

Aberhart's legions swept into power

THE CALGARY HERALD

Tues., May 27, 1975

As the Aug. 22, 1935 provincial election approached, something new and vaguely ill-defined, but potentially a powerful new force, was emerging on the Alberta political scene.

It had a name: Social Credit. It had a leader: William Aberhart. Beyond that, few either within or without this curious new "movement" were able even to attempt to define it.

The Canadian Press tried to define it on April 25, 1935, and sent out this report to its readers across Canada:

"Guided by William Aberhart, school principal and dean of the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute, Social Credit forces have moved into the limelight of Alberta affairs in a short three years of active existence.

"Social Credit in Alberta is William Aberhart and the Alberta Social Credit League which he founded. Definitely launched as a political party promising to give the foothills province a new economic deal, the league is exemplified in the personality of its founder.

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"About average height, portly, bald and bespectacled, Mr. Aberhart has lived in Calgary since 1910. He is principal of Crescent Heights high school and scores of voters who will go to the polls when his candidates seek endorsement were among his students.

"The 56-year-old native of Huron County, Ont., came into the public eye through his Sunday school work. He taught Bible classes in Calgary churches for several years, in 1913 organizing a Bible class at Westbourne Baptist Church which became the start of the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute.

"The institute is an incorporated company and it owns and controls a \$65,000 brick building on Calgary's main street (8th Ave.). As he was in the beginning, Mr. Aberhart is the power behind the institute. And the Alberta Social Credit League is gradually forming more and more around the institute.

"Mr. Aberhart first learned of Social Credit three years ago when he was in Edmonton marking school examination papers. A friend spoke to him about the Douglas system and lent him a book, *Unemployment or War*. Out of this chance conversation grew the Alberta Social Credit League.

"Although Mr. Aberhart read the books of Major C. H. Douglas, British economist and founder of Social Credit, the Douglas supporters point to departures from Douglas principles in the Aberhart proposals for Alberta. Some of the differences are declared technical; others are termed fundamental.

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"Basic dividends for all adults in Alberta forms one of the foundation stones of the Aberhart proposals for Social Credit in Alberta. Sometimes it is definitely stated to be a \$25 payment monthly to all adults, but Mr. Aberhart maintains the figure can not be fixed until a survey of resources has been made.

"The government would act as the state credit house, guiding the flow of credit into channels most necessary to the people."

If details of the Social Credit theory were lacking in this story, it was not surprising. The original Douglas theory, having to do with putting more wealth in the hands of people, was vague enough, and Aberhart's theories varied considerably from the Douglas version. No one ever received \$25.

To say that Social Credit in Alberta was William Aberhart, and William Aberhart was Social Credit, was accurate enough. He didn't start out to be a politician, but he emerged as the most powerful politician by far in Alberta in 1935.

William Aberhart was born Dec. 30, 1878 on a farm near Kippen, in Huron County, Ont. As a youth he walked 2½ miles daily to attend high school and graduated with a second-class teacher's certificate. He went on to acquire a

first-class certificate and attended Queen's University, specializing in mathematics and commerce.

He came to Calgary in 1910, became principal of Crescent Heights High School, and devoted all his spare time to what really was his first love, teaching fundamentalist religion.

The Prophetic Bible Institute which he founded in downtown Calgary (opposite today's Penny Lane) was sold by the Social Credit League in 1966 and the building was torn down in 1974. In the 1930s it was the cornerstone of the greatest religious and political crusade this province ever has seen.

Teaching school children and reaching a huge radio audience every Sunday with his broadcasts from the Prophetic Bible Institute, Aberhart was well aware of the impact of the depression. Convinced that a drastic remedy was needed, he was reaching here and there in search of some solution. The answer, he became convinced, was Social Credit.

A Calgary group brought Major Douglas here to talk about his ideas, and a crowd estimated at 2,000 turned out in April, 1934, to hear him speak in the local armories.

But Douglas was a dull, uninspiring speaker. If anybody knew what he was talking about, few cared. The torch passed to Aberhart. From then on, throughout Alberta, it was his movement and his alone. When the 1935 elections came, the force of his rhetoric, if not always his logic, was unbeatable.

At his side, always was Ernest Manning, the first student to enrol at the Prophetic Bible Institute and the first to graduate. In an interview in Edmonton in 1973, the former premier (now Senator Manning) said there were two main reasons why Aberhart threw his hat into the political arena:

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● He had a long association with young people, and he was fond of them. It distressed him to see capable young people go out and find nothing to do, winding up walking the streets or riding the rods — or dropping out of school because their father was unemployed and everyone had to try to make ends meet.

● As a Christian layman, Aberhart had a humanitarian concern. He saw suffering all around him, and he wouldn't sit on the sidelines.

Aberhart's personality was such that there were no half measures. Those who weren't with him were against him. Those who wouldn't understand the Social Credit economic theories, which never were to prove practical, just weren't listening. There were two camps: those who trusted Aberhart implicitly and those who didn't.

The Social Credit economic theory, as defined by Aberhart acquired capital letters and became Social Credit. Adherents always referred to it as a movement, not a political party. But it was a political party, and by the spring of 1935 it had more than enough momentum to carry everything before it.

The first Social Credit convention in Calgary was held on April 4 and 5, 1935. After the first day's session, The Herald carried, in part, this account:

"On waves of applause accelerated by the momentum provided in the passing of seven sweeping resolutions, followers of the Aberhart theory of Social Credit celebrated their first southern Alberta convention by graduating their efforts in spheres definitely political.

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"By unanimous consent they passed a resolution urging William Aberhart to continue his teachings of the work founded on divine guidance and the theory 'I am my brother's keeper.'

"They desire him to continue as leader — he was consistently referred to as 'our leader' — and they desire him as premier, if and when Social Credit assumes the reins of government.

"Emphasizing that unshaken faith, the convention passed a further resolution vesting in Mr. Aberhart and a small advisory committee virtual dictatorial powers in the final selecting of candidates to carry Social Credit banners through Alberta constituencies."

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Convened in the Bible Institute, it was the "first convention

of its kind in Alberta and the Dominion" and it "budded over with enthusiasm."

Something different it indeed was. Here, in part, is The Herald's account of the conclusion of the two-day convention:

"Attended by a visible audience estimated at 2,000 people, the first general convention of the Alberta Social Credit League, southern division, reached a rousing finale Friday evening.

"While the gathering taxed capacity of the Bible Institute, two meetings in other sections of the city accommodated the overflow crowd. The program was broadcast, thanks to sponsorship of the Ogden shop group.

"Radio, song and oratory all combined to send out what movement followers classed as the scientific solution to present economic ills.

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"William Aberhart climaxed the variety program with a general address, predicting that 80 per cent of the voters of Alberta are now behind Social Credit.

"He turned a verbal broadside at the Calgary Herald, briefly touched on the public debt, and the huge interest burden it is causing, charged the UFA with failing to look after the suffering people of the province and terminated with a plea to Social Credit groups not to reorganize or permit troubles to creep into the ranks.

"The prelude to Mr. Aberhart's address comprised musical numbers, outlines of Social Credit principles, a plea for unified action, a reading and several band numbers provided by the orchestra of the Calgary Musicians' Union."

By April, 1935, William Aberhart was front-page news. A year earlier, when Douglas packed the armories but failed to impress a big but disappointed audience, "Wm. Aberhart" merely was listed among the dignitaries on the platform.

The Herald and William Aberhart never were on the same wavelength. On the Thursday of the Calgary convention, an editorial criticized the whole approach:

"The mixing of religion and politics is never agreeable to the thoughtful observer, and it cannot be doubted that the leader of this movement has used and is using a tabernacle built in the name of religion to promote what is rapidly becoming a political party."

That touched a vital nerve, and Aberhart fired back with a fierce salvo on Friday:

"The day is past when religion should be put on the shelf during the week and taken down on Sundays . . . Religion that amounts to anything should be practised in every sphere of life."

The Herald carried pages of letters, pro and con, about Aberhart and Social Credit. They were headed "People Going Crazy," "Aberhart No Fool" and "Divine Guidance."

Such was the temper of the times. There was no fighting Aberhart on either religious or logical grounds. The UFA still had a few eloquent speakers in its ranks, but they fought back mainly with logic — the economics of the situation — and they got nowhere.

The UFA government in Edmonton introduced bills aimed at controlling soil drifting and helping debt-ridden farmers. Such measures were no more than a dying gasp. Whatever their merit they weren't Social Credit and that was what the people wanted.

Growing out of "study groups" scattered throughout the province, Social Credit demonstrated its political clout in the Aug. 22, 1935 election. The result was 56 Social Crediters elected, 5 Liberals, 2 Conservatives.

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William Aberhart, who wasn't a candidate, won election in a safe seat later. He never got anywhere with his economic ideas, and in the 1940 election he suffered a setback. Social Credit won the 1940 election with 36 seats, but a new Independent movement garnered 19 seats.

After 1935 the Alberhart saga moved away from Calgary to Edmonton, the provincial capital, and to a series of bitter confrontations between the Social Credit government in Edmonton and the Liberal government in Ottawa.

William Aberhart died in Vancouver in 1943. He had entered a Vancouver hospital for treatment of a serious liver ailment. He was 65 years old when he died, and he was buried in Vancouver. A service was held in Calgary at the Bible Institute.

Ernest Manning took over as premier in 1943, resigning without ever losing an election in 1968.



SOCIAL CREDIT PROSPERITY CERTIFICATE

... an attempt to share the wealth among the poor