A Province Defined
An Analysis of the Political Ideology of the 1952-1972 Social Credit Government of British Columbia

Jacob Helliwell

The Social Credit policies of 1952-1972 resulted in the aggrandizement of contemporary British Columbia. Under the ambitious and charismatic leadership of W.A.C. Bennett, the Social Credit (Socred) government successfully implemented a policy of province-building through unrivaled infrastructure expenditures and a dedication to the development of the hinterland. The following will consider the actions of Bennett's twenty-year reign in relation to political ideology. Beginning with a sketch of the ideology behind 'right-wing,' the essay will move to analyze some of the actions of the Social Credit government. By this analysis, it can be argued that the BC Social Credit government was in fact a right-wing party, and policies that traditionally align with the left are explicable as Bennett's attempt to build a foundation for new wealth and resource exploitation.

What is right wing?

The conceptualization of 'right-wing' has largely evolved out of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a time characterized by the proliferation of rational thought. A systematic separation of church and state during the Enlightenment years led many theorists to explore and sketch out a depiction of Man as a rational being capable of running the affairs of the state and their own livelihood without church interference. As rational thought progressed throughout the Enlightenment, new political ideologies began to shift and take form. The terms 'right' and 'left' surfacing from the Enlightenment can often be traced back to the French National Assembly of 1789, when the "defenders of aristocratic privilege and hierarchy stood on the right side of the chamber,

while the proponents of greater equality and individual freedom stood on the left".[1]

Traditionally, these Enlightenment ideas are associated with the 'left' or liberal thought. Liberalism holds to individual freedom and rights against aristocracy, hierarchy, and arbitrary church or state power. This commitment to individual autonomy often makes liberals strong egalitarians in support of equal rights for all citizens. Growing numbers of liberals coming out of the Enlightenment helped to challenge the aristocratic privileges and the labels 'right' and 'left' became part of the political discourse of the late 18th century.[2]

The terms 'right' and 'left' have gone through substantial evolution and entrenchment since the late 18th century with most political systems holding their own interpretations of the terms. Conservatism, regardless of interpretation, is consistently viewed as synonymous with the 'right'.[3] The following will be a brief analysis of the common conceptions of conservatism and will sketch out the four characteristics applicable to the Social Credit government of 1952-1972.

The disagreement between hierarchy and equality is only one of the fundamental issues separating liberalism and conservatism. Another major dichotomy is the internal split over whether the private interest of individuals should take precedence over the interest of society.[4] Liberalism holds strongly to the idea that individuals should be able to hold to their own interests as long as they do not cause harm to anyone else.[5] Conservatives, on the other hand, prefer the notion of a community within society. To conservatives, a nation is more than just a group of individuals in a geographical area; it is the uniting bonds of common culture, language and interests.[6] Conservatives are not necessarily against individual rights and freedoms; they are just willing to curb personal freedoms in exchange for the protection of society. Edmund Burke, whom conservatism analysts identify as the

"conservative archetype," stressed the importance of harmonious community in molding virtuous persons; persons that will then be able to give back to society and provide leadership for the next generation to inherit the ideals of society.[7] Moreover, for strong and effective leadership, the community must be based on a hierarchical system.[8] A hierarchy is seen as essential as those with superior abilities will provide leadership and mentoring to subsequent generations in their maturity with society's ideals.

Hierarchical relationships should be the basis of a conservative community. The argument is as follows: a society that lacks sufficient hierarchy will fail to provide incentives for individuals to excel if these individuals do not have distinctions in status.[9] Without incentives and competition, the society will result in "a stifling mediocrity and dragging of the entire society into economic stagnation, boredom, and apathy".[10] This belief helps frame the conservative stance on the issue of individual rights held by liberals. It would be impossible in a societal sense for men to be equal; and thus, providing individual rights would be counter intuitive to the progression and sustainment of society.[11] It is important, therefore, to protect individuals, but never at the jeopardy of society. Gad Horowitz argues that Canadians have a strong acceptance of the facts of economic inequality, social stratification, and thus hierarchy.[12] This theory is sustained by Richard Sigurdson, who explores the New Democratic Party's (NDP) inability to implement radical socialist change because they are operating in a capitalist structural system that is accepted and maintained by the majority of citizens.[13] Hierarchy is the lament of many citizens, though most accept its entrenchment and are unwilling to fight class conflicts when "cross-cutting cleavages … divide citizens along religious, ethnic, geographical, or ideological lines rather than class ones".[14] Rightists defend hierarchy as essential in maintaining prosperity and order because it organizes the complexities of society. Institutions such as government, corporations, schools and families must be hierarchically

structured and maintained like society in order to achieve their objectives.[15]

Traditionalism has been a major component of conservatism since Burke first rooted the ideals. To Samuel Huntington, "conservatism is the passionate affirmation of the value of existing institutions".[16] Society evolves through slow historical growth and the product exhibits the enlightenment of the previous generations.[17] This, by no stretch of the word, means conservatism opposes all change. Naturally, it may be necessary to accede on secondary issues in order to preserve the fundamentals of society. This was particularly true for the Social Credit government under W.A.C. Bennett as we will explore shortly. Conservatism is not the absence of change, but the intelligible resistance to it.[18]

The three aspects of conservatism mentioned above are highly theoretical compared to some common perceptions of conservative governments. The fourth aspect that is important to mention is the long history of unique fiscal management. Conservatives often hold that the laws of commerce are the laws of nature and that the state should remain out of economic matters wherever possible.[19] That being said, the 'tory touch' in Canada led to a willingness of English-Canadian political and business elite's to use the power of the state for the purpose of development and control of the economy.[20] The 'tory touch' is explained as the large influx of British conservatives into the political affairs of Canada when the united empire loyalists fled the newly formed United States of America after the Revolutionary War.[21] Conservatives also hold strongly to the idea of balanced budgets. Liberals and conservatives are often characterized by their approval or disapproval of social spending based on balancing the budget, where it is a common conception that liberals are far more willing to introduce a deficit budget.[22]

Conservatism has a long history throughout the world. In Canada the 'tory touch' helped to entrench conservative ideals into

our political discourse. As the nation spread west, British Columbia explored the impacts of liberalism, conservatism and socialism. Between 1952 and 1972 the Social Credit government worked hard to give off an aura of development, BC community and fiscal management.   Building on the hierarchism, traditionalism, communitarianism, and fiscal management that characterize conservatives, we will now explore the twenty years of W.A.C. Bennett reign as premier and the actions of his Social Credit government.

20 Years of Social Credit

W.A.C. Bennett campaigned tirelessly in the lead up to the 1952 British Columbia provincial election. As a member of the Social Credit party, he championed his South Okanagan seat and saw his party elect nineteen MLAs, enough to form a minority government. This was a remarkable feat considering the party held no seats in the previous legislature and was formally leaderless. Shortly after the election, however, W.A.C. Bennett was chosen as leader in a closed-door caucus election.

A few important events led to the election of a Social Credit government. Firstly, election of the Social Credit was constructed by the fragile Liberal-Conservative coalition. The Liberals were considered the dominant party in the coalition because of their greater number of seats in 1941. Furthermore, the formula used by the coalition to select candidates was grossly biased, and enshrined the dominance of the Liberals.[23] By the end of the 1940s there was tension within the coalition. The Liberals favoured greater government control and a development of a welfare state, while the Conservatives were hard fast to keep taxes low and government intervention to a minimum. A public dispute broke out between the partners and in January 1952 the coalition was officially null.[24] The loss of the coalition helped precipitate the creation of the Social Credit who did not emphasize specific policies but rather emphasized the 'tory-touch' by "[promising] a

way of life based on Christian principles, Alberta-style fiscal management, and individual freedom".[25]

As a last drive of the stake, the coalition government decided to institute a new voting method called single transferable ballot. This essentially allowed the electorate to number their preference of candidates. If, after all the votes were counted using first preferences, and there was no winner with a fifty-per-cent majority, then the candidate with the lowest first preference votes would be knocked off the list and the second choices on those ballots would be divvied up between the remaining candidates. The rationale was that the electorate would choose either the Liberals first and Conservatives second, or the Conservatives first and the Liberals second. This action would force the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the strongest political rival to the coalition, to a third preference standing that would likely never be elected. The election results were apprehensively close, and on second count most voters did not give their second choice to the Liberals or to the Conservatives. Instead, second choice votes were distributed to the Social Credit (CCF voters were also more likely to give their second choice to the new Social Credit government) triggering a Social Credit victory.[26] The lieutenant-governor called on W.A.C. Bennett, after his caucus-vote leadership victory, to form the government on 1 August 1952.[27]

Although the failure of the coalition and the new ballot system were two major reasons for the Social Credit victory, Gordon Hak explored the history of populism in BC and found that it had an immense impact on the election results. Leading up to the 1952 election, the BC Social Credit (Socred) organization had very shallow roots in BC, no support from the press, and an extremely vague platform.[28] Based on political history, this was a recipe for disaster. At this time, however, BC was wrought with large foreign corporations that had special access to the coalition government of the day. Populist sentiments challenged this dominant bloc, criticizing the growth of big business and monopoly.[29] The Social

Credit capitalized on this criticism and espoused a broad vision of a 'petit-bourgeoisie' society. The petit-bourgeoisie, to Hak, were those who did not control the development of the province but had space to acquire wealth, develop community association, formulate educational policies, and manage hospitals.[30] The thought was that the Social Credit government would open access to the decision making bureaucracy and cabinet, and create opportunity for the petit-bourgeoisie. This was a fallacy.

Bennett gave the illusion of a Social Credit government that was looking to end the longstanding social hierarchy in order to produce a petit-bourgeoisie society that renounced big business. Instead, Bennett exploited his legislative experience in order to organize a form of hierarchy within the legislature that suited his needs. According to Murray, there was no question who was the boss. As Bennett said later of his jerry-built cabinet, "they were a great team because they were all new and so they took advice well".[31] Like a man possessed, Bennett went to work to single-handedly rebuild the province's economy. The Social Credit victory did not usher in an ideal populist society.[32] Instead, W.A.C. Bennett took advantage of the inexperience of the new Social Credit MLAs, the lack of specific electoral commitments, the minority position of the Social Credit government, and the business community's fear of the continuing socialist threat to shape the party and the government around his personal agenda.[33] Over and above his authoritarian posé completely based on a self-dominated hierarchy, Bennett did little to quell the fears of big business held by the petit-bourgeoisie.

The Social Credit administration enticed foreign firms by granting easy access to resources and offering lucrative incentives for investment. In 1958 the legislative assembly passed an amendment to the Forest Act in order to consolidate forest tenures for large, externally owned timber corporations and to annul competition from small, locally operated companies.[34] The Forest Management Licenses given to the large firms gave them a

monopoly on timber extracts from their particular holding. Furthermore, to supply a growing domestic demand for newsprint, ten American owned pulp mills were introduced to the province between 1963 and 1974.[35] In consolidating political control, Bennett respected the realities of power and supported the large companies. For the 1953 election, Bennett "reoriented Social Credit as an anti-socialist, anti-union party, demonizing the CCF. Social Credit now attracted support from big business and, in this strange alliance, retained the support of right-wing populists".[36]

For the twenty years that Bennett held power he maintained Social Credit populism regardless of his relationship with big business. It was two distinct reasons that maintained this coalition. First, the petit-bourgeoisie perceived the Socred government as the upholder of their traditional place in BC society. It was Bennett's government that offered the largest economic benefits and opportunities, regardless of foreign ownership and corporate size, as BC's economy expanded. Second, it was vastly through the Social Credit's policy of province-building that Bennett supported the petit-bourgeoisie and maintained his populist coalition. The first triumph in this regard was the completion of the Pacific Great Eastern (PGE) Railway to Prince George.[37] The reality at the time was that power was consolidated in Victoria and Vancouver. These two economic hubs were cut off from the majority of the province, making the hinterland an easy prey to Ottawa, Alberta and American expansionism.[38] Bennett did not believe that these hubs were the only places that counted in BC, and the PGE was the first step in his dream of populating and securing the hinterland. Following the 1953 election, now with a strong majority, the Socred government quickly extended the PGE into the Peace River country. The railways helped Bennett rapidly act on his policy to reverse underdevelopment in the interior and north.

Working with record revenues, infrastructure projects sprang up in every corner of the province. According to Jackman, "all governments build roads, but none were to do so on the scale

of the Social Credit government".[39] In 1958, following job action by employees of the Puget Sound Navigation Company and Canadian Pacific Railway's steamships, the BC Ferry Authority was established. The Authority was provided with its own vessels in order to expand communication between the coastal communities and to link the capital to the mainland in a sustainable fashion.[40] This is an important example of Social Credit government consolidation and nationalization of a company, not for the purpose of equity and equality, but for the purpose of building the foundation for stabilized economic relations.

Bennett's government also tore into its revenues for construction of new school buildings and employment of new teachers on a scale unknown in the past. The University of British Columbia (UBC) was given a larger grant, Victoria College became a full-fledged university and a new institution, Simon Fraser University, was created in Burnaby.[41] New engineers and professionals were hired to construct an oil and gas pipeline, build a superport at Roberts Bank, and upgrade and expand the provincial highway network.[42] The Socreds subsidized new logging roads throughout the interior by offering companies tax breaks and discounting resource rents in exchange for road construction. Much of the electorate was unhappy with the corporate tax breaks for big business, but W.A.C. Bennett defended his policy by arguing that they provide the most efficient, cost-effective, and sustainable way to create infrastructure in the province.[43]

Bennett's massive social spending and infrastructure expenditures are not typical of right-wing governments. Upon further examination, however, it is obvious that Bennett was motivated by conservative rationales. The Social Credit expenditures for province building were justified as building the foundation for future resource manipulation and exploitation. Bennett predicted great future returns for the interior and north's residents through large-scale exploitation of timber, water, and

mineral resources. Soren Larson argued "this ideology became the fulcrum of a dominant structure of expectation that enabled British Columbians to accept and … advocate the rapid development of the northern resources at any social or environmental cost".[44] With the belief that Victoria and Vancouver elites had not done enough to preserve the integrity of the province, Bennett was able to garner support for his province-building and defending of BC's territory from the external political threats of Ottawa, Alberta and America.[45] Bennett was attempting to consolidate the BC population into a united front against outside ideologies and pressures in order to secure the resources of the province for British Columbians.

The Bennett government was not alone in protecting their province from external threats through province-building. Infrastructure spending surged nationwide in the 1960s and 1970s, strengthening the provinces against the federal government and serving the needs of a rapidly-growing population.[46] Not only did infrastructure spending surge but the weight of this financial burden was felt by the provinces. Bird and Tassonyi found that federal transfers to provinces were at their lowest point from 1963 to 1978 as a percentage of provincial revenues.[47] Moreover, provincial governments were frequently constrained from borrowing to fund infrastructure investment. Without federal transfers, it can be expected the provincial infrastructure expenditures would decrease. This was not the case. In fact, the share of infrastructure spending by provinces, expressed as the national average, was 63.3 percent.[48] Provinces Canada-wide, regardless of ideology, invested hoards of money in province-building and infrastructure development.

A remarkable aspect of Bennett's social spending was his ability to eliminate the provincial debt.[49] According to Murray, Bennett did this by continuing Premier Johnson's 'pay-as-you-go' policy of financing public works out of current revenue instead of borrowing as in the past.[50] Murray also points out, however, that

the Dominion Bureau of Statistics found that Bennett used the pay-as-you-go philosophy as well as disguising expenses as contingent liabilities.[51] This means that crown agency debts are not recorded on the provincial budget to give the illusion of no government debt. Regardless of crown agency debts, Bennett's prudent finances, high revenues and policy of pay-as-you-go saved the province billions of dollars, and helped quell the deficit from the previous coalition government.[52]

As the Social Credit administration underwent the implementation of their economic agenda, Bennett found the legislative process a nuisance.[53] To combat this, he would often keep sessions short and infrequent. This forced a diminished role onto the opposition who had no money or offices between sessions.[54] In fact, Bennett exploited the parliamentary system in order to introduce controversial legislation at the end of a session forcing sittings beyond normal adjournment times – this was his policy of legislation by exhaustion.[55] He held the press in contempt, restricted debate and refused to build a complex bureaucracy.[56] Luckily for Bennett, British Columbians never demanded substantive institutional changes.[57] Indeed, according to Norman Ruff, W.A.C. Bennett's twenty-year Social Credit regime instituted no substantive institutional changes. A limited Hansard was introduced, "but excluded coverage of much of the sitting by ignoring the lengthy time spent in consideration of budget estimates in the committee of the Whole House on Supply".[58] Bennett's resistance to institutional change helped label him as the conservative he was. It is interesting to note, however, that Bennett's contempt for parliamentary rules and traditions of courtesy and cooperation may have distinguished him from true conservatives, but he was conservative nonetheless.[59]

Conclusion

After the first election of the Social Credit government in 1952, W.A.C. Bennett worked tirelessly to organize a hierarchy

that allowed him to have unprecedented control of economic and social policy. He was quick to implement his version of nation-building, spending billions of dollars to secure and inhabit the interior and north. Bennett also undertook large expenditures in health and education for the purpose of uniting British Columbians and giving them a sense of imagined community and provincialism. His policies helped him maintain his populist support regardless of the fact that it originally supported him for his preference of small- to large-business. Although many of Bennett's policies could be classified as left-wing, there is strong evidence that his policies were implemented to build the foundation for future business and exploitation of BC resources. Bennett held strong to the conservative ideals of hierarchy, community, traditionalism, and fiscal management. Community focus was expressed through his province-building and provincialism; traditionalism through his disregard for institutional change and reluctance to follow even the established rules; and fiscal management which climaxed with his elimination of the public debt. Broadly, the Social Credit government supported a hierarchical organizational structure through its continued support of big business and its attempt not at leveling the playing field, but at bringing the petit-bourgeoisie to the ranks of larger businesses. Bennett also supported hierarchy through his exploitation of legislative experience over his cabinet during his reign as the twenty-year Social Credit premier from 1952-1972.

Notes

[1] Barry S. Clark, *Political Economy: A Comparative Approach* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998) 33.
[2] Barry S. Clark, *Political Economy: A Comparative Approach* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998) 33.
[3] G. Horowitz, "Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada: An Interpretation," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 32.2 1966: 165.
[4] Barry S. Clark, *Political Economy: A Comparative Approach* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998) 34.

[5] Barry S. Clark, *Political Economy: A Comparative Approach* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998) 34.

[6] Barry S. Clark, *Political Economy: A Comparative Approach* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998) 30.

[7] Samuel P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *The American Political Science Review* 51.2 1957: 456.

Barry S. Clark, *Political Economy: A Comparative Approach* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998) 36.

[8] Barry S. Clark, *Political Economy: A Comparative Approach* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998) 36.

[9] Barry S. Clark, *Political Economy: A Comparative Approach* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998) 34.

[10] Barry S. Clark, *Political Economy: A Comparative Approach* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998) 34.

[11] Samuel P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *The American Political Science Review* 51.2 1957: 458.

[12] G. Horowitz, "Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada: An Interpretation," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 32.2 1966: 150.

[13] Richard Sigurdson, "The British Columbia New Democratic Party: Does It Make a Difference?," *Politics, Policy, and Government in British Columbia*, ed. R. K. Carty (Vancouver, UBC, 1996) 319.

[14] Richard Sigurdson, "The British Columbia New Democratic Party: Does It Make a Difference?," *Politics, Policy, and Government in British Columbia*, ed. R. K. Carty (Vancouver, UBC, 1996) 319.

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[16] Samuel P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *The American Political Science Review* 51.2 1957: 455.

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[18] Samuel P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *The American Political Science Review* 51.2 1957: 461.

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[20] G. Horowitz, "Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada: An Interpretation," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 32.2 1966: 150.

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[23] Gordon Hak, "Populism and the 1952 Social Credit Breakthrough in British Columbia," *The Canadian Historical Review* 85.2 2004: 278.

[24] Gordon Hak, "Populism and the 1952 Social Credit Breakthrough in British Columbia," *The Canadian Historical Review* 85.2 2004: 278.

[25] Gordon Hak, "Populism and the 1952 Social Credit Breakthrough in British Columbia," *The Canadian Historical Review* 85.2 2004: 292.

[26] Gordon Hak, "Populism and the 1952 Social Credit Breakthrough in British Columbia," *The Canadian Historical Review* 85.2 2004: 278.

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[29] Gordon Hak, "Populism and the 1952 Social Credit Breakthrough in British Columbia," *The Canadian Historical Review* 85.2 2004: 290.

[30] Gordon Hak, "Populism and the 1952 Social Credit Breakthrough in British Columbia," *The Canadian Historical Review* 85.2 2004: 295.

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[33] Gordon Hak, "Populism and the 1952 Social Credit Breakthrough in British Columbia," *The Canadian Historical Review* 85.2 2004: 294.

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[38] Stephen G. Tomblin, "WAC Bennett and Province-Building in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 85 1990: 46.

[39] S. W. Jackman, *Portraits of the Premiers* (Sidney: Gray's, 1969) 260.

[40] S. W. Jackman, *Portraits of the Premiers* (Sidney: Gray's, 1969) 261.

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[42] Stephen G. Tomblin, "WAC Bennett and Province-Building in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 85 1990: 55-60.

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[49] S. W. Jackman, *Portraits of the Premiers* (Sidney: Gray's, 1969) 262.

[50] Peter Murray, *From Amor to Zalm* (Victoria: Orca, 1989) 127.

[51] Peter Murray, *From Amor to Zalm* (Victoria: Orca, 1989) 136-7.

[52] Peter Murray, *From Amor to Zalm* (Victoria: Orca, 1989) 127.

[53] Peter Murray, *From Amor to Zalm* (Victoria: Orca, 1989) 129.

[54] Peter Murray, *From Amor to Zalm* (Victoria: Orca, 1989) 129.

[55] Peter Murray, *From Amor to Zalm* (Victoria: Orca, 1989) 129.

[56] Peter Murray, *From Amor to Zalm* (Victoria: Orca, 1989) 130.

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