
Social Classes and Social Credit in Alberta

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EDWARD BELL

Foreword by Maurice Pinard

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*In loving memory of my parents,
Edward William Bell and Josephina Salveig Kristjanson*

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Foreword

For some forty years now, a great number of Canadian social scientists have considered the rise of the Social Credit movement in Alberta during the mid-1930s to be a political phenomenon whose general characteristics have been well analysed and explained. For them, it never presented any puzzle to start with and no further examination or revision of the received wisdom regarding it appeared necessary. Almost unanimously, they shared the view that the Social Credit doctrine was conservative, even reactionary, and aimed at preserving capitalism. More specifically, Social Credit was seen as fundamentally petit-bourgeois in its orientations and projects. Given such views, it did not surprise them that Social Credit should have had such success in a prairie province characterized (falsely) as having a relatively high degree of class homogeneity and dominated by the petite bourgeoisie of "independent commodity producers," whether farmers or the urban self-employed. Indeed, they believed that it was precisely the supposedly confused members of this intermediate class, located between the bourgeoisie and the working class, who had propelled the Alberta Social Credit Party to power in 1935.

Unfortunately, despite the very wide "scientific" consensus, that interpretation gives every indication of being wrong in almost every respect. In the future, no one will be able to hold a cogent discussion of the Social Credit movement without tackling, one way or another, Edward Bell's pathbreaking re-analysis of it. His study is outstanding not only in its results, which are sharply at variance with conventional

views, but also in the exemplary nature of his efforts at empirical verification and his new interpretation of the movement.

From C.B. Macpherson's allegedly classic *Democracy in Alberta*, originally published in 1953, to the many analysts who have since adhered to his views, with at most only minor variations, one is struck by the paucity – if not the total absence – of empirical evidence that has been provided to support the received claims regarding the Social Credit movement. In sharp contrast, Professor Bell's study is striking in the rigorous, often very painstaking, efforts that he has made to empirically assess the various claims advanced previously.

Foremost in this regard is his return to the archival electoral data to ascertain the distribution of support for Social Credit and other parties in both the 1935 and the 1940 provincial elections for each of the polling subdivisions in most of the main cities in Alberta, and his mapping of those results on to areas representing various social classes in those cities. He has also assessed the support received in small towns and in the countryside – the latter as a measure of the farm vote. With no less rigour, he has scrutinized Major Douglas's statements as well as Alberta Social Credit philosophy to assess the extent to which they agreed with the characterizations of them in the extant literature. Finally, he has carefully analysed the actions and legislation of the Social Credit government between 1935 and 1940 to establish whether it really was a conservative, petit-bourgeois administration.

The author's efforts to ground his analysis empirically have not been in vain. None of his data on class voting support the assertion that the class basis of the movement's electorate was located in the petite bourgeoisie proper, or in the lower middle class as a whole, or even in the middle class in general. Nor was it located disproportionately in small towns (presumably an important location for the petite bourgeoisie) and/or in purely rural agrarian areas. Instead, data for both the 1935 and 1940 elections reveal, first, that within the larger urban areas support was strongly inversely related to social class, with the working class providing particularly high levels of support, and, second, that in rural areas farmers provided strong support, although at a lower level than urban workers. As for those in small towns, their support was in fact slightly lower than in the province as a whole. Thus the movement, rather than being based in a single class, turns out to have represented a cross-class alliance of workers and farmers – which would also be the case some twenty-five years later with the Cr ditistes in Quebec.

As mentioned above, Professor Bell also carefully analyses both Douglas's original Social Credit doctrine and its Alberta variant in

Aberhart's movement; moreover, he also examines the beliefs that appear to have been behind the actions of the first Social Credit administration from 1935 to 1940. The interpretations he draws from that analysis are again sharply at odds with the prevailing consensus. Rather than simple conservative philosophies developed to promote the interests of the petite bourgeoisie or the capitalist system in general, he shows that these doctrines advocated radical transformations of the existing economic system, transformations that would have worked against both bourgeois and petit-bourgeois interests. Particularly interesting is the author's demonstration that, in contrast to the Progressives of the 1920s, the Alberta Social Credit movement did not originally espouse the recurrent anti-central-Canada views of many western Canadians. As for Aberhart's first administration, Professor Bell argues that it was a combination of Douglas's Social Credit projects, most of which failed, and successful implementations of social-democratic economic reforms. To be sure, it might have been helpful if the author had provided a clearer distinction between the social and economic tenets of Social Credit, but this would not have altered the validity of the criticisms he levels at previous analyses.

But if previous interpretations have so little going for them, why have they been so widely accepted? Is there an alternative explanation for the sudden rise of Social Credit and for its class bases? The first question leads the author into a brief foray into the sociology of knowledge. As for the important second question, the author, in refreshing contrast to most previous analysts, grounds his interpretation in the literature on social and political movements, stressing, in particular, the high level of rationality behind the Social Credit preferences of so many workers and farmers. (See, for example, the author's interpretation of these voters' choice of Social Credit over social democratic alternatives.) More generally, Professor Bell argues that serious economic grievances (very high levels of unemployment among workers, falling agricultural prices compounded by farmers' inability to repay their mortgages and loans); an uncomplicated ideology rooted in Christian beliefs; a charismatic leader and the conversion of his radio broadcasts from religion to politics; and an important organizational substructure, the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute, were key determinants of the movement's ability to forge a cross-class alliance around common interests, leading to overnight electoral success. Here the reader may regret that the author did not examine some of the political factors conducive to this success and, more generally, did not provide a brief comparative analysis of this and other economic protest movements.

All in all, however, Professor Bell's contribution to our understanding of this and similar movements is invaluable. His research carries an important lesson for all of us – that we should not uncritically accept the prevailing received wisdom on many issues in the social sciences. This is a very significant book; it clearly deserves the attention of all Canadian social scientists.

Maurice Pinard
McGill University
November 1993

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Maurice Pinard read the entire text of this study and provided valuable critical commentary. Richard Ogmundson, Axel van den Berg, Michael R. Smith, Thomas Flanagan, and Tom Langford kindly read various chapters, offering helpful criticism and suggestions. Also to be acknowledged are the comments provided by Morton Weinfeld, Jerome Black, Donald Von Eschen, and Harry Hiller, and two anonymous reviewers selected by McGill-Queen's University Press. Copy editor Susan Kent Davidson should be commended as well for her attention to detail and matters of style.

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The responsibility for the shortcomings of this study, of course, rests with the author.

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1 Introduction

The Social Credit movement in Alberta provided some of the most intriguing and controversial episodes of Canadian history. It was from the beginning a movement that evoked the strongest emotions, both positive and negative. It achieved a remarkable notoriety in the short period preceding its electoral victory in 1935 and once in power received extensive international attention.

What really captured people's imaginations was the movement's promise that it could solve the problems of the Depression. Social Credit represented one of several programs competing for acceptance in a world desperately looking for solutions. The other competitors included socialism, communism, fascism, liberalism, and conservatism, as well as combinations of these. Much of the English-speaking world watched to see if Social Credit in Alberta could offer any hope.

The Social Credit doctrine was a major part of the controversy. To some it was an epochal scientific discovery that would finally bring about an end to "poverty in the midst of plenty." To others it was merely the utopian maunderings of an eccentric British military officer. Yet somehow even the most sceptical were drawn to it.

Other facets of the Alberta movement contributed to the fascination. A fiery lay preacher orchestrating a mass movement through an exciting new medium – radio – was a spectacle in itself. The persona of Alberta Social Credit leader William Aberhart aroused much interest as well. Movement supporters looked upon him with the reverence and awe due a prophet or saviour, while those opposed