

CONTROVERSY / POLÉMIQUE

“Telford Time” and the Populist Origins of the CCF in British Columbia

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IN THE NOVEMBER 1933 PROVINCIAL ELECTION in British Columbia (BC) the newly formed Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) captured almost one-third of the popular vote, a sharp increase in left-of-centre support from previous elections when a variety of labour and socialist parties had spread many fewer votes over several organizations. Since then the CCF and its successor, the New Democratic Party (NDP), have formed the largest or second largest group in the BC legislature in every election but one since 1933. The persistence in the political culture of a substantial party of the left in turn has structured BC politics into a pattern of polarization marked by the CCF or NDP on the left and a series of coalitions – four different ones from the early 1940s to the present – on the right.¹ Yet the 1933 election has received only the most cursory attention from historians, with analysts drawn either to the disintegration of the preceding Simon Fraser Tolmie-led Conservative government – this was the last time in BC history that the Conservative Party formed a majority government – or to the rise of the Thomas Duff Pattullo-led Liberal Party and the implementation of Pattullo’s “Little New Deal.” To the extent that the election marked the emergence of a province-wide party of the left in British Columbia scholars have mostly emphasized the fact that the CCF in BC was more radical than elsewhere in Canada. Thus, in his recently published book *Militant Minority*, Ben Isitt talks of the “explicitly socialist doctrine” of

1. Donald E. Blake, *Two Political Worlds: Parties and Voting in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1985), and Stephen Phillips, “Party Politics in British Columbia: The Persistence of Polarization” and Dennis Pilon, “Democracy, BC-Style,” in Michael Howlett, Dennis Pilon, and Tracy Summerville, eds., *British Columbia Politics and Government* (Toronto 2010), 87–108 and 109–129.

the British Columbia CCF in the 1930s.² While this contention recognizes an important fact about the rise of the political left, a closer look at the election of 1933 suggests that the provincial movement's "socialist" character at its inception has been exaggerated, thus obscuring the more complex nature of the province's political transformation in the early 1930s. In particular, I am suggesting that the rise of the CCF can be explained as much by populism as it can by socialism, a perspective that is easier to see if we shift our attention from the movement's socialist leaders, and from core areas of radical left voter strength in BC's coal towns and dominant city, to the explosion of support for the CCF across the province as a whole. Political history, in other words, looks different when viewed from the streets of Grand Forks or Prince George than it does from the socialist reading rooms of downtown Vancouver.³

The standard narrative for the emergence of the CCF in British Columbia starts with the observation of Dorothy Steeves – a CCF member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from 1934 to 1945 and the biographer of socialist MLA Ernest Winch – that the decade following the Winnipeg General Strike was marked by "a decline of radical thinking in British Columbia."⁴ After the newly created Federated Labour Party (FLP) had won three seats in the 1920 provincial election, support across the province for left-oriented candidates dropped modestly between 1920 and 1924 (from 15.8 per cent to 12.7 per cent) and precipitously in 1928 (to five per cent). Indeed, by 1928 the political left in BC seemed barely to register a pulse. Characterized by an unstable organizational structure of small labour and socialist parties, the political left functioned mainly at the local constituency level through institutions that were relatively shortlived. In this environment Angus MacInnis, the Canadian-born socialist from South Vancouver, undertook to unify "the various existing political labour groups" in British Columbia into an organization "that would appeal to the great mass of the workers." From this 1925 initiative the Independent Labour Party (ILP) emerged, drawing in "all the major radical groups...except the Socialist Party of Canada."⁵ Notwithstanding MacInnis' electoral victories for school trustee and then alderman at the civic level, electoral success for the

2. Ben Isitt, *Militant Minority: British Columbia Workers and the Rise of a New Left, 1948–1972* (Toronto 2011), 16.

3. Gordon Hak makes a similar argument in "The Socialist and Labourist Impulse in Small-town British Columbia: Port Alberni and Prince George, 1911–33," *Canadian Historical Review*, 70 (December 1989), 84. For this essay the story of the emergence of popular support for the CCF in outlying areas has been explored in the following newspapers: *Chilliwack Progress*, *Grand Forks Gazette*, *Kamloops Sentinel*, *Nanaimo Free Press*, *Peace River Block News*, *Prince Rupert Daily News*, and *Vernon News*.

4. Dorothy G. Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1960), 70. Also see Benjamin Isitt, "Elusive Unity: The Canadian Labor Party in British Columbia, 1924–28," *BC Studies*, 163 (Autumn 2009), 33–64.

5. Quotations from Walter D. Young, "Ideology, Personality and the Origin of the CCF in British Columbia," *BC Studies*, 32 (Winter 1976–77), 141.

party did not follow. The ILP reached its lowest ebb in late 1929 and early 1930, but as political scientist Walter Young noted, it did survive to provide “an active core that maintained the semblance of a vital left in British Columbia.”⁶ As the Depression solidified its grip on British Columbia’s economy this core group began to gain support and move to the left, a shift confirmed at the December 1931 convention when Ernest Winch, an important labour and political activist at the end of World War I and now active again in left politics, became the secretary-treasurer and fellow socialists Wallis Lefeaux and A.M. Stephen joined the executive. The ILP evolved from its original conception as a labour party to that of a socialist party committed to working with other leftist groups “on a Marxian basis,” as a result of which the ILP changed its name first to ILP (Socialist) and then, in June 1932, to the Socialist Party of Canada. It was this party that became British Columbia’s first and most important affiliation with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (Farmer, Labour, Socialist), formed at the fifth conference of western labour parties held at Calgary in August 1932. BC Socialists, considered the radicals among those who debated and approved the Regina Manifesto in July 1933, enthusiastically embraced the final paragraph of the Manifesto calling for the eradication of capitalism and the operation of a full programme of socialized planning.⁷

But the newly created CCF was a federation, and the Socialist Party was not its only BC affiliate. Branches of the reform-minded intellectual movement called the League for Social Reconstruction, whose eastern members were to write the CCF’s Regina Manifesto, emerged in Victoria and Vancouver in the summer and fall of 1932, and these British Columbia reformers formed a group called the Reconstruction Party that in May 1933 joined the CCF as a co-affiliate with the Socialists. That summer the two branches of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in BC were challenged in turn by a surge of new CCF clubs, which in August amalgamated with the Reconstruction Party to form a group called the Associated CCF Clubs of British Columbia. During the November election, then, the CCF in BC was a coalition of two groups, one led by a small coterie of Marxists in the Socialist Party of Canada, the other consisting of a much bigger group of Associated CCF Clubs. Unlike the Vancouver-centred Socialist Party, the Associated Clubs carried the banner of the CCF movement in parts of the province such as Victoria and the Okanagan that had not been traditional centres of left political support. This coalition captured a third of the provincial vote in 1933 even though it fought the election without a leader.⁸

6. Young, “Ideology, Personality and the Origin of the CCF,” 142 and Richard Grey Stuart, “The Early Political Career of Angus MacInnis,” MA Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1970, 36.

7. Steeves, *Compassionate Rebel*, 85–87 and Gregory Baum, *Catholics and Canadian Socialism: Political Thought in the Thirties and Forties* (Toronto 1980), 38–40.

8. Young, “Ideology, Personality and the Origin of the CCF,” 148–151; Steeves, *Compassionate*

The existing literature focuses on the success of the Socialist Party wing of the federation because this group – led by Ernest Winch – defined the provincial CCF in the 1930s as a socialist party. Along with Steeves' biography of Winch, Walter Young's seminal essay on the origin of the CCF convincingly documents the process by which a small group of Marxist socialists maintained ideological and institutional control of the movement into the 1940s. The literature makes clear that elected and appointed leaders of the party embraced a shared discourse about the need to end capitalism, though different understanding about whether scientific or pragmatic methods should be used to implement that goal sharply divided leftists. The differences led to the resignation of the provincial party's moderate leader, Victoria's Reverend Robert Connell, in 1936.⁹ The radical character of the provincial CCF in British Columbia found perhaps its fullest expression following the 1941 provincial election when the legislative caucus to 1945 included Marxist-influenced legislators such as Ernest Winch, Dorothy Steeves, Colin Cameron, and the theoretically-articulate Wallis Lefeaux, as well as more moderate socialists such as Grace MacInnis, Laura Jamieson, Arthur Turner, and Bert Herridge.¹⁰ They were a remarkable group whose leadership in raising questions about Canada's participation in the war and in planning for the postwar world testified to the strength of the ideologically-based leftist tradition in British Columbia provincial politics.

That said, the institutional expression of this radicalism undoubtedly obscures a much more complex history of progressive thought on Canada's west coast that ranged from reform liberalism in the tradition of William Gladstone to single tax ideas, labourism, and left populism, a complexity that closer examination of the 1933 election illustrates. For instance, Young and Steeves say little about the outpouring of enthusiasm for the CCF label that surged across the province from 1932 to 1934, an enthusiasm that Kelowna Conservative J.W. Jones called a "mania" among "thousands of people" in the Okanagan.¹¹ Other strands of the CCF story also call for attention. One of them is Dorothy Steeves's reference to the presence of Social Creditors in the eclectic mix of people who came together to form the Reconstruction

Rebel, 78–88; and Stuart, "The Early Political Career of Angus MacInnis," 68–84 and 92–4.

9. On the conflict in the legislative party over Connell's leadership see Gordon Wickerson, "Conflict in the British Columbia Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the 'Connell Affair'," MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1973.

10. For the CCF caucus during the war see Steeves, *Compassionate Rebel*, 156–170; Maurice Hodgson, *The Squire of Kootenay West: A Biography of Bert Herridge* (Saanichton 1976); and Susan Walsh, "The Peacock and the Guinea Hen: Political Profiles of Dorothy Gretchen Steeves and Grace MacInnis," in Barbara Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria 1984), 365–379.

11. J.W. Jones to Col. A.M. Brown, 7 November 1933, Provincial Archives of British Columbia (hereafter PABC), W.J. Jones Papers (Jones Papers), MS 0023, Box 2, File 4.

TABLE A British Columbia Vote in Core Left Constituencies vs All Others, 1916–1933

| Election | Left Vote For Province (% of total) | Left Vote In Core* Left Constituencies (% of total) | Left Vote in All Other Constituencies (% of total) |
|----------|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1916 | 4.1 | 5.2 | 2.4 |
| 1920 | 15.8 | 19.5 | 14.2 |
| 1924 | 12.7 | 18.6 | 2.7 |
| 1928 | 5.0 | 8.4 | 0.4 |
| 1933 | 32.8 | 41.9 | 27.3 |

* The core left constituencies were defined as those that had a demonstrated history of supporting labour or socialist candidates. The constituencies included in this category are Burnaby (1924–33); Comox (1916–33); Fernie (1916–33); Nanaimo (1916–28) and Alberni-Nanaimo (1933); Newcastle (1916 and 1920) and Cowichan-Newcastle (1924–33); New Westminster (1916–33); South Vancouver (1916–28); Vancouver City (1916–1928); Vancouver Burrard (1933); Vancouver Centre (1933); and Vancouver East (1933).

SOURCE: *Electoral History of British Columbia, 1871–1986* (Victoria 1988).

Party in December 1932.¹² Another is the tendency of writers to overlook Dr. Lyle Telford's role in building the movement culture of the left that led up to the election. For instance, Walter Young acknowledges that "Telford's charisma...had led to the creation of a large number of CCF clubs throughout the province" but finds in Telford's mix of socialism and social credit a combination that renders his politics "unclassifiable."¹³ In so doing he marginalizes Telford's contribution in the election narrative. Charisma and social credit are not factors normally included in explanations of the uniquely radical character of the CCF movement on Canada's west coast. Perhaps they should be.

The emergence of CCF clubs around the province offers an obvious place to start. The data in Table A underlines the challenge that a rethinking of the 1933 election results poses for historians. The table summarizes the left political vote (by candidates who ran under labour or socialist labels) in the five elections from 1916 to 1933. It does so for constituencies that a subjective reading of historical data would suggest were, and were not, traditional centres of left political support. The CCF vote in core left constituencies such as Newcastle, Fernie, Burnaby, and South Vancouver jumped dramatically in 1933 over 1928 (from 8.4 per cent to 41.9 per cent), but it is the vote in the rest of the province that truly astounds. Here the left vote was 14.2 per cent of the provincial total in 1920, dropping to 2.8 per cent in 1924 and a miniscule 0.4 per cent in 1928. Yet in these non-core constituencies – ridings such as Skeena, Peace River, and South Okanagan – the left vote in November 1933 jumped to 27.3 per cent from virtually nothing and resulted in the election of CCF members in

12. Steeves, *Compassionate Rebel*, 80.

13. Young, "Ideology, Personality and the Origin of the CCF in British Columbia," 141.

three ridings – Delta, North Vancouver, and Mackenzie – that had not previously exhibited support for socialist or labour candidates. Thus, while Robin Fisher might dismiss the CCF in 1933 as “a collection of disparate and fractious groups that had been cobbled together at the last minute,”¹⁴ a closer look at the numbers suggests that something remarkable was happening across the face of British Columbia in 1932 and 1933. What stands out, then, is less the outstanding success of the left in a handful of urban and coal mining constituencies where it had always had a presence than its emergence as a political force in the rest of the province.

A key factor was the role of the charismatic Dr. Lyle Telford, the Ontario-born doctor who had come west in 1913 after graduation to practice medicine and participate in socialist politics in 1920s Vancouver. Known for his spell-binding oratory, the short, silver-haired man became “the voice of the C.C.F. to thousands in the rural districts of the province”¹⁵ where he presented socialism to people in halls throughout the Fraser Valley and around Vancouver in the summer and fall of 1932, and further afield to the Okanagan, Kootenay, Cariboo, and North Coast regions of the province in 1933.¹⁶ On a speaking tour through the central interior, for instance, Telford packed the local hall in Salmon Arm where he demonstrated with charts to people from surrounding communities such as Magna Bay, White Lake, Tappen, and Silver Creek how the Co-operative Commonwealth’s “planned system of production and distribution” would work.¹⁷ Grassroots enthusiasm for the CCF was also expressed on Saltspring Island where a farmer gushed that the visiting Telford had “captivated this whole Island. Everyone is talking Dr. Telford and the C.C.F.”¹⁸ Telford’s popularity came in part from what one commentator called his “oratorical thunder,”¹⁹ as well as from the lively monthly paper, *The Challenge*, that he owned and edited from mid-1931 to mid-1933.

But it was his radio broadcasts that accorded Telford most celebrity status among both rural and working-class people. In her biography of Winch, Steeves tells of how people “said that on a summer evening one could hear the whole of a Telford broadcast simply by walking down any street in the

14. Robin Fisher, *Duff Pattullo of British Columbia* (Toronto 1991), 234.

15. *Vancouver Sun*, 27 September 1960, 1; *Vancouver Province*, 28 September 1960, 3, and 6 July 1936, 7.

16. The extensive number of political speeches given around the province is suggested in the following sources: *The Challenge*, July 1932, October 1932, and March 1933; *Vernon News*, 25 May 1933, 2; *Kamloops Sentinel*, 17 May 1933, 1; *The Commonwealth*, 31 May 1933 and 9 August 1933; and *Peace River Block News*, 6 June 1933, 2.

17. *Commonwealth*, 24 May 1933, 8.

18. *Commonwealth*, 23 August 1933, 6.

19. *Province*, 31 October 1933, 4.

city and picking it up as it poured from the open windows.”²⁰ A similar story spoke of “Telford Time,” a brief interlude when Fraser Valley farm labourers would “leave their chores to gather about the radio and listen with great interest to the words of one of the most effective evangelists of socialism to appear on the British Columbia scene.”²¹ Even in Powell River, the pulp and paper company town where the depression struck less severely than in many parts of the province, a pre-election crowd of upwards of 800 people came out to hear the man whose radio addresses were said to be “making an impression.”²² In a decade when the proportion of occupied dwellings in BC with radio sets grew from 36 to 84 per cent, Telford’s political success supports the observation of Alejandra Bronfman, a Caribbean historian, that we should consider more fully how reliance on new communication technologies such as the radio may have shifted power dynamics among political actors in the 1930s.²³

Telford’s success as a charismatic speaker raises the question of whether it was the class message of the CCF or the populist appeal of a radio crusader that drew working-class support to the movement in 1933. Evidence about the social basis of support for the CCF is slight and mostly circumstantial. The party did well in urban and industrial centres such as Vancouver and Powell River, suggesting a class identity. For instance, the general manager of the pulp and paper mill in Powell River noted that “at least 60 percent of the mill’s 1,250 employees” voted for the CCF?²⁴ The coastal riding of Mackenzie, which included the pulp and paper manufacturing communities of Powell River and Ocean Falls, in 1933 elected one of the six CCF MLAs who defined themselves unequivocally as socialist. Yet, places like East Vancouver and Powell River were also locations where Telford’s radio programs exhibited wide appeal. Furthermore, the size and geographic range of the CCF vote across the province implies that the movement also appealed to the middling strata of farmers, low status professionals, and small businessmen. The only systematic analysis of the 1933 election at the community level is Gordon Hak’s study of the

20. Steeves, *Compassionate Rebel*, 76.

21. Douglas P. Clark, “Some Aspects of the Development of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in British Columbia,” Unpub. History Essay, University of British Columbia, 1945, 15–16. Also see J.C. Harris to John Norcross, 27 December 1937, PACB, MS. 807, Joseph C. Harris Papers, Box 1, File 37.

22. *Commonwealth*, 2 August 1933, 1 and 2, and 9 August 1933, 3.

23. The observation is drawn from Alejandra Bronfman, “Weapons of the Geek: Romantic Narratives, Sonic Technologies, and Tinkerers in 1930s Santiago, Cuba,” in Alejandra Bronfman and Andrew Grant Wood, eds., *Media, Sound, and Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Pittsburgh 2011), 57. On the expanding presence of radios in BC in the 1930s see Robert Jeremy Wilson, “The Impact of Modernization on British Columbia Electoral Patterns: Communications Development and the Uniformity of Swing, 1903–1975,” PhD thesis, University of British Columbia, 1978, 240–41.

24. Gordon Hak, *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Industry, 1934–74* (Vancouver 2007), 49 and 73.

election in the resource towns of Port Alberni and Prince George. Here, where “small businessmen and professionals set the tone” for community life and dominated social and political institutions, the left vote appears to have come not from industrial workers but from middle status families, including those headed by railroad workers and small businessmen who had often experienced working-class life at some point in their past and who were deeply committed to values such as co-operation, self-improvement, and the advancement of the local community.²⁵

If charisma helps explain the “mushrooming activity which followed in Telford’s footsteps,”²⁶ it is his message that invites us to rethink what a vote for the CCF meant to thousands of British Columbians in the early 1930s. Telford was a committed socialist, in Prince Rupert calling for “a radical change in the whole economic system.” Under capitalism, he argued, a small minority who owned the natural resources and controlled the banking system had exploited some “96% of mankind” through rents, profits, interest, and graft.²⁷ “Human rights should be placed before the rights of vested interests,” he roared in Grand Forks.²⁸ “We have got to do away with this system of exploitation. We have got to have a co-operative system, instead of a competitive system.”²⁹ Telford presented himself as a dedicated socialist and for several years supported the Marxist-leaning socialist faction that controlled the provincial CCF.

Yet there was much in the expanding base of popular support for the CCF that troubled socialist leaders like Winch and Wallis Lefaux, who feared that new supporters had only a rudimentary understanding of socialist principles and might be “nothing more than a bunch of left wing liberals.”³⁰ The speeches heard from rural and outlying areas of the province would have justified their concerns. Reminiscent of the populist rhetoric of the western farmers’ movement leading up to and during World War I, speakers ranging from local CCF candidates to elite members of the movement such as Lyle Telford, William Pritchard, and Angus and Grace MacInnis defined the problem of capitalism as the inordinate power of big industries and the banks. Their solution was public ownership of utilities, banks, and large industries that controlled natural resources. Size mattered in this discourse, with speakers like Pritchard, one of

25. Hak, “The Socialist and Labourist Impulse in Small-Town British Columbia,” 520–21 and 542.

26. Steeves, *Compassionate Rebel*, 79.

27. *The Daily News* (Prince Rupert), 19 August 1933, 1 and 4.

28. *Grand Forks Gazette*, 8 September 1933, 1.

29. *Victoria Daily Times*, 20 November 1934, 3.

30. Wallis Lefaux to Angus MacInnis, 21 April 1933, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections Division (hereafter UBC Spec. Col.), Angus MacInnis Fonds, Box 72, File 4 and Ernest E. Winch to J.G. King, National Archives of Canada, (hereafter NAC), CCF/NDP Fonds, MG28-IV-1, Box106. File “E.E. Winch.”

the leaders of the Winnipeg General Strike and now the mayor of Burnaby, linking “ruthless capitalism” to “big interests” and arguing for the need to resist capitalism by transferring large-scale industries to the ownership of “the people.”³¹ Asserting that the “movement wanted people to have more and better (private) property,” Telford and others were especially keen to assure farmers that their land was secure.³² Yet speakers entirely ignored the sector of small commercial and manufacturing businesses that operated for profit in Canada’s market economy. It is at least arguable that CCF discourse heard in places such as Vernon and Grand Forks implied, without stating so explicitly, that “capitalism” meant only big capital, and not that of small producers symbolized by the family farm.³³

For Telford, capitalism’s heart was the banking system, and it was issues of money, banking, and credit that framed his analysis of the economy. In language that resonated with overtones of social credit theory, he told of vast supplies of needed food and clothing filling stores, yet of people starving because of an inadequate system of exchange.³⁴ How can it be, he asked, that last year Okanagan apples were dumped into the lake even though a previous government “at huge expense” had created the Oliver irrigation scheme to produce apples?³⁵ The whole country was “pretty well in the hands of the banks,” he proclaimed, which they got away with because money and banking were issues “clouded in superstitions.”³⁶ For him the answer was to be found in the power that banks had to print money, which they used as a commodity for profit rather than as a medium of exchange to meet human needs.³⁷ To balance consumption and production the government should issue its own currency, a “form of provincial socialized currency and credit” that he called “C.C.F. money.”³⁸ At the largest gathering of the 1933 election, a debate between star candidates Gerry McGeer of the Liberals and Lyle Telford of the CCF in Vancouver before an overflow crowd of more than 12,000 excited citizens proved less contentious than expected in part because both McGeer and Telford shared similar views about the need to increase purchasing

31. *Kamloops Sentinel*, 1 August 1933, 1; 3 and *The Challenge*, October 1933.

32. *Prince George Citizen*, 31 August 1933, 1 and 2; *Nanaimo Free Press*, 2 October 1933, 1 and 4.

33. Alan Whitehorn makes a similar point concerning the Regina Manifesto when arguing that the Manifesto presented “dramatically more negative references to capitalism (17) than positive references to socialism (1).” In that sense the Manifesto “fitted into the populist tradition.” See Whitehorn, *Canadian Socialism: Essays on the CCF-NDP* (Toronto 1992), 43.

34. *Vernon News*, 25 May 1933, 1; *The Daily Colonist*, 3 October 1933, 3.

35. *Province*, 22 May 1933, 4.

36. *Challenge*, October 1932.

37. *Peace River Block News*, 6 June 1933, 2.

38. *Daily Colonist*, 13 October 1933, 2 and 14 October 1933, 2; *Daily News* (Prince Rupert), 30 October 1933, 1; and *Sun*, 16 June 1936, 2.

power through monetary reform.³⁹ Telford's interest in money increased in the years after the 1933 election and was his principal concern by the time of the 1936 CCF convention when, attracted by what Dorothy Steeves referred to as "the fallacies of Alberta's Aberhart," he persuaded the CCF convention "to pass a clause in the provincial program calling for the provincial socialization of finance and credit (in order) to make purchasing power available to the people."⁴⁰ Steeves' linking of Telford to Aberhart is intriguing because Alvin Finkel has shown that Alberta's working class was "actively implicated in the spread of Social Credit ideas" in that province.⁴¹ Perhaps what Telford's mixing of socialism and social credit in British Columbia illustrates, then, is the fluidity of political thinking across the west in the depths of the Great Depression.

The theme of resistance to elites on both the left and right of the ideological spectrum has been popular in writing about BC's political parties, leading political scientist David Elkins to argue that populism is a "pillar of B.C. political culture, manifesting itself in ideological form" as well as in "styles of conduct and habits of thought."⁴² This interpretation applies particularly to the period after the election of 1952 when the Social Credit Party emerged from nowhere to form a government under W.A.C. Bennett, formerly a Conservative MLA. British Columbia's political scientists have also made clear that the ideological polarization of BC politics into left and right groupings has not precluded the influence of populism on both sides of the political spectrum, a phenomenon best illustrated in Gordon Hak's important study of the 1952 provincial election in which the collapsed authority of the coalition of Liberal and Conservative parties led to a surge of anti-elite sentiment that changed the partisan landscape of BC politics for forty years.⁴³ What is missing from the literature on what Donald Blake, Ken Carty, and Linda Erickson call "the populist style of

39. Gerry G. McGeer to Rt. Hon. William Lyon Mackenzie King, 20 January 1933, PABC, Thomas Duff Pattullo Fonds, Add. Mss. 3, Vol.51, File 16, 4; *Colonist*, 21 October 1933, 1.

40. Steeves, *Compassionate Rebel*, 108; Wickerson, "Conflict in British Columbia," 19; and *Province*, 6 July 1936, 7.

41. Alvin Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta* (Toronto 1989), 30–2 and 211.

42. David J. Elkins, "British Columbia as a State of Mind," in Donald E. Blake, ed., *Two Political Worlds: Parties and Voting in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1985), 57 and 63. On writing by political scientists about populism in British Columbia also see Blake, *Two Political Worlds*, 11, 20, 47, and 84; Walter Young, "Political Parties," in J. Terence Morley *et al.*, *The Reins of Power: Governing British Columbia* (Vancouver 1983), 97–9 and 108–111; Donald E. Blake, "Value Conflicts in Lotusland: British Columbia Political Culture," and Norman Ruff, "The British Columbia Legislature and Parliamentary Framework," in R.K. Carty, ed., *Politics, Policy, and Government in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1996), 4–16 and 99; and Donald E. Blake, R.K. Carty, and Lynda Erickson, *Grassroots Politicians: Party Activists in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1991), 5–6 and 41–43. Conventional wisdom in political science literature about populism has recently been challenged by Dennis Pilon in "Democracy, BC-Style."

43. Gordon Hak, "Populism and the 1952 Social Credit Breakthrough in British Columbia," *Canadian Historical Review*, 85, 2 (June 2004), 277–96.

politics” practiced in British Columbia is serious consideration of the roots of populism before 1952.⁴⁴ What I am arguing is that the emergence of the political left as a province-wide phenomenon across BC in the 1933 election constituted an important populist moment in British Columbia history that preceded the rise of Social Credit in 1952.

Most scholars of populism would agree with David Laycock’s observation that populism “is a notoriously ambiguous concept.”⁴⁵ Observers approach the topic, broadly-speaking, in one of two ways. The first sees populism as a “syndrome” of values, or as an “emphasis” or “impulse.”⁴⁶ For instance, in *The Populist Persuasion* American historian Michael Kazin explores the role of populist language as “a flexible mode of persuasion” that runs through American political culture.⁴⁷ By contrast, others discount the focus on leadership style and rhetoric because it ignores what Laycock, for instance, considers a necessary requirement of populism: a mass organizational expression of populist experience in the form of a political movement or political party.⁴⁸ Histories of the farmers’ movements in the American south and west after the Civil War and in Canada’s prairie west in the early twentieth century are examples of the second approach. Yet, whether emphasizing language or organization, scholars agree that the central premise of populism is that “virtue resides in the simple people...and in their collective traditions.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Margaret Canovan’s comprehensive survey of writing about populism in a number of countries concluded that all forms of populism without exception involve “some kind of exaltation of and appeal to ‘the people’, and all are in one sense anti-elitist.”⁵⁰

Recently political scientist Paul Taggart has offered a different explanation, arguing that populism emerges at points in time when people lose faith in their institutions, especially representative institutions. Appearing “when its adherents are overcome with a sense of crisis and moral collapse,” populist sentiment focuses on the system of representative institutions that are “found wanting.” People’s frustration with economic and political institutions leads

44. Blake, Carty, and Erickson, *Grassroots Politicians*, 5–11 and 97.

45. David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945* (Toronto 1990), 14.

46. Peter Worsley argued influentially that “populism is better regarded as an emphasis, a dimension of political culture in general” than simply “as a particular kind of overall ideological system or type of organization.” See Worsley, “The Concept of Populism,” in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (London 1969), 245.

47. Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY 1995), 3.

48. Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought*, 15.

49. Peter Wiles, “A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism,” in Ionescu and Gellner, eds., *Populism*, 166–79.

50. Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (New York 1981), 294.

them to construct simple forms of organization to replace the ones that are not working. They imagine an idealized world that encompasses their core values in simplified form, a condition that Taggart calls the “heartland,” which is inhabited by a generalized group called “the people.” Frustrated with representative politics, populists “prefer the simple solution of leadership itself over the complex process of politics to resolve problems,” sometimes resulting in the emergence of charismatic populist leaders. Obvious examples during the Great Depression include Detroit’s “radio priest” Father Charles Coughlin and Alberta’s William Aberhart. The sense of spontaneousness that often characterizes populist movements means that they tend to be short-lived and episodic, emerging as political phenomena that occupy only discrete “populist moments” in history. Crucially important, Taggart suggests, is the notion that because populist movements lack a unique ideological system they are shaped by the context in which they occur, and can emerge on either the left or right of the political spectrum.⁵¹ David Laycock, citing theorist Peter Worsley, has similarly argued that “all manifestations of populism have been ideologically parasitic on what Worsley calls ‘neighbouring ideologies’ that do not possess ‘distinctive boundaries’” marking them off from other ideological systems.⁵²

The period from 1932 to 1934 in British Columbia was one such moment. Understanding the motives of voters in the era before polls tracked public opinion is a highly speculative task, but public discourse during BC’s 1933 election suggests that popular support for CCF candidates emerged from “a common disillusionment with existing political organizations,” much like Alvin Finkel observed in the mindset of diverse groups that first coalesced into the Social Credit movement during the same period in Alberta.⁵³ Newspaper editorials in Chilliwack and Prince George spoke of the “sullen indifference” of voters and “unrest in the electorate.”⁵⁴ Confused voters were searching for change, yet as socialist Wallis Lefeaux made clear, the churning discontent that was evident on the hustings was not the result of any “immediate revolutionary feeling in the province.” In his view, that would have to await the educational leadership of an elected CCF government.⁵⁵ In columns written from the campaign trail around the province journalist Bruce Hutchison concluded that voters were “broke and fed up” and had “little to lose by economic change.”⁵⁶ James W. Jones, a former member of the Tolmie Conservative Government, similarly concluded that the significant erosion of the English vote from the

51. Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham 2000), 3–5, 8, 25, 95–9, 100–3, 106, 114, 116.

52. From Worsley, “The Concept of Populism,” cited in Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought*, 15.

53. Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta*, 39.

54. *Chilliwack Progress*, 18 April 1933, p.4; *Prince George Citizen*, 28 September 1933, 2.

55. *Province*, 28 October 1933, 2.

56. *Province*, 18 October 1933, 10 and 26 October 1933, 13.

Conservatives to the CCF in South Okanagan, won by the Liberals in a close three-way race, reflected an electorate “befuddled with their losses in fruit growing” and “determined to have a change of some kind (though) they know not what.”⁵⁷

The picture that emerges from this contemporary commentary is that of an electorate “determined to offer a cold shoulder to (traditional) party politics,”⁵⁸ open to the simple solutions that populist rhetoric offered. The specific proposals of Lyle Telford and other socialist speakers were less important to voters than the fact that solutions, of whatever kind, were being offered to the system of representative institutions that British Columbians “found wanting.” The *Chilliwack Progress* captured this sentiment when it argued editorially that British Columbia’s “unstable type of government” was “adding its dead weight to the many other burdens of the province” and leaving people uncertain that anything better could be achieved. “The refusal of leaders to do more than jostle, berate and quibble over trifles when they should be leading a province so sorely in need of leadership” left many people “turning to leaders of socialistic movements which exhibit some sign of life and possible action.”⁵⁹ Herein lays the appeal of Dr. Lyle Telford who responded to the sense of economic and moral collapse in Depression-era British Columbia by offering simple solutions characterized by charismatic leadership and monetary reform.

The mixing of socialism and populism in Telford’s politics, which Walter Young was unable to classify in conventional political terms, makes perfect sense when we consider Taggart’s argument that populism takes the form of a political movement at points in time when voters have become fundamentally ambivalent about their representative institutions. Since populism lacks a coherent ideology of its own – what Taggart describes as populism’s empty heart – the movement attaches the idea of “the people” to the values of other ideologies, depending on the context. In Alberta the CCF negated itself by tying its fate to the discredited United Farmers of Alberta government, thereby opening the door to the charismatic leadership and monetary solutions articulated by William Aberhart.⁶⁰ In British Columbia a very different context prevailed in which alternatives to the old ways of the discredited government were presented by both the progressive-oriented Liberals of Thomas Duff Pattullo and the socialists further to the left. It is not surprising, then, that in this political environment voters who were disillusioned with government would look to the left rather than to the right for solutions. Twenty years later the electorate’s “institutional ambivalence,” this time about the province’s postwar coalition government, once again generated a populist moment

57. J.W. Jones to Col. A.M. Brown, 7 November 1933, Jones Papers, Box 2, File 4.

58. *Kamloops Sentinel*, 22 May 1933, 2.

59. *Chilliwack Progress*, 13 April 1933, 4.

60. Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta*, 25.

when electors delivered a strong “protest” vote to two parties that had populist inclinations, the CCF and the upstart Social Credit Party.⁶¹ Unlike 1933, when the populist impulse proved to be episodic and ephemeral, in 1952 the right-of-centre populists in the Social Credit movement attained power under the leadership of a former Conservative MLA, W.A.C. Bennett.

The 1933 election established an important new trajectory for provincial politics in British Columbia, a pattern defined by four consecutive centre-right coalitions, lasting from the early 1940s to the present day, that were organized in opposition to the CCF and NDP. Understanding that this “take-off” point for modern British Columbia politics had populist as well as socialist origins encourages us to think further about the complexity of progressive politics in the Pacific Province, a complexity that includes the influences of single tax, labourism, Christian socialism, and social democracy, as well as Marxist-influenced socialism. Historians of the left tend to discount progressive traditions that are variants of British Columbia’s underlying and dominant liberalism, preferring to write about what Ben Isitt has referred to as the left’s “militant minority.”⁶² But the story of Lyle Telford and the populist moment of 1932 and 1933 suggests that British Columbia’s left had a popular base that extended to ordinary people from across the social spectrum, and was not simply a movement of the working class or of ideologically-informed socialists. It also reminds us of Alan Whitehorn’s observation that the CCF, and the NDP that succeeded it, were “a blend of different colours of the political rainbow.”⁶³ In British Columbia the history of the 1933 election shows that populism – though hard to define and not always easy to see – was an important part of that rainbow.

61. Thomas Michael Sanford, “The Politics of Protest: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation and Social Credit League in British Columbia,” PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1961.

62. The argument that liberalism has historically formed the ideological foundation of British Columbia’s political culture, and that much of the left political culture is best described as “variants of liberalism,” is made in Robert A.J. McDonald, “‘Variants of Liberalism’ and the Liberal Order Framework in British Columbia,” in Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, eds., *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto 2009), 322–46.

63. Whitehorn, *Canadian Socialism*, 13.