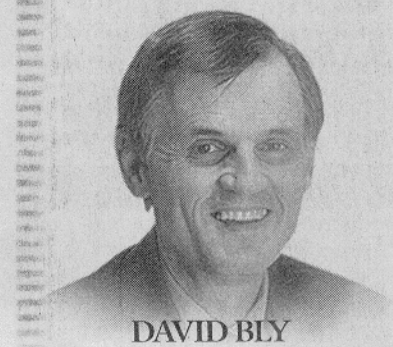


Foundation puts Bible Bill's legacy into perspective



DAVID BLY

HERITAGE

William Aberhart is an important figure in Alberta's history, says Art Dixon, but the premier who ushered in the Social Credit era does not get the recognition he deserves.

So Dixon and some like-minded friends, encouraged by Grant MacEwan, former lieutenant-governor and a keen historian, set out to form the William Aberhart Foundation, which was incorporated as a registered charity in January 2000.

Dixon was a Social Credit MLA from 1952 to 1975, and was Speaker of the Alberta legislature from 1967 to 1971.

"But the foundation is non-political," he said.

"We have people from a variety of political backgrounds. Our purpose is not politics, it's history. William Aberhart is important to Alberta's history — he did so much to help the province become what it is today."

Dixon says Aberhart did not set out to be a politician.

Born in Ontario in 1878, he moved to Calgary in 1910. From 1910 until 1915, he was principal of three public schools: Alexandra, Mount Royal and King Edward. In 1915, he was appointed principal of Crescent Heights High School in Calgary, where he served for 20 years.

During this time, Aberhart preached at various churches in the Calgary area and conducted Bible classes.

In 1918, he founded the Prophetic Bible Conference, which later became the Prophetic Bible Institute.

He foresaw the importance of radio when it was in its infancy, and in 1925 started Back to the Bible, a weekly religious broadcast that attracted audiences exceeding those of comedian Jack Benny.

Those broadcasts earned him the nickname Bible Bill.

"A lot of people thought he went into politics to spread his religious beliefs," says Dixon, "but he just wanted to help, to make things better."

When the Depression was darkening Alberta skies, Aberhart was disturbed by the bleak future faced by his students.

"He saw that students were graduating, but weren't able to get jobs," said Dixon.

"Now, Grade 12 was a pretty good education in those days, but it bothered Mr. Aberhart that these students were unemployed. This is what got him interested in politics."

A fellow teacher showed Aberhart a book by Maj. C. H. Douglas, a Scottish engineer who had formulated a theoretical fiscal system called social credit. Aberhart adopted — and later adapted — Douglas's views as a political platform.

The teacher-preacher from Calgary attracted incredible grassroots support.

David Elliott and Iris Miller, who wrote a book in the 1980s about Aberhart called Bible Bill, said the Social Credit campaign of 1935 was like nothing Alberta had seen.

"The public discussions, lectures and social gatherings of the old-fashioned political campaign were supplemented by many of the propaganda features of present-day political campaigns," they wrote, "except that this was in the days before professional publicity agents, speech writers and public relations experts."

The campaign was phenomenally successful. Aberhart swept to power with an unprecedented 56 out of 63 seats. The United Farmers of Alberta was destroyed as a political party, and Social Credit ruled Alberta for the next 36 years.

Aberhart succeeded because he offered hope, Dixon said, at a time when hopelessness reigned.

"There was starvation amid plenty," he said. "What did it matter if steaks cost 15 cents a pound if you didn't have 15 cents?"

"Mr. Aberhart knew there was enough to go around — it was a matter of distribution. He felt that if the wealth could be circulated, jobs would



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be created, the economy would improve."

Alberta was deeply in debt.

"Fifty-one cents of every dollar the province took in went to pay interest on the debt," Dixon said. "Never mind the principal."

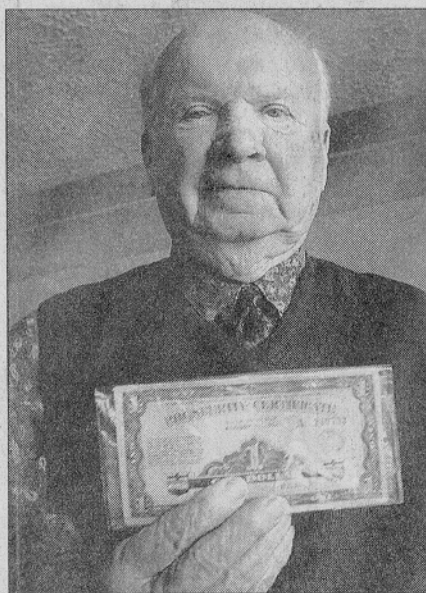
Aberhart made promises he later found he could not keep — a regular monthly allowance of \$25 to each adult citizen, a system in which credit vouchers would be used instead of money.

A few Alberta Prosperity Certificates, nicknamed "funny money," were issued, but the concept was struck down by the Supreme Court of Canada because currency and credit fall under federal jurisdiction.

"One of the great success stories, though, was the Treasury Branches," Dixon said. "When banks were leaving the small towns, the Treasury Branches were there, and became one of the province's most successful business enterprises."

The provincial debt is another success story, he said.

"Mr. Aberhart said in 1935 that the orderly development of Alberta's resources would make the province less dependent on taxes. He could foresee the time when Alberta would be debt-free. He wanted to leave more money in the hands of the people, where it would do some good, and you don't do



David Bly, Calgary Herald

that by raising taxes."

Aberhart died in 1943. His successor, Ernest C. Manning, was premier until 1968; the Social Credit party held power until it was swept aside by Peter Lougheed's Conservatives in 1971.

Under Manning, Alberta did become debt-free.

"We've been very fortunate tax-wise in Alberta," said Dixon.

"We have no provincial sales tax, and we're in pretty good shape. William Aberhart and Ernest Manning

Above, William Aberhart, with Ernest C. Manning, seated, at a Social Credit picnic in 1936. At left, Art Dixon, president of the William Aberhart Foundation, shows a \$1 Prosperity Certificate, an artifact from Aberhart's reign.

really got this province going."

Dixon said the William Aberhart Foundation is hoping to put together a collection of documents, artifacts, books and information that will help this chapter of Alberta's history be better understood.

"We have schools and universities asking for material on Mr. Aberhart," he said. "By 2005, we hope to have all material available as a historical record of one of Alberta's prominent pioneer citizens."

Dixon says he knows Aberhart, because of his unorthodox views and policies, had critics and enemies.

"Regardless of what you think of his policies, he's important historically," he said.

The William Aberhart Foundation can be contacted through J. Alvin Speers, secretary-treasurer, at 256-4639 or Dixon at 287-3919.