Liberals were not particularly concerned about losing the election. Indeed, with the Conservatives still in disarray over the drubbing they had received at the polls in 1934 and other parties, such as the CCF, espousing radical views, the Liberals seemed the natural choice of voters who wanted a safe, trusted option. Discussion over what party seemed a suitable 'non-Liberal' alternative was difficult to peg down, as Smith writes,

Confusion in the CCF constituency associations became increasingly evident as local leaders were unsure which party or parties were progressive enough to be approached on the matter... potential cooperation was limited to the Conservatives or Social Credit. Even then it was hard to set a firm and fast rule... in some respects the Conservatives were the more perplexing of the two alternatives. Although they had chosen a new leader, John Diefenbaker, in October 1936, the party's chances in the next provincial election were far from promising.¹⁸

With such a complicated scene among provincial opposition parties, the Liberals remained the party of the establishment. But some unorthodox coalitions were being

¹⁷ David E. Smith, *Prairie Liberalism: The Liberal Party in Saskatchewan, 1905-71* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 230.

¹⁸ Smith, *Prairie Liberalism*, 233- 234.

considered in a desperate attempt to remove the Liberals from power. As Smith goes on to write,

The shift in CCF attitudes towards the Tories could be explained in part by their desire to defeat the Liberals. This was the interpretation the Liberals put upon it as they adopted the incongruous stance of the majority party underdog. Good partisan propaganda that it was, it did not tell the whole story.¹⁹

To be sure, some Liberals were concerned about choosing good candidates for the election. Generally, though, Liberal concerns in the election focussed not so much on a disorganized opposition but on keeping loyal party members happy. Jimmy Gardiner's influence in provincial politics remained strong, and Premier Patterson was only more than happy to mimic Gardiner's government in his own. Liberal organizers believed that, due to the failure of the Conservatives to bring Saskatchewan out of the Great Depression by 1934, the Liberal Party was the only real option for concerned citizens who were unwilling to trust radical alternatives with the governance of the province. This strategy, as implemented by the Liberal Party, would prove to be most effective in keeping the Liberal Party in power in Saskatchewan.

Equally deserving of attention in looking at the years leading up to the Saskatchewan election of 1938 is the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). The CCF, possessing a distinctively socialist ideology, was desperate to rid Saskatchewan of the governing Liberals. Unlike the Social Credit or the Conservatives, the CCF had never attained power anywhere in the country at this point, neither on the provincial or federal scene. They, much like Social Credit, had a progressive vision for the province which differed considerably from the Liberal image of Saskatchewan's future. The CCF was also willing to cooperate with other progressive movements.

¹⁹ Smith, *Prairie Liberalism*, 234.

Specifically, CCF members were, at least initially, open to the idea of cooperation with the Social Credit Party. From the minute book of the Executive meeting of July 14, 1937, the following resolution was passed:

This convention of the Sask. CCF reaffirms its belief in the wisdom and necessity for the cooperation between progressive and democratic groups in the political field. The CCF does not ask other groups to relinquish their identity and join with the CCF in a fusion party nor is the CCF willing to sink its identity and principles in a fusion party. The CCF believes the program as accepted by the Provincial Convention provides a basis on which such groups may cooperate. AND BE IT RESOLVED that this convention requests the incoming Provincial Council to find ways and means of promoting cooperation between such individuals and organizations in the Province. Carried.²⁰

Clearly, the executive of the CCF was given a mandate to work towards removing the Liberals from power, while at the same time not watering down their principles. This proposal was considered and accepted and appeared to be viewed as an open gesture towards other parties, leading to the hope that it would be reciprocated.

With this mandate in hand, the CCF executive proceeded to see what could be done regarding cooperation. Thus, at the CCF executive meeting held on September 11, 1937, another motion was passed regarding Social Credit and cooperation with their group. A message to be presented to Social Credit was thoroughly discussed and approved. It read:

To members of the Social Credit Convention, Saskatoon, October 6, 1937. Through the medium of this message of greeting, the Saskatchewan Cooperative Commonwealth desires to extend to your organization an invitation to meet a committee from the Saskatchewan CCF to canvass the possibility of cooperation, in order to prevent the forces of reaction again sweeping Saskatchewan by splitting the reform vote.²¹

²⁰ *Saskatchewan Archives Board* [hereafter *SAB*], CCF Papers, II., 2, Minutes of Executive Meeting Book, 14 July 1937.

²¹ *SAB*, CCF Papers, II, 2, Minutes of Executive Meeting Book, 11 September 1937.

This message can only be read as a bold CCF attempt to try to reverse their electoral failures and gain ground on the Liberal party. While having explicitly stated earlier that they wished to not water down their party principles, it seems as though they were willing to make some significant compromises in order to win over the support of other, potentially disparate groups of progressive forces. In a further statement released on March 19, 1938, the CCF restated that it is “reasonable for the CCF people in a constituency in which their organization is not strong enough to reasonably expect to elect a progressive and reform candidate to seek to find a candidate in that constituency belonging to some other progressive group whom they can support without sacrificing any of their principles, where the CCF organization decide not to nominate.”²²

Regardless of the optimistic view of some CCF members towards cooperation, other progressive groups were not particularly impressed by these overtures. On April 1, 1938, a representative of the CCF was sent to Edmonton, Alberta to interview Aberhart regarding his opinion on cooperation with the CCF in the upcoming election. Aberhart was cool to the idea. He expressed his view that the CCF had essentially blown its chance at forming government and winning an election. He stated that “you fellows may think you can defeat that Government down there, but I am one who knows you cannot and to save the situation, we the Social Credit, are going into that Province to capture it.”²³ Aberhart was also upset by the fact that, as he saw it, the CCF had done nothing to assist him when he was attempting to win his own election in Alberta in 1935. Furthermore, he denied many of the major elements of CCF policy, and stated his views to the interviewer:

²² SAB, CCF Papers, II, 2, Minutes of Executive Meeting Book, 19 March 1938.

²³ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 2, Minutes of Executive Meeting Book, 16 April 1938.

I am going to frankly tell you I have no use or faith in Socialism, and if it were to come to a showdown and I was placed in a position that I had to make my choice in a constituency where I had only two choices, CCF or Liberal, I certainly would vote Liberal.²⁴

Despite the CCF's great hope that cooperation could be found between themselves and the Social Credit movement, this statement by Aberhart clearly shut the door on cooperation between these two groups.

This prospect of non-cooperation with the Social Credit did not necessarily mean that there were not other ways the CCF could prepare for the upcoming election by trying to unite the progressive vote together. In a letter from George Williams, provincial leader of the CCF, to M.J. Coldwell and T.C. Douglas, CCF members of the House of Commons on February 17, 1938, Williams laid out a strategy that could be used in their favour in the months leading up to the election. Williams stated his belief that "it would very much help us here in Saskatchewan if a definite wedge could be driven between [Social Creditors] Needham and Haver."²⁵ Williams believed the best strategy to eliminate Social Credit as a threat would be to drive a wedge between these two men and take advantage of party infighting. Williams then gave Coldwell and Douglas his personal suggestion on how to deal with Needham:

If you two could talk to him quietly about the getting together of the Social Credit group and the CCF group in that corner of the Province... and even leave the impression that you would like to have him come in with the CCF without definitely asking him to desert his own party, I think the day would come when he will come in with the CCF and desert his own party. In other words a little bit of tactful diplomacy with Needham just now will pay good dividends.²⁶

²⁴ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 2, Minutes of Executive Meeting Book, 16 April 1938.

²⁵ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 29, G. Williams to M. Coldwell and T. Douglas, 17 February 1938.

²⁶ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 29, G. Williams to M. Coldwell and T. Douglas, 17 February 1938.

Another issue that this particular letter brings up is the doubt among many CCFers that members of the Social Credit movement were actually all that strongly dedicated to the cause of Social Credit. Divisions within Social Credit were not limited to the Battlefords. They were also divided in places such as Wilkie, as Williams pointed out in a letter to M. J. Coldwell dated February 5, 1938:

The situation in Wilkie is in a state of flux. The sum and total of the situation to date is that Social Credit has been internally weakened by bickerings [sic] within their own party, while we on the other hand have possibly gained some ground. Whatever happens with respect to Wilkie and other things of a like nature in Saskatchewan, one thing we are determined to avoid is expulsions and internal friction.²⁷

Indeed, one thing that the CCF seemed to have going for it in the lead-up to the 1938 election that Social Credit did not have was a stable internal party structure.

Other possibilities of cooperation were still being considered in the lead-up to the election. The idea of cooperation with the Conservatives had been brought up by the CCF party executive, but in a letter dated September 13, 1937 from George Williams to J. H. Mayhew, secretary of the Willowbunch Constituency, Williams threw cold water on the idea. He stated that “insofar as the Conservatives are concerned, you will recollect that the question was raised at the convention. Although not put to a vote, the indication was that the convention was not favourably disposed to any cooperation with the Conservatives.”²⁸ Williams’ view on cooperation with the Conservatives seemed to become even less enthusiastic as time went by. In a letter dated March 15, 1938 from Williams to T. D. Agnew of Penton, Saskatchewan, Williams wished to reassure Agnew of the fact that, although the CCF candidate in Weyburn had also accepted the Conservative nomination, he had pledged to sit as a CCFer if elected. Williams further

²⁷ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 29, G. Williams to M. Coldwell, 5 February 1938.

²⁸ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 29, G. Williams to J. Mayhew, 13 September 1937.

went on to state unequivocally that “this does not mean that we are foolish enough to expect reactionary Tories such as Diefenbaker to become supporters of the CCF.”²⁹ The CCF was the party most willing to engage in cooperation with other opposition parties to defeat the governing Liberals. However, their efforts at cooperation were largely met with either indifference or outright hostility, particularly from William Aberhart, who was especially opposed to the idea of cooperation with the CCF.

In the years leading up to the Saskatchewan election of 1938 the Conservative Party was in the political wilderness. After its defeat in the 1934 provincial election, it had been struggling to find a way to remain relevant. Especially difficult was the fact that the Liberals represented the party of big business, as well as those who were fearful of change and of radical economic policies. This fact made the traditional role of a fiscally conservative party essentially obsolete for the time being as the Liberals had assumed the role. However, the Conservatives under leader John Diefenbaker decided to go ahead and contest the election. In a letter dated April 8, 1938, Diefenbaker wrote to supporter R. W. Ward of Calgary, Alberta, to thank him for a financial contribution. In the letter, Diefenbaker added that “I am hopeful that the Conservatives will have about thirty-five candidates in the field. The great difficulty at the moment is that Aberhart has announced that Social Credit intends to nominate in this province, which will tend to make one further division in the opposition vote.”³⁰ Considering that the Conservatives planned to nominate 35 candidates in a Legislative Assembly holding 52 members, they must certainly have realized they had no chance of forming government. In the minutes of a meeting of the northern council of the Conservative Party held December 21, 1937,

²⁹ *SAB*, CCF Papers, II, 287(15), G. Williams to J. Agnew, 15 March 1938.

³⁰ *University of Saskatchewan Special Collections* [hereafter *USSC*], Diefenbaker Papers, 1, Aberhart, J. Diefenbaker to R. Ward, 8 April 1938.

several party members felt they had little chance of winning seats if the opposition vote was split between the Conservatives, Social Credit, and CCF. One member, a Mr. Swallows of North Battleford, expressed his opinion that “a three cornered fight would ensure election of Liberal.”³¹ Concerns about splitting the opposition vote, therefore, were not limited to the CCF. A strong, mostly trusted Liberal government with the support of established business interests and a friendly government in Ottawa would be a challenge in any election to defeat, let alone one that faced three opposition parties.

Cooperation between the Conservatives and other parties, particularly the CCF, was considered to a degree at this point in time. In a letter dated November 27, 1937, a D. G. Mclean of Wakaw, Saskatchewan wrote to Diefenbaker to express his feelings about the status of opposition parties and nominations for provincial ridings:

There seems to be a regret that the C.C.Fs. nominated a man in Lumsden as that is counted a sure seat for us, and some of them is saying that we better get busy and get our men in what we think is safe seats before the C.C.Fs. Nominate these men, if that is the policy our party is going work on then there is no getting busy about it. If we are to have an understanding with the other party, we had better call both the leaders of both parties together [sic] and agree on certain seats.³²

However, problems quickly arose. In a letter written on April 2, 1938, Frank Turnbull of Regina, Saskatchewan wrote to Diefenbaker explaining the difficulties that the Conservatives faced in being able to win any seats, even under a scheme of cooperation with the CCF:

George [Williams] claims the C.C.F. are the dominant party in the Province, and that we should recognize that we are distinctly inferior. He expresses the belief that the C.C.F. will have a clear majority in the next house and I presume, for that reason, does not intend to give us a clear field in very many seats. He apparently figures about eight seats for us, about 12 seats that are

³¹ USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 39.2, Minutes of a Meeting of the Northern Council, 21 December 1937.

³² USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.1, D. Mclean to J. Diefenbaker, 27 November 1937.

hopeless for anybody except the Government and thirty-two seats left, which he hopes to win. It is hard to negotiate with a man without any balance.³³

Others within the party were also disappointed with the situation regarding cooperation, but it was not one easily resolved. E.E. Perley, Member of Parliament for Qu'Appelle, wrote Diefenbaker on April 4, 1938 to relay information on discussions he had held with fellow Members of Parliament from the CCF, Major Coldwell and T.C. Douglas:

In conclusion I can only say, that Douglas and Coldwell both stated to me last night that they would go to Regina and lay down the law to Williams as they both stated the arrangement must be fair and reasonable to both parties. I pointed out that if it wasn't it would be too bad for Williams and the C.C.F. Even if they had a larger group than the Conservatives, they would be in a difficult position if the Conservatives were sore, feeling they had not had a square deal in the distribution of seats and therefore, were in the third position. They recognize this is a fact.³⁴

George Williams clearly saw a weakened Conservative Party entering the 1938 election and did not want to give any concessions to help them win seats. It is easy to understand Williams' perspective. When a political organization was as weak as the Conservatives going into the election, it would be difficult not to exploit. Perley could only do so much to convince his fellow Members of Parliament from the CCF to support discussions between the Conservatives and CCF on cooperation. Ultimately, however, the two parties were both separate organizations with different viewpoints on how governance should be undertaken, and these difficulties were not easily overcome.

Some criticism was also levelled at the abilities of Diefenbaker as leader of the Conservatives. On March 16, 1939, John M. Robb, Dominion Organizer of the national Conservative Party, wrote Diefenbaker to explain that "while in Saskatchewan I heard several criticisms of your leadership. At the same time I have heard many commendable

³³ USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.3, F. Turnbull to J. Diefenbaker, 2 April 1938.

³⁴ USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.3, E. Perley to J. Diefenbaker, 4 April 1938.

things said also. This of course is to be expected especially when a leader has not been successful.”³⁵ While this letter was written after the election, it nevertheless underscores the fact that Diefenbaker struggled to find success early on in his political career. This unfortunate situation was not Diefenbaker’s fault. In a letter dated May 26, 1939, A. Kimball of Regina, Saskatchewan wrote to Diefenbaker to express his feelings that “since the last federal election (1935) the Conservatives have done little but observe the tide of passing events.”³⁶ Kimball went on to state how there was a pure absence of concerned individuals within the Conservative Party:

Leaving yourself out of the picture for the moment, what man of former prominence in the party is or has taken the slightest interest in party affairs since the Federal election and why is this? If a caucus of party leaders was called tomorrow how many former provincial ministers, federal ministers, members of Parliament or senators would be sufficiently interested to attend? Not a Corporal’s Guard! Again I ask you why is this? I venture the statement that in ninety percent of the provincial constituencies there is not the semblance of an active organization existing. In fact it is worse if possible than in 1926 when Dr. Anderson re-organized the province. Again I ask why?³⁷

Kimball blamed the party’s poor standing in Saskatchewan on its time in office during the Depression³⁸ Divided, the Conservative Party stood little chance of mounting a serious effort in the election of 1938.

In the years leading up to the Saskatchewan election of 1938, all three main opposition parties faced significant challenges. For the Social Credit Party, the primary challenge was in getting the movement off the ground. Several party members wished to assume positions of authority, often in conflict with others in the party. Premier William Aberhart of Alberta was hesitant to intervene in the affairs of the party in Saskatchewan,

³⁵ USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 39.3, J. Robb to J. Diefenbaker, 16 March 1939.

³⁶ USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.1, A. Kimball to J. Diefenbaker, 26 May 1936.

³⁷ USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.1, A. Kimball to J. Diefenbaker, 26 May 1936.

³⁸ USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.1, A. Kimball to J. Diefenbaker, 26 May 1936.

frequently citing his own business in Alberta and a desire to see the Saskatchewan wing find strong leadership of its own. The CCF, meanwhile, was not plagued by the problem of leadership, and had a good understanding of the political scene in Saskatchewan. However, their efforts to cooperate with other opposition parties in an effort to unseat the Liberals were largely unsuccessful due to competing visions and an unwillingness to compromise key party policy planks. Finally, the Conservatives were in the worse shape of all. They had little organization, few actively engaged individuals, and difficulty finding natural allies to cooperate with.

On the other hand, the Liberals went into the 1938 election in a strong position. They were seen as a trusted, if somewhat flawed, government, and if nothing else, could be viewed as a steady hand to help Saskatchewan weather the Depression. They also had the support of a strong federal Liberal government, with the ability to dole out patronage to loyal party supporters. They did have some challenges but were generally in the strongest position, especially as the sitting government.

Chapter Two

The Election: Chaos and Confusion

The Saskatchewan election of 1938 largely caught the Social Credit movement off-guard. The legislative assembly was dissolved and the election scheduled for June 8, 1938, almost four years from the date of the previous election. However, this election call was widely viewed as a ‘snap election’, with one newspaper describing Premier Patterson’s election call as a “sudden announcement”.¹ Social Credit had a significant amount of difficulty getting organized because a number of prominent organizers within the party fought among each other and questioned one another’s loyalty to the movement. The beginning of the election campaign consequently saw Social Credit largely unprepared, and they were forced to speed up organizational work in order to mount a successful campaign to capture the province. As infighting within the party in Saskatchewan was such a distraction, it seemed as though there would be only one way to rectify the situation: call in outside help. Alberta Premier William Aberhart, previously reluctant to interfere with the affairs of the Social Credit movement in other provinces, now felt pressure to intervene to keep the movement strong and hopefully capture a second province for Social Credit in the process. Aberhart had told party organizers in Saskatchewan time and again that he was unwilling to get involved in the affairs of another province, mainly citing the reason of being too busy taking care of the concerns of being premier of Alberta. But action was now required, and action would need to be taken.

¹ *Provincial Archives of Alberta* [hereafter PAA], Premier’s Papers, 1093, Sacred Nominations Rushed; Vote Date Set, *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 May 1938.

The *Edmonton Bulletin* reported on the situation of the Saskatchewan election as it stood on May 16, 1938. The news ran on the newspaper's front page, as "Sacred Nominations Rushed: Vote Date Set."² The article, which included a significant number of Aberhart's comments, focussed on the meaning of the call of the election and detailed plans for how Social Credit would fight the election. Aberhart had much to complain about Premier Patterson's decision to call an election:

Premier Patterson's rush in holding the election on June 8, is in accord with his statement last week, 'if we hold the election at once the people will put the Liberals in again. If we defer a few weeks, no one can tell what may happen'. Evidently the Liberals decided to take no chances. On account of the suddenness of the election and the short time allowed to give the people a chance to think this whole matter through, our meetings as announced last Sunday will need to take the form of conventions.³

In preparation for nomination meetings, Aberhart had written a letter several days earlier on May 12, 1938 to T. A. McInnis, an organizer for Social Credit from Regina, discussing how Social Credit was "zoning the province and appointing key men of supervisors over each zone. We are accepting the nominations of the people who know the men there."⁴ Unless Social Credit had been able to successfully organize the entire province, appoint supervisors, and accept nominations within the four-day period between Aberhart's letter to McInnis and the election call as reported in the *Edmonton Bulletin* article of May 16, 1938, Social Credit was, organizationally speaking, in a very tight bind.

John Hilton, secretary of the Social Credit Party in Saskatchewan, was just one example of a man concerned about the situation of Social Credit in the days immediately

² PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, Sacred Nominations Rushed; Vote Date Set, *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 May 1938.

³ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, Sacred Nominations Rushed; Vote Date Set, *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 May 1938.

⁴ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart to T. McInnis, 12 May 1938.

before the election call. On May 5, 1938, he wrote to Aberhart to express his concerns personally. Hilton pressed the issue that organizational work needed to proceed as quickly as possible. He was also frustrated at the lack of a response from the Alberta government about what to do: “I have had no answers to the letters I have written you this week but I continue to be the butt for considerable interrogation. Here is almost another week passed and no action.”⁵ At this point, nobody seemed to have any positive things to say about Malcolm Haver, the Social Credit organizer discussed in the first chapter. His actions suggested that he was, in fact, never a real Social Creditor. Naturally, when a political movement has organizers who are not dedicated to the cause, it will be difficult to organize properly.

Hilton continued to press forward his concern that little was being done in anticipation of the election call. He proceeded to make his opinion known that if no response was given to him quickly, he and the executive would move forward immediately to do “REAL work FORTH-WITH”.⁶ Hilton went on to explain his perspective to Aberhart:

You need the endorsation of Sask for your own benefit & pussy-footing will never get it for you. We have a real man in Arnold, ready to ‘go places’ and equipped to go. Why monkey around with discredited weaklings? Liberals have arranged all their conventions except one in the Prov. showing they are ready on the word to go. We have it all to do... Quickest way to get the zones is by air... Let’s hear from you at once.⁷

Aberhart was quick to reply with a letter dated May 9, 1938 with his own perspective on the ever-deteriorating situation in Saskatchewan. He was not particularly pleased with Hilton’s comments:

⁵ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, J. Hilton to W. Aberhart, 5 May 1938.

⁶ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, J. Hilton to W. Aberhart, 5 May 1938.

⁷ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, J. Hilton to W. Aberhart, 5 May 1938.

I am quite surprised at the statements you make in your letter. You are apparently an impossible man. We accepted your invitation when you were here and made arrangements with your men regarding how to proceed. I am afraid you have your eyes too much on Haver. If Mr. Elliott gave Colonel Arnold [Saskatchewan Social Credit organizers] his complete authority to proceed to organize the province after our meeting and you are ready to endorse this authority also at this time, then I quite understand that you both are not in harmony with the Social Credit movement there. I hope Colonel Arnold will not assume authority. If he does he will be double-crossing us in the arrangements we have already made.⁸

Aberhart remained displeased with the confusing situation as it existed between the different men in charge of organizing the province.

Hilton, however, was right about the need to move quickly in organizing the province. Later on in Aberhart's letter to Hilton, Aberhart discussed his views regarding what the way ahead should be:

May I suggest to you that the holding of conventions and the nominating of candidates is not of the greatest importance at the present moment. I feel that both you and Mr. Arnold should abide by your agreement when you were here or you need not call our attention to anybody else. I trust that this letter will be understood and that you will meet with Mr. Manning [Ernest Manning, a prominent cabinet minister in the Aberhart government] who will be in Saskatoon on the 11th to discuss further the whole program.⁹

Aberhart did not seem to be worried about the pending election. Ernest Manning, Aberhart's right-hand man in Alberta and a future premier himself, was scheduled to travel to Saskatchewan to discuss the preparations for the election, and that all would be resolved. By this point, though, it would appear that Aberhart was of the opinion that the Saskatchewan organization could not be relied upon to do anything in the lead-up to the election and that outside intervention would be necessary. Saskatchewan Social Credit organizers came to the same realization. Organizer T.A. McInnis wrote Aberhart:

After giving due reflection to the events of the past ten days, I have come to the conclusion that it is not the wish of those in charge of the campaign that I have

⁸ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart to J. Hilton, 9 May 1938.

⁹ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart to J. Hilton, 9 May 1938.

any active part in that campaign, and I shall act in accordance with that belief. I shall still be an ardent supporter of Social Credit, and will do nothing at any time that will in any way hinder the progress of the movement... if at any time, I can be of any service to any candidate standing on behalf of Social Credit, I will be happy to assist, and in the meantime, I will stand on the sidelines and do my best to cheer you on.¹⁰

McInnis also took the opportunity to inform Aberhart that he was forwarding to the Alberta premier's office all letters he had received from supporters wishing to participate in the campaign. Five such letters were enclosed to Aberhart. Aberhart, when responding to McInnis, wrote that "I have nothing against you, Mr. McInnis. It was unfortunate that the Social Credit situation in Saskatchewan had become so tense. I appreciate your spirit, and hope you may help in whatever way is best."¹¹ With the men in Saskatchewan still largely confused about who was doing what, who was a true Social Creditor and who was a turncoat, and general confusion overall, Aberhart assumed full responsibility for the campaign in Saskatchewan. McInnis had signalled that this was indeed the case when replying to a Social Credit supporter:

I wish to inform you that I am forwarding your letter to Premier Aberhart, as the direction of the Social Credit campaign in Saskatchewan is under the Western Social Credit Board, and I am, therefore unable to give you any information on that matter. I believe, however, that if you will continue your organization of local groups, that you will receive assistance and direction from the proper authority in due course.¹²

Clearly, the Social Credit organization as a whole believed that the Saskatchewan organization was unable to effectively carry out a campaign of its own, and as a result, assumed authority itself.

One important aspect of the Social Credit campaign in Saskatchewan, as directed by Aberhart, was the exporting of prominent Social Credit MLAs, cabinet ministers and

¹⁰ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, T. McInnis to W. Aberhart, 7 May 1938.

¹¹ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart T. McInnis, 12 May 1938.

¹² PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, T. McInnis to R. Cowell, 7 May 1938.

organizers from Alberta to Saskatchewan to serve as speakers on whirlwind tours of Saskatchewan. The *Edmonton Bulletin* continued its coverage of the election call by reporting on these meetings. Locations for meetings included Lloydminster, Maidstone, North Battleford, Prince Albert, Tisdale, Swift Current, Macklin, Unity, Kerrobert, and Kindersley. Speakers included Ernest Manning, Solon E. Low [Alberta provincial treasurer] and Lucien Maynard [Alberta Minister of Municipal Affairs], in addition to Aberhart himself.¹³ Aberhart also issued a call for more speakers to step forward:

Owing to the premature date announced for the Saskatchewan election, there is an urgent demand for speakers from Alberta. Will any Social Credit M.L.A.'s who are prepared to hold meetings in Saskatchewan please notify Mr. E. C. Manning, chief organizer of the Western Social Credit Association, at the earliest possible date, stating where and for how long they are prepared, also any Saskatchewan districts in which you have contacts. Also give the names of any qualified speakers in your constituency who are prepared to go. Don't delay. Your assistance is needed. We trust that the people will turn out in large numbers as we bring you a message of cheer and hope.¹⁴

With the local organization in disarray, Aberhart stepped in and used the same tactic that had proven successful before: bombard the people with the message of 'cheer and hope'. Aberhart wished to portray Social Credit as a force for good in coming to Saskatchewan. He told the residents of Saskatchewan that Social Credit would be able to help the province out of the Great Depression. He spoke at length about what Social Credit could and would do for the people of Saskatchewan, highlighting what his government had done in Alberta:

The Premier declared that "from many centres of Alberta comes the good news that our people are beginning to realize that we are working steadily toward freedom in security. We are determined to provide security in contented homes with a sufficiency of purchasing power. We are fighting for economic freedom

¹³ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, Sacred Nominations Rushed; Vote Date Set, *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 May, 1938.

¹⁴ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, Sacred Nominations Rushed; Vote Date Set, *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 May, 1938.

that will enable our people to develop their individual enterprise and enjoy the culture of their individual aptitudes and particular tendencies.¹⁵

Aberhart made the same offer to Saskatchewan. He believed that Social Credit could be a real alternative for Saskatchewan.

Many Social Creditors throughout Saskatchewan shared this view. Andrew Witwicki, the President of the Western Social Credit Group of Canora, was one of these individuals. In a letter written by Witwicki to Aberhart on June 2, 1938, Witwicki expressed his disappointment that Social Credit had been unable to nominate a candidate in his riding. It was an example of how Social Credit was not well prepared for the election. Witwicki explained: “as our riding was scheduled at very last for introduction of Social Credit thru meetings, unfortunately there had not been sufficient time to successfully cover the constituency before election date, however we are still confident it could had been done to our victory.”¹⁶ Because of the rushed nomination process, Social Credit had not been able to nominate a full slate of candidates. However, supporters such as Witwicki remained hopeful and wished to proceed with organizational work and support the Social Credit movement as a whole:

We have formed a Social Credit group here and have our secretary communicate with the Social Credit secretary Mr. Baker of Edmonton for full particulars as to establishing Social Credit group officially.

Although I had not been nominated in this riding, I am behind the principles of Social Credit and will remain so in future and do all in my power to assist at present Yorkton riding to reach and carry the Social Credit banner on June the 8th, and wishing without and doubt of hope for our Triumphant Victory for the Province of Saskatchewan.¹⁷

¹⁵ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, Sacred Nominations Rushed; Vote Date Set, *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 May 1938.

¹⁶ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, Letter of A. Witwicki to W. Aberhart, 2 June 1938.

¹⁷ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, A. Witwicki to W. Aberhart, 2 June 1938.

Even though Social Credit had been unable to nominate a candidate in every riding, Wiwicki's comments show that the movement had not lost some of its devoted followers. But capturing government would be difficult without a full slate of candidates. While being supportive, there was only so much Witwicki and other Social Creditors could do without every riding having a candidate nominated.

The Melville area was a microcosm of Social Credit difficulties in Saskatchewan. R. Dempster, a zone supervisor based in Melville, had enjoyed some success in organizing parts of the east central Saskatchewan region, including the Touchwood constituency. In a report from Dempster to the Members of the Advisory Board in Edmonton dated May 28, 1938, Dempster provided a detailed report of the nomination convention May 27:

The constituency had been divided into nine zones according to geographical and population differences. Zone captains were placed in charge. In the short space of five days forty eight bonafide delegates representing a group each were present at the convention. Organization work is going on stronger than ever at the present time.¹⁸

However, his report also indicated that Social Credit support was limited and that it might be difficult to elect a member of the Legislative Assembly:

In addition to the delegates there were fifty one registered visitors. A tone of harmony was evident throughout the convention for the furtherance of Social Credit. The selection of an advisory committee was difficult owing to the fact that the majority of delegates present were representative of only three zones... we feel a Social Credit victory is quite feasible and are confident of good results.¹⁹

Even though Social Credit had some support, it would be difficult with the lack of organization on the ground to obtain enough support across the province to elect a sufficient number of candidates to form government.

¹⁸ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, Report of R. Dempster to Advisory Board, 28 May 1938.

¹⁹ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, Report of R. Dempster to Advisory Board, 28 May 1938.

Lucien Maynard, Aberhart's Minister of Municipal Affairs, in a letter written to Aberhart on May 23, 1938, provided additional perspective on the situation in east-central Saskatchewan. He expressed his opinion that "in connection with Touchwood constituency, it is all zoned up and pretty well organized. With a speaker in this constituency to do the educational work we stand a good chance of electing our candidate."²⁰ Melville, on the other hand, faced a strong Liberal presence. Maynard relayed to Aberhart some of the concerns of this particular constituency's organizers:

They are exceedingly anxious however that you should speak in Melville on June 7th, the night before the election. The reason for this date particularly is because Jimmy Gardiner [federal Minister of Agriculture] and Charlie Dunn, present minister of Public Works in Saskatchewan will both be speaking at Melville in the Town Hall and the Social Creditors have made arrangements to rent the skating rink for your meeting. I can assure you, judging by the crowd of between 1400 and 1500 people that attended my meeting last Saturday, you should have no difficulty in securing a crowd of several thousand in this large center, leaving Gardiner and Dunn with a few hundred people. The prestige that you will acquire by the comparison in crowds will be sufficient to swing to our side many of those who will still be wavering on the night of the 7th and that Gardiner is likely to swing his way if you are not there.²¹

Certainly, Social Credit in Saskatchewan had a significant amount of support from speakers in Alberta. But the election would decide whether the people of Saskatchewan were receptive of the message that Social Credit was expressing, and wanted something different.

Further expressions of disappointment in the rushed nomination process were articulated by others. Robert K. Michael, a Social Credit supporter living in Edmonton, passed on his "regret that there are 'a few' constituencies [in Saskatchewan] in which Social Credit candidates might not be entered."²² His wish, naturally, was that Social

²⁰ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, L. Maynard to W. Aberhart, 23 May 1938.

²¹ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, L. Maynard to W. Aberhart, 23 May 1938.

²² PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, R. Michael to W. Aberhart, 30 May 1938.

Credit would be able to nominate a full slate of candidates for Saskatchewan. Michael even made an offer to fill at least one of those constituencies without a nominee:

If, therefore, there are some constituencies which for any reason your Association feels are 'hopeless', if you will arrange my nomination in any one of them and other nominations in the remainder and put me in charge of them, I would be very pleased to show what can be done in exactly one weeks time by my own very especial methods of campaigning.²³

Michael brings up an interesting point. With the difficulty in finding candidates to fill empty nominations, Michael, a resident of Edmonton, volunteered to fill a riding despite the fact that he did not even live in Saskatchewan. At this juncture, the local appeal of Social Credit in Saskatchewan is questionable. Was the promotion of Social Credit in Saskatchewan by Premier Aberhart of Alberta motivated by a legitimate desire to effect positive, long-lasting political change, or was it an invasion, motivated by a desire by Aberhart to control as much of the political realm of western politics as possible? If Aberhart was so willing and eager to mobilize as much of his political machinery in Alberta as possible to move into Saskatchewan, how would voters really know the difference?

The answer lies in the reaction by other parties to the Social Credit incursion into Saskatchewan in the election. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), another self-styled populist movement, viewed the Social Credit move into Saskatchewan in a particularly negative light. At the same time, though, in the *Daily Bulletin* from the Central Office released on May 23, 1938, the party was happy to see that the governing Liberals bore the brunt of the Social Credit threat:

It is eminently satisfactory to us to see the Liberals in the position of having to do most of the fighting. They are responsible for Social Credit being here. Aside

²³ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, R. Michael to W. Aberhart, 30 May 1938.

from local situations, we have nothing to gain by fighting them. According to all press reports, Alberta speakers are, so far, not attacking our policies.²⁴

The CCF, naturally, viewed the Liberal record as the main reason why Social Credit, and indeed the CCF itself, were trying their best to unseat them. However, it was unfortunate that they had been unable to strike some form of substantive agreement with the Social Creditors before the election to prevent a division of the populist vote. Media coverage would prove to be a special problem, since coverage of the Social Credit message took attention away from the CCF. In the *Daily Bulletin* released two days later, on May 25, the Central Office expressed disappointment that “Aberhart monopolizes news value. All dailies are jammed with news of his meetings. It is a help in drawing opposition fire from us. It is a danger in this way, that it monopolizes the public interest. People are not given time to weigh over issues”²⁵ The Central Office was also concerned that voters might not differentiate between the two parties. On one hand, Aberhart did not actively oppose the CCF at this point in the campaign. On the other hand, little attention was given to other opposition parties. Additionally, comparisons between Social Credit and the CCF, as both progressive parties, could be easily made. The *Daily Bulletin* stated that the “Liberals are attacking ‘The Something For Nothing Principles’ [principles of Social Credit] and link us indirectly with Social Credit on that score.”²⁶ The danger at this juncture was dividing the progressive vote and thereby undermining the CCF’s message and how it was different from Social Credit.

As the campaign continued, it became increasingly obvious that Social Credit and the CCF were making each other’s situation more difficult. In a letter to George

²⁴ *Saskatchewan Archives Board* [hereafter *SAB*], CCF Papers, II, 119, Daily Bulletin from Central Office, 23 May 1938.

²⁵ *SAB*, CCF Papers, II, 119, Daily Bulletin from Central Office, 25 May 1938.

²⁶ *SAB*, CCF Papers, II, 119, Daily Bulletin from Central Office, 25 May 1938.

Williams, leader of the CCF in Saskatchewan, A. J. Mercer of Piapot, Saskatchewan, secretary of the executive committee of his riding, expressed his view that, in his constituency, it appeared as though the election was “going to be a three-cornered fight. The Liberals will probably be the party to beat, but Social Credit is going to be a threat. The other night Solon Lowe [Alberta provincial treasurer] got things started for them at Maple Creek and it appears that these Social Creditors are going to put on a strenuous campaign.”²⁷ Mercer was clearly concerned about the threat that Social Credit was going to be in the campaign. Indeed, this sentiment was not localized to individual constituencies and organizers, but the entire party as a whole. In a *Daily Bulletin* released later in the campaign, the CCF Central Office explained the situation on the ground:

It looks as if Aberhart has definitely declared war on us. Note the fact that he leaves Patterson, Parker and Dunn unopposed. Many of the candidates will probably run into difficulties locating their constituencies by June 1st. Take the case of Yorkton, Wadena, Hanley, Milestone, Qu’Appelle-Wolseley, Estevan, Arm River, etc. We can see Aberhart in action, with name tickets in two containers, drawing the candidate’s names with the left hand while he drew simultaneously the constituency names with his right. They will poll a considerable block of the aggregate vote. But we cannot see where they will elect more than two or three candidates.²⁸

CCF headquarters saw a genuine shift in the electoral playing field from a simple Social Credit incursion into Saskatchewan to a dangerous threat to the CCF’s chances of winning the election. The Central Office observed that Aberhart was now largely attacking the CCF instead of focussing on the Liberal government. The progressive vote was only further divided by these attacks. Additionally, the CCF Central Office noted how Aberhart was choosing candidates to stand for election in an effort to achieve a full

²⁷ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 274, A. Mercer to G. Williams, 18 May 1938.

²⁸ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 119, Daily Bulletin from Central Office, 3 June 1938.

slate of candidates. Perhaps the CCF's portrayal of Aberhart selecting names out of two hats for candidates to run in constituencies was slightly exaggerated, but there was certainly evidence that so-called 'parachute' candidates were utilized by Social Credit. One only need to note the letter from Robert Michael to Aberhart where Michael offered his name up for nomination in a seat that Aberhart and the Social Credit viewed as a hopeless cause in order to achieve a full slate of candidates. Additionally, this process also confirmed the disorganization within the Social Credit immediately leading up to the election. How could a political organization expect to achieve success in an election if it could not get sufficiently organized and nominate candidates?

The Liberal Party, meanwhile, had little to say about Social Credit. It seemed to be largely unconcerned about the threat that Social Credit posed towards their chances at re-election. A.N. Mitchell, Vice President and General Manager of The Canada Life Assurance Company of Toronto, wrote to Jimmy Gardiner, the federal Minister of Agriculture and a former Premier of Saskatchewan, on May 23, 1938 about the Social Credit campaign tactics and how the Liberals should respond:

In reading a report of a couple of Aberhart's speeches it sounds to me as if he were taking the attitude that the new Alberta Acts were going to be disallowed anyway and as if he were basing his argument on the fact that they are going to be disallowed. For instance, at Saskatoon his point apparently is that refusal by the Dominion Government to allow a Social Credit experiment in Alberta will result in a general movement all over Canada in order to permit the attempt. In this he would seem to be acknowledging that the Dominion Government will not permit these Acts to stand and to be making his appeal based on that.²⁹

These Alberta Acts, of course, were the ones that would have implemented Social Credit monetary policies. Disallowance is a reserve power which the federal government held at the time, whereas the federal cabinet could issue an order to the provincial lieutenant-

²⁹ SAB, Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, A.N. Mitchell to J.G. Gardiner, 23 May 1938.

governor to refuse to sign an act of a provincial legislature. Aberhart's argument was a potentially strong one to make: if his policies and attempts at monetary reform were not allowed to proceed by the federal government, he could insist that the federal Liberal party and the eastern banking establishment did not want to free the western provinces from the shackles of the Great Depression. However, Mitchell believed that the Liberal party could use this argument during the election to their benefit. Mitchell, himself a member of the so-called eastern banking establishment, suggested:

If this [Aberhart's argument] is so it would seem to me that nothing is being gained by withholding disallowance until after the election and any advantage that may come through granting an early disallowance is lost. If my latest information from Regina is correct, there are certainly a great number in the Liberal fold there that think disallowance at the present moment would help the election situation. These would be naturally disappointed if it does not happen. Those that feel that disallowance before the election might injure our prospects seem to be rather offset by Aberhart already arguing from the standpoint of probably disallowance.³⁰

Mitchell did not seem to be too concerned about the prospect of a Social Credit victory in Saskatchewan. Indeed, the Liberal party as a whole seemed to have had little concern about the electoral prospects of Social Credit based on the available Liberal party documents.

The Conservative Party, by contrast, was worried about the Social Credit participation in the election. Alex H. Reed, A Conservative supporter and lawyer from Turtleford, Saskatchewan, wrote to provincial Conservative leader John Diefenbaker on April 5, 1938, to express his concerns about their people, their policies and their campaign:

Lord man, I am afraid of those Social Creditors. They are, especially in this Province, a worthless lot of adventurers, but owing to the latest mistakes of Jimmie Gardiner, they are on the crest of the wave of enthusiasm and boldness

³⁰ SAB, Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, A.N. Mitchell to J.G. Gardiner, 23 May 1938.

since the Edmonton victory. I have them killed here. They were disorganized and under cover. Their Mr. Mathe at North Battleford and Mr Haver at Saskatoon, to say nothing of the adventurer Col. Arnold were unable to get a meeting together. But since Edmonton, the woods [sic] is full of them and they are as smug and complacent as a Free Methodist at a Camp meeting. They go about quoting the bible and Prophet Aberhart on every occasion. AND YOU CANNOT ARGUE WITH THRM [sic]. They shut you up by saying the people [sic] of Alberta should know and look what they have done.³¹

Reed's letter suggests that several people in the Social Credit organization were not regarded by Conservatives as true believers of Social Credit but merely Social Creditors in name only, trying to gain power at all costs. Indeed, from Reed's perspective, the Social Credit was muddying Saskatchewan's electoral waters and stood to benefit:

The whole situation is most discouraging. The C.C.F. are so arrogant and wild in their demands for Socialism, yea for Communism that they are not quite responsible. The Grits have been so intent on dividing the forces against them that these forces have got out of hand and they are now reaping the whirl-wind (and crushing us at the same time). The irresponsible political adventurers whose very lack of respectability has heretofore kept them down, are now rising on the ashes of the defunct Liberal Machine and threaten to swamp the Province in a deluge of wild, uncontrolled political fury.³²

A discouraging situation existing in Saskatchewan would be understating the prospects that the Conservatives were facing.

Social Credit had far more political momentum than the Conservatives did. H.B. Hall, a Conservative supporter from Lloydminster, Saskatchewan, wrote to Diefenbaker on May 19, 1938 to report on a campaign appearance by Aberhart. Hall described a meeting at which people were eager to see Aberhart and learn what he and his movement were all about:

Premier Aberhart visited this town last Monday. The Crowd that came to hear him was tremendous. The Theatre which has Seating capacity for 750 was jamed [sic] and there seemed to be near as many more outside on the sidewalk – a loud

³¹ *University of Saskatchewan Special Collections* [hereafter *USSC*], Diefenbaker Papers, 43.3, A. Reed to J. Diefenbaker, 5 April 1938.

³² *USSC*, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.3, A. Reed to J. Diefenbaker, 5 April 1938.

speaker having been provided. At the close of his speech, Aberhart asked all those that felt they could support the Social Credit idea 100% to stay to consider matters of organization.³³

Hall's letter is yet one more indication of the amount of attention that Aberhart was able to generate in bringing the Social Credit movement to Saskatchewan. The crowd was clearly interested in what Aberhart had to say. Hall also provided another example of how the Saskatchewan Social Credit movement selected candidates for the election:

About half the audience stayed. Among other things, Aberhart asked the meeting to nominate two names as possible candidates. (two were named and they were both the most unsuitable that could have been selected.)

The two names were to be grouped with two others to be named at the Nomination convention at Maidstone on the morrow – Tuesday afternoon, and that out of those four names he – Aberhart and two of his ministers – who were with him – would pick the Candidate to contest the riding. Further, that if none of the names so submitted were thought suitable, he would select some one else.³⁴

Hall's remarks show that Aberhart's candidate selection process was not limited to the observations that the CCF had made. Candidate selection could be arbitrary, and this process was not limited to any one part of the province. Hall took issue with the candidate selection process:

In this way the people would not have the choice at all. The people would be utterly ignored. Aberhart makes the final choice himself – some one to suit his own purposes. Since then I have heard, through numerous sources, that who ever is selected, must sign papers and declare himself willing to obey, without question, the dictates of the chief – Aberhart – in everything. In this way the candidate has not freedom of thought or action. He might as well be in the garbage heap. Aberhart would be – as I guess he is now – an absolute dictator.³⁵

Hall went on to warn to Diefenbaker that “if the Social Credit party is successful in winning the election, that we shall be under the heel of an absolute dictator, just like a

³³ USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.3, H. Hall to J. Diefenbaker, 19 May 1938.

³⁴ USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.3, H. Hall to J. Diefenbaker, 19 May 1938.

³⁵ USSC, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.3, H. Hall to J. Diefenbaker, 19 May 1938.

Hitler or Mussolini”.³⁶ Indeed, Aberhart’s tactics, in hindsight, do resemble dictatorial rule. Certainly, that was Hall’s opinion. In addition, Hall believed that Aberhart did a poor job in explaining what Social Credit was all about. He wrote that he “had the opportunity of being close to the platform and could hear everything Aberhart said. He admits they are not telling all of what it is or means, and that the people must take the idea on trust. Same way as we take a Motor car. We use a car but the ordinary man knows little about it and what are the different functions of the various parts.”³⁷ Aberhart counted on his widespread appeal to carry the day and persuade the people to vote for his movement without sufficiently explaining Social Credit monetary policies.

Clearly, this campaign tactic had worked before for Aberhart in Alberta, but there was opposition to it from every corner of the political realm in Saskatchewan. Indeed, opposition to Social Credit was not limited to political organizations. Civil organizations also opposed Social Credit and intervened in an attempt to persuade the people of Saskatchewan not to vote for Aberhart. The Donalda Civic League on May 27, 1938 composed a dossier warning the people of Saskatchewan against voting for Social Credit. It believed strongly that Social Credit had been a completely negative force when it came to governing Alberta. It began its letter to the people of Saskatchewan with a strongly-worded introduction:

In view of the invasion of your Province by the forces of the Aberhart Government, and the barrage of election twaddle with which you are being bombarded, with regard to the half-baked theory of economics called Social Credit, it has occurred to us that you might be interested in getting the views of the average rural elector in this part of Alberta.³⁸

³⁶ *USSC*, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.3, H. Hall to J. Diefenbaker, 19 May 1938.

³⁷ *USSC*, Diefenbaker Papers, 43.3, H. Hall to J. Diefenbaker, 19 May 1938.

³⁸ *SAB*, CCF Papers, II, 143, Dossier of Donald Civic League to the Electors of Saskatchewan, 27 May 1938.

The Donalda Civic League's dossier then explained how Social Credit government worked in Alberta:

We have enjoyed the "God-given right to suffer" under the Social Credit Government for almost three years; we have seen it operate in a series of "starts, stops and reversals" that has been the most amazing display of legislative incompetence seen in any provincial government since Confederation, and WE ARE ABSOLUTELY FED UP WITH IT.³⁹

They explained that Aberhart's promises to Albertans included monthly dividends, reduction of taxation, reduction of government costs, protection from seizure of property, interest free loans, all to be accomplished within eighteen months and within the limits of the constitution.⁴⁰ The civic league went on to provide a detailed account of how Aberhart had failed to achieve his promises. These included: no dividends, an increase as opposed to a decrease in taxation, expansion of government, no loans to farmers, and an attempt to control the press.⁴¹ The civic league believed strongly that the Aberhart government had been unsuccessful:

If this government ever had a plan it has never yet seen fit to trot it out for the inspection of the people most concerned; as a matter of fact it was admitted by the Major Prophet of Fig Tree, before this Government was elected that any plan of Social Credit was impracticable within provincial limitations, and the Premier himself has admitted that he had no plan. But the bogey of the banks and the dastardly financial interests makes good election material and the shadow boxing goes merrily on.⁴²

Social Credit may have had ideas but no clear plan of how to implement them. It was a clear message of caution. Aberhart had no plan. The civic league concluded its dossier with a warning:

³⁹ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 143, Dossier of Donald Civic League to the Electors of Saskatchewan, 27 May 1938.

⁴⁰ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 143, Dossier of Donald Civic League to the Electors of Saskatchewan, 27 May 1938.

⁴¹ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 143, Dossier of Donald Civic League to the Electors of Saskatchewan, 27 May 1938.

⁴² SAB, CCF Papers, II, 143, Dossier of Donald Civic League to the Electors of Saskatchewan, 27 May 1938.

Do not be misled; this government is through in Alberta and is well aware of the fact; hence its anxiety to gain a foothold in your Province. Its theory is impracticable and unworkable and was discarded by reputable economists before Mr. Aberhart was born... we appeal to you, electors, of Saskatchewan, if you wish to avoid the "misery in the midst of poverty" which we have enjoyed in Alberta for the past three years, you will see to it on June 8th that you are not saddled with a similar system of chaos and confusion that can only result in delaying the return of prosperity to your province.⁴³

It was absolutely essential that the people of Saskatchewan avoid Social Credit at all cost.

The civic league did not even recommend an alternative party; they simply stated that voters should avoid Social Credit, no matter what Premier Aberhart promised to give them during these trying times.

Social Credit was not prepared to fight the Saskatchewan provincial election of 1938. Although initially unwilling to campaign outside of Alberta and expressing his wish that the party within Saskatchewan organize its own affairs, Alberta Premier Aberhart was compelled to lead the movement himself in Saskatchewan. This intervention was necessary because of Social Credit's disorganization in Saskatchewan and Premier Patterson's decision to call a snap election. Aberhart mobilized his forces throughout the province in a strong attempt to convince the people of Saskatchewan of the benefit of voting Social Credit. He used a variety of means at his disposal, including town halls, radio broadcasts and newspaper coverage to communicate his message. However, disorganization remained a constant theme throughout the campaign. Candidates for individual riding nominations had to be rushed, and many candidates ended up being 'parachute' candidates. There was also spirited opposition to Social Credit. The CCF was concerned that Social Credit was going to damage their chances at forming government. The Liberals, meanwhile, did not see Social Credit as a serious

⁴³ SAB, CCF Papers, II, 143, Dossier of Donald Civic League to the Electors of Saskatchewan, 27 May 1938.

threat and as such were largely indifferent to them. The Conservatives, still hurting from their previous electoral loss, were wary of the Social Credit movement. Additionally, the Donalda Civic League from Alberta warned the voters of Saskatchewan that Social Credit could not and should not be trusted. It remained to be seen whether Aberhart could repeat his 1935 Alberta victory in Saskatchewan in 1938.

Chapter Three

Desolation, Desertion and Departure: The End of Social Credit in Saskatchewan

The Social Credit party, while gaining a significant amount of interest from the electorate of Saskatchewan, were only able to elect two Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), Bill Roseland and John Herman. Despite its efforts to appeal to the voters of Saskatchewan, Social Credit had been rejected. This chapter will focus on the aftermath of the election, the remnants of the party's organization, and Premier William Aberhart's lack of interest in promoting the Social Credit movement in Saskatchewan. While a number of members of Social Credit continued to believe that Social Credit could have success, leadership of the progressive movement in Saskatchewan was grudgingly conceded to the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.). Indeed, many electors in Saskatchewan seemed to be more willing to trust the C.C.F. going forward at this point, as Social Credit had governed Alberta for three years and failed to deliver major reforms, with the C.C.F. was a brand new force. Accusations between Social Creditors as to who was a true supporter also returned as a major post-election theme. Significant evidence exists to suggest that several prominent Social Creditors were, indeed, turncoats.

The 1938 Saskatchewan election result proved disappointing for Social Credit organizers. In a letter to Aberhart on June 9, 1938 John Hilton, the party's pre-election secretary, wrote "I hope and pray that you may be sustained in the disappointment that I know you will have suffered with the rest of us and your good helpers."¹ Hilton's

¹ *Provincial Archives of Alberta* [hereafter *PAA*], Premier's Papers, 1093, J. Hilton to W. Aberhart, 9 June 1938.

disappointment was mixed with optimism for the future, and that organizational work would continue going forward for the Social Credit movement. But Hilton also believed that mistakes had been made in the campaign and that the path forward would not be easy: “I cannot help but say that I am now more sure than ever that we could have made a better show had we avoided the charge that you were dictating.”² That Aberhart had largely led the campaign in Saskatchewan was an issue that comes up time and again in the archival record. The principal reason that Aberhart had stepped into the campaign was because it had become obvious to him and the Social Credit government in Alberta that the Saskatchewan organizers of the movement were unable to accomplish anything on their own. If Social Credit was to have any success in Saskatchewan, it was necessary for Aberhart and members of his cabinet to participate in the campaign. This involvement was a reluctant move for Aberhart since he was deeply absorbed with the affairs of Alberta and running the government.

Figure 1.0. Saskatchewan Election Results:

Political Party	Votes Cast	% of Vote	Candidates Elected
Liberal	200,334	45.45	38
C.C.F.	82,529	18.73	10
Social Credit	70,084	15.90	2
Conservative	52,315	11.87	0
Unity	9,848	2.24	2
Total Source: www.elections.sk.ca	440,072	100.00	52

² PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1093, J. Hilton to W. Aberhart, 9 June 1938.

After the election, Aberhart reverted to the position that he held before the writ was dropped. W.E. Lake, a Social Credit supporter from Mervin, Saskatchewan, suggested that a paid director be appointed to handle matters. Aberhart bluntly replied:

I do not see how it would be possible for us to appoint a paid organizer, as no funds are available. I think it would scarcely be fair to expect the people in Alberta to raise the funds necessary to carry on the Saskatchewan organization work. The people in Saskatchewan who wish to have a sound organization formed should take some steps to get together and do some of the necessary foundation work in order that future progress may be on a solid basis.³

With the failure of Social Credit to gain traction in Saskatchewan, Aberhart did not want much to do with the situation. He now took the position, similar to his opinion before the election campaign, that if the people of Saskatchewan wanted a Social Credit government, then they had to accomplish this matter for themselves.

Interest in Social Credit did persist after the election. Some people still wished to see Social Credit succeed in Saskatchewan and sought Aberhart's opinion. In a letter dated March 29, 1940, W. Ducklow of North Battleford, Saskatchewan gave Aberhart his congratulations on his re-election in Alberta, and thanked him for his support in the 1938 Saskatchewan election, stating: "we feel that a Provincial executive should be set up. What is[sic] your wishes? As to this and the method of organization should we not standardize with Alberta. Wishing you every success."⁴ Aberhart's response on April 3 was supportive but he was careful to warn that "it will be necessary, however, to be very careful that you do not cause another split in the ranks."⁵ Indeed, the problems of leadership and loyalty within the Social Credit movement in Saskatchewan persisted after the election. The difficulty largely revolved around who was a true supporter of Social

³ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart to W. Lake, 14 July 1938.

⁴ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, W. Ducklow to W. Aberhart, 29 March 1940.

⁵ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart to W. Ducklow, 3 April 1940.

Credit and who was only promoting the movement for their own personal gain. Aberhart discussed the potential of a united reform movement going forward in an April 24, 1940 letter:

It would seem to me, as I look over the situation, that it will be necessary for the leaders in the Reform Movement in Saskatchewan to get together in some definite way honestly, before anything can be done in Saskatchewan.

I have heard that Mr. Herman [Social Credit MLA] is definitely taking a stand on the side of the C.C.F. and admitted that he took the name of Social Credit in his provincial seat at the request of George H. Williams [leader of the CCF]. I can hardly believe such a statement but there it is.⁶

Aberhart's fear that Herman was a secret CCF supporter was just one of several examples of where Social Party loyalty was in doubt. John Hilton shared these concerns. On April 9, 1940, he advised Aberhart:

I'm told that A.C. Stewart, M.L.A. for Yorkton will visit you soon. Am I too forward in saying that he is a man that I should caution you about? He served in the late Anderson Govt. here. Has been a very free liver. Is considered the leader in the Sask. House of the 'National Reform'. Was very agreeable to the C.C.F. Candidate in Yorkton, Mr. Castleden, objected to any opposition to this party in the last election.⁷

Aberhart responded: "it would seem to me that affairs down there are in a horrible mess. I am afraid the situation in poor old Saskatchewan will be difficult to handle."⁸

Even the elected Social Creditors questioned the loyalty of those around them. In a letter to Aberhart dated April 26, 1940, Carl Stewart, an independent MLA who presented himself as a progressive as well as a supporter of Social Credit, identified several people whom he believed to not be true Social Creditors:

I do not know who your Saskatchewan advisers have been but if they are men such as Colonel Arnold and Messrs. Hilton & Haver of Saskatoon, then the advice you are receiving is entirely erroneous and in my opinion Messrs. Arnold &

⁶ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart to C. Stewart, 24 April 1940.

⁷ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, J. Hilton to W. Aberhart, 9 April 1940.

⁸ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart to J. Hilton, 26 April 1940.

Hilton at least were merely tools of the Liberal Party in the last Federal Election and the results in the constituencies where they ran namely, Saskatoon and Weyburn, show that the people were wise as to who was backing them and where they got the money to run.⁹

Stewart also vouched for Herman's credibility. Aberhart, in his reply to Stewart on May 1, 1940, stated that "you have lifted quite a load from my mind in advising me of Mr. Herman. I have always felt that he is a square shooter and could hardly believe the rumours that have been floating this way about him."¹⁰ All this conflicting information only helps to further show the difficulty in drawing clear conclusions about who supported what policies, and who was merely involved in politics for their own personal gain.

As it turned out, Aberhart would have been wise to have followed Hilton's advice regarding Carl Stewart. In a letter labelled 'strictly private and confidential', Attorney General of Saskatchewan T.C. Davis wrote to federal Minister of Agriculture Jimmy Gardiner about an in-depth conversation that he had with Stewart: "I would recommend, that when you are out here again, that your path should in some unexpected way cross his, that you go out of your way to have a chat with him along the lines of my chat."¹¹ Davis finished his letter to Gardiner by stating his belief that "anything that can be done to get him gradually over the Liberal Party, would have a far-reaching effect in this province."¹² An enclosed note, dated June 8, 1939, is a fascinating look into Stewart's political background and potential future. Davis wrote that the two men spoke frankly to each other, and that Davis "suggested to him [Stewart], that if he intended to pursue a

⁹ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, C. Stewart to W. Aberhart, 29 April 1940.

¹⁰ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1093, W. Aberhart to C. Stewart, 1 May 1940.

¹¹ *Saskatchewan Archives Board* [hereafter SAB], Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, T.C. Davis to J.G. Gardiner, 9 June 1939.

¹² SAB, Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, T.C. Davis to J.G. Gardiner, 9 June 1939.

political life, the time was ripe when he should affiliate himself with one of the old line parties and that the only place he could go, if he decided to pursue this course, was to the Liberal Party.”¹³ Davis wrote that Stewart’s reply was as follows:

He stated that he went to Yorkton as a Liberal and that the leaders of the Liberal Party there, by their attitude towards him, drove him out of the Party, and that they have been fighting for twenty years as a result. He says he has always been a Liberal in the broad sense of the term.¹⁴

Stewart, elected as an independent candidate in the previous election, had worked towards organizing a unity movement and had corresponded with Aberhart. He refrained from discussing his Aberhart connection in the course of this conversation with Davis, but mentioned “that he was very bitter against [leader George] Williams of the C.C.F. He stated, that during the session, Williams accused him of favouring the Liberals, as against the C.C.F., and failing to co-operate with the C.C.F., and that Williams objected to his saying anything of a commendatory nature in connection with the policies being followed by the government.”¹⁵ John Herman even gets a mention in this note. Davis writes that Stewart told him “the C.C.F. are busily engaged in the Melville Provincial seat, trying to undermine Herman and that Herman is very bitter about it.”¹⁶ All told, Stewart had become frustrated with the reform movement as a whole in Saskatchewan, having exhausted most of his options.

The remainder of Davis’ note concerns Stewart’s path forward. Davis notes that Stewart “is not very averse to going back into the Liberal Party again and is coming to the conclusion, that he and others of his frame of mind could perhaps get further in

¹³ *SAB*, Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, Note of Davis’ conversation with Stewart, 8 June 1939.

¹⁴ *SAB*, Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, Note of Davis’ conversation with Stewart, 8 June 1939.

¹⁵ *SAB*, Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, Note of Davis’ conversation with Stewart, 8 June 1939.

¹⁶ *SAB*, Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, Note of Davis’ conversation with Stewart, 8 June 1939.

having their viewpoint met, by pressure within the Liberal Party, than by pressure without.”¹⁷ Davis had obviously earned himself a captive audience with Stewart. It is worth noting, however, that this conversation came nearly a full year before the correspondence between Aberhart and Stewart in which Stewart portrays himself as a man supportive of Social Credit and advising Aberhart of the way forward in Saskatchewan. The Gardiner documentation suggests that Stewart was already interested in returning to the Liberal fold, and it is with this biased perspective that Stewart’s correspondence should be understood. The Davis note continues by discussing the niceties of how Stewart could potentially return to the Liberal Party:

His [Stewart’s] trouble is that he has been fighting the Liberals for twenty years and he can’t gracefully come out whole-heartedly in their support but he is inclined to do this gradually.

His present frame of mind is, that at the next session of the legislature, he is going to go after the C.C.F. hammer and tongs, and ask to be moved away from and may ultimately walk across the floor of the House in support of the government.¹⁸

Davis concluded his note restating his opinion that Stewart could be convinced to support the government, “with a little judicious handling”, before the next election.¹⁹ This letter and its corresponding note are the most concrete evidence available indicating the problem with determining the affiliations of the various political actors in the Saskatchewan election of 1938. During 1939, Stewart was actively corresponding with the Attorney General of Saskatchewan about potentially rejoining the Liberal Party and abandoning his position on the opposition benches. A year later, he was writing letters to Premier Aberhart discussing personalities within the Social Credit movement and

¹⁷ SAB, Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, Note of Davis’ conversation with Stewart, 8 June 1939.

¹⁸ SAB, Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, Note of Davis’ conversation with Stewart, 8 June 1939.

¹⁹ SAB, Premier Gardiner Fonds, VII, 5, Note of Davis’ conversation with Stewart, 8 June 1939.

whether they could be trusted or not. Clearly, the issue of trust within the Social Credit party remained a significant issue.

As for John Herman, one of the two Social Credit MLAs elected in the 1938 Saskatchewan, the C.C.F. records help to clarify matters about his political affiliations to a certain degree. Initially, the papers support the argument that Herman was, indeed, a C.C.F. supporter. In the minutes of a meeting of the Provincial Council held on June 18-19, 1938, several questions were posed to Herman regarding his possible support for the C.C.F. in the legislature and for C.C.F. policies. The response, as recorded in the records of the minute book, was as follows:

Mr. J. L. Phelps, Mrs. D. Pope, and Mr. Stork were appointed as a Committee to meet Mr. Herman. The following questions were submitted to Mr. Herman, which were answered to the satisfaction of the Council.

1. Has Mr. Herman given any pledge to the Social Credit Group or to Mr. Aberhart. Ans. NO
2. Will Mr. Herman guarantee to hold in strict confidence all matters discussed in Caucus and that they be not made known to anyone. Ans. YES.
3. Will Mr. Herman be willing to abide by the decision of the caucus on all matters of policy. Ans. YES.
4. Will Mr. Herman be willing to support the principles of the CCF platform on the floor of the legislature. Ans. YES.²⁰

If ever there was a clear sign of support by Herman of the C.C.F. movement, these answers would have certainly clarified the matter to the satisfaction of the provincial council. A motion was quickly carried to allow Herman to sit in on this council meeting.²¹ What is of particular significance is that Herman, in his answers to the above questions, essentially repudiated everything that he had stood for in the election. He had no devotion to Aberhart, no devotion to Social Credit, agreed to support all C.C.F.

²⁰ SAB, CCF Papers, I., 2, Minutes of Provincial Council Meeting held in Regina, 18 and 19 June 1938.

²¹ SAB, CCF Papers, I., 2, Minutes of Provincial Council Meeting held in Regina, 18 and 19 June 1938.

policies, and made a ‘guarantee’ of secrecy. This agreement marked a significant reversal for Herman from his election platform, and further portrays him as a turncoat. Indeed, George Williams was quite optimistic over the outcome of this meeting and made his opinion known to a Hugh McLean in a letter written June 21, 1938. In it, he stated that because Social Credit did not stay out of the election campaign, hampering the C.C.F.’s electoral success, the progressive forces in Saskatchewan, in part, “have 10 CCF, 1 Social Credit man who really is CCF and has already joined the caucus... and 1 real Social Credit who like most them knows just exactly nothing.”²²

Of course, the characterization of Herman as a Social Creditor in name only is difficult to ascertain in a satisfactory way. Williams, in particular, had decided by the end of 1938 that “insofar as the CCF is concerned people either must be in it or out of it. Mr. Herman can make his choice.”²³ The minutes of a meeting of the C.C.F. executive held on August 13, 1939 serve to show the developing attitude of the CCF leadership towards the two Social Credit members of the legislature. The membership committee wished to make it clear to the executive that “in the event of Mr. Fred Herman and Mr. H. K. Warren applying for membership in the CCF that their membership be not granted in view of the fact that the constitution prohibits them from being members of the organization.”²⁴ Herman, for his part, still needed to make a decision regarding whether he would agree to sit in the C.C.F. caucus or remain true to Social Credit and accept the influence of Aberhart. In a letter written to George Williams, Herman attempted to clarify the situation as he sees it. This letter, however, is written in a manner in which Herman is able to remove responsibility for his own specific political affiliation:

²² SAB, CCF Papers, II., 168, G. Williams to H. McLean, June 21, 1938.

²³ SAB, CCF Papers, II., 287(16), G. Williams to F. Makaroff, December 8, 1938.

²⁴ SAB, CCF Papers, I., 2, Minutes of an Executive Meeting, 13 August 1939.

Relative to the matter of joining up with the CCF, my Executive of Melville Provincial Constituency sometime ago instructed me to maintain my identity as a Social Credit member but to cooperate with the CCF in every way possible and at the same time to work toward unity of the progressive forces.

Consequently as each constituency has independence under social credit, I must at this time decline the invitation of the CCF Executive [to become a member of the CCF Opposition] but can assure your executive that so long as the interests of the people are paramount with the CCF they will have the whole cooperation of myself as a member of the Legislature.²⁵

In this passage, Herman diplomatically but successfully manages to ‘pass the buck’ regarding his affiliation in the legislature from himself to his constituency association. He paints a picture of being a faithful servant of the wishes of members of the Social Credit party within his constituency, but does not alienate the C.C.F. executive at the same time. Herman leaves the door open to changes which may occur depending on the political winds.

Meanwhile, other organizers of the Social Credit movement in Saskatchewan continued to write Aberhart about the best way forward. Malcolm Haver, the man acting as general secretary and organizer on his own initiative prior to the election, thought it might be helpful if he contested a forthcoming by-election in Saskatoon and sought Aberhart’s opinion. The Alberta premier’s reply of August 1, 1940, must have come as a significant disappointment. He stated that it would be impossible to provide any financial support from Alberta and that “your progressive forces in Saskatchewan are becoming so broken up that it would appear to me very difficult to hope for success under the circumstances.”²⁶ Aberhart repeated his pessimistic views in another letter to Lillie Beirne of Saskatoon: “I really feel it is going to be a mistake to attempt to do anything in

²⁵ SAB, CCF Papers, I., 2, Minutes of an Executive Meeting, 7 January 1939.

²⁶ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to M. Haver, 1 August 1940.

this by-election in Saskatoon on behalf of Social Credit... You know, it is my personal belief that Saskatchewan will be the last province that will ever stand for reform.”²⁷

Aberhart clearly did not have much optimism about the situation going forward in Saskatchewan. Nor did he have much reason to believe that the situation might get better: as time passed, even more conflicting information arrived at his office. Henry Brachman, a general merchant from Success, Saskatchewan, wrote to Aberhart on December 3, 1941 asking the leaders of the Social Credit Party of Alberta help in saving the movement in Saskatchewan:

Our friends in this part of the country would like to see you take the initiative in calling a national conference and try to do something for us in Saskatchewan so that we may be able to get going again and be able to lay the foundation for a truly national movement and party that will have the ability to guide the destinies of our country when this war is over.²⁸

Brachman’s request was not uncommon among Social Crediters in Saskatchewan. Having had little success in organizational matters, members of the movement in Saskatchewan turned to Aberhart for help. Aberhart’s response to Brachman on December 11, 1940 was cautious regarding intervention in Saskatchewan, quite similar to other exchanges with other Saskatchewan Social Crediters. Aberhart stated “I would be very pleased indeed to do anything I can to gather together the disjointed parts of the Progressive Movement in Saskatchewan but I do not desire to have the criticism levelled at me that I am trying to interfere in another province.”²⁹ Aberhart did, however, ask Brachman to provide him with a list of names of people who “are really sold to the Social Credit Movement and would put their efforts to a great organization there.”³⁰ Brachman

²⁷ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to L. Beirne, 7 August 1940.

²⁸ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, H. Brachman to W. Aberhart, 3 December 1941.

²⁹ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to H. Brachman, 11 December 1940.

³⁰ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to H. Brachman, 11 December 1940.

dutifully put together the list, but then expressed his opinion in a subsequent letter that many who identified themselves as Social Creditors “are just adventurers and opportunists for personal gain”.³¹ It is difficult to imagine how anyone would be able to make any sense out of the conflicting information arriving at Aberhart’s office, especially with individuals claiming that another man was a turncoat and not to be trusted.

Aberhart continued to express his disappointment with the affairs of the Social Credit movement in Saskatchewan. As late as September 1941, Aberhart wrote to W.J. McCallum of Brownlee, Saskatchewan, complaining about the way that the 1938 election had been handled and wondering what the path going forward should be. Of note in this letter is a specific reference to the selection of candidates for constituencies in the election:

You (McCallum) have asked me if we intend to have a Social Credit candidate in the Morse Constituency to contest in the next Provincial election.

In reply permit me to say that we did the best we knew how at the last election and received a real rebuke in the way the people voted. We are attempting to organise a Federal Association in Winnipeg on the 27th, 28th, and 29th of October. When we have held these meetings we will be able to judge how far Saskatchewan would join in it by the attendance and interest shown.

In reply to your statement that it would be better to run a candidate who lives in the constituency I would like to say that we tried to get that in the last election but there was no one who would stand.³²

In this letter, Aberhart’s statements challenge the perception given by earlier accounts of the election that Aberhart willingly appointed ‘parachute’ candidates in constituencies. While the documentation supports the argument that Aberhart did indeed end up appointing candidates who did not live in the ridings in which they ran, the letter

³¹ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, H. Brachman to W. Aberhart, 7 January 1941.

³² PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to W. McCallum, 26 September 1941.

indicates that Aberhart did so rather unwillingly. This example is yet further proof that Aberhart only intervened in the Saskatchewan election unwillingly.

By the early 1940s, interest in Social Credit remained strong among some people, but it was clear that the few who were still involved in promoting Social Credit were not receiving much support. John Hilton asked Aberhart on January 31, 1942 for literature to help rekindle interest in Social Credit in Saskatchewan. He specifically wished to have something written along the lines of a “brochure on the subject ‘Achievements of Social Credit.’ Too long we have taken abuse and ridicule without any reply and after all, it does appear to me the philosophy of ‘turning the other cheek’ can be carried too far.”³³

Aberhart’s response on February 3, 1942 showed impatience with Hilton:

I am afraid that you are getting entirely out of touch with things, as you suggest we write up a brochure on the subject of ‘Achievements of Social Credit’. Over a year ago we published a little booklet entitled ‘The Records Tell the Story’. Of course I suppose another one could well be written on what has happened since then.³⁴

This rebuke might have been a reason for Hilton to stop writing Aberhart. This lack of correspondence should serve as evidence that interest in Social Credit in Saskatchewan was in a serious decline. Indeed, the overall amount of correspondence between Aberhart and his Saskatchewan supporters shrinks considerably beginning in the second half of 1941. However, people like Hilton remained committed to the movement. In a letter to F.E. Werry of Reward, Saskatchewan dated July 30, 1942, Hilton largely blamed the lessening of interest to external factors beyond the party’s control, stating that “while it is true our Social Credit organization has been languishing and the ranks of our vanguard are now in other lands and many in war work, it seems to me the principles are just as

³³ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, J. Hilton to W. Aberhart, 31 January 1942.

³⁴ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to J. Hilton, 3 February 1942.

sound and the pioneer effort is worthy of maintenance and revivifying.”³⁵ The Second World War certainly had a significant aspect on all elements of society and took its financial and human toll. Still, it is difficult to see where these statements of optimism were grounded in any sense of reality.

Aberhart’s lack of optimism for the Saskatchewan situation continued into the second half of 1942. Indeed, he eventually came to the conclusion that Social Credit in Saskatchewan was dead, and that there was really no hope for the movement any longer. On September 4, 1942, Aberhart wrote a response to a letter from Mrs. M.L. Krogh of Marshall, Saskatchewan. In it, he specifically addressed the persistent issue of leadership within the Social Credit Party of Saskatchewan and the already divided political landscape:

I can quite understand people taking the second best if there are not sufficient leaders to carry the banner for Social Credit...take Saskatchewan for example: I can quite understand that there is just one choice the people have to make, that is to vote Liberal or to vote C.C.F. If Social Credit were to go into Saskatchewan at the present time, we would just break the ranks of the C.C.F. and allow the Liberal Party to go in on a minority vote. This of course would be folly on our part.³⁶

Aberhart had clearly abandoned any hope of spreading the Social Credit movement into provinces outside Alberta. His primary motivation was to avoid splitting the ranks of progressive-minded citizens and to prevent the Liberals from winning elections. With such little chance of success, there was no point in wasting the resources of the Alberta branch of the Social Credit movement on Saskatchewan.

Aberhart also continued to cite the necessity of running the provincial government in Alberta as a reason why he could do little in the way of support. Even a letter from a

³⁵ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, J. Hilton to F. Werry, 30 July 1942.

³⁶ PAA, Premier’s Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to M. Krogh, 4 September 1942.

Social Credit supporter suggesting that support for the CCF in Saskatchewan was waning failed to sway him. Aberhart's short response of November 18, 1942, articulated his dismissive view of the situation in Saskatchewan:

I would not be a bit surprised that you were absolutely right and that the warmth of enthusiasm for the C.C.F. would wane down to a minimum. Of course I do not know who else the people in Saskatchewan will vote for if the Social Crediters over there are not strong enough even to put up candidates. I feel that we here have so much to do that we could not undertake anything more.³⁷

This letter was the second last piece of correspondence between the Premier's Office and a Social Credit supporter in Saskatchewan. The last one was a reply Aberhart wrote to Wm. Alex Seymour of Glenellen, Saskatchewan on December 8, 1942. Aberhart told Seymour that the Social Credit's 1938 campaign may have backfired, and "that it was our action that elected the Liberals again, and so forth and so on."³⁸ He believed that there simply were not enough people such as Seymour in Saskatchewan who would take a strong stand for Social Credit. Besides, the CCF seemed poised to win the next provincial election:

When I heard of your election coming on again, in spite of what happened after the last one, I interviewed some of the people in Saskatchewan and I was told that the people in Saskatchewan were going to try to elect a C.C.F. Government, and therefore it would be better for us to stay out, for we would merely divide the vote and neither of us would get in. Now, if the people of Saskatchewan want a socialist government, I have nothing whatever to say to them; that is their business. I personally am against regimentation, rationalization, or socialization of any of the rights of the people. I want freedom in every sense of the word.³⁹

Aberhart had conceded that the Social Credit movement in Saskatchewan was dead. The record of correspondence between the Premier's office and Saskatchewan Social Credit essentially ends at this point. No one could ever make the claim that Aberhart had not

³⁷ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to J. Hilton, 18 November 1942.

³⁸ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to W. Seymour, 8 December 1942.

³⁹ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to W. Seymour, 8 December 1942.

tried to bring Social Credit to Saskatchewan. He just did not have the organizational structure necessary in the province to transform interest in Social Credit to support.

With the continued disorganization and serious questioning of where loyalties lay among party operatives, it comes as no surprise that the post-1938 period of the Social Credit Party's history in Saskatchewan closely resembles that of the pre-election period. Aberhart had been forced to personally intervene in the 1938 election campaign. That intervention, though actually hampered Social Credit's chances as opposed to helping them. Aberhart was portrayed as an intruder who had no real connection with the province. He detested this characterisation as an interloper and an invader in the affairs of Saskatchewan, and consequently decided to leave the Social Credit movement in the province to local organisers. If the people of Saskatchewan wanted Social Credit, they would find the message of Social Credit appealing on its own merits. If not, Aberhart accepted the will of the people.

Conclusion

The Saskatchewan election of 1938 proved to be a tidewater election in the political history of Saskatchewan. It would be the last election in which an old-line political party would win until the early 1960s. The forces of progressive political ideologies were moving forward at a rapid pace. However, this election would not be the one in which a reform political movement would change the face of Saskatchewan politics. The Social Credit Party would divide the progressive forces in Saskatchewan until the 1944 election, when Tommy Douglas would take the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation to power. A struggling Conservative Party would also play a role in further dividing the vote. Most importantly, the electorate of Saskatchewan continued to have faith in the Liberal party and was not ready for “radical” alternatives. Premier William Aberhart of Alberta was able to generate considerable interest in the Social Credit Party during the 1938 Saskatchewan election campaign, but had been unable to convert this curiosity into support. Infighting and poor organization among Social Creditors in Saskatchewan would also cause difficulty in moving the party forward in securing electoral support.

The Saskatchewan electorate in 1938 had been looking for a way out of the Great Depression. They were faced with one of two choices: either take a chance on a new political party with untested ideas on how to improve the economy, or stick with a party that was familiar, but had not been very successful in solving the problems of the depression. Meanwhile, the progressive forces in Saskatchewan were largely fractured. As a result, Social Credit found a considerable amount of difficulty securing support. As

the 'new' party in Saskatchewan, Social Credit needed to quickly establish itself as a viable alternative.

But Social Credit was saddled with another problem. It quickly became clear while examining the primary source materials that a considerable amount of infighting occurred within the movement in the years leading up to the 1938 election. Most party members took the side of one organiser or another in the belief that their idea of Social Credit was the correct one, or that they were the one sufficiently dedicated to the movement. There was a significant level of distrust among party members who believed that other members were not true Social Creditors and that they were only in it for themselves. This theme is common throughout the materials, and persists from the beginning of Social Credit's formation in Saskatchewan right through to the end of serious organisation in the early 1940s. As members schemed against each other, the progress of the movement went nowhere. When the election was called, support for Social Credit had completely stalled.

Premier Aberhart, who had been extremely reluctant to intervene previously in Saskatchewan, repeatedly citing the affairs of Alberta as the reason for this hesitancy, removed the authority of the Social Credit Party of Saskatchewan in conducting the election campaign and placed it under the management of the Western Social Credit Board, with himself as *de facto* leader. He led numerous rallies across the province in an attempt to generate as much support for Social Credit as possible. However, the other established political parties in Saskatchewan were not receptive to Social Credit and their economic ideas. Social Credit was attacked from all sides, as "both the Liberals and CCF responded [to Social Credit] by characterizing Alberta premier William Aberhart as a

despot intent on ruling the province from Edmonton.”¹ However, as this thesis has shown, Aberhart only ended up playing a role in the Saskatchewan election campaign because local Social Credit party members could not handle their own affairs. Social Credit was rejected, winning only two seats, and Aberhart returned to Alberta, resigned to letting local Social Credit organizers in Saskatchewan carry the party banner. Aberhart also returned to his earlier, pre-campaign stance that he would not intervene in the affairs of another province. It was his observation that, by leading the campaign in Saskatchewan, he had opened himself up to the perception that he was an interloper. Aberhart reflected after the campaign, in response to a letter from a supporter asking for assistance in further organisational matters, that “I would be very pleased indeed to do anything I can to gather together the disjointed parts of the Progressive Movement in Saskatchewan but I do not desire to have the criticism levelled at me that I am trying to interfere in another province.”² With the election over and interest in Social Credit having largely evaporated, the movement was dead by the end of 1940.

One noteworthy factor which had appeared time and again in the research materials was Social Credit’s inability to have formed any kind of meaningful alliance with any of the other parties contesting this election. Aberhart had rejected the idea of teaming up with the CCF, and few other progressive movements had any real strength at all. As a result, the voters of Saskatchewan ended up with a continuation of the Liberal government. The CCF, which did make overtures to Social Credit to run under a united banner, ended up proving to be the strongest of the opposition parties and the most appealing alternative to the Liberals by the time of the next election. Continued

¹ William Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (Calgary: Fifth House, 2005), 324.

² *Provincial Archives of Alberta* [hereafter *PAA*], Premier’s Papers, 1094, W. Aberhart to H. Brachman, 11 December 1940.

infighting in Social Credit Circles ensured that the movement would remain weak. Again, a dearth of leadership within the Saskatchewan branch of the party would ultimately prove fatal. The CCF, on the other hand, was not saddled with this problem, as they would soon replace George Williams with future Premier Tommy Douglas as leader.

The Social Credit movement in Saskatchewan, largely running on the same policies as the Alberta branch of the Social Credit movement, is an integral element in understanding the political culture in Saskatchewan and the nature of prairie populist political movements during the 1930s. While researching through the primary source materials, several important contrasts between Social Credit and the other political organisations in Saskatchewan become obvious. First, the Liberals and CCF were well organised. In contrast, the Saskatchewan wing of the Social Credit Party was in a constant state of chaos. As a result, Aberhart felt it was his duty to take charge of the campaign during the election. Second, it was difficult to ascertain who was a true Social Creditor and who was simply in it for their own personal benefit. Indeed, the title of this thesis derives from this theme. Despite all of the research conducted, it is still and will remain impossible to ever determine with complete certainty who was a Social Creditor in both name and practice. Just one example of this theme is shown below:

Regarding your impression that Mr. Needham is favourable to the CCF and to uniting with them. Frankly, Mr. Aberhart, I do not share this impression. I know exactly where that propaganda originated and that is with Malcolm Haver and Hinkson of Regina. These men have both worked for the Liberal party ever since they began to camouflage as Social Crediters. They are just adventurers and opportunists for personal gain. Hinkson was Haver's candidate for the presidency of Saskatchewan Social Credit at the 1937 convention in opposition to Mr. Needham.³

³ PAA, Premier's Papers, 1094, H. Brachman to W. Aberhart, 14 March 1941.

In several other letters between Aberhart and Saskatchewan Social Credit supporters, many people frequently accuse each other of treacherous activity.

One other noteworthy fact that should be mentioned in comparing Social Credit and the CCF between Alberta and Saskatchewan is that the CCF did not have the kind of opportunity to develop in Alberta politics during this time that Social Credit did in Saskatchewan's politics. This is due to the fact that the CCF was associated with the previous government of Alberta, the United Farmer's of Alberta (UFA), who had been voted out of office due to the fact that they had not been able to deal with the challenges of the Great Depression in Alberta.

It must be stressed that this research is important to understanding the nature of the political culture of both Alberta and Saskatchewan. One might have expected the Social Credit movement to have appeal in Saskatchewan because it had success in Alberta, but it did not turn out that way. This thesis does not support a conclusion that the politics of Saskatchewan and Alberta are fundamentally different. Instead, this paper suggests that the three greatest factors which prevented Social Credit from having success in Saskatchewan were disorganisation, disunity, and disbelief within the internal party structure. The party was not well prepared for the election, having failed to establish a coherent chain of command with one centralised party mechanism. Along the same lines, Social Credit struggled with a lack of unity, with its members constantly fighting among themselves. Finally, the issue of opportunism, with supporters who did not actually believe in Social Credit, was endemic, with no one really able to determine who was a true Social Creditor and who was only in it for themselves.

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