Federalism-E

The CCF and Canada's Socialist Streak

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Federalism-E is founded by the Royal Military College of Canada and the Institute of Intergovernmental Relations at Queen's University

Federalism-E Vol. 20, No.1 (2019)

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Introduction

During the 20th Century, Canada saw the emergence of a powerful force, spurred on by the unsatiated desire of working-class people for change, which pushed Canadian political identity leftwards and aided in the move towards a larger state. This force was prairie-born socialism, and its power was manifested in a new political party – the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), whose branches garnered national attention federally and created a government provincially. It would eventually evolve into the New Democratic Party (NDP), which still serves as one of Canada’s three major federal political parties. This research paper asks: how did the emergence of a strong socialist movement from the prairies, embodied by the CCF, influence Canadian political identity and domestic policy in the long term? This paper argues that this socialist movement and the CCF were crucial in applying the necessary force to shift Canada’s general ideology from classical liberalism to reform liberalism. In pursuit of this thesis, this paper will: (1) discuss the ideologies of classical liberalism, reform liberalism, and socialism; (2) explore the origins of Prairie-born socialism; (3) tell the story of the CCF – its origins, leaders, and initiatives; (4) conclude with the legacy of this movement in Canadian political history.

The Ideologies

The political ideologies that were engendered in Canada, both before and after the influence of the CCF, cluster around classical liberalism, reform liberalism, and socialism, which all trace their origins back to Europe and the Enlightenment. As feudalism declined and the rigid European class structure dissolved during the 18th Century, capitalism sprang from Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. The ideology that proliferated in this period was classical liberalism, upholding the concepts of the equality of right, minimum state control, and the supremacy of the individual. Decades later, the industrial society that had grown from capitalist practices produced deep unhappiness, inspiring other ideologies that criticized it. The most notable critic of capitalism was Karl Marx, whose ideas altered the fate of Europe and laid the foundation for socialism in Western Europe and Canada.¹ Marx’s theory was that the internal workings of capitalism inevitably lead to inequality, unemployment, and corporate hegemony. Marx remains one of capitalism’s most important critics, but he did not anticipate the methods that the economies of the West would employ to reform it.

From the 1940s to the 1970s, voters elected policymakers that implemented social democratic policies without incurring economic disasters. Through the learned management of the instability that capitalism brings, Western democracies somewhat discredited Marx’s central proposals such as the abolition of private property.² However, his teachings were informative for the Western world in the birth of a new ideology, which this paper shall call ‘reform liberalism.’ Reform liberalism is an adaptation of classical liberalism that takes some of the critiques of capitalism to heart. Instead of prioritizing equality of right, reform liberalism upholds equality of opportunity and exercises “positive liberty” – the possibility of realizing one’s full potential. The ideology recognizes that within a capitalist system – which is informed by the classical liberal worldview – there are some individuals who fall behind and have very little hope of succeeding along with the rest of society, and it is society’s duty to help them succeed. Socialism takes this

¹ Varghese, Robin. Marxist World: What did you expect from capitalism? *Foreign Affairs*, 97.4 (2018), 36.

² Ibid.

ideal to a greater extreme by placing greater emphasis on the amalgamation of individuals in an organic community and seeks a redistribution of wealth rather than the lending of a helping hand to disadvantaged individuals.

The Origins of Prairie-Born Socialism

From the Enlightenment period until the early 20th Century, states reflected a classical liberal model of being relatively uninvolved in the lives of its citizens. A couple of watershed moments occurred that placed Marxism in a different light for everyday Westerners and cast doubt on the merits of capitalism and its ability to guarantee prosperity for all. These moments were the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Depression sparked a change in policy by provoking states to initiate countercyclical policies to reinvigorate their economies.³ For the first time in the Western world Adam Smith's "invisible hand" had been dismissed in favour of Keynesian economics.

However, the question remains: why did socialism find such strong support in the prairies – especially in Saskatchewan? It seems peculiar that a largely rural base would be the launchpad for the CCF, especially when compared to the politics of the United States' rural society, which failed to produce any significant or long-lasting socialist party. Part of the reason for socialism's Canadian success lies in how labour-socialist demands were met by the ruling parties – the Liberals and Conservatives. While the Great Depression sparked socialist reactions in both Canada and the US, President Roosevelt's "New Deal" effectively integrated these interests into the Democratic Party's doctrine and delegitimize the parties that embodied these sympathies.⁴ The Canadian Liberals and Conservatives, however, failed to conciliate the interests of the British-labour inspired movements and allowed for a third party to emerge in force.⁵

Nelson Wiseman, one of the 20th Century's foremost scholars on Canadian prairie politics, has asked the same question. His work has focused on the entire prairie region's political distribution and has argued that it should not be viewed as a single unit. Manitoba's more traditional liberal inclinations, Albertan farmers' populist liberalism, and Saskatchewan's socialist inclination indicate that there was a powerful distinguishing factor at play when these province's ideologies entered the political arena of the 1940s. According to Wiseman, this factor was the pattern of settlement across the prairies, meaning that the prairies' ideologies are importations from Europe. He divides the settlers into four waves: the first was the "Canadian" wave of settlers from Ontario into modern-day Manitoba; the second wave came from Britain and was made up of urban and working class people who settled in rural Saskatchewan and some of the prairies' large cities; the third wave was made up of Americans who successfully engendered their populism in Alberta; the fourth and final wave brought continental Europeans from numerous nations to the entire prairie region.⁶

³World Bank. "The Evolving Role of the State." *World Development Report 1997*. (June 1997). 21-22

⁴ Eidlin, Barry. Why is there no labor party in the United States? Political Articulation and the Canadian Comparison, 1932 to 1948. *American Sociological Review*, 81.3 (2016). 505

⁵ Ibid.

⁶Wiseman, Nelson. "The Pattern of prairie politics." *Queen's Quarterly*, 88.2 (1981). 426-427

The second wave from Britain was the key to socialism's success in Canada. The urban and working-class British settlers that arrived in Saskatchewan came from the highly industrialized Britain of the late 19th Century whose conditions bred socialist sentiments. Though the effect of British-imported socialism in cities such as Winnipeg should not be understated, the longest-lasting impact was made in rural Saskatchewan, where the country's most successful socialist movement was born. Wiseman posits that this British impact was so essential to the socialist movement's success that without it "the CCF would never have attained the stature it did (indeed, it might not have been created at all)."⁷

The Story of the CCF

Prior to the CCF's appearance on the Canadian political stage, the two-party rule that the federal Liberals and Conservatives shared had been quite stable. M. J. Coldwell, who at one point was the leader of the federal CCF, said that "Canadian Politics must have appeared in the past to possess the virtue of stability and the vice of dullness," despite the occasional attempt at progression by new parties seeking to occupy a third position in the House of Commons.⁸ These "third party movements" of the era before the CCF accomplished little more than temporary disturbances to the Tories' and Grits' regular business of alternating who sat in office. Coldwell said of Canada's apparent opposition to progression at this time:

"Canada, the 'Tory Dominion,' as it has well been called in the past, has until very recently presented strong opposition to imaginative and progressive social change. For Canada is a country where private monopoly has long been firmly entrenched and where sectional divisions have always obstructed national reforms."⁹

The reason for the slow progression may lie in the fact that the capitalist economy had yet to fail the young country. Until 1929, Canada's economy had satisfactorily performed under the "private enterprise system," a term indicative of a classical liberal worldview. The path to economic success was hindered only by a person's own shortcomings and lack of ability. This worldview was effectively promoted in Canada by both the Liberals and the Conservatives until the previously-mentioned Great Depression – the watershed moment that cast doubt on capitalism's efficacy – began in 1929. The economic planning that followed it, which occurred during the Second World War, put countercyclical policies and heavy-handed government involvement on the table for Canadian political aspirants.

In 1932, in the midst of the depression, the conditions for the CCF's founding were set. At this point in the crisis, Canada's average income had halved. The intense social unrest that resulted produced small surges in support for "blind-alley" parties such as the Communist Party. The party to gain the most traction, due in part to the labour-influenced background of some of its leaders, was the CCF.¹⁰ The party was born in Calgary, a federation between farmers, labour-supporters, and socialists that together aimed for the elimination of economic exploitation and the introduction of government control over national resources for redistribution to all of Canada's citizens. Though sharing its roots with British labour, the CCF did not identify itself as

⁷Ibid.

⁸Coldwell, M. J. *Left turn, Canada*. Canada: Duell, Sloan and Pearce. 1945. 8

⁹ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰ Ibid.

a labour party as its main effort was not to represent urban industrial workers and in fact had a stronger connection to farmers on the prairies.¹¹ The press was captivated, with one media outlet stating:

“A new movement is sweeping across Canada, a movement causing consternation in the camp of reaction, and causing stirrings of hope among the masses who have been sorely battered by almost three years of deepening depression. Into an atmosphere charged with apathy and despair, which none of the glowing words of politicians have been able to dissipate, comes the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation – the “C.C.F.” as it is known everywhere – like a fresh wind from the prairies where it came into being.”¹²

The first CCF national convention, which took place in Regina in 1933, resulted in a long-lasting set of principles established by a general policy declaration and constitution. These principles were known as the “Regina Manifesto.”¹³ Some of its policy points were: equitable distribution of national income, farmers’ security; the abolition of protectionist policies for international trade; a Labor Code to protect workers against hazards to their health and wellbeing, old age, and discrimination; and socialized health services.¹⁴

The CCF held the majority of its support in Saskatchewan and managed to form a provincial government there. After a federal election in 1940 which saw the CCF elect five members of parliament, the party’s confidence in its ability to gain popular support increased, despite lacking it outside of the prairies. During the 1944 provincial election in Saskatchewan, the CCF made sure to create a platform that, in addition to maintaining consistency with the national movement’s objectives, specifically targeted the agricultural voting base. It pioneered a land policy which placed the protection of farmers and their crops from threats such as eviction, seizure, debts, and crop failure clauses in mortgages.¹⁵

One of the factors in the success of the CCF to become a significant force – particularly on the provincial level in Saskatchewan – was Tommy Douglas. A Scottish-born Baptist preacher, Douglas was able to bring both the British labour-informed background and inspirational speaking abilities to the table as he pushed for a CCF government in Saskatchewan, during the 1944 election. Robert Tyre, a political reporter who followed Douglas on his campaign trail in 1944, described him as young and eager to initiate Canada’s first and only socialist government. He wrote that he “ranged the province like a conquering Genghis Khan and his voice was a rapier that cut down Liberals left and right.”¹⁶ It was this power of persuasion that Douglas wielded, coupled with the frightful experience of Saskatchewan’s farmers in the recent Great Depression that yielded such a fine return on votes.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² MacInnis, Grace. “Canada’s workers and farmers unite.” *The New Leader*. March 25, 1933.

¹³ McHenry, Dean E. *The Third Force In Canada: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation 1932-1948*. Toronto: Oxford University Press. 1950. 27-29

¹⁴ Ibid.,

¹⁵ Ibid., 210-213

¹⁶ Tyre, Robert. *Douglas In Saskatchewan: The Story of a socialist experiment*. Canada: Mitchell Press Limited. 1962. 7

Douglas made promises to the farmer and urban worker, guaranteeing economic security to the former and full employment to the latter. Platform points that appealed to his voter base were more focused on natural resource development by the government or through cooperation; free health care and social services, and a redistribution of the tax burden off the shoulders of everyday people and onto those of the wealthy corporations. The message that Douglas delivered, how he delivered it, and the conditions which the experience of the Great Depression had created, provided him with the necessary support to create Canada's first and only socialist government.

The provincial CCF's outcomes were not all celebrated, however. By 1961, there were many disillusioned individuals who had lived to see Douglas' provincial government fail to deliver on many of their promises over their seventeen years in power. Among the failures was the tax burden that common people still had to bear to pay for the socialist policies that were implemented, instead of deferring much of that burden to the large corporations which the CCF had initially promised to target. The most radical and attractive policies, such as healthcare and welfare did not come to fruition because the provincial government could not acquire the necessary funds.¹⁷ However, there was much good that resulted from the CCF's time in government. The construction of good infrastructure, the establishment of free cancer-treatment, modernization of the education system, and progression of worker-favoring legislation were all implemented to the province's satisfaction. Whatever conclusion one draws from the good and bad aspects of Saskatchewan's CCF government, Douglas' seventeen-year tenure cost a great price for taxpayers. The promises of new income and lower taxes that Douglas had made during the 1944 campaign were not met, and in 1961 he resigned his position as Premier. He soon embarked on a new mission – to bring the CCF's policies to the federal level through the freshly-branded New Democratic Party.

Of all the initiatives championed by the CCF and its successor the NDP, Medicare may be the most famous. The growth of Medicare from a provincial issue to a national debate is one of the most significant consequences of the CCF's agenda in the mid-20th Century. It evolved from the unsatisfactory medical policies implemented by the provincial CCF in Saskatchewan in 1962 after a fierce battle between anti-Medicare groups – mostly comprised of members of the medical hierarchy – and the powerful public opinion that supported Medicare. The 1962 Saskatoon Agreement, which attenuated the assaults on Medicare by anti-Medicare interest groups and kept it within the government's jurisdiction, did little to help the now-NDP government in Saskatchewan. In the election of 1964, they lost narrowly to the provincial Liberals, ending the CCF/NDP reign in Saskatchewan.¹⁸

The Medicare issue went national as a multitude of other vocal support groups began to push for a national policy that reflected Saskatchewan's. The federal Conservative government, led by Diefenbaker, created a royal commission to examine the potential benefits of such a program, though he hoped to shoot down such aspirations. Instead, the rising tide of public opinion supporting a single-payer Medicare system soon engulfed many political actors,

¹⁷Avakumovic, Ivan. *Socialism in Canada: A Study of the CCF-NDP in Federal and Provincial Politics*. McClelland and Stewart Ltd. 1978. 184

¹⁸ Brown, Lorne and Taylor, Doug. "The Birth of Medicare." *Canadian Dimension*, 46.4 (2012). 27-30.

including some Liberals and Red Tories who saw a shift to the left by their parties as necessary to conform to the public's desires and remain electorally viable. Six years of minority governments increased the potency of these demands, and in 1966, the Medical Care Insurance Act was passed 177 to 2 in the House of Commons.¹⁹

Conclusion: The Legacy

The unprecedented rise of the CCF as a third party on the Canadian political stage left a lasting impact on the country. The attention that its socialist policies garnered in the middle of the 20th Century bled into the mainstream discourse and effectively shifted Canadian political identity away from classical liberalism and toward reform liberalism. Saskatchewan's provincial CCF government, though unsuccessful in fulfilling many of the promises it made to voters in 1944, set the stage for progression in a country that was resistant to it. Its legislation promoting workers' rights over those of corporations and its relentless fight to establish a government-run single-payer Medicare system in Saskatchewan rallied the Canadian public to push for change leftwards on the political spectrum. This significant effect is seen in the policies that were adopted by the two original leading parties – particularly the Liberals – after the CCF and NDP's rise to prominence.

The CCF, now transformed into the NDP, may be doomed to never form a federal government and never spearhead the course of Canadian policymaking. However, the CCF's and NDP's critical role in the 20th Century as a third force upon the two ruling federal parties has altered Canadian political identity from one of classical liberalism to reform liberalism by demanding socialist reforms.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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