

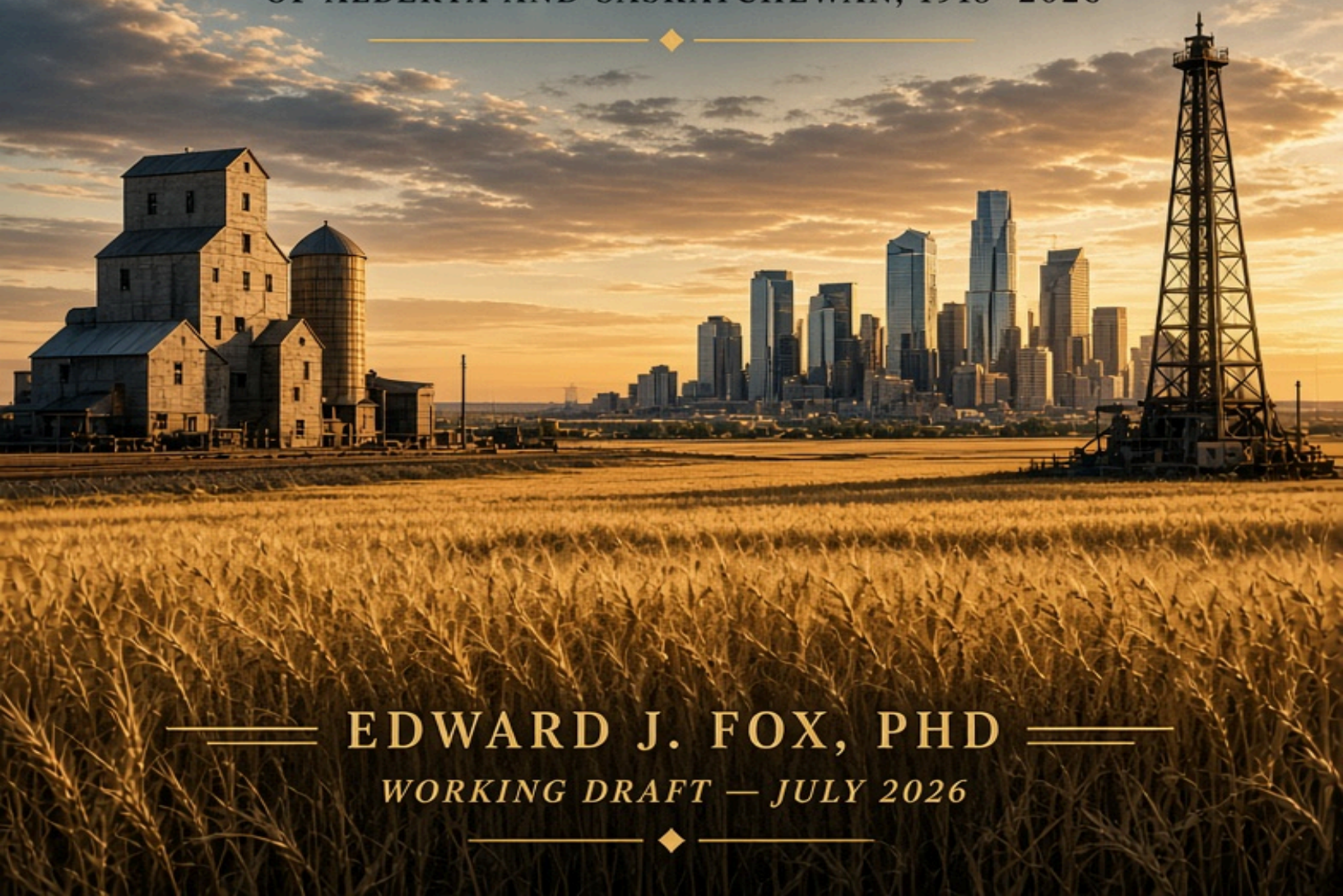


PRAIRIE FIRE

AND THE

PROPHET'S MICROPHONE

RADIO, RELIGION, AND THE POLITICAL DIVERGENCE
OF ALBERTA AND SASKATCHEWAN, 1915–2026



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A Note on the Use of AI in This Manuscript

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The author has made a sustained effort to guard against these tendencies through close editing and independent verification of sources and claims. Any errors that nonetheless remain are the author’s own.



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Introduction: Two Provinces, One Microphone

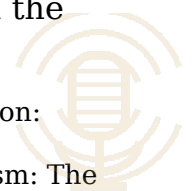
*You don't have to know all about Social Credit
before you vote for it; you don't have to understand
electricity to use it. All you have to do is push the
button and you get the light.*

— William Aberhart, 1935 campaign, quoted in
Elliott and Miller, *Bible Bill*

In August 1935, the voters of Alberta elected a government led by a high-school principal and radio evangelist who had never held public office, running for a party that had not existed three years earlier, on a monetary doctrine that virtually every trained economist in the country considered incoherent. William Aberhart's Social Credit League took fifty-six of sixty-three seats and annihilated the farmers' government that had ruled the province for fourteen years. Nine years later, in June 1944, the voters of Saskatchewan elected a government led by a Baptist minister running for the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, and in doing so created the first social democratic government in North America. Tommy Douglas would govern for seventeen years and build, piece by piece, the institution for which Canada is now perhaps best known to the world: universal public health insurance.¹

The two events are usually told as separate stories — one a curiosity of Depression-era crankery, the other a founding chapter of the Canadian welfare state. Told together, they constitute one of the most instructive natural experiments in the political history of North America. Alberta and Saskatchewan were created on the same day in 1905, carved from the same territory by the same Act of the same Parliament. They were settled in the

¹David R. Elliott and Iris Miller, *Bible Bill: A Biography of William Aberhart* (Edmonton: Reidmore Books, 1987), the standard biography, for Aberhart's career and the 1935 election; for Douglas and the 1944 victory, Seymour Martin Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), and A. W. Johnson, *Dream No Little Dreams: A Biography of the Douglas Government of Saskatchewan, 1944-1961* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).



same land rush, by many of the same peoples, to grow the same crop for the same world market. They were ruined by the same drought and the same collapse in wheat prices, and they raged against the same railroads, the same grain exchanges, and the same eastern banks. Yet within a single decade, from nearly identical grievances, they produced governments of opposite ideological character — and the divergence held. Alberta became, and remains, the most reliably conservative jurisdiction in Canada, the home of every significant right-populist insurgency of the past ninety years and, today, of a separatist movement that commands the sympathy of a quarter or more of its population. Saskatchewan built the cooperative commonwealth, exported its universal physician and hospital insurance(medicare) to the nation, and stamped Canadian social democracy with its accent for two generations.²

This paper argues that the divergence cannot be understood without placing a technology at the center of the story: radio, and specifically the fusion of radio with a particular kind of religion. Both provinces were led into their founding political eras by Baptist preachers radicalized by the Depression. But the two men held opposite theologies, and the two theologies had opposite relationships to the new medium. Aberhart was a dispensationalist fundamentalist — a prophecy teacher who located evil in vast external systems and salvation in intervention from above — and fundamentalism, shut out of the mainline pulpits and respectable institutions after the modernist controversies of the 1920s, had learned to go direct to its audience over the air. Douglas was a social gospeller — heir to a theology that held the Kingdom of God to be built patiently, cooperatively, by human hands — and the social gospel's natural habitats were the church basement, the co-operative local, and the delegate

²The classic adjudications of the divergence are Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*, and C. B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953); the modern synthesis draws on Nelson Wiseman, *In Search of Canadian Political Culture* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), and David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).



convention. Alberta's insurgency was therefore *born on the radio*: a broadcast audience of three hundred thousand converted, in under three years, into sixteen hundred study groups and then into a government. Saskatchewan's insurgency was born in the co-op hall and merely amplified by the radio. The medium did not simply carry the two movements; it shaped what kind of movements they could be — a prophet's following in one province, a delegate democracy in the other — and the difference between a following and a democracy is visible in the politics of the two provinces to this day.

Radio and religion do not act on empty ground, and the paper builds the ground first. The grievance both movements channelled was not born on the Canadian prairies at all: it came north from the American wheat belt, where farmers had been organizing against railroads, elevator companies, and banks since the 1870s, and where American populism had already forked into the two remedial logics — public ownership and monetary reform — that Saskatchewan and Alberta would respectively inherit. The Nonpartisan League of North Dakota, the "prairie fire" that captured a state government and built a state-owned bank and mill that operate to this day, sent its organizers, its methods, and in many cases its own members across the forty-ninth parallel. The paper also builds the constitutional ground: Canadian provinces and American states are differently made federal creatures, and the differences — parliamentary majorities without checks, provincial ownership of resources, an appointed and feeble Senate, a federal power of disallowance with no American analogue — determined which prairie programs could live and which would be strangled, and in the strangling of Aberhart's program created the grievance liturgy that Alberta politics has recited, in successively modernized forms, ever since.

The argument, compressed: settlement streams and religious ecologies prepared two different soils; the Dakota populist inheritance supplied fuel of two different kinds; the constitution channelled what could burn; and radio



— in the hands of the one religious culture structurally fitted to seize it — determined the form of the flame. Saskatchewan's founding movement dissolved into its achievement, and its distinctiveness faded as the cooperative economy that sustained it died. Alberta's founding movement dissolved into its grievance, which is renewable, and which each subsequent media revolution — talk radio, satellite television, social media — has re-run under new management. The road from Aberhart's microphone to the Alberta Sovereignty Within a United Canada Act, and to the separatist agitation of the present decade, is longer than it is crooked.

The paper proceeds in eight parts. Section 1 tells the American prelude: the political economy of wheat, the populist revolt, and the Nonpartisan League's fire and its crossing into Canada. Section 2 maps the constitutional terrain — two federalisms, and what each permitted. Section 3 examines the settlement streams that peopled the two provinces, alike in the gross and decisive at the margins. Sections 4 and 5 form the paper's hinge: the fork in prairie Protestantism between the social gospel and dispensational fundamentalism, and the arrival of radio — who seized it, how, and what the Canadian state built in reaction. Section 6 narrates and adjudicates the divergence itself, 1935 and 1944. Section 7 inventories what each regime built, and what each monument did to the political culture that built it. Section 8 follows the long echo of Aberhart's grievance — through Ernest and Preston Manning, the National Energy Program, the Reform Party, and the Sovereignty Act — to the separatist movement of the 2020s, and closes where the story began: with an unmediated voice, a scattered and distrustful audience, and a demonology of distant power.



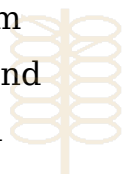
Section 1. Prairie Fire: The American Prelude

Go home and slop the hogs.

— advice reportedly given to a North Dakota farmer-legislator, and the founding legend of the Nonpartisan League

1.1 The Political Economy of Wheat

Every argument in this paper begins with the position of the wheat farmer in the continental economy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because that position was structurally identical on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel and it generated the grievance that every prairie movement — Populist, Nonpartisan, Progressive, Co-operative Commonwealth, Social Credit — was built to answer. The farmer of Dakota Territory in 1885, and of Saskatchewan or Alberta in 1915, sold his one product into a world market whose price was set in Liverpool and Chicago and which he could not influence by so much as a cent. Everything else in his economic life, however, ran through local monopolies he could not escape. The railroad — usually a single line within hauling distance, built on government land grants and lightly taxed — set freight rates at what the traffic would bear. The line elevator at the siding, frequently affiliated with the railroad or with a Minneapolis or Winnipeg syndicate, controlled the grading of his grain, the dockage deducted for weed and moisture, and the scale on which it was weighed; farmers believed, often on good evidence, that they were systematically cheated on all three. The terminal grain exchange — the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, and later its northern twin, the Winnipeg Grain Exchange — appeared to the farmer as a gambling den in which men who had never grown a bushel made and lost fortunes on the price of his labour. And the bank or mortgage company advanced him short-term credit at high interest against a crop that came once a year and might not come at all, holding foreclosure as the permanent background condition of his life.





Two macroeconomic facts sharpened the structure into an ideology. The first was the tariff: in both the United States and Canada, protective tariffs raised the price of nearly everything the farmer bought — implements, clothing, lumber, sugar — while his wheat sold at the unprotected world price. The National Policy tariff of 1879 taught the Canadian prairie farmer, precisely as the McKinley and Dingley tariffs taught his Dakota cousin, that the national economic order was designed by and for the manufacturing East. The second was deflation. Through the last three decades of the nineteenth century, prices fell steadily under the gold standard, which meant that every dollar the farmer had borrowed was repaid in dearer wheat: the debt was fixed, the crop that serviced it shrank in value year over year. The farmer did not need an economics degree to conclude that the monetary system itself was operated in the interest of creditors — and the conclusion, as Section 4 will show, was available for translation into theological registers of considerable power. The whole apparatus — railroad, elevator, exchange, bank, tariff, gold — was experienced not as a set of separate frictions but as a single system of extraction, run from Minneapolis, St. Paul, Chicago, and New York; or, in its northern translation, from Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal. The vocabulary that named it — "the interests," "the money power," "the middlemen" — crossed the border intact, needing no passport and no revision.

1.2 Three Waves of Revolt

The organizational response came in three waves, each of which left deposits that the prairie movements of the 1930s would mine. The first was the Grange — the Patrons of Husbandry — which spread through the Midwest in the 1870s as a fraternal order and became, almost despite itself, a political force. The Granger legislatures of Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota passed the first laws regulating railroad and elevator rates, and in defending them before the United States Supreme Court won *Munn v. Illinois* (1877), which held that private property "affected with a public



interest" — Chief Justice Waite's phrase, borrowed from the seventeenth century — could be regulated by the state. The doctrine is worth pausing on, because it is the constitutional seed of everything from grain commissions to public utilities to, at the far end of the lineage, a provincial hospital insurance plan: the idea that the infrastructure of an agricultural economy is not fully private, and that a legislature answerable to farmers may say so.³

The second wave was the Farmers' Alliance of the 1880s, and its contribution was less legislative than pedagogical. The Alliance built cooperative stores, cooperative elevators, and cooperative marketing exchanges, and it staffed a system of travelling lecturers who rode circuit through the wheat and cotton districts teaching political economy in schoolhouses and church basements. Lawrence Goodwyn, the movement's great historian, called what the Alliance created a "movement culture": a set of institutions in which ordinary farmers learned to run meetings, keep books, argue doctrine, and trust their own collective competence against the expert opinion of bankers and editors. The concept will do heavy work later in this paper, because the presence or absence of such a culture — the co-op hall as a school for politics — is precisely what distinguished Saskatchewan's soil from Alberta's in 1935, and because the alternative to a movement culture, as Alberta would demonstrate, is a broadcast audience.⁴

The third wave was the People's Party — the Populists proper — who in 1892 carried the accumulated program of two decades into presidential politics. The Omaha Platform demanded government ownership of the railroads and telegraphs, a federal subtreasury system to finance crops, a graduated income tax, and the free coinage of silver. Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas were its heartland; North Dakota gave the Populist-backed

³Munn v. Illinois, 94 U.S. 113 (1877).

⁴Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), introduces the concept of "movement culture."

Weaver ticket its electoral votes. The movement crested and broke in 1896, when the party fused with the Democrats behind William Jennings Bryan and free silver swallowed the rest of the program. Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech deserves a moment's attention beyond its fame, because of what it reveals about the idiom of monetary politics in North America: it is a sermon. Its climax — "you shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold" — places the money question inside the Passion narrative, and the placement was not a flourish but a translation into the only universal public language rural Protestant America possessed. Forty years before Aberhart taught the A plus B theorem between hymns, monetary reform was already being preached.⁵

Populism's defeat in 1896 is conventionally treated as the movement's death, but for the purposes of this paper it is better understood as a division of the estate. Populism had always contained two distinct diagnoses of the extraction system, and after 1896 they separated and travelled different roads. The first diagnosis located the extraction in *ownership and market structure*: the railroad charges what it likes because it is a private monopoly; the elevator cheats because it answers to the syndicate; the remedy is therefore public or cooperative ownership — state railroads, co-op elevators, publicly owned terminal facilities, a state bank. The second diagnosis located the extraction in *money itself*: the creditor class engineers deflation through the gold standard, purchasing power is systematically withheld from the producing classes, and the remedy is monetary — greenbacks, free silver, credit reform, and in the fullness of time, social credit. The first logic matured into the Nonpartisan League and, carried north, fed the cooperative stream that became Saskatchewan's CCF. The second went underground after 1896 and resurfaced across the continent in

⁵John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931); the Omaha Platform is reprinted there in full.



the catastrophe of the 1930s — in Father Coughlin's radio crusade for silver and against the bankers, and in William Aberhart's Alberta — with its conspiratorial tendencies not merely intact but darkened. One grievance, two diagnoses; and the map of the fork, this paper will argue, is the map of the two provinces.

1.3 North Dakota, 1915: The Nonpartisan League

North Dakota on the eve of the First World War was as close to a colonial economy as the continental United States contained. Roughly ninety percent of its people were rural; its single crop was marketed, graded, milled, and financed out of Minneapolis and St. Paul; and its politics had been managed for a generation by Alexander McKenzie's Republican machine in comfortable alliance with the railroads and the out-of-state grain trade. The specific insult that lit the fire was the terminal elevator. North Dakota's voters had approved a state-owned terminal elevator in successive referenda, and the legislature, session after session, declined to build it. In the 1915 session, a farmer delegation lobbying for the elevator was — in the story the movement told about itself ever afterward — advised by a legislator to "go home and slop the hogs." The remark may be embellished; its work as legend is beyond dispute. It compressed the whole colonial relation into a sentence: the men who grew the state's wealth were, in its own capitol, hogs' company.

Arthur C. Townley was a failed bonanza flax farmer from the western part of the state, and — the detail matters for this paper's genealogy — a former organizer for the Socialist Party of America. Rural socialism was an American phenomenon before it was a Canadian one: the Socialist Party's plains organizing had made real inroads among wheat and cotton farmers, and Oklahoma, not New York, gave Eugene Debs his highest state vote shares in the elections before the war. Townley took the Socialist platform's farm planks, deleted the word socialism, and in 1915 built upon them an organization of studied ideological blankness and ruthless practical focus.



The Nonpartisan League's founding insight was procedural, and it was brilliant: do not build a third party, which splits the protest vote and dies; instead, *capture the dominant party from inside* by organizing farmers to vote in the Republican primary. The League's organizers — farmers themselves, paid on commission, working township by township in Model T Fords — sold a sixteen-dollar membership, postdated checks against the crop cheerfully accepted, that bundled a subscription to the movement newspaper, the *Nonpartisan Leader*, with membership in a machine for taking the state. The program was the old Alliance-Populist ownership logic made concrete and provincial: a state-owned terminal elevator and flour mill, a state bank to refinance farm mortgages at cost, state hail insurance, rural credits, and tax exemption for farm improvements.⁶

The speed of the capture astonished the country. In the 1916 Republican primary the League swept the state ticket, and in November its candidate for governor, the farmer Lynn Frazier, won with seventy-nine percent of the vote. By 1919 the League controlled both legislative chambers and the governorship, and it enacted the program essentially whole: an industrial commission to run state enterprises; the Bank of North Dakota, opened 1919, the only state-owned general bank in American history; and the North Dakota Mill and Elevator at Grand Forks, opened 1922, the largest flour mill in the state to this day. Both institutions were immediately attacked in court as socialism beyond the constitutional powers of a state, and both were upheld by the United States Supreme Court in *Green v. Frazier* (1920) — a unanimous decision, rendered in the very heart of the *Lochner* era's hostility to economic regulation, holding that a state's judgment of its own public purposes was entitled to deference. The significance of the case for this paper's comparative argument can hardly be overstated, and Section 2 will return to it: the American constitutional

⁶Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915–1922* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955); Michael J. Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).



order, reputedly the graveyard of economic radicalism, *kept* North Dakota's socialist bank. Both the Bank of North Dakota and the State Mill and Elevator operate profitably today, more than a century on — the bank having enjoyed a curious afterlife of admiration from across the political spectrum — long after the movement that built them was dust.⁷

The movement's destruction was as instructive as its victory. The counterattack came from every direction at once: the Independent Voters' Association organized the towns and the professional classes against "Townleyism"; the Twin Cities banks conducted what amounted to a credit war against the state, refusing its bonds and starving the new institutions of capital; the wartime loyalty apparatus was turned on the League, whose ambivalence about the war (many of its German- and Scandinavian-American members opposed it) exposed it to prosecution — Townley himself served jail time under Minnesota's sedition statute for allegedly discouraging enlistments; and in 1921, the opposition deployed the new machinery of direct democracy to recall Governor Frazier, the first recall of a state governor in American history. The League was broken as a governing force within six years of its first victory, though it persisted for decades as a faction inside North Dakota's Republican Party — and Frazier, in the irony that Section 2 will spend, went almost directly from the recall into the United States Senate, where North Dakota's grievances retained a voice inside the federal government itself. "Prairie fire" was the contemporary image for the League's rise, and it is preserved in the title of the standard history, Robert Morlan's *Political Prairie Fire*: a fire that burned across a state in two years, and burned out in six — but not before scattering sparks northward across a border that, in wheat country, scarcely existed.⁸

⁷Green v. Frazier, 253 U.S. 233 (1920).

⁸Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, chs. 12-14; Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).



1.4 The Fire Crosses the Line

The transmission of the League into Canada is not a matter of vague "influence"; it is documented movement of organizers, money, methods, and members. The League treated the forty-ninth parallel as the administrative formality it was in the wheat belt — the same crop, the same railways' northern cousins, the same Winnipeg exchange standing in for Minneapolis, and in thousands of cases literally the same families, since (as Section 3 will detail) a substantial fraction of Saskatchewan's settlers were Americans, and many of Saskatchewan's "Americans" were Scandinavian and German immigrants who had first farmed in Minnesota and the Dakotas before moving north for cheaper land. League organizers entered Saskatchewan in 1916 and 1917 and signed up thousands of members; Canadian editions of League materials circulated; and the League's technology — the paid travelling organizer, the membership fee financing a movement press, the farmer-candidate slate pledged to a platform — was absorbed into a Saskatchewan farm politics that already possessed, crucially, the densest cooperative infrastructure in North America: the Territorial Grain Growers' Association dating from 1901, the cooperative elevator companies, and soon the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. The Canadian Nonpartisan League as a named organization was short-lived, but its cadres and methods flowed into the great farmers' revolt of the early 1920s — the Progressive movement that stunned the Dominion by winning sixty-five federal seats in 1921 — and thence, joined with urban labour and the social gospel, into the founding of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation at Calgary in 1932. William Irvine, the Calgary minister-turned-politician who will appear again in Section 4 as one of the social gospel's parliamentary pioneers, published *The Farmers in Politics* in 1920 as, in effect, the movement's Canadian theoretical manual; the intellectual traffic across the border was continuous and acknowledged.⁹

⁹Paul F. Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: A Survey Showing American Parallels* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1948), the standard study of the



Alberta received the other half of the estate. The United Farmers of Alberta, who swept the province in 1921 in the same continental wave that produced the Progressives, carried the League's anti-party instinct — Henry Wise Wood's doctrine of "group government," the conviction that party politics itself was the machinery of the interests — but when the UFA collapsed in 1935, what replaced it drew not on the ownership logic but on the monetary one. Social credit is greenbackism's grandchild. Major Douglas's A plus B theorem — the doctrine that the price system perpetually generates less purchasing power than it does prices, the gap accruing to finance — is the old producers' complaint against the creditor rendered in pseudo-technical notation, and Aberhart's demonology of the "Fifty Big Shots" of Canadian finance is the free-silver demonology of the eastern creditor re-armed for the Depression. The "Man from Mars" of Aberhart's broadcast dramas, asking in naive wonder why children go hungry in a province drowning in wheat, is asking the Omaha Platform's question of 1892; Alberta answered it from the monetary fork, Saskatchewan from the ownership fork. And one darker continuity must be named at the outset rather than discovered late: the money-power demonology carried its antisemitic freight across both the decades and the border. The rhetoric of an international financial conspiracy had trailed antisemitic code since the Populist fringe of the 1890s; it saturated Father Coughlin's broadcasts by the late 1930s; and it was explicit in Major Douglas's own writings and in the Douglasite wing of the Alberta movement, which Ernest Manning finally purged only in 1947 and 1948. This paper will treat that strand squarely where it arises, because it is not incidental to conspiratorial monetary populism; it is one of the forms such populism takes when its abstraction — "finance" — demands a face.¹⁰

cross-border transmission; William Irvine, *The Farmers in Politics* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1920).

¹⁰Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); Janine Stingel, *Social Discredit: Anti-Semitism, Social Credit, and the Jewish Response* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).



The chapter's closing observation frames everything that follows. Compare the fates of the fire on the two sides of the line. The American constitutional order — federal, checked, layered with courts, primaries, referenda, and recalls — proved hostile to the *movement* and hospitable to its *works*: the Nonpartisan League was ground to powder in six years by recall, prosecution, and credit war, but the Bank of North Dakota and the State Mill stand today. The Canadian order inverted the pattern. Parliamentary majorities are fireproof: once a prairie movement took a province, it held total, unchecked power for a generation — seventeen unbroken years for Douglas's CCF, thirty-six for Social Credit — with no recall, no midterm reversal, no separately elected chamber, no gubernatorial veto. But what such a majority could *do* with its power was channelled by a different constitution: Saskatchewan's program ran through provincial jurisdiction and was built; Alberta's ran through money and banking, exclusive federal ground, and was annihilated by disallowance and the courts. Prairie fire burned hotter and longer north of the line, but the two federalisms determined the shape of the flames — and it is to the two federalisms that the paper now turns.



Section 2. Two Federalisms: The Constitutional Terrain

*The right of free public discussion of public affairs
... is the breath of life for parliamentary institutions.*

— Chief Justice Lyman Duff, Reference re Alberta
Statutes (1938)

2.1 Ten and Fifty

Alberta, Saskatchewan, and North Dakota are all subnational units of continental federations, all wheat economies of the same era, all peripheral by every measure of distance from their nations' financial capitals. The temptation is to treat the border as a line on a map and the three as variations on one political species. They are not, and the differences of constitutional architecture did as much as religion or settlement to determine which prairie insurgencies lived, which died, and what each left behind. This section maps the terrain before the armies move onto it.

Begin with arithmetic. Canada divides its territory among ten provinces; the United States among fifty states. The consequence is not merely that each province is, on average, a larger share of its country, but that the largest provinces are negotiating powers in a sense no American state can be. Ontario and Quebec have each contained a quarter or more of Canada's population and economy — proportions no American state approaches — and the western provinces, though smaller, inherited the bargaining posture the big two established. Federal-provincial relations in Canada are accordingly conducted as a form of internal diplomacy: First Ministers' conferences, bilateral fiscal agreements, constitutional summits — the machinery the political scientist Donald Smiley named *executive federalism*, in which premiers deal with prime ministers roughly as heads of government deal with one another. A governor of North Dakota does not negotiate with the President of the United States; a premier of Alberta negotiates with the Prime Minister of Canada as a matter of routine, and





the province's political culture is organized around the negotiation. This single structural fact will bear weight throughout the paper: Canadian regional grievance is channelled into *confrontation between governments*, because that is where the system locates the bargaining table.¹¹

2.2 The Missing Senate: Interstate and Intrastate Federalism

The second difference explains why the table is set that way. Political scientists distinguish *intrastate* federalism — regional interests represented inside the central government's own institutions — from *interstate* federalism, in which regions confront the centre from outside as governments. The American system is lavishly intrastate. Every state, however small, sends two senators to a chamber of real power, with confirmation authority over judges and cabinet officers and, for most of the twentieth century, a filibuster that made intense regional minorities nearly unmovable. North Dakota's revolt could therefore prosecute its grievances in Washington through North Dakota's own senators — and did: Lynn Frazier went from the governor's office, via the 1921 recall, directly into the United States Senate, where he served three terms, and the League sent William Langer after him. The wheat belt's quarrel with the railroads and the Federal Reserve was carried on *inside* the federal legislature by men elected to carry it.

Canada has no such channel. The Senate of Canada is appointed by the federal government of the day, apportioned by region rather than by province, and politically feeble by convention; no western grievance has ever been prosecuted through it. Regional interest therefore has almost no purchase within federal institutions and must be asserted *against* Ottawa by premiers — in conferences, in courtrooms, and ultimately in threats of exit. The point is worth stating as a standing amplifier of everything in Section 8: the Canadian architecture converts regional discontent into premier-versus-

¹¹Donald V. Smiley, *Canada in Question: Federalism in the Eighties*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1980).



prime-minister confrontation because it offers discontent nowhere else to go. When the Reform Party's founding slogan demanded that "the West wants in," the demand was precisely for intrastate federalism — a Triple-E Senate, elected, equal, and effective, on the American model — and the demand's futility (the Senate remains appointed to this day) kept the grievance in its interstate channel, where it has flowed ever since. Separatism, in this light, is not an aberration of the Canadian system but one of its standing options: where the American design invites a region to capture federal institutions, the Canadian design invites it to defy them.¹²

2.3 Jurisdiction: The Stronger, Weaker Provinces

Here the comparison inverts, and the inversion is the making of this paper's central irony. Measured by jurisdiction, Canadian provinces are far the *stronger* subnational units. Sections 91 and 92 of the British North America Act divided the field exhaustively, and the provinces received exclusive authority over "property and civil rights," municipal institutions, hospitals, education, and the management and sale of public lands — a list that the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, Canada's final court of appeal until 1949, read generously for decades while reading the Dominion's trade-and-commerce power narrowly. The American development ran the other way: the commerce clause, especially after 1937, federalized economic regulation to a degree Canadian Ottawa never achieved over the provinces' internal economies. And in 1930 the prairie provinces gained the foundation of everything that follows in Alberta's story: the Natural Resources Transfer Agreements conveyed Crown lands, mines, and minerals — withheld at the provinces' creation in 1905 — to the provinces themselves. Alberta had owned its own subsoil for only five years when Aberhart took power, and for seventeen when Leduc No. 1 blew in. Every subsequent war between Alberta and Ottawa, from the disallowances

¹²On the distinction, Donald V. Smiley and Ronald L. Watts, *Intrastate Federalism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).



to the National Energy Program to the carbon-pricing reference, has been fought on the ground the 1930 agreements conveyed: the resources are the province's *property*, not merely its tax base, and the province defends them with an owner's fury. No American state stands in a comparable proprietary relation to its resource wealth.¹³

But the same document that made the provinces strong gave the Dominion two weapons with no American analogue whatsoever. Under the power of *disallowance*, the federal cabinet could simply void any provincial statute within a year of its passage — no court, no hearing, no appeal; the Act ceased to exist. Under *reservation*, a Lieutenant-Governor — a federal appointee, it must be remembered, standing at the head of every provincial government — could withhold assent from a provincial bill and refer it to Ottawa, where it died unless the federal cabinet chose otherwise. Washington possesses nothing of the kind: it cannot void a state statute by executive decision; it must persuade a court that the statute offends the federal constitution, and as *Green v. Frazier* demonstrated, the court may decline. The two systems thus distributed their checks in opposite places. The American order checks the subnational government *internally* — governor against legislature, referendum and recall against both, courts against all — but shields its enactments from federal annihilation. The Canadian order leaves the provincial government internally unchecked — a premier with a majority faces no veto, no recall, no midterm, no elected second chamber — but holds the whole provincial statute book hostage to a federal cabinet's pleasure.¹⁴

2.4 What Each System Did to Its Radicals

Now run the two prairie programs through the two machines, and the outcomes cease to look like accidents of leadership and begin to look like

¹³Constitution Act, 1930, 20–21 Geo. V, c. 26 (U.K.), scheduling the Natural Resources Transfer Agreements.

¹⁴G. V. La Forest, *Disallowance and Reservation of Provincial Legislation* (Ottawa: Department of Justice, 1955), tabulates the historical use of both powers.



constitutional destiny. The Nonpartisan League operated inside the checked American system, and the checks devoured it: its governor recalled, its leaders prosecuted, its majorities dismantled at primaries within six years. But its *works* were unreachable — the state bank and the state mill, once upheld as valid exercises of North Dakota's public purposes, could not be disallowed by anyone, and they stand today. Douglas's CCF operated inside the unchecked Canadian system, and the absence of checks was its superpower: seventeen uninterrupted years of fused executive and legislative authority, party discipline near-absolute, no separately elected chamber to obstruct and no recall to fear. Hospital insurance was legislated within his government's first years; the medicare edifice rose across a decade and a half of patient, unobstructed construction. A reader accustomed to American government should pause on how alien this is: it is as if a Nonpartisan League governor had held both houses of his legislature, by wide margins, without interruption, from 1916 to 1933, with no referendum or recall available to his enemies and no Senate confirmation required for his appointees. Parliamentary majorities do not weaken radical programs; they supercharge them — *within jurisdiction*.

The qualifier is the crux, and it is the elegant, underappreciated explanation for why Douglas succeeded where Aberhart was crushed. The two programs had different constitutional addresses. Douglas's socialism ran almost entirely through section 92: hospitals, insurance, utilities, labour relations, public lands — provincial ground, every acre of it. The constitution was his friend, and he repaid the friendship by never straying from it. Aberhart's social credit ran through money, banking, currency, and interest — section 91's most exclusively federal terrain, assigned to the Dominion in 1867 precisely so that no province could ever do what Aberhart proposed to do. His program was constitutionally impossible at any majority. When his backbench insurgents forced the issue in 1937 and the legislature passed the Credit of Alberta Regulation Act and its companions

— statutes that would have licensed and controlled the banks as provincial instruments — Ottawa disallowed them outright. When the legislature repassed them in altered form, the Lieutenant-Governor reserved the bills, the first use of reservation in Alberta's history. The Supreme Court of Canada, in the 1938 Alberta reference, held the banking legislation *ultra vires* — and with it the Accurate News and Information Act, Aberhart's attempt to compel the hostile daily press to print government rebuttals, which the Court struck down in reasons that planted the seed of an implied constitutional freedom of the press. Between 1937 and 1943, Aberhart's Alberta became the most disallowed, most reserved, most judicially rebuked provincial government in the modern history of Confederation. The program died entire. Not one dividend of twenty-five dollars was ever paid.¹⁵

Set the two national outcomes side by side, because the paradox deserves its full weight. The American state — fifty among many, jurisdictionally modest, internally checked — *kept its socialist bank*, which a unanimous Supreme Court declined to touch in the most property-jealous era of American jurisprudence. The Canadian province — one of ten, proprietor of its lands, master of an unchecked legislature — watched a federal cabinet erase its central statutes by minute of council, and a federally appointed viceroy refuse its bills the royal assent. The system reputed to strangle radicalism preserved radicalism's monuments; the system reputed to empower provinces demonstrated, upon provocation, that provincial power ends exactly where Ottawa says it does. Every Alberta politician for ninety years has governed in the shadow of that demonstration.

2.5 The Grievance Machine and the Long Constitutional Coda

For the disallowance crisis did two things at once, and the second mattered more than the first. It killed social credit as policy — after 1938

¹⁵J. R. Mallory, *Social Credit and the Federal Power in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1954), the classic study of the disallowance crisis; the judicial sequel is *Reference re Alberta Statutes*, [1938] S.C.R. 100.



the doctrine was, in practice, abandoned, and the movement governed as an increasingly conventional conservative administration. And it *created the liturgy*. Aberhart had preached that a distant financial power was strangling Alberta's prosperity; Ottawa, the courts, and the banks now obligingly performed the sermon's content in public, annulling the elected legislature's economic program by federal decree. That the program was unworkable is beside the point of the political lesson learned: Alberta's democratic will, the story ran, had been overridden by the East acting in concert — the cabinet, the appointed viceroy, the judges, the chartered banks, and the newspapers, a single apparatus wearing five costumes. Social Credit governed for three more decades on the grievance rather than the theory, and the grievance proved infinitely renewable because it was structural: any federal intrusion on provincial economic ground — a tax agreement, an energy program, an environmental assessment act — could be slotted into the 1937 template without modification. Section 8 will follow the template to the present day; here it is enough to mark its manufacture, and to note the mirror image next door. Saskatchewan's constitution *validated* its founding movement's program, and so the CCF's legacy institutionalized as policy pride — medicare, the Crown corporations, the visible works — rather than as constitutional wound. One province's founding memory is of what it built; the other's is of what was done to it. The emotional structures of prairie politics were set in those years, and they were set by the constitution as much as by any preacher.

Three codas complete the terrain, each a delayed consequence of the Alberta collision. First, disallowance itself died of the episode. Wielded against Aberhart's statutes more aggressively than against any modern province, the power became politically radioactive — a naked contradiction of the federal principle it had always been — and it has never been used since 1943. Alberta's resistance, futile in the moment, permanently disarmed the weapon that defeated it: a fact of which Alberta's later



constitutional warriors have been well aware, since it established that federal powers can be killed by making their exercise politically unbearable. Second, the patriation settlement of 1982 rewrote the terrain the prairie wars had been fought on: a domestic amending formula requiring provincial consent; a Charter of Rights with a *notwithstanding clause* — section 33, a provincial legislature's power to override judicial rulings that no American state possesses, extracted by the western premiers as the price of assent, and lately rediscovered by them; and section 36's constitutional entrenchment of equalization payments, which converted a fiscal program into a permanent fixture of Alberta grievance arithmetic, culminating in the province's 2021 referendum demanding its removal. Third, and continuing: broadcasting itself, the instrument of Aberhart's rise, was assigned to federal jurisdiction by the Privy Council's 1932 Radio Reference at the very moment the instrument was remaking Alberta's politics — a decision whose consequences belong to Section 5, but whose shape the reader can already guess. The medium that made the prophet answered, constitutionally, to the power that unmade his program.¹⁶

The terrain, then: a federation whose architecture channels regional anger into intergovernmental war and offers exit as a standing temptation; provinces internally all-powerful and externally exposed; a jurisdiction map that predetermined one prairie program for triumph and the other for martyrdom; and a martyrdom that became the founding memory of a political culture. Onto this ground, in the first decades of the century, came the settlers — and the settlers, as the next section shows, did not come evenly.

¹⁶Constitution Act, 1982, ss. 33, 36; *In re Regulation and Control of Radio Communication in Canada*, [1932] A.C. 304 (P.C.); on disallowance's disuse after 1943, La Forest, *Disallowance and Reservation*.



Section 3. Two Peoples? The Settlement Streams

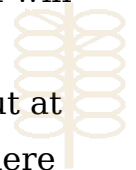
The last best West.

— Canadian government immigration slogan, c.
1896–1914

3.1 The Twin Provinces

A demographer handed the 1931 census returns for Alberta and Saskatchewan, with the province names blacked out, would struggle to tell them apart. Both were created by the same Act of Parliament on the same day — September 1, 1905 — from the same North-West Territories. Both were filled in the same great inrush, the Laurier-era land boom of 1896 to 1914, when Clifford Sifton's Immigration Branch papered Europe and the American Midwest with pamphlets advertising "the last best West" and free quarter-sections under the Dominion Lands Act. Both were overwhelmingly rural and agricultural; in both, a majority of adults had been born somewhere else; both grew the same hard red spring wheat for the same Liverpool price. Both showed British-origin pluralities of roughly half the population, large continental European blocs — Germans, Ukrainians, Scandinavians — substantial American-born cohorts, and Protestant majorities. And both were institutionally young in the way that mattered most for insurgent politics: no entrenched party machines worth the name, no hereditary elites, no thick crust of incumbency. A movement that could organize the countryside could take either province whole — which is precisely what happened, once each, a decade apart, in opposite directions.

The gross similarity is what makes the divergence a genuine puzzle rather than an unsurprising difference between different places, and it disciplines the argument of this section. No explanation from population will work at the level of census categories; the streams that filled the two provinces differed not in kind but in proportion, and not at the centre but at the margins. The claim to be defended here is that the margins were where the politics lived: that a difference of ten or fifteen points in the composition





of a settler stream, compounded by clustering and by the institutions each stream carried in its baggage, prepared two soils that the same Depression seeded with opposite crops. The section takes the streams in turn — American, British, continental European — and then the geography and the organizational inheritance, before closing with an honest statement of how much this kind of explanation can and cannot carry.

3.2 Which Americans

Alberta received the heavier and the more distinctive American inflow. By 1911 the American-born were roughly a fifth of Alberta's population, the largest concentration in Canada, clustered thickly in the southern ranching country and the dry-farming belt — districts whose town names (Raymond, Magrath, Cardston) and whose windmills, Hereford herds, and Fourth-of-July habits announced their origins. Saskatchewan drew great numbers of American settlers too; the difference begins to appear only when one asks, as Nelson Wiseman taught prairie historiography to ask, *which* Americans. A large share of Saskatchewan's American-born were not old-stock Yankees at all but Scandinavian and German immigrants at one remove — families who had first landed in Minnesota and the Dakotas, farmed there for a decade or a generation, and moved north when land at home grew scarce and dear. These were people who carried, in the memorable shorthand, the Dakotas in their baggage: Nonpartisan League memberships, cooperative elevator shares, subscriptions to the *Nonpartisan Leader*, and, among the Scandinavians especially, old-world instincts about cooperation and social insurance that the Norwegian and Swedish labour movements had already made mainstream at home. When the League's organizers crossed into Saskatchewan in 1916, as Section 1 recorded, they were in large part following their own members north. Alberta's Americans skewed differently: more native-born Midwesterners of the individualist plains — Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Montana stock — Methodist and Baptist in religion, Republican or Bryanite in politics, carrying the *monetary* fork of the



populist inheritance, the free-silver suspicion of eastern creditors, rather than the state-ownership fork. The census recorded both populations under one heading, "born in the United States," and the heading concealed the difference between the NPL veteran taking up land near Saskatoon and the Kansas wheat farmer arriving at Lethbridge: two Americans, two populisms, two destinations.¹⁷

3.3 Which Britons

The same question applied to the British stream yields the same pattern. Saskatchewan drew proportionally more settlers direct from Britain, and among them a significant contingent of industrial workers and miners from the north of England, Scotland, and Wales — men and women formed before emigration by trade unionism, by chapel nonconformity of the reforming sort, by Fabian lectures and the young Labour Party. These arrivals became, out of all proportion to their numbers, the local cadres of prairie socialism: the secretaries of CCF constituency associations, the movers of resolutions, the readers of pamphlets. Their type specimen is Douglas himself — Scottish-born, raised in a Winnipeg household of labourist Scots ironworkers, formed as much by Keir Hardie's memory as by any Canadian influence. Alberta's British-origin population, by contrast, contained a heavier admixture of the *Ontario-born* — the second great internal migration of English Canada, Orange and Methodist and Baptist small-property Ontario moving west along the rail lines to replicate itself. Transplanted Ontario Protestantism inclined to moral reform, temperance, Sabbath observance, and individual salvation; it produced formidable civic energy and almost no class politics. Its type specimen, symmetrically, is Aberhart — Ontario farm stock, Huron County, a self-made schoolmaster carrying west a religion of personal rectitude and prophetic certainty. That each province's founding prophet embodied its distinctive British stream is

¹⁷Census of Canada, 1911; the settlement-stream analysis follows Wiseman, *In Search of Canadian Political Culture*, chs. 6–8.

the kind of coincidence a careful historian distrusts and a truthful one reports.¹⁸

3.4 The Religious Overlay

Religion will occupy the whole of Section 4, but its demographic skeleton belongs here, because denomination was the census category in which the settlement streams' political differences were most legibly recorded. Alberta became, within a generation of settlement, the prairie stronghold of sectarian and fundamentalist Protestantism: Baptists of Aberhart's premillennial stripe, Pentecostals from the revivals of the 1910s and 1920s, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Plymouth Brethren, German-speaking pietists, and — a bloc with no Saskatchewan counterpart — the Mormon settlements of the Cardston country, communal in economic practice and firmly anti-socialist in politics. W. E. Mann's classic study counted the sects and cults of Alberta and found an ecology unlike anything else in Canada. Saskatchewan's Protestant majority, by contrast, leaned mainline: Methodist, Presbyterian, and after 1925 United Church — the denominational home of the social gospel — together with a large social-gospel-adjacent Baptist population of the Brandon College rather than the Prophetic Bible Institute persuasion. The distinction should not be overdrawn at the level of individuals; every district had every kind of church. But as ecology — as the question of which pulpits were numerous, which colleges trained the ministers, which religious vocabulary a political organizer could assume his audience shared — the two provinces had measurably different Protestantisms by 1930, and Section 4 will argue the difference was decisive. One further demographic fact cuts the other way and must be entered on the ledger: Saskatchewan's large Catholic population — French, German, Hungarian, Ukrainian Catholic — was durably hostile to socialism, its clergy armed after 1931 with a papal

¹⁸Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*, ch. 2; Thomas H. McLeod and Ian McLeod, *Tommy Douglas: The Road to Jerusalem* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1987), ch. 1.



encyclical condemning it by name. The Catholic vote is a standing reason the CCF's victory waited until 1944, and a standing correction to any temptation to read Saskatchewan as uniformly prepared for Douglas.¹⁹

3.5 Continental Streams and the Map of the Economy

The continental European blocs, similar in aggregate size, differed in political texture the same way. Saskatchewan's Scandinavians — Norwegians and Swedes above all, many by way of Minnesota and the Dakotas — proved disproportionately CCF-friendly, and its large Ukrainian population included a significant left-labour current alongside its nationalist and Catholic majorities. Alberta's continental mix ran more heavily to German-speaking Catholics and Mennonites — communities politically quietist where they were not actively anti-socialist — alongside the Mormon south. None of these blocs was politically monolithic, and all of them were courted by every party; the point is again proportional, a matter of which communities were numerous where, and of what organizational experience each had imported.

Geography and economic structure completed the preparation of the two soils. Saskatchewan was the purer creation of wheat: a near-monoculture, more totally exposed than any economy in North America to the collapse of a single price, and more uniformly organized by the institutions of that single crop — above all the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, which by the late 1920s was the largest grain-handling cooperative on earth, with elevators at every siding and locals in every district. When wheat fell from \$1.60 to under forty cents and the Palliser Triangle blew away in the same years, Saskatchewan's per-capita income fell further than that of any province in Canada — a radicalizing catastrophe visited upon a population already schooled, by two decades of cooperative practice, in collective response. Alberta was never so pure a wheat economy. Its south

¹⁹W. E. Mann, *Sect, Cult, and Church in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955); on the Catholic vote, Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*, ch. 9.



was ranching country from before the settlement boom, Tory and individualist in culture from the first Anglo-American cattlemen onward; it had irrigation districts, and coal towns in the Crowsnest Pass whose miners voted for radicals of a different colour — Alberta possessed a genuine labour left, it must be said, which elected Communists and mine-union men locally for decades; the left was not absent from Alberta but *regionally contained*, quarantined in the coal seams while the farm districts went another way. Calgary was a private-enterprise cattle-and-oil town almost from its founding, and Turner Valley — gas in 1914, crude in force by 1936 — meant that Alberta's economic imagination possessed, even in the Depression's depths, a non-agrarian escape hatch that Saskatchewan wholly lacked. A province that could dream of oil did not have to dream of the cooperative commonwealth.²⁰

3.6 The Organizational Inheritance

All the differences converge on the one that did the proximate political work: the density and condition of collective organization on the eve of the Depression. This is Seymour Martin Lipset's founding argument restated demographically. By 1930 Saskatchewan possessed the thickest cooperative infrastructure in North America — the Wheat Pool's hundreds of locals, cooperative stores, credit unions, telephone companies, the whole apparatus descended from the Territorial Grain Growers of 1901 — and that apparatus functioned, exactly as Goodwyn's "movement culture" concept predicts, as a school: a generation of farmers had learned in it to run meetings, elect delegates, audit books, and trust their collective competence. When the CCF organized Saskatchewan, it did not build a movement; it federated one that already existed, hall by hall. Alberta's equivalent, the United Farmers of Alberta, was on paper a comparable network of locals — but by 1935 the UFA was also the *government*, fourteen

²⁰Bill Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (Calgary: Fifth House, 2005), chs. 8–9; on Alberta's coal-belt left, Alvin Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), ch. 1.

years in office, exhausted, scandal-broken, and discredited by its helplessness before the Depression. Its locals were demoralized precisely when Saskatchewan's Pool locals were radicalizing, and into that organizational vacuum came something new in kind: Aberhart's study groups, recruited not through the farm economy but through a radio audience and a Bible-institute mailing list — some sixteen hundred of them conjured in under three years, as Section 5 will detail. The contrast in one image: Saskatchewan's movement was assembled *face to face in the co-op hall*; Alberta's was assembled *over the air*, in kitchens, around receivers. The two forms of assembly produced two forms of politics — a delegate democracy and a broadcast following — and the difference between them is this paper's thesis in miniature.²¹

3.7 What Settlement Explains, and What It Cannot

The honest close. Every difference catalogued above is a difference of degree, and the pure settlement-composition explanation has been seriously contested. Macpherson's rejoinder stands: both provinces were societies of independent commodity producers in the same quasi-colonial relation to eastern capital, and if class structure determined politics, they should have moved together. The critics of Lipset add that Alberta had cooperatives too, and Saskatchewan had fundamentalists; that the correlations between origin and vote, where they can be measured at all, are ecological rather than individual; and that contingency did independent work — the UFA's scandal-hastened collapse, the nine-year gap between the two provinces' decisive elections, and the sheer accident of who commanded the region's most powerful transmitter. A counterfactual worth entertaining seriously, if only in a footnote: had Aberhart kept school in Regina and Douglas taken a pulpit in Calgary, would the provinces have exchanged destinies? The demographic answer defended here is *probably not entirely* — the soils

²¹Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*, chs. 2–3; on the study groups, John A. Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959).



were differently prepared, and each man flourished in the one suited to his method — but the honest answer concedes that leadership, medium, and moment were not mere expressions of demography. Settlement loaded the dice; it did not throw them. What threw them — the fork in prairie Protestantism, and the machine that carried one fork's voice into every kitchen in two provinces — occupies the next two sections.²²

²²Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, ch. 1 and conclusion; for the critique and the counterfactual, Wiseman, *In Search of Canadian Political Culture*, ch. 8.



Section 4. The Fork in the River: Two Protestantisms

You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.

— William Jennings Bryan, 1896 — monetary
politics, preached

4.1 One River

Begin a step back from the prairies, because the two religious cultures that would divide them were not imports from different worlds but branches of a single stream. Nineteenth-century English Canada was saturated in evangelical Protestantism — Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian — carried into every township by circuit riders, camp meetings, and revivals, and expressed publicly in the great moral crusades of the age: temperance, Sabbath observance, missions, moral reform. Crucially, for most of the century there was no "fundamentalist" and no "liberal" Protestantism to choose between; evangelicalism was simply the mainstream, at once revivalist in piety and activist in society, and a Methodist of 1870 would not have understood the question of which side he was on. Both of this paper's protagonists are children of that undivided river: Aberhart of Ontario Baptist farm stock, Douglas of Scots Baptist artisans. The story of prairie religion is the story of the river forking — into a Protestantism that collectivized salvation and one that individualized it, one that set out to build the Kingdom and one that waited for it — and the fork's timing is the hidden mainspring of this paper's argument. Protestantism divided in exactly the decades the West was being settled, roughly 1890 to 1925, so that the two provinces were peopled *while the division was in progress*, and, as Section 3 showed, they drew in different proportions from the dividing stream. Alberta and Saskatchewan are, among other things, the two banks on which the fork's waters came ashore.



4.2 The Social Gospel: Building the Kingdom

The first branch emerged from Protestantism's collision with industrial capitalism. Confronted with the slum, the sweatshop, the twelve-hour day — "the social question," in the era's phrase — a generation of ministers and theologians concluded that the old evangelism had misdiagnosed the disease. Sin, they argued, inheres not only in individual hearts but in social structures; a man may be personally blameless and yet participate in collective wickedness through the wage system, the tenement, the trust; and the Christian's task is therefore not merely to rescue souls from the world but to redeem the world itself — to build the Kingdom of God on earth, which in practice meant factory acts, public health, cooperatives, and, for the movement's left wing, socialism. The American fountainhead was Walter Rauschenbusch — a Baptist, it is worth noting for the symmetry to come, whose *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) became the movement's summa after his years of pastoral work beside the tenements of Hell's Kitchen. In Canada the social gospel's centre of gravity was Methodism, and its capital was Winnipeg — the immigrant metropolis of the West, with its North End slums, its railway shops, and, in 1919, its General Strike.²³

The Canadian line of descent from pulpit to party runs with a directness that requires little argument, only narration. Salem Bland taught the new theology at Wesley College, Winnipeg — and was dismissed for it in 1917. His circle's outstanding figure, J. S. Woodsworth, superintendent of All Peoples' Mission in the North End, wrote the movement's Canadian handbooks (*Strangers Within Our Gates, My Neighbor*), resigned from the Methodist ministry over the church's enthusiasm for the war, was arrested in the General Strike, entered Parliament in 1921 as a labour member, and in 1932 became the founding leader of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. Beside him from the beginning stood William Irvine — a minister, note the city, of *Calgary* — whose *The Farmers in Politics* has

²³Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907).



already appeared in Section 1 as the theoretical manual of the farmers' revolt. And Douglas: Baptist, but trained at Brandon College, a Baptist school so theologically liberal that prairie fundamentalists — Aberhart's cohort explicitly among them — denounced it as apostate. His Brandon teachers gave him the social gospel entire, and his 1930s ministry at Calvary Baptist in Weyburn was the doctrine in practice: relief programs run from the church basement, and the pastoral arithmetic — young men dying for want of care their families could not buy — that concluded in the judgment that charity without structural change was triage. When the Regina Manifesto of 1933 declared that no CCF government would rest content until it had eradicated capitalism, the cadence was a revival preacher's; the sentence is an altar call with the theology exchanged for economics. Richard Allen, the movement's historian, called the CCF the political residue of the social gospel after the churches themselves retreated from it — the passion outliving the pulpit — and the description fits Saskatchewan best of all, because there the residue found the cooperative institutions of Section 3 waiting to receive it. Institutionally, the social gospel's monument was the United Church of Canada (1925) — Methodists, Congregationalists, and most Presbyterians merged into the largest Protestant body on the prairies, strongest of all in Saskatchewan: ecumenical, this-worldly, reformist. When a CCF organizer spoke in a Saskatchewan town, he was very often speaking the vocabulary the minister had used on Sunday.²⁴

4.3 Fundamentalism: Waiting for the King

The second branch defined itself against exactly this liberalization, and its theology must be taken seriously on its own terms, because its political consequences follow from its doctrines with rigorous logic. From the 1870s,

²⁴Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914–28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971); Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J. S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959); McLeod and McLeod, *Tommy Douglas*, chs. 2–4.



a revival of *premillennialism* — the ancient teaching that Christ returns before, not after, the millennium — spread through the Anglo-American evangelical world by way of the Plymouth Brethren theologian John Nelson Darby, the prophecy-conference movement, and Moody's revival empire. Darby's distinctive system, dispensationalism, divided history into successive economies of God's dealing with man, taught that the present dispensation ends in apostasy and tribulation, and expected the rapture of the church before the catastrophe. The system might have remained a seminary curiosity but for a publishing event: the Scofield Reference Bible of 1909, which printed the dispensational scheme as annotations on the sacred page itself, so that a generation of ordinary readers — Aberhart, a self-taught prophecy student by correspondence course, emphatically among them — absorbed Darby's chronology as if it were Scripture's own marginalia. The pamphlet series *The Fundamentals* (1910–1915) gave the broader anti-modernist coalition its name; the humiliations of the 1920s — the Scopes trial, the lost denominational wars — gave it its siege mentality and drove it out of the mainline institutions into a parallel world of its own making: Bible institutes, prophecy conferences, missionary societies, and, decisively for this paper, the radio.²⁵

The political valence of the doctrine is the mirror image of the social gospel's, and the mirroring is exact. If the world is a sinking ship from which souls are to be rescued — the image is Moody's — then the social gospel is not merely mistaken but apostate: a substitution of man's kingdom for God's, and quite possibly the very apostasy prophecy foretold. Premillennialists of the interwar years read the League of Nations, the ecumenical movement, and socialism as candidate vehicles of the coming world-system of Antichrist. Here is the taproot of a fact that will organize Sections 6 and 7: Alberta fundamentalism was not incidentally but

²⁵Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).



doctrinally anti-socialist, and Ernest Manning would spend three decades explaining to a radio audience that the CCF was not simply wrong but ungodly.

4.4 The Aberhart Paradox

But the doctrine poses the paradox on which any honest account of Aberhart must turn: how does a man who believes the world unreformable until Christ returns launch a total reform of the monetary system? The resolution, assembled by his biographers, has several interlocking strands. First, dispensational theology locates evil in vast *external systems* — world-powers, apostasies, Babylons — and salvation in intervention from outside and above; and Major Douglas's social credit located economic evil in precisely such a system: a parasitic financial power withholding purchasing power from the producing people. The A plus B theorem slotted into the prophetic imagination as a secular demonology, with the banker standing in the structural position of the apostate world-power. Second, social credit demanded no transformation of human relations — no cooperative reconstruction of society, which premillennialism deemed impossible this side of the Second Coming — but only the mechanical removal of a satanic obstruction, effected from above by a leader: the shape of salvation itself, transposed into economics. Third, Aberhart preached explicitly that God had created a world of plenty and could not have intended poverty in the midst of abundance; scarcity was therefore artificial, therefore engineered, therefore culpable. The syllogism turned the Depression itself into evidence of conspiracy. Social credit, in short, was not a departure from Aberhart's theology but its economic translation: a premillennialist's politics — pessimistic about human cooperation, credulous of hidden systemic evil, hungry for deliverance by decree.²⁶

²⁶Elliott and Miller, *Bible Bill*, chs. 4-6, reconstruct the theology and its fusion with social credit.



And the translation carried the darkness flagged in Section 1. A demonology of "finance" demands, sooner or later, a face, and the face such demonologies had worn since the 1890s was antisemitic. Major Douglas's own writings were explicitly so; the "international financier" of social credit rhetoric trailed well-worn code; and the Douglasite wing of the Alberta movement — the imported experts of the "Board of Strategy," certain backbenchers, and the movement's later publications — trafficked in it openly, until Manning purged the overt antisemites from party and government in 1947 and 1948. The purge was real and should be credited; the strand was real and must be named. It marks a difference in the moral structure of the two prairie movements that no amount of surface similarity can erase: the CCF blamed a *system* — capitalism — and proposed to socialize it; Social Credit blamed a *cabal* and proposed to break it. Systems can be reformed by institutions; cabals can only be hunted, and the hunt does not end when the policy dies.²⁷

4.5 The Ecology of Belief

Around Aberhart stood the religious ecology Section 3 sketched, and it amplified everything. His own Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute — the adjective doing its full work — opened in 1927 on the strength of radio-audience donations and trained the movement's cadres, Ernest Manning in the first graduating class. Beyond it: the Pentecostal congregations of the prairie revivals; the Christian and Missionary Alliance, which would make Alberta its Canadian stronghold; the Brethren assemblies; the German pietists; the Mormon south; and, from 1922 at Three Hills, the Prairie Bible Institute, which grew under L. E. Maxwell into one of the largest Bible schools on the continent and anchored a fundamentalist subculture — a belt of towns where the returned missionary outranked the member of Parliament — that persists, demographically traceable, into the constituency politics of the present day. Alberta became, and remains, the

²⁷Stingel, *Social Discredit*; Finkel, *Social Credit Phenomenon*, ch. 4, on the purge.



most evangelical province in Canada. Saskatchewan had its fundamentalists and Alberta its social gospellers; the claim, as throughout, is ecological, not individual — a matter of which religious vocabulary was the public one, which colleges trained the local clergy, and whose voice a stranger turning the radio dial on a Sunday afternoon would hear.²⁸

4.6 The Mirror

The radio itself is the next section's subject, but the handoff can be stated here in one paragraph, because the fork in the river determined who would seize the microphone. Fundamentalism, expelled from the mainline's pulpits, presses, and colleges, had learned to go *direct to its audience* — and radio was the ultimate direct medium: a single authoritative voice, no presbytery or conference or editorial board between the speaker and the kitchen, an audience of scattered believers assembled at a fixed sacred hour. The social gospel, by contrast, was institutionally embedded; its theory of change was organizational, its natural instruments the church court, the college, the co-op local, the royal commission brief. It produced committees and moved denominations; it did not produce radio prophets, because it did not believe in prophets — it believed in delegates. The religious fork thus determined the *medium fit*, and the medium fit determined the political form each province's insurgency would take.

Close the section where the paper's two lives converge and part. Both Baptists. Both preachers whom the Depression radicalized in the same years, within four hundred miles of one another. Both convinced to the marrow that poverty amid plenty was a moral abomination that Christians were forbidden to accept. But one held a theology in which the Kingdom is built by human cooperation, patiently, from below — and so he organized, federated, legislated for seventeen years, and left as his monument an institution his country regards as its own self-portrait. The other held a

²⁸Mann, *Sect, Cult, and Church in Alberta*; John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).



theology in which the world is rescued by intervention from outside — and so he promised a dividend, named a cabal, was crushed by the constitution, and left as his monument a grievance. Saskatchewan's politics became, and long remained, an argument about what government should *build*; Alberta's became, and remains, an argument about what distant powers *withhold*. Both arguments are audible today, and both were first rehearsed in sermons.



Section 5. The Prophet's Microphone: Radio on the Prairies

The Voice of the Prairies.

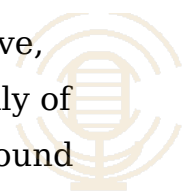
— slogan of CFCN Calgary, the most powerful private transmitter in Canada

5.1 The Medium Arrives

Canadian broadcasting was born essentially simultaneously with American: XWA in Montreal was transmitting scheduled programs by 1920, the same season as Pittsburgh's celebrated KDKA, and the prairies were on the air almost at once. CKCK Regina, operated by the *Leader* newspaper, began in 1922 among the first stations in the West; Edmonton had CJCA, the *Journal's* station, the same year, and from 1927 CKUA, the University of Alberta's educational broadcaster — an early Canadian experiment in public-service radio whose later career holds one of this section's ironies in reserve. But the station that matters most to this paper grew from the workbench of a Calgary radio engineer named W. W. "Bill" Grant, whose transmitting experiments became CFCN — under his engineering the most powerful private station in Canada, ten thousand watts at its height, styling itself "The Voice of the Prairies" with simple accuracy. Prairie geography was a broadcaster's gift: flat land, low electrical noise, and the nighttime skywave that carries a clear-channel signal for hundreds of miles meant that a single Calgary transmitter genuinely blanketed Alberta and Saskatchewan and spilled deep into Montana and the Dakotas. One voice could reach two provinces. It remained only to be seen whose voice it would be.²⁹

The reception context is what made the medium politically explosive, and it deserves to be seen from inside a farm kitchen. The prairie family of the 1920s lived on a quarter-section miles from its neighbours, snowbound for a third of the year, served by a weekly paper that arrived days stale.

²⁹Mary Vipond, *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting, 1922-1932* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).





Electrification lay decades away — it would take Douglas's CCF to deliver it — so the radio ran on batteries, or was a crystal set built from a mail-order kit, and it was commonly the most treasured object in the house. Radio annihilated rural isolation at a stroke, and the prairies adopted it faster than their poverty would predict; by the mid-1930s a substantial majority of prairie farm households had access to a receiver. And listening was *communal*: neighbours gathered at the farm that owned a good set, an evening's social form that — the point will bear weight shortly — Aberhart's study groups did not invent but merely formalized. Assemble the elements: a scattered population starved for voices, a technology of unprecedented intimacy, a geography that let one transmitter cover an audience the size of a small nation, and — the crucial subtraction — *no local gatekeeper of any kind*. No editor stood between the broadcaster and the kitchen table; no presbytery licensed him; no party riding association vetted him. Whoever held the microphone held an unmediated channel into a hundred thousand homes. The only question the technology left open was supplied, as Section 4 showed, by the sociology of religion: which religious culture was structurally fitted — and structurally driven — to seize it.

For the pattern, documented on both sides of the border, is that respectable broadcasting gave the mainline churches the free time and thereby taught the outsiders to buy. In the United States the networks allotted free "sustaining" hours for religion to the established church councils; fundamentalists and sectarians, locked out, had to purchase airtime and finance it themselves — and exclusion made them entrepreneurial. They learned audience-building, program craft, fundraising by mail; the mainline kept the free slot and stayed dull. Aimee Semple McPherson — Ontario-born, a Canadian export — built her own Los Angeles station in 1924; Charles Fuller's *Old Fashioned Revival Hour* grew into one of the largest radio audiences in America; and the political possibility latent in the form was demonstrated by Father Charles Coughlin of Detroit, whose

arc from radio priest to monetary demonologist to mass political movement is the exact American parallel to Aberhart's, running on the same calendar — a comparison this section will collect at its close. Aberhart, buying his Sunday hours on CFCN from 1925 and funding them by listener donation, is the Canadian type specimen of the outsider-broadcaster, and the purest case anywhere of what the type could become.³⁰

5.2 Aberhart on the Air, 1925-1943

He began in November 1925 — straight prophecy teaching and sermon, the Back to the Bible Hour, Sunday afternoons over CFCN. Across the following decade he built a complete broadcast institution: a Sunday block running hours; listener mail read and answered on air; fundraising appeals that raised the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute from the audience's pockets by 1927; and a repertoire of craft well ahead of its time — dialogue, characters, dramatization. His schoolmaster-preacher's voice, by every account, produced the medium's signature illusion at full strength: each listener certain the man was talking to *him*. At his peak the audience was estimated at three hundred thousand and more, across two provinces and the border states — this in an Alberta of some 770,000 souls. Years before he had a political thought to broadcast, Aberhart was the most familiar voice in Alberta, woven into the ritual structure of the rural week. Families dressed for the broadcast; doors went unanswered during it; the hour was kept, in the strict sense, like church.³¹

Then, from 1932, the conversion — of the man, and of the audience into an organization, which is the mechanism on which this paper's whole argument turns. Encountering Major Douglas's theory in the pit of the Depression, Aberhart began sliding social credit into the Sunday

³⁰Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*.

³¹John A. Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta*, the indispensable study of the broadcasts and study groups; audience and study-group figures follow Irving and Elliott and Miller, *Bible Bill*.



broadcasts, scripture into monetary doctrine and back, within a single hour. His signature dramatic device, the "Man from Mars," put the doctrine into the mouth of an innocent: a visitor to whom Alberta's condition had to be explained — children hungry in a province drowning in wheat, farms foreclosed by banks a thousand miles away — so that the A plus B theorem arrived not as economics but as the answer to a child's question, common sense against the experts. And then the masterstroke of organization: listeners were invited to form *study groups*, and the Bible Institute mailed them lesson sheets — questions in, answers broadcast back. By 1935 there were on the order of sixteen hundred such groups across Alberta: a complete political organization conjured from a listenership in under three years, staffed at its cadre level by Bible Institute students and alumni, Ernest Manning first among them. Recall Section 3's contrast and set it beside this: the CCF federated an organization that two decades of cooperative life had already built; Aberhart *generated* one, out of the air, over months. The UFA's lodge-and-local structure, twenty years in the making, was simply overrun. In the August 1935 campaign the hostile Calgary and Edmonton dailies thundered against him to no effect — worse than no effect, for his audience had been taught for three years that the financiers controlled the press, and every editorial confirmed the sermon. He barely needed newspapers; he had never needed them. Social Credit took fifty-six of sixty-three seats.³²

The relationship of the premier to the media did not change at the microphone's side of the desk; it changed at the other. Aberhart governed and broadcast simultaneously — the premier of Alberta taught Sunday Bible school on the radio throughout his premiership — and treated the daily press as what his cosmology had always said it was, an instrument of the enemy. The Accurate News and Information Act of 1937, compelling newspapers to print government rebuttals and disclose their sources'

³²Irving, *Social Credit Movement*, chs. 10–12, on the 1935 campaign.



identities on demand, was the logical product: a man who owed nothing to print and everything to the ether attempting to legislate print into submission. Section 2 recorded its fate in the 1938 reference — struck down, with reasons that seeded a constitutional freedom of the press — and recorded too what the whole judicial demolition became in Alberta's memory. Here it need only be added that the press war completed the closed loop of the broadcast world: the voice on the radio told the audience the papers lied; the papers' fury proved it; and the courts' intervention proved the rest. And when Aberhart died in 1943, the succession told the whole story in a single fact: Ernest Manning inherited the microphone along with the premiership, hosting Canada's National Back to the Bible Hour for decades while governing the province — making Alberta the only jurisdiction in the democratic world routinely governed, across two generations, by its own radio evangelist. The fusion of medium and movement was not an episode. It was a regime.³³

5.3 The Saskatchewan Counterpoint

Radio mattered in Saskatchewan too, and the contrast must not be drawn as presence against absence. CCF campaigns bought airtime and used it well; Douglas was superb on the air — the Depression-honed wit transferred intact, and the "Mouseland" fable he made famous is among other things a perfect piece of radio writing — and as premier he broadcast regularly to explain legislation, budgets, hospital insurance, in plain kitchen language. The contrast is one of *structural position*: in Saskatchewan, radio was one instrument of a movement that existed elsewhere — in Pool locals, constituency associations, church basements, delegate conventions; in Alberta, radio was the movement's origin, skeleton, and sustaining organ. The distinction can be fixed in a pair of images. Douglas used radio the way

³³Reference re Alberta Statutes, [1938] S.C.R. 100; on Manning's broadcast ministry, Elliott and Miller, Bible Bill, epilogue, and Finkel, Social Credit Phenomenon, ch. 4.



a government uses a printing press. Aberhart used radio the way a church uses an altar.

The pair repays unpacking, because it carries more of this paper's argument than any other sentence in it. A printing press is an *instrument*: the government that uses it transmits content — laws, budgets, explanations — that exists prior to the press and independently of it. Break the press and the government still stands; the laws are still laws; another channel is found. The press extends the institution's reach without touching its nature. That was the CCF and the air: had every radio in Saskatchewan gone dark in 1944, the CCF would still have won — more slowly, perhaps — because the movement's existence was located in its face-to-face institutions, and its broadcasts merely reported it. An altar is not an instrument in that sense. A church does not use an altar to transmit something that exists elsewhere; the altar is where the constitutive act *happens* — where the congregation is assembled as a congregation, where the officiant's authority is enacted rather than reported, where the community is made and remade at a fixed sacred hour around a single authorized voice. Remove it, and one has not lost a distribution channel but the site where the institution exists. That was Aberhart and CFCN. The Sunday broadcast was not the Social Credit movement's communications arm; it was the place the movement *was*. The audience was assembled weekly at consecrated time — Sunday afternoon, liturgical time, the political teaching arriving inside a devotional frame with all the trust and the posture of reception that frame commands, where Douglas bought Tuesday-evening airtime like any advertiser. The movement's organization was generated from the broadcast and sustained by it: lesson sheets outward, questions inward, answers on air. Authority flowed from the microphone out, never from delegates up — which is why the movement took the plebiscitarian shape David Laycock's typology assigns it: a following that could ratify and acclaim but not deliberate, because a



broadcast audience, unlike a co-op local, possesses no mechanism for talking back. And it is why the backbench insurgency of 1937, when Social Credit legislators forced their prophet's hand on the banking legislation, was a crisis of a different order than an ordinary caucus revolt: it was the one moment the congregation tried to seize the altar.³⁴

One asymmetry of access completes the counterpoint. The airwaves were not ideologically neutral ground. Private station owners were businessmen; the CCF complained through the 1930s and 1940s, with cause, that the left was refused or rationed airtime that governments could command and monetary evangelists could buy, and for a period regulatory policy against "controversial" broadcasting bore hardest on exactly the CCF's kind of content. The medium's political tilt was not only a matter of who was fitted to seize it, but of who was permitted to.³⁵

5.4 The State Reacts: Regulation as Counter-Prophecy

Canadian broadcast regulation was invented in precisely the years of Aberhart's rise, and partly in reaction to what men like him revealed the medium could do — a dialectic that gives the Canadian half of this story its distinctiveness. The sequence of beats: In 1928 the licences of stations operated by the International Bible Students (the Jehovah's Witnesses), whose broadcasts attacked the churches and the clergy, were revoked amid public outcry — Canada's first great broadcast-content war, and the founding precedent for treating the airwaves as a public trust subject to content limits. The controversy fed directly into the Aird Commission of 1929, Canada's first royal commission on broadcasting, which recommended full nationalization on quasi-BBC lines — driven above all by fear of American commercial saturation, but with the religious-broadcasting wars in its background papers. Then the constitutional hinge, already

³⁴Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought*, ch. 5, on plebiscitarian populism; Finkel, *Social Credit Phenomenon*, ch. 2, on the 1937 insurgency.

³⁵Walter D. Young, *The Anatomy of a Party: The National CCF, 1932-61* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).



flagged from Section 2: the Privy Council's 1932 Radio Reference assigned jurisdiction over broadcasting to the *Dominion* — so that at the very moment radio was remaking Alberta's politics, the instrument itself passed to Ottawa. Bennett's government created the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission in 1932, reorganized in 1936 as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation — which was both broadcaster and, remarkably, *regulator of its private competitors*, CFCN included. The prophet's altar stood, from 1932 onward, on federally licensed ground.³⁶

Two episodes show the regulatory dialectic at work. In the 1935 federal election — the same season as Aberhart's provincial triumph — the Conservative party sponsored the "Mr. Sage" broadcasts: dramatized attack programs against Mackenzie King, aired without clear identification of their sponsor. The scandal that followed produced rules against dramatized political broadcasting and undisclosed political sponsorship — and the reader should pause on what that means for this story: *dramatization was Aberhart's signature technique*, and the national regulatory system moved, within months of his victory, to prohibit precisely the fusion of theatre and politics on the air. The state was writing rules against the Aberhart method almost as fast as the method proved itself. Second, the CBC's later restrictions on controversial and religious broadcasting kept the commercial religious broadcaster under continuing pressure for a generation; the Canadian system remained persistently less hospitable to the Coughlin-Aberhart form than the American — and even the American system closed over Coughlin in the end, the networks and wartime pressure forcing him off the air by 1942, a useful reminder that the demagogic radio form frightened every North American establishment that met it. The Canadian response was simply more architectural: a centralized, federal, public-trust broadcasting order built, in part, as a dike against what had

³⁶Report of the Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1929); Marc Raboy, *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); *In re Regulation and Control of Radio Communication*, [1932] A.C. 304.

happened in Alberta. It is among the reasons Aberhart had no national successors, and why his phenomenon stayed provincial: the medium's commanding heights were nationalized while he held the provincial hilltop.³⁷

The section's closing ironies knit the threads. The Social Credit government, understanding better than any government in Canada what broadcasting was, eventually acquired CKUA and put provincial radio to its own purposes — while Ottawa's CBC entered Alberta demonology as one more eastern institution, the national broadcaster joining the banks, the courts, and the dailies in the ledger of powers arrayed against the province. The entry has never been erased: hostility to the national media, born in the 1930s press wars and federalized with the airwaves, runs in a recognizable line to the "defund the CBC" applause lines of the present decade, and Section 8 will collect it. The deeper irony belongs to the structure of the whole story. The medium that made Alberta's insurgency was, by the Radio Reference, an instrument of the federal power that unmade the insurgency's program — so that even the prophet's microphone, in the end, stood on Ottawa's ground; and the political culture the microphone founded has been quarrelling with the landlord ever since.

³⁷Raboy, *Missed Opportunities*, ch. 2, on the Mr. Sage affair; Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, on Coughlin's removal from the air.



Section 6. The Divergence: 1935 and 1944

*Two insurgencies stood ready to inherit the prairie
West. Each province chose one, and each choice
foreclosed the other for a generation.*

6.1 Alberta, 1935: The Prophet Takes the Province

The United Farmers of Alberta entered 1935 triply doomed, and the anatomy of the doom matters because it determined what could replace them. First, Depression paralysis: Premier Brownlee's government — competent, cautious, and orthodox — could offer against thirty-cent wheat nothing but retrenchment, and a farmers' government that answers ruin with economy lectures has resigned its reason for existing. Second, scandal: Brownlee's seduction suit of 1934, a courtroom sensation that destroyed him personally and was, for a movement built on Protestant rectitude, a moral catastrophe beyond any policy failure. Third — and least remembered, most important — ideological exhaustion of a specific kind: the UFA's own membership had been radicalizing for years, its conventions passing monetary-reform resolutions its cabinet would not touch. The government wing and the movement wing of the UFA had come apart, and into the gap between them flowed the future.³⁸

For the inheritance was contested, and the contest is the hinge of the whole comparative story. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation had been founded in *Calgary* — in 1932, in Alberta, with the UFA formally affiliated and William Irvine among its architects. On paper, the CCF stood positioned to inherit Alberta as naturally as Saskatchewan; the farmers' government's own federal wing sat in the new party's caucus. What happened instead is the cleanest demonstration the historical record offers of this paper's thesis. Two insurgencies competed for the same ruined electorate through the same terrible years — and the radio prophet beat the

³⁸Franklin L. Foster, John E. Brownlee: A Biography (Lloydminster: Foster Learning, 1996); Finkel, *Social Credit Phenomenon*, ch. 1.



delegate party on every axis of the competition. Organization: Aberhart's study groups, conjured from the airwaves as Section 5 described, multiplied past sixteen hundred while CCF locals in Alberta could be counted in dozens; the broadcast simply outran the organizer's Ford. Reach: the Sunday audience entered households no canvasser would ever visit. Message: social credit asked nothing of the voter but belief and promised twenty-five dollars a month, where the Regina Manifesto demanded the eradication of capitalism and offered a transformed society — a heavier lift for a desperate electorate, and one bearing a label, socialism, that Aberhart's religious culture had been taught to regard as apostasy. Trust: Aberhart had ten years' standing in the province's kitchens as a religious authority before he asked for a vote; the CCF's Alberta spokesmen were, by comparison, strangers. In August 1935 Social Credit took fifty-six of sixty-three seats; the UFA, the sitting government, took none; the CCF, born in Calgary three years earlier, took none. A farmers' government and a farmers' socialist party were annihilated together by a broadcast audience — and Alberta's window for the cooperative fork closed, as it proved, permanently.³⁹

6.2 Saskatchewan, 1944: The Organizer Takes the Province

Saskatchewan's road was nine years longer, and every year of the difference is instructive. The CCF's obstacles were precisely the things Alberta's insurgency never faced. The Saskatchewan Liberal machine was the most professional political organization in western Canada, patronage-fed and rurally rooted; the province's large Catholic population was organized against socialism by a clergy armed with *Quadragesimo Anno*; and the CCF itself insisted on being a delegate democracy, which meant its platform moved at the speed of conventions, not of revelation. The 1934 election returned five CCF members; 1938 disappointed again — and the

³⁹W. L. Morton, *The Progressive Party in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950); Young, *Anatomy of a Party*, ch. 2; Irving, *Social Credit Movement*, on the 1935 contest.

1938 campaign deserves a paragraph of its own, for in it the two prairie insurgencies met in open combat on Saskatchewan soil. Aberhart, at the height of his powers and ambitions, invaded: Social Credit ran candidates across Saskatchewan, the CFCN signal carried the gospel over the border nightly, and the premier of Alberta campaigned in person for a movement that proposed to sweep the second province as it had swept the first. It failed — two seats, and collapse thereafter. The standard explanation is the one this paper's architecture predicts: Saskatchewan's cooperative culture starved the monetary one. An electorate schooled for two decades in Pool locals and delegate conventions — in Goodwyn's movement culture — had collective instruments for evaluating a promise, and the promise did not survive evaluation; the broadcast following that could be conjured from Alberta's organizational vacuum could not displace an organization already standing. The 1938 result is the controlled experiment inside the natural experiment: the same prophet, the same microphone, the same Depression — different soil, different harvest.⁴⁰

The CCF used the nine years to become a governing party. Douglas took the provincial leadership in 1942 and completed a transformation already underway: the apocalyptic register of 1933 was retired in favour of an administrator's platform — security of farm tenure against foreclosure, hospital insurance, public auto insurance, labour law, electrification — each plank costed, each within provincial jurisdiction, the whole presented with the wit and pastoral warmth that made Douglas the best platform performer in the country. The war did the rest: full employment and wheat at war prices lifted the fear that socialism meant sharing scarcity, and the national CCF surged — first place in a national Gallup poll in 1943, official opposition in Ontario the same year — while business and the press mounted an anti-socialist counter-campaign of matching ferocity, cheered from Alberta by Manning. In June 1944 Saskatchewan gave the CCF forty-

⁴⁰Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*, ch. 6; Waiser, *Saskatchewan*, ch. 10.



seven of fifty-three seats: the first social democratic government in North America, elected not in a spasm but at the end of a twelve-year organizational march, by an electorate that knew precisely what it was choosing because it had debated the choice, local by local, for a decade. The contrast of the two mandates is the contrast of the two movements: Alberta's 1935 landslide was an acclamation; Saskatchewan's 1944 landslide was a resolution, moved, seconded, and carried.⁴¹

6.3 The Historians' Court

Why did it fall out so? The scholarly adjudication has run seventy years and produced three generations of answers, each of which this paper has been quietly deploying and can now arraign in order. Seymour Martin Lipset's *Agrarian Socialism* (1950), the founding text, argued from the Saskatchewan side: the province's cooperative infrastructure — the densest in North America — functioned as a school for collective politics, and one-crop vulnerability plus organizational density produced the CCF. The argument stands, and Sections 3 and 6.2 have leaned on it. Its weakness was always Alberta: the UFA had cooperatives too, and Lipset's framework cannot by itself explain why comparable density next door yielded acclamation rather than resolution. C. B. Macpherson's *Democracy in Alberta* (1953) answered from the other province with the most theoretically ambitious book ever written about prairie politics: both provinces, he argued, were societies of independent commodity producers — petit-bourgeois proprietors — in a quasi-colonial relation to eastern capital; such producers systematically misrecognize their class position, and their politics therefore oscillates between non-partisan delegate schemes and plebiscitarian leader-worship rather than arriving at socialism. The analysis of Social Credit's plebiscitarian form remains unsurpassed — Section 5 borrowed its spirit — but as prediction the theory fails exactly where Lipset's does, in the neighbouring province: if petit-bourgeois

⁴¹Young, *Anatomy of a Party*, ch. 5; Johnson, *Dream No Little Dreams*, chs. 1–2.



structure determines plebiscitarian politics, Saskatchewan's identical farmers should not have built a delegate socialism. Each classic explains its own province and breaks on the other; the natural experiment refutes every single-cause account submitted to it.⁴²

The modern synthesis, which this paper has assembled across its first five sections, is accordingly plural. Nelson Wiseman's settlement streams prepared different soils; David Laycock's demonstration that the prairies grew not one populism but several — his plebiscitarian category built for Social Credit, his social-democratic category for the CCF — dissolved the false unity of "prairie protest" that had made the divergence look paradoxical in the first place; and Alvin Finkel's recovery of Social Credit's early *left* complicates the tidy story usefully: the movement of 1935 contained genuine radicals, and the backbench insurgency of 1937 — the congregation seizing the altar — forced upon a temporizing Aberhart the very banking legislation whose disallowance became the founding grievance. The reactionary Social Credit of legend was consolidated only later, under Manning, upon the doctrine's grave. To settlement, religion, organization, and medium, then, add honest contingency: the UFA's scandal-hastened collapse; the nine-year gap that let Alberta's outcome harden before Saskatchewan's arrived; a war that rescued the CCF's economics and a peace that entrenched Social Credit's oil; and the brute accident that the region's most powerful transmitter stood in Calgary and its most gifted preacher-organizer took a pulpit in Weyburn. The counterfactual of Section 3 returns for final judgment: swap the two men, and the soils resist the transplant — Aberhart's method needed the organizational vacuum and the fundamentalist audience that only Alberta offered; Douglas's needed the cooperative apparatus that only Saskatchewan had built. Each prophet flourished in the one province suited

⁴²Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*; Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*.

to his instrument. That is not determinism; it is affinity — and affinity, compounded, was enough.⁴³

6.4 Lock-In: The Uses of an Enemy

What the elections began, the regimes completed, and the completion mechanism deserves its own name, because "political culture" is too passive a term for it. From 1944 to Douglas's departure in 1961 — and in truth until Social Credit's fall in 1971 — the two provinces were governed by adjacent, mutually demonizing one-party dominions, and each *needed* the other rhetorically. Manning's Alberta defined itself weekly, on air, against the godless socialism next door: Saskatchewan was the standing proof of what Alberta had escaped, the cautionary tale that kept the coalition assembled after the dividend was forgotten. CCF Saskatchewan returned the favour: funny money, reaction, and the petroleum plutocracy next door were the foil against which the cooperative commonwealth measured its virtue. For nearly three decades the border between them was among other things a pulpit facing a pulpit — and forty years of reciprocal sermon hardened what settlement, religion, and radio had begun into something that survived them all: identity. By the time the founding generations passed, neither province needed the original causes; each had become the other's other. Polarization was not a residue of the divergence. It was the divergence's ongoing manufacture — and the plant, as Sections 7 and 8 will show, never closed.⁴⁴

⁴³Wiseman, *In Search of Canadian Political Culture*; Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought*; Finkel, *Social Credit Phenomenon*, chs. 2-3.

⁴⁴Jared J. Wesley, *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), analyzes the campaign rhetoric through which the two provinces' codes were reproduced.

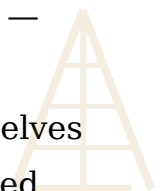


Section 7. Monuments: What Each Regime Built

Political cultures persist not as attitudes but as institutions, and as the interests institutions create.

7.1 The Saskatchewan Package

Douglas took office in June 1944 with a majority no American reformer ever possessed and, as Section 2 established, a program whose every plank stood on provincial ground, and the speed of construction remains startling to read. Within the government's first years: the most advanced labour code on the continent, extending to public employees the union rights most democracies then denied them; farm security legislation shielding the family farm from foreclosure; and in 1945 the Saskatchewan Government Insurance Office, whose compulsory public automobile insurance — the first universal plan in North America — turned an everyday grievance of rural life into a visible dividend of the cooperative commonwealth. The Crown corporations followed: SaskPower carried rural electrification across the province in a sustained campaign that brought light and power to tens of thousands of farms — the material transformation prairie families remembered longest, the end of the battery radio's era among much else — while SaskTel did the same for the telephone. In 1947 came the Hospital Services Plan, universal hospital insurance, again the first in North America, financed by a modest premium and the general revenue of a poor province that had decided the thing mattered more than its poverty. And behind the visible works stood the least glamorous and perhaps most consequential creation: a professional planning civil service. Douglas recruited nationally and internationally — George Cadbury, of the English chocolate Quakers, to head the Economic Advisory and Planning Board — and made Regina, of all improbable capitals, the continent's working laboratory of democratic planning. The laboratory's alumni were themselves an export: a generation of administrators trained in Saskatchewan moved





on to staff the construction of the national welfare state in Ottawa, so that the province's influence travelled by résumé as well as by example.⁴⁵

The summit was medicare, and the summit was a battle. Douglas announced universal medical care insurance in 1959, carried it through the 1960 election, and left its implementation — having departed in 1961 to lead the new federal New Democratic Party — to his successor Woodrow Lloyd. On July 1, 1962, the day the Saskatchewan Medical Care Insurance Act took effect, the province's doctors struck: twenty-three days, the climactic class confrontation of prairie social democracy, with the profession backed by the insurance industry and cheered by the American Medical Association, and "Keep Our Doctors" committees prophesying the flight of every physician and the death of patients by bureaucracy. The settlement brokered that July — the Saskatoon Agreement — preserved the plan's universal, tax-financed, single-payer core while leaving physicians independent contractors rather than state employees: the precise compromise that became the Canadian model. For it did become the Canadian model, by a route so ironic it reads as invented: the royal commission that recommended universal medicare for the nation in 1964 was chaired by Emmett Hall, a Saskatchewan Conservative appointed by John Diefenbaker — a Tory judge from Douglas's own province ratifying Douglas's experiment — and the Medical Care Act of 1966 federalized the Saskatoon settlement for every province. Saskatchewan's poorest-province experiment had become, within four years of the strike, the constitutional furniture of Canadian identity.⁴⁶

Honesty requires the ledger's other column. The early enthusiasm for provincial enterprise produced failures — the shoe factory, the box factory,

⁴⁵Johnson, *Dream No Little Dreams*, the authoritative account of the Douglas government's administrative construction.

⁴⁶Robin F. Badgley and Samuel Wolfe, *Doctors' Strike: Medical Care and Conflict in Saskatchewan* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1967); C. David Naylor, *Private Practice, Public Payment: Canadian Medicine and the Politics of Health Insurance, 1911-1966* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986).

the tannery, small Crown ventures that lost money until Douglas, always more administrator than ideologue, pruned them and concentrated on utilities and insurance, where public ownership demonstrably worked. Farm land itself was never socialized nor ever seriously proposed to be: the movement of proprietors held its line, and Macpherson's petit-bourgeois farmers set the boundary of prairie socialism exactly where his theory said they would. And the long arc bent. The cooperative economy that had built the CCF began dying in the very decades of its political triumph: rural depopulation emptied the locals; the Crow Rate, the sacred freight-rate covenant of 1897, was abolished in 1995; the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool — once the largest grain cooperative on earth and the CCF's organizational cradle — demutualized, staggered, and vanished into the Viterra corporation. When the base dissolved, the politics followed: the Devine Conservatives' privatizing interregnum in the 1980s, and from 2007 the Saskatchewan Party's unbroken right-populist ascendancy, complete — the detail that closes the circle — with autonomist gestures toward Ottawa in Alberta's own idiom. Present-day Saskatchewan, governed from the right and flirting with a "Saskatchewan First" politics, is itself evidence for this section's epigraph: the *institutions* outlived their movement — medicare is untouchable, SGI and SaskTel endure — but the movement culture did not, and when it died, the province drifted toward its neighbour. What Saskatchewan built survives; what built Saskatchewan does not.⁴⁷

7.2 The Alberta Package

Alberta's regime built a different kind of monument, and the construction began with a burial. After the disallowances, social credit as doctrine was quietly abandoned — no dividend was ever paid — and after Aberhart's death Manning completed the interment, purging the Douglasite true believers and their antisemitism from party and government in 1947 and 1948 and settling into government as debt retirement, low taxation,

⁴⁷Waiser, Saskatchewan, chs. 17-19.



moral conservatism, and weekly broadcast piety. Then, on February 13, 1947, at a farm near Devon, Leduc No. 1 blew in, and the fiscal constitution of the province changed forever. The resource ownership conveyed in 1930 — Section 2's groundwork — now met the continent's postwar appetite for crude, and Alberta discovered the third way between taxing and borrowing: *royalties*. Resource rent progressively displaced the tax state itself; Alberta became and remains the only province without a sales tax, its treasury riding the commodity price, its low-tax identity — in time marketed as the Alberta Advantage — resting not on small government but on oil's subsidy of government. The arrangement's political chemistry deserves precise statement, because it manufactured the durable conviction Section 8 will track: a citizen whose public services are financed by resource rent rather than visible taxation experiences federal claims on the resource not as fiscal policy but as *confiscation* — Ottawa's hand not in his pocket but in his province's patrimony. Manning presided over the compound of piety and petroleum for twenty-five years, the Back to the Bible Hour and the oil leases administered from the same office, prosperity itself folded into the providential narrative: Alberta blessed, and blessed conditionally, so long as it kept faith and kept socialism out.⁴⁸

Peter Lougheed's Progressive Conservatives retired Social Credit in 1971, and the change of party masked a continuity of project — indeed an intensification. Lougheed was urban, modern, secular, and corporate where Manning had been rural and prophetic, but his governing idea was province-building in the most literal sense: the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund (1976) to bank the rent; the purchase of Pacific Western Airlines; petrochemical strategy; and the deliberate cultivation of a Calgary-headquartered energy-capital class, so that the province's wealth would be commanded from the province. He described the posture himself in the corporate idiom that came naturally: Alberta defending itself against

⁴⁸John Richards and Larry Pratt, *Prairie Capitalism: Power and Influence in the New West* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979).



Ottawa as a corporation defends against a hostile takeover. The metaphor was tested to destruction in 1980. The National Energy Program — federal price controls holding Alberta oil below world price, an expanded federal revenue share, Canadianization measures — landed atop double-digit interest rates and the deepest recession since the war, and however its architects understood it, Alberta experienced it as the 1937 template made flesh at last: the East, through Ottawa, confiscating the province's prosperity in the open. Boarded storefronts and foreclosed bungalows were attributed to it wholesale; the bumper sticker of the era — "Let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark" — entered the provincial liturgy permanently; and the NEP became to modern Alberta what the disallowances had been to Aberhart's: the proof-text that requires no argument, only citation. That the program was dismantled within a few years mattered no more than that disallowance died in 1943. The grievance is not a claim about current policy; it is a memory with a use.⁴⁹

Ralph Klein's 1990s completed the package's modern form: deficit elimination pursued as moral crusade, deregulation, workfare, the "Alberta Advantage" branded and evangelized — and beneath the triumphalism, the structural choice that keeps the whole machine running. Alberta never rebuilt a tax state. No sales tax was ever imposed; income taxes were held low and eventually flattened; the treasury remained leveraged to the price of hydrocarbons, and the Heritage Fund, Lougheed's hedge, was left to stagnate while Alaska's and Norway's equivalents compounded into national fortunes. The consequence is a fiscal cycle that doubles as an emotional one: each boom re-proves the Advantage and the maker-identity; each bust arrives as victimization — and at every bust, the equalization program stands ready as the grievance's arithmetic. The mechanics deserve one exact sentence, because the myth is politically indestructible in proportion as the mechanics are misunderstood: equalization is a *federal* program paid

⁴⁹Richards and Pratt, *Prairie Capitalism*, chs. 8–10; Doreen Barrie, *The Other Alberta: Decoding a Political Enigma* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2006).

from federal revenues collected from individuals and corporations nationwide; the Government of Alberta writes no cheque to Quebec or to anyone, and "Alberta's" outsized contribution is simply the federal taxation of unusually high Alberta incomes. Every premier since Lougheed has understood the mechanics; most have preferred the myth, for the myth is the NEP, the disallowances, and the Fifty Big Shots in fiscal dress — the withholding of Alberta's own from Alberta — and it mobilizes as nothing accurate ever could.⁵⁰

7.3 The Mirror, Completed

Set the two monuments side by side, for the asymmetry between them organizes everything that remains. Saskatchewan's founding movement left a *program*: medicare, the Crowns, the visible works — achievements so complete that they escaped their maker, were nationalized, and ceased to distinguish the province at all. Canadians do not think of single-payer health care as Saskatchewan socialism; they think of it as Canada. The movement dissolved into its achievement, and when its economic base died, nothing remained to reproduce its distinctiveness — hence the drift of the present. Alberta's founding movement left a *posture*: the defended treasure, the external enemy, the democratic will overridden by distant power — a structure of feeling that requires no particular policy content and therefore cannot be satisfied, nationalized, or completed. A program, once enacted, is finished; a grievance, properly maintained, is renewable forever, and Alberta's has been renewed on schedule by disallowance, NEP, and carbon levy for ninety years. One monument closed its own story; the other is a story-generating machine. That is why the through-line to the present — to Reform, to the Sovereignty Act, to the separatist agitation of this decade — runs through Calgary and not Regina, and it is the road Section 8 now takes.

⁵⁰Fair Deal Panel, Report to Government (Edmonton: Government of Alberta, 2020); Constitution Act, 1982, s. 36.





Section 8. The Long Echo: From the Microphone to the Sovereignty Act

The West wants in.

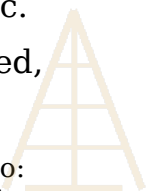
— founding slogan of the Reform Party of Canada,
1987

8.1 First Transmission: Social Credit to Reform

The lineage from Aberhart's movement to modern Canadian conservatism is not metaphorical; it is genealogical in the literal, dinner-table sense. Preston Manning was raised in Ernest Manning's household — the household of the Back to the Bible Hour — and in 1967 father and son published *Political Realignment* together, a call for the consolidation of Canadian conservatism around principled free enterprise: the premier-evangelist and his heir drafting, a generation early, the blueprint of the movement the son would build. The occasion for building it was supplied by the sequence Section 7 closed on. The National Energy Program wounded; Ottawa's subsequent gestures failed to heal; and under Mulroney — a Conservative prime minister the West had helped elect precisely to end its exclusion — came the proof-text of the second generation: the 1986 award of the CF-18 fighter maintenance contract to a Montreal firm over a technically superior, lower Winnipeg bid. The episode was small in dollars and perfect in shape — western merit overridden by Laurentian politics, in the open, by the West's supposed friends — and it did what perfect proof-texts do: it made the general grievance undeniable in a particular case. In 1987 Preston Manning founded the Reform Party of Canada on the slogan that compressed ninety years of the story: *the West wants in*⁵¹.

Read against Section 2, Reform's program is almost eerily diagnostic. Its centrepiece demands were institutional: the Triple-E Senate — elected,

⁵¹E. C. Manning, *Political Re-Alignment: A Challenge to Thoughtful Canadians* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967); Preston Manning, *The New Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1992); Tom Flanagan, *Waiting for the Wave: The Reform Party and Preston Manning* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995).



equal, effective, the American intrastate remedy demanded by name — together with referenda, citizens' initiatives, and recall: the plebiscitarian instruments of the Nonpartisan League's old toolkit, and of Laycock's Social Credit category, reissued. Alberta's second insurgency, like its first, diagnosed the constitution correctly and proposed to repair the missing channel. Like the first, it failed at the repair and succeeded at everything else: Reform swept the West in 1993, destroyed the federal Progressive Conservatives as a national force, became the Canadian Alliance in 2000, and in 2003 reverse-acquired the old Conservative brand entire — so that the modern Conservative Party of Canada is, institutionally, the Reform Party wearing Confederation-era clothes. From 2006 to 2015 the country was governed by Stephen Harper of Calgary, Reform's onetime policy chief. By every visible measure the West had gotten in: the prime minister, the governing caucus, the policy agenda. And here the chapter reaches its analytic pivot, for the grievance did not close. It slept through the Harper decade and woke refreshed, because — as Section 7 argued — a posture is not a program: its function is identity, not remedy, and identities are not satisfied by office. A grievance that survived its own party's decade in power had demonstrated the property that defines it: renewability.⁵²

8.2 Second Transmission: The Reflux, 2015-2025

The Liberal restoration of 2015 re-armed the liturgy within months, and the decade that followed assembled proof-texts at a rate the 1930s would have envied. The inventory, in the order Alberta's narrative recites it: the oil price collapse of 2014-16, tens of thousands of Calgary layoffs coinciding with a Trudeau in office again; Northern Gateway killed and Energy East abandoned; Trans Mountain bought by Ottawa and then agonizingly delayed — federal ownership experienced, with the era's characteristic doubleness, as both rescue and humiliation; Bill C-69, the overhauled federal

⁵²David Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada: Understanding Reform and the Canadian Alliance* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002).



assessment law, named in Alberta discourse the "no more pipelines act"; Bill C-48's tanker ban on the northern coast; and the federal carbon price, fought by three provinces to the Supreme Court and upheld in 2021 — the courts once again, in the template of 1938, ratifying Ottawa's reach onto what Alberta held to be its ground. Alberta's official responses escalated through the registers this paper has catalogued. The 2019 Fair Deal Panel proposed the Quebec toolkit — provincial police, provincial pension plan, provincial tax collection — autonomism borrowed from the old antagonist. The 2021 equalization referendum asked Albertans to demand removal of section 36 from the constitution and received 61.7 percent — a vote every participant understood to be legally inert, which was precisely its Aberhartian function: impossible legislation as staged confrontation, the demonstration vote as sermon. And in December 2022, under Danielle Smith, the Alberta Sovereignty Within a United Canada Act: a statute empowering the legislature to direct provincial entities not to enforce federal laws the legislature deems unconstitutional or harmful to Alberta. Set it beside 1937 and the symmetry completes itself: then, Ottawa disallowed Alberta's statutes; now, Alberta legislates the pre-emptive disallowance of Ottawa's. The grievance liturgy has run so long that it has captured the enemy's weapon and reversed its polarity — the disallowance power, dead in federal hands since 1943, reborn in provincial ones as a gesture of the very sovereignty it once denied.⁵³

8.3 The Present Moment: The Referendum on a Referendum

The events of the past fourteen months — current as this draft is written, in July 2026 — read as though composed to close this paper's circle, and must be recorded with the caution owing to unfinished history. The 2025 federal election returned the Liberals under Mark Carney to a fourth consecutive term, and the cycle activated on schedule: within weeks,

⁵³References re Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act, 2021 SCC 11; Alberta Sovereignty Within a United Canada Act, S.A. 2022, c. A-33.8; the 2021 equalization referendum result is reported by Elections Alberta.



Premier Smith's government amended the Citizen Initiative Act to lower dramatically the signature threshold for petition-triggered referenda, and the separatist organizations moved. The Alberta Prosperity Project's proposed question — sovereign country, ceasing to be a province — was referred to the Court of King's Bench, which ruled it unconstitutional in December 2025; a successor petition under the Stay Free Alberta banner gathered some three hundred thousand signatures by early May 2026, while a counter-initiative, Alberta Forever Canada, gathered over four hundred thousand validated signatures for remaining — the loyalist petition, note, outdrawing the separatist one, a fact the movement's coverage rarely leads with. Then, in May 2026, the collision this paper's architecture predicts: the Court of King's Bench quashed the separatist petition, holding that the Crown's duty to consult First Nations had been neglected — that a process aimed at separation engages the treaties, which precede Alberta itself, bind the Crown, and are not the province's to abrogate. The premier denounced the ruling as the work of a federally appointed judge thwarting Albertans' democratic will — the 1938 sermon, verbatim in structure — and mused publicly about the notwithstanding clause, section 33 of Section 2's coda, though it has no application to treaty rights; and within days she announced her workaround: a tenth question added to the province's October 19, 2026 referendum ballot, asking not whether Alberta should separate but whether the government should commence the constitutional process toward a future *binding* referendum on separating. A referendum on whether to hold a referendum: the plebiscitarian instrument at one further remove, confrontation staged while commitment is deferred — Aberhart's own method, refined by ninety years of practice. As this is written the litigation continues on appeal, with signature verification resuming by an appellate order of late June; the premier declares she will herself vote to remain, to the fury of the movement she has ridden; and polling tells the story polling has always told about Alberta separatism: roughly three in ten sympathetic at the cycle's emotional peak in the winter, under two in ten by early

summer when costs are canvassed — a durable minority, large enough to command the governing party's attention, small enough to lose any honest vote, renewable at the next collision.⁵⁴

Two features of the present episode deserve analytical weight beyond the news cycle. The first is the position of the First Nations, which is not a procedural complication but the deepest constitutional and moral fact in the field. The numbered treaties were made between the Crown and the nations of the territory decades before Alberta existed; the province was created onto treaty land, not the reverse; and the First Nations parties — the Blackfoot Confederacy and Treaty 6, 7, and 8 leadership prominent among the litigants — have stated the consequence plainly: the land is not Alberta's to take out of Canada. Under the Supreme Court's secession framework, any lawful separation would require negotiation in which Indigenous rights-holders stand at the table; the separatist movement possesses, and its literature betrays, no answer to this beyond the promise of talks. The 1930s movement, it will be remembered, had a demonology where its economics should have been; the present one has a silence where its treaty answer should be. The second feature is the perfect inversion of 1937 now visible in full. Then, a federally appointed viceroy and federally appointed judges annulled the economic program of Alberta's elected legislature, and the annulment founded the grievance. Now, the courts annul the province's separatist machinery on behalf of the constitution's oldest promises, and the annulment *feeds* the grievance by the same mechanism — judicial defeat as proof of external strangulation — even as it protects parties whom the province's democratic will, however large its majority, cannot lawfully override. The liturgy, in other words, no longer requires Ottawa. Any check will serve. That is what ninety years of renewal does to a founding memory:

⁵⁴The account of 2025–26 follows contemporary reporting and official sources: Elections Alberta, “Referendum” (2026); CBC News reports of May–June 2026 on the Court of King's Bench ruling, the appeals, and the Court of Appeal order of June 29, 2026; and Ipsos polling for Global News, January and June 2026. These paragraphs describe litigation and a campaign in progress and should be re-verified before publication.



it becomes a lens that makes all obstruction one obstruction, and all obstructors the East.⁵⁵ Events have continued to oblige: on the eve of this draft's completion, the leverage dynamic delivered its largest prize yet.⁵⁶

8.4 Coda: The Medium Outlives the Message

End where the paper began, at the receiver. The structural conditions of 1935 — a population addressed directly by a trusted, unmediated voice, bypassing gatekeeper institutions it had been taught to distrust — were not a stage of media history that passed; they were a configuration that recurs, and each communications revolution since has rebuilt it with better equipment. Talk radio rebuilt it first, and Alberta's open-line hosts inherited Aberhart's time-slot sociology whole. Satellite and cable religious broadcasting rebuilt it again. Then the platforms perfected it: the Facebook group, the YouTube channel, the podcast feed, and the Telegram broadcast are the study group, the Sunday block, and the Bible Institute mailing list with the friction removed — the lesson sheets now distribute themselves, the questions come back in comment threads, and the Man from Mars asks his innocent questions in every algorithmic feed. The contemporary separatist movement organizes through digital assemblies Aberhart would recognize at a glance, and its relation to the national media completes the oldest continuity of all: "defund the CBC" stands today exactly where the

⁵⁵Reference re Secession of Quebec, [1998] 2 S.C.R. 217.

⁵⁶On July 2, 2026 — after this section was drafted, and eleven weeks before the referendum vote — Prime Minister Carney announced in Calgary a fast-tracked public-private West Coast pipeline of up to one million barrels per day, in partnership with the Alberta government, the federally owned Trans Mountain Corporation, Pembina Pipeline, and prospective Indigenous equity partners, explicitly framing the project against separatist tension and conceding that the prior government's climate policy had become a political wedge; British Columbia's premier, holding a new federal prosperity agreement and the preserved northern tanker ban, acknowledged that his province lacked authority to stop it (Politico, July 2, 2026). The announcement is the leverage dynamic described in this section operating in real time — the exit threat extracting, on the eve of the vote, the grievance's central demand — and it sets up the cleanest test of the renewability thesis since the Harper decade: if the pattern of Section 8.1 holds, the concession will no more close the grievance than office did. Whether the pipeline is ever built is a separate question on which Northern Gateway and Energy East counsel patience; announcements have died in Alberta's ledger before, and their deaths fed it.



Accurate News and Information Act stood in 1937 — the founding movement's war on the gatekeeper press, renewed by its heirs against the broadcaster the federal state built, in part, as a dike against the founding movement itself. Meanwhile the counterpoint province confirms the thesis by subtraction. Saskatchewan's founding ran through face-to-face economic institutions, and when the Pool locals and co-op halls died, the politics they made died with them; there was no medium to re-run a founding that had never been mediated, and the province drifted, as Section 7 recorded, into its neighbour's rhetorical orbit. Alberta's founding was a broadcast, and broadcasts can be rerun forever. The radio made the difference; the difference outlived the radio; and the voice that first told a scattered, frightened, decent people that their poverty was engineered by distant enemies is still on the air, on every device in the province, waiting for the price of oil to fall.



Section 9. The Digital Prairie: Testing the Continuity Thesis

From two thousand members to one hundred and sixty thousand in a single afternoon.

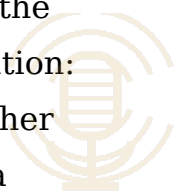
— the growth of the Wexit Facebook group, October 21-22, 2019

9.1 The Assertion and the Test

Section 8 closed by asserting a continuity: that every communications revolution since radio has rebuilt the founding configuration of 1935 — the trusted, unmediated voice; the scattered, gatekeeper-distrusting audience — with better equipment, and that the contemporary separatist movement organizes through digital assemblies Aberhart would recognize at a glance. The assertion is the paper's coda, and it deserves better than assertion. This section tests it against the documented record of the past decade, and the test returns a verdict more interesting than confirmation. The continuity is real — in some particulars almost eerily literal. But the digital medium also differs from radio in ways that have already shaped outcomes on the ground, and the differences force an amendment to the conclusion's central proposition. Alberta, once again, turns out to be the laboratory: it is probably the best-documented case in any democracy of a separatist movement literally born on a platform, and simultaneously the best-documented case of why platform-born movements fail — and of what now succeeds instead.

9.2 The Mediated Premier

Begin with the continuity at its most literal, which is the person of the premier. Danielle Smith's road to office ran through media at every station: newspaper columnist, television host, and then — after the collapse of her first political career in the Wildrose floor-crossing of 2014 — years as a Calgary talk-radio host, followed, when the radio ended, by an independent online broadcasting phase in the pandemic years, and then the return, the





leadership, and the premiership. She is the first head of an Alberta government since Ernest Manning whose political base was assembled as a listenership before it was a membership, and the political analyst Dave Cournoyer has captured the governing consequence in a formulation this study could not improve upon: Smith operates less as a conventional party leader than as, in his phrase, “the host of the province's largest call-in talk show” — a leader whose method is the open line, whose caucus and convention function as callers, and whose authority rests on the intimacy of the parasocial bond rather than the discipline of the machine.⁵⁷ Count the pattern across the century and it stops looking like coincidence: Aberhart, Manning, Smith — three times now, Alberta has been governed by a politician whose first constituency was a broadcast audience. No other jurisdiction in North America has managed it once per generation; Alberta has made it a tradition of the office.

9.3 Born Digital: Wexit and the Conversion Problem

The Wexit episode of 2019 supplies the cleanest natural experiment since 1935 itself, because it is the founding sequence of that year re-run at platform speed. The movement did not adopt social media; it *was* social media. A Facebook group created in June 2019, following a billboard provocation that winter, held roughly two thousand members on the night of the October federal election. When the Liberal government was returned without a single seat in Alberta or Saskatchewan, the group grew to nearly one hundred and sixty thousand members by the following afternoon and crested past a quarter million within weeks, as #Wexit trended nationally — a surge to which, analysts found, bots and coordinated amplification contributed from the start. For readers south of the border, the translation is direct: the name is a Brexit coinage — “Western exit” — and the situation

⁵⁷Dave Cournoyer, “Danielle Smith Hosts Alberta's Largest Call-In Talk Show,” Daveberta, November 2023. Smith's media career ran from Calgary Herald columnist through television to Corus talk radio (2015–2021) and independent online broadcasting before her return to politics.



is an energy-producing, deep-red region watching a government re-elected without carrying a single district on its soil, Texas shut out of a White House it cannot unseat, answering with a Tea Party moment at algorithmic speed. The morphology of the moment was pure 1935: the grievance ambient, the gatekeepers distrusted (the CBC was booed at Wexit rallies precisely where the Calgary dailies had been jeered at Aberhart's), the demonology intact — the movement's founder promised crowds he would remove the parasite of eastern Canada from their necks, the Fifty Big Shots recast for the algorithm — and the assembly instantaneous. Scholars supplied the mechanism in terms this chapter adopts: the spiral of silence breaking, a suppressed opinion discovering its own numbers through amplification and spreading accordingly.⁵⁸ What took Aberhart a decade of Sunday afternoons, the platform accomplished in twenty-four hours.⁵⁹⁶⁰

And then — the finding on which this section's amendment rests — it converted into almost nothing. The quarter-million-member audience became a registered federal party; the party changed hands and names, becoming the Maverick Party under borrowed establishment leadership; and in the 2021 federal election the successor of the largest spontaneous political assembly in prairie history managed to field twenty-nine candidates, before being deregistered in 2025 for failing to file financial statements.⁶¹ Set the two conversion rates side by side, because the comparison is the analytical heart of the chapter. Aberhart's three hundred thousand listeners became sixteen hundred study groups became a

⁵⁸The spiral-of-silence framework originates with Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion," *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (1974): 43–51, elaborated in Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁵⁹Javier Ruiz-Soler and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Regionally Alt-Right? #Wexit as a Digital Public Sphere," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 47, no. 1 (2022): 173–196, the first peer-reviewed study of the movement's digital form.

⁶⁰Membership figures per Canadian Press reporting collected in "The New Separatists," *The Walrus*, April 2020; the Hill+Knowlton analysis attributing part of the #Wexit surge to bots and disinformation was reported in national media, November 2019.

⁶¹On the Maverick Party's 29 candidates in 2021 and deregistration in 2025, Elections Canada records and contemporary reporting.



government became a thirty-six-year regime. Wexit's quarter million became hats, rallies, and a deregistered shell within six years. The difference is not the grievance, which was the same grievance, nor the reach, which the platform delivered faster and cheaper than CFCN ever could. The difference is the cost of belonging. A study group met weekly in a farm kitchen; its members mailed questions, worked lesson sheets, and drove township roads in winter — the membership *was* the obligation, and the obligation was the organization. A Facebook membership costs one click and obliges nothing; it assembles sentiment without assembling capacity. The digital medium, in short, reproduces radio's assembly but not its discipline: platform followings are cheaper to raise than broadcast congregations, and cheaper to disperse.

9.4 The Hybrid: Take Back Alberta

The counterexample proves the rule, and it is the most consequential political organization in Alberta's twenty-first century. Take Back Alberta grew out of the COVID-era Coutts border blockade — convoy politics, itself organized substantially through social platforms — and set itself not to found a party but to capture one: the Townley method of 1915, primary capture updated, aimed at the governing United Conservative Party from inside. Its communications architecture is the chapter's thesis in miniature. On one side, the digital pulpit: a Telegram channel of some five thousand members in which few besides the founder, David Parker, and his regional lieutenants held permission to post — which is to say, a one-to-many broadcast form rebuilt inside a messaging app, the Sunday microphone with the congregation's replies disabled — supplemented by weekly Zoom training seminars open to any registrant. On the other side, and decisively, the face-to-face layer the born-digital movements lacked: town halls across rural Alberta by the hundred, named regional captains, and physical mobilization of members into party processes — the organization claimed to have delivered roughly half the attendance at the party meeting that sealed



the fate of Premier Jason Kenney's leadership, and its endorsed slates subsequently swept the party's board elections. The results speak in a register Wexit never reached: a sitting premier removed, a successor installed, half a governing party's board controlled — power exercised not through any election won but through the capture of the instrument that wins them.⁶² The organization's influence has ebbed since its 2023 peak — movements of this type flare like their platforms — but the method it demonstrated is now the province's template. Two grace notes belong in the record. The founder is the son of a rural Alberta preacher — the genealogy of pulpit and politics running true a fourth generation. And the state's response has repeated, on schedule, the dynamic this paper traced from the Mr. Sage affair through the CBC's content rules: investigation, contempt proceedings, and six-figure fines from the elections regulator — the apparatus once again writing rules against the method after the method proved itself.

9.5 The Manufactured Grievance

So far, continuity refined. But the record of the present decade contains one element with no radio-era analogue at all, and the paper's honesty requires that it be named as rupture rather than upgrade. Aberhart's grievance was homegrown and his medium was local: CFCN's footprint *was* the political community, the broadcasts were funded by the listeners' own donations, and no one outside the signal's reach had any means or motive to shape what the signal carried. None of that describes the environment of 2026. Analysts attributed part of the original #Wexit surge to bots and coordinated inauthentic activity. This spring, researchers identified a network of roughly twenty YouTube channels coordinating the promotion of western separatism through synthetic content — and investigative reporting

⁶²CBC News, “‘We Need to Control the Party’: A Look Inside Take Back Alberta's UCP Insurgency,” May 2023; PressProgress, “Who Is Take Back Alberta and What Do They Really Want?,” 2023 (updated 2025); The Tyee's reporting on the Elections Alberta investigation and fines, 2024–2025.



traced portions of the network to individuals in Europe who hired actors for the channels, alongside more than a dozen foreign social-media accounts monetizing the separatist theme for engagement revenue. Above the content farms sits geopolitics: the leading separatist organization met repeatedly with officials of a foreign government whose treasury secretary publicly mused that Albertans were “a very independent people” and a natural partner.⁶³ The structural point deserves italics in the argument if not on the page: the grievance is now partially manufactured abroad for profit and courted abroad for strategy. Aberhart's congregation paid for its own altar; today's congregation generates engagement revenue harvested by platforms and content mills it will never see, and its founding emotion — honestly come by, as this paper has insisted throughout — is amplified by parties for whom Alberta is not a home but a market and a lever. Whatever else this is, it is not 1935. The prophet's audience has acquired impresarios the prophet never had.

9.6 The Amended Proposition

The chapter's findings can now be assembled into the amendment the conclusion's proposition requires. The proposition stands: the medium through which a movement is founded determines its organizational form, and the form outlives the medium, the doctrine, and the founder — Alberta's plebiscitarian, leader-and-audience politics, founded by broadcast, persists under every subsequent technology, up to and including a premier who governs as a call-in host. But the digital case adds a corollary the radio case could not supply: *the platform founds audiences faster than radio ever did, and founds organizations worse*. Assembly has been decoupled from capacity. The consequence, visible in the Alberta laboratory, is that pure

⁶³Canadian Digital Media Research Network findings of April 2026 on the coordinated YouTube network; CBC Investigates, June 8, 2026, on foreign accounts monetizing separatist content; contemporary reporting, January–February 2026, on the Alberta Prosperity Project's meetings with United States State and Treasury Department officials. As with Section 8.3, these paragraphs describe a fast-moving information environment and should be re-verified before publication.



platform movements flare and die — Wexit's arc from two thousand to a quarter million to twenty-nine candidates to deregistration — while the durable power of the digital era belongs to hybrids that re-attach the face-to-face layer the platforms dissolved: Take Back Alberta's Telegram pulpit joined to its town halls and its captured party. The deepest irony of the digital prairie is therefore this: the winning formula of the 2020s is the *recombination* of the two prairie methods this study has spent nine sections holding apart — Aberhart's broadcast intimacy and the co-op hall's physical obligation, the following and the delegate meeting, fused at last in a single organization and aimed, as Townley aimed, at the dominant party's soft interior. The spiral-of-silence scholars are right that the platforms break silences faster than any medium before them;⁶⁴ what the platforms cannot do, on the Alberta evidence, is build anything from the noise — and the political entrepreneurs who understand both halves of that sentence are the ones who now hold the province. The referendum of October 2026, whatever its result, will be counted among audiences assembled at platform speed; whether anything is built from the count will depend, as it depended in 1935 and 1944, on who owns the kitchens.

⁶⁴Sean Holman's application of the spiral-of-silence framework to Wexit was reported in CBC News analysis, November 2019.



Conclusion: The Long Echo of a Microphone

Saskatchewan inherited institutional memory.

Alberta inherited narrative memory.

In August 1935, Alberta elected a government led by a radio evangelist who promised that the Depression could be overcome by reforming the monetary system. Nine years later, Saskatchewan elected a Baptist minister who promised that the same catastrophe demanded a cooperative reconstruction of society. The two elections have usually been treated as separate episodes — one an eccentric detour in Canadian political history, the other the beginning of the Canadian welfare state. This study has argued that they are better understood as a single historical experiment. No two provinces offered a fairer comparison: born together in 1905 from the same legislation, settled in the same immigration boom, dependent on the same wheat economy, devastated by the same drought and the same collapse in world prices, and populated by many of the same peoples. Yet from nearly identical circumstances they produced political traditions that diverged sharply and have remained distinct for nearly a century.

The explanation cannot be found in any single cause. Economic grievance alone cannot account for the divergence, because both provinces suffered the same collapse. Settlement history alone cannot account for it, because the differences in population were differences of proportion rather than kind. Constitutional structure alone cannot account for the *choice* each province made — the same federation contained both — though it decisively determined which choice could survive. Religious belief alone cannot account for it, because both movements were led by Baptist preachers responding to the same crisis. Only when these factors are considered together does the divergence become intelligible: settlement patterns prepared different political cultures, religious traditions supplied competing moral vocabularies, constitutional design determined which remedies could endure, and radio transformed the way one of those vocabularies could



become a mass political movement. None of these forces acted independently. Together they produced one of the most revealing natural experiments in North American political development.

Stating the convergence is also the study's claim upon the scholarship, and the claim should be made against names. Lipset's cooperative-density thesis explains Saskatchewan and breaks on Alberta, whose farmers had cooperatives too. Macpherson's class analysis explains Alberta and breaks on Saskatchewan, whose identical independent producers built a delegate socialism his theory forbids. Laycock's typology names the two populisms — plebiscitarian and social democratic — but not the mechanism that sorted one province into each. What the present study adds is that mechanism: the organizational medium. The same transmitter reached both provinces; only one possessed the religious culture fitted to seize the microphone and the organizational vacuum for a broadcast following to fill, and only one possessed the institutional density that made a following unnecessary — and unwelcome. The finding can be stated as a general proposition, and it is offered as this study's contribution: *the medium through which a political movement is founded determines its organizational form, and the form outlives the medium, the doctrine, and the founder.*⁶⁵

Historians have often treated communications technology as a vehicle through which political ideas travel — radio as an instrument of persuasion, valuable because it reaches larger audiences more efficiently than newspapers or public meetings. The Alberta experience shows something more fundamental: radio altered the organizational structure of democratic politics itself. Broadcasting rewarded a style of leadership built on direct personal authority. It reduced the importance of intermediary institutions. It allowed thousands of individuals, scattered across isolated farms and small

⁶⁵The positioning compresses the adjudication of Section 6.3: Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*; Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*; Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought*. The organizational analysis of the movement itself descends from Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta*.

towns, to experience themselves as members of a single community gathered around one trusted voice. Saskatchewan entered the Depression possessing one of the densest cooperative infrastructures in North America — Wheat Pool locals, credit unions, cooperative elevators, and social-gospel congregations that had accustomed citizens to deliberation, committee work, elections, compromise, and institutional responsibility — and when the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation emerged, it did not create a movement from nothing; it federated organizations that already existed. Alberta entered the same crisis with its farmers' government exhausted and discredited after fourteen difficult years, and into the vacuum stepped William Aberhart, whose congregation had never been confined by church walls; it already existed across the province as a radio audience. The distinction is subtle but profound.

One movement assembled citizens face to face. The other assembled listeners.

That organizational difference shaped everything that followed. Saskatchewan's politics naturally emphasized delegates, conventions, policy committees, and institutions; Alberta's naturally emphasized personal trust in a leader who spoke directly to ordinary people over the heads of established authorities. And the difference was reinforced rather than diminished by constitutional experience. Saskatchewan's reforms largely occupied ground assigned to provincial jurisdiction and therefore became permanent institutions. Alberta's monetary program collided almost immediately with federal authority over banking, with judicial review, and with disallowance. The result was one of history's ironies. Saskatchewan built institutions so durable that later generations forgot how radical they once appeared. Alberta built a grievance so durable that later generations forgot the economic doctrine that first inspired it.

This is why the political cultures of the two provinces have proven more durable than the movements that created them, and why they persist in



different registers. Douglas's government eventually became known primarily for medicare — yet medicare itself gradually ceased to be understood as socialist. Once adopted nationally, it became part of ordinary Canadian life, and the same occurred with many of Saskatchewan's cooperative innovations: their success rendered their ideological origins almost invisible. They survived precisely because they ceased to appear revolutionary. Social Credit followed the opposite trajectory. Its monetary doctrines disappeared from practical politics — Ernest Manning quietly buried the economics while retaining the movement's broader identity — but the constitutional confrontation that destroyed the program generated something more enduring than policy: a narrative. The lesson many Albertans drew from 1937 was not that Social Credit economics had failed; it was that an elected provincial government had tried to defend the province against distant financial and political power and been blocked by Ottawa, the courts, the banks, and the established press. Whether that interpretation accurately reflected constitutional reality matters less than that it became politically formative — an enduring framework through which later conflicts would be read. The names changed and the pattern remained: the National Energy Program, equalization, environmental regulation, carbon pricing, and the Alberta Sovereignty Within a United Canada Act all entered a political culture whose founding memory had already taught many Albertans to interpret conflict as a recurring struggle between provincial democracy and distant centralized authority. One province, in short, inherited its founding as institutions; the other inherited it as narrative. Both inheritances have proven remarkably resilient.

The comparison with North Dakota completes the argument, and its least likely survivor supplies the proof. The Nonpartisan League was the common ancestor of both prairie traditions, and constitutional difference governed its legacy too: the movement was destroyed within six years by recall, prosecution, and credit war, but the institutions it built survived



because American federalism permitted them to survive — and they did not merely survive. The Bank of North Dakota today is a working institution of roughly ten billion dollars in assets, profitable every year for decades in one of the most conservative states in the union. When the Red River destroyed Grand Forks in 1997, the state's bank extended credit within days; through the crisis of 2008 it required no rescue and kept lending; in the pandemic's emergency programs North Dakota led the nation in relief loans secured per capita because the state bank stood behind its community lenders — an ecology of local banking it had preserved, ironically, by operating as partner rather than competitor to the private banks it was founded to fight. Radicalism mellowed into infrastructure, and a century on, the bank serves as the template for a public-banking movement that revived across American states after 2008.⁶⁶ Set the ledger out plainly: one branch of prairie populism left functioning institutions — a state bank, a provincial health system that became a national one. The other left an enduring political vocabulary. Both remain alive today, and the asymmetry between them is the study's deepest finding: programs, once enacted, complete themselves and disappear into ordinary life, while grievances, never enacted, never complete and never disappear.

The broader implications extend well beyond western Canada, and they have grown more rather than less urgent. Every major communications revolution since radio has recreated the organizational conditions of Aberhart's rise: talk radio, cable and satellite broadcasting, podcasts, YouTube, and the social platforms all weaken intermediary institutions while strengthening direct relationships between charismatic communicators and dispersed audiences. The technology has changed repeatedly; the organizational logic has not. Political communities increasingly cohere around trusted communicators rather than formal

⁶⁶Bank of North Dakota, Annual Reports (Bismarck, N.D., various years); Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, epilogue, surveys the bank's modern career and its influence on the post-2008 public-banking revival.

membership organizations; authority flows through personal relationship rather than institutional hierarchy; parties matter less than personalities; delegates yield to followers. The broadcast audience has become the digital audience. Seen from this vantage, Aberhart occupies a larger place in democratic history than either his admirers or his critics have usually allowed. His significance does not lie in Social Credit economics, a theory that proved constitutionally impossible and economically unworkable. It lies in his demonstration — the first in any democracy — that electronic communication could reorganize democratic politics by creating a political community whose cohesion owed less to institutions than to shared media experience. And Douglas demonstrated the opposite possibility, which is the reason this study is a comparison and not a case: democratic politics can also emerge from institutions patiently built over decades — churches, cooperatives, unions, municipalities, voluntary associations — that cultivate habits of deliberation before they ever seek power. Neither model has disappeared. Modern democracies oscillate between them still. This was never simply a contest between conservatism and socialism; it was a contest between two methods of organizing democratic life — one that relied on institutions through which citizens learned to govern collectively, and one that relied on direct communication between leader and audience — each with strengths, each with vulnerabilities, each leaving a lasting imprint on the province in which it first achieved power.

History rarely offers controlled experiments; Alberta and Saskatchewan come remarkably close, and their similarities permit the historian to isolate differences that would otherwise vanish into the complexity of national history. The result is not a deterministic explanation. Contingency mattered, leadership mattered, chance mattered: had Aberhart accepted a teaching position in Regina, or Douglas a pastorate in Calgary, prairie politics might have unfolded differently in important respects — but only in important respects. The deeper structures would still have told. Settlement patterns



would still have shaped local institutions; constitutional boundaries would still have determined which reforms could endure; religious traditions would still have offered competing understandings of social crisis; and the communications technology of the age would still have favoured some forms of political leadership over others. History never follows a single cause. It is the convergence of causes that produces enduring political cultures.

The story therefore ends where it began. Two Baptist preachers confronted the same prairie catastrophe, and each believed he possessed a moral answer to economic despair. One sought redemption through institutions patiently constructed by communities working together. The other sought redemption through a prophetic voice carried into every home by the newest communications technology of the age. Their economic programs belonged to the twentieth century. The political cultures they helped create belong very much to the twenty-first.

A Note on Citation Verification

The footnotes and Sources list below were examined for accuracy in three separate passes: one covering the early sections, one covering the later analytical chapters (Sections 8–9 and the start of the Conclusion), and one covering the final ten pages (pp. 80–89), which include the complete bibliography.

Result: No false, fabricated, or misattributed citations were found in any of the three passes. All checked references — classic scholarly works (Elliott & Miller, Lipset, Macpherson, Irving, Morlan, Lansing, Goodwyn, Hicks, Laycock, Wiseman, and others), court cases and statutes (*Munn v. Illinois*, *Reference re Alberta Statutes*, *Green v. Frazier*, the Alberta Sovereignty Act, and others), and recent 2025–2026 sources (the Carney pipeline announcement, the Canadian Digital Media Research Network “Slopaganda” report, the Maverick Party deregistration, Ipsos polling, Take Back Alberta reporting, and Alberta Prosperity Project meetings) — correspond to real, correctly attributed publications and official records.

The bibliographic apparatus of the manuscript holds up under verification from beginning to end.



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