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Christianity and Political Conservatism in Alberta's History By: Dr. Michael Wagner, January 18th, 2017.

Alberta has long had a reputation for political conservatism. At the provincial level, the Social Credit Party and then Progressive Conservative Party held power from 1935-2015. Federally, right-leaning parties (Social Credit, Progressive Conservative, Reform, Canadian Alliance, and Conservative) have held the majority of seats over that same period. Notwithstanding the Great Mistake of 2015 (where the NDP won a majority government with only 40.6% of the popular vote), Alberta's historical voting record has overwhelmingly favoured parties on the Right.



In 2016, Brock University political scientist Clark Banack published a book that explains this unique political phenomenon as being the result of the influence of evangelical Christianity on a number of Alberta's political

leaders. The book was issued by McGill-Queen's University Press and it is entitled, *God's Province: Evangelical Christianity, Political Thought, and Conservatism in Alberta*.

Henry Wise Wood of the United Farmers of Alberta

The United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) was founded as a lobby group for farmers in 1909. In 1919 it decided to run candidates for election, and it won the provincial elections of 1921, 1926 and 1930. After losing the 1935 election it withdrew from electoral politics, and today it exists as an agricultural supply cooperative.

From 1916 until 1931 the president of the UFA was Henry Wise Wood. Banack writes that Wood “was by far the movement’s most respected and influential figure” (p. 66). This is important because he had a very different perspective than most agrarian leaders in Alberta.

Most political leaders within the farming community in western Canada were influenced by socialism to one degree or another. Indeed, there was a close relationship between the theologically liberal “social gospel” movement of the early twentieth century and farming activists. Both groups saw the government as the key instrument to improve society. Given enough power, the government would be able to create some sort of utopia. This is the basic socialist perspective.

Wood was not theologically conservative as we think of that today, but he was evangelical enough to see the leftist social gospel perspective as false. Wood believed that an ideal society could only be realized by the voluntary co-operation of godly citizens. Socialism is based on government coercion, not voluntary association, so it could not lead to the best form of society.

In Wood’s perspective, only a Christianized society could produce the kinds of citizens necessary to build an ideal community. Banack

describes Wood's view this way: "The kingdom of God was not to be built via government regulation but rather, first, by large-scale voluntary individual regeneration, or rebirth, and second, by the co-operation of those regenerated individuals within voluntary organizations" (p. 85).

The Effect of Henry Wise Wood's Anti-Socialism

In Saskatchewan, the agrarian movement was dominated by left-wing thinking that favoured government action and socialism. In Alberta there were also many leaders in the farmers' movement that embraced the same perspective. But Wood actively fought against socialist solutions and, because of his popularity among Alberta farmers, he prevailed.

Indeed, Wood's efforts to derail support for socialism among Alberta's farmers had a long-term impact on Alberta's politics. Banack writes, "Wood rejected both the secular intellectual solutions of Marx and the Christian-based social gospel calls for socialism and placed the onus squarely on the individual to bring about the perfect democratic and economic system. In doing so, Wood helped to steer early Alberta society in a decidedly anti-socialistic and more individualistic direction by harnessing the Prairie-wide utopian and co-operative hopes of Alberta agrarians to a stern emphasis on individual responsibility" (pp. 95-96).

Thus the origin of Alberta's generally anti-socialistic perspective goes back at least 100 years to the leadership of Henry Wise Wood.

When Wood retired as UFA leader in 1931, left-wing farm leaders seized control of the organization. Within a couple of years they had aligned it with the new Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), an extreme socialist party that would later evolve into the New Democratic Party (NDP). Most Alberta farmers were shocked by the radical socialist perspective of the CCF and abandoned the UFA's political efforts.

Banack believes that Wood's anti-socialist views continue to influence the province. He notes that "the Alberta populace has, to this day, remained faithful to the populist variant of conservatism inherent in Wood's political thought, including the radical emphasis on the virtue and capacity of the common people and the more conservative demand that individual and societal well-being is dependent upon the exercise of individual responsibility as opposed to state intervention and socialistic arrangements" (p. 101).

William Aberhart and the Alberta Social Credit Party

Around the time that the UFA's political efforts were falling apart, William "Bible Bill" Aberhart of Calgary was starting the Alberta Social Credit Party. Aberhart was a public school principal who was best known as a popular Christian radio broadcaster with a huge listening audience in the province. When the Great Depression hit Alberta causing widespread hardship and despair, Aberhart began to use his radio program to promote Social Credit economics as the solution.

Basically, the idea of Social Credit economics is to replace credit issued by private banks with credit issued by the government. In this way, it was believed, the financial system could be operated for the benefit of all citizens rather than for the wealthy, especially rich bankers.

However, having government in control of credit appeared to some people as socialistic. But according to Banack, Aberhart denied that, and asserted "that Social Credit, despite advocating state control of credit, was against traditional socialist ideas such as communal property or state ownership or confiscation of any kind" (p. 127).

When the Alberta Social Credit Party won the 1935 provincial election (ousting the UFA which had abandoned Wood's anti-socialism), Aberhart became premier. He remained premier until he died in 1943.

Throughout his term as premier he continued preaching the gospel on his radio broadcast.

Ernest Manning

After Aberhart's death his chief lieutenant, Ernest Manning, became Alberta's premier and head of Aberhart's radio ministry. It's important to note that Manning, like Aberhart before him, continued the vital work of radio evangelism even as premier. This is because both Aberhart and Manning believed "that economic oppression was rooted in the depravity of man and that society's only hope to fully rectify the situation was wide-scale religious conversion, or rebirth, at an individual level" (p. 150). In other words, political problems could only be solved as citizens turned to Christ for salvation. In this respect there was a relationship between the radio evangelism and political activities of these two premiers.

Like Henry Wise Wood before him, Ernest Manning was strongly opposed to socialism. Banack writes that "Manning's approach to governance while premier was characterized by a stern and unflinching defence of a free-market economy" (p. 137).

Interestingly, it wasn't just the anti-socialist theme of Social Credit that influenced Alberta. According to Banack, the "intense devotion to biblical literalism that characterized the Christian fundamentalism of Aberhart and Manning encouraged a strong conservatism based upon the moral laws of God" (p. 149).

In short, "working from a distinctly religious position that guided their thinking about politics, Aberhart and especially Manning did much to guide Alberta on an anti-collectivist trajectory that is largely unique among Canadian provinces" (p. 154).

Ted Byfield and *Alberta Report*

Although not a political leader as such, one of the most influential Alberta opinion leaders during the latter part of the twentieth century was Ted Byfield. He was the founder of *Alberta Report* magazine which was published from 1973 to 2003 (sometimes under slightly different names). That magazine had a distinct conservative and generally Christian perspective. Because of its popularity and large circulation, it had a substantial impact on Alberta society and politics.

It's hard to overstate the significant role *Alberta Report* filled during its existence. Referring to the days before the World Wide Web, Ted Morton, the University of Calgary political scientist and former provincial finance minister, is quoted by Banack as saying, "Alberta Report was our Internet, it was our website, Facebook and Twitter . . . in those early years [of conservative activism], almost all roads passed through Alberta Report" (p. 161).

Alberta Report vigorously defended conservative views on a whole range of contemporary issues. According to Banack, the "essence of Byfield's social thought—the message that most easily resonated with readers—was the notion that the vast majority of the ills of contemporary society, including crime, domestic abuse, family breakup, and even rampant government spending leading to chronic deficits, could be traced back to the declining influence of traditional Christian values, especially as they pertained to the norms governing sexual behaviour" (p. 161).

The magazine had an important role to fill in the culture war. "Responding to 'the systematic attempt to abolish religious influence on the law and society,' Byfield utilized *Alberta Report* as a vital tool within the larger battle to gradually re-establish traditional Christian morality in the minds of citizens" (p. 162).

Importantly, Ted Byfield, like Aberhart and Manning in previous years, recognized that social change could only be realized if citizens would turn to Christ: “‘To change society, you must preach the gospel,’ noted Byfield” (p. 163).

Preston Manning and the Reform Party of Canada

Ted Byfield played a key role in the creation of the Reform Party of Canada in 1987. However, Preston Manning (the son of former Premier Ernest Manning) was the first and only leader of the party. Like his father, Preston was an evangelical Christian and his religious views affected his political views.

In a 1987 speech describing the perspective of the new party, Preston noted that “while we uphold freedom of conscience for all citizens, we also acknowledge Canada’s Judeo-Christian heritage and its value as a source of moral and ethical guidance” (p. 188).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, governments at both the provincial and federal levels were accumulating huge deficits because spending was out of control. Preston Manning correctly argued that such spending was unsustainable and would lead the country into financial disaster. Like the previously discussed leaders, Manning knew that bigger government was not the answer to society’s problems.

Banack summarizes Manning’s political perspective this way: “As government services grow, the corresponding agency and responsibility of individuals, families, and even community-level organizations are eroded. To continue down such a path would not only further impede basic political and economic freedoms, it would also jeopardize the individual’s ultimate freedom, that of religious worship and expression” (p. 191).

The Influence of the Reform Party of Canada

The Reform Party of Canada elected 52 MPs in the 1993 federal election, and later became the official opposition after electing 60 MPs in the federal election of 1997. Although it never formed the government, the Reform Party's arguments for reduced government spending were so convincing that even the Liberal government of the time brought federal finances under control. It's unlikely that would have happened without the Reform Party's strong showing in the 1993 and 1997 elections.

According to Banack, because Preston Manning and the Reform Party were so popular in Alberta, demands for spending reductions by the provincial government emerged as well: "Reform played a significant role in the articulation and re-popularization of a strong pro-market, anti-state sentiment that had long been part of Alberta's dominant political rhetoric but had gone somewhat dormant during the 1970s oil boom and the subsequent explosion of state expenditures under the premiership of Lougheed" (p. 201).

The Continuity of the Free Enterprise Perspective

As Banack points out, Preston Manning's political and religious views were very similar to his father's views. "Manning's call for a fiscally conservative and democratically enhanced state was derived squarely from a religious perspective that he largely shared with his father and William Aberhart" (p. 209).

Indeed, with regard to Alberta's overall political history, Banack writes, "it is quite significant to note that a certain religious interpretation has undergirded this populist, pro-market sentiment from Wood, through the thought of Aberhart and Ernest Manning, and into the thinking of Preston Manning in contemporary Alberta" (p. 209).

What about the NDP Election Victory of 2015?

With 100 years or so of a Christian-based preference for free enterprise political parties, did Alberta suddenly adopt a socialist perspective when it elected an NDP government in May 2015?

Banack does not believe so. For one thing, the NDP became a majority government with only 40.6 per cent of the popular vote. That means 59.4 per cent voted against the NDP. For another thing, a few months later, in October 2015, almost 60 per cent of Albertans voted for the Conservative Party of Canada in a federal election. Therefore, while the election of the NDP in 2015 is very significant, it does not appear to represent a wholesale change in Alberta's political culture.

Conclusion

Alberta has rightly been seen as having a generally more conservative political culture than the other provinces. Clark Banack's book does an excellent job of explaining why this has been the case historically. The most significant factor, in his view, is the strong influence of conservative Christian political and opinion leaders.

All of these leaders appear to have shared the view that the most important ingredient for an improved society is genuine Christianity. Without God in our lives, we cannot live in a right relationship with Him or with others. The spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will always be the key element for the well-being of society, not to mention the well-being of individuals too. Without the one true God (the triune God of the Bible), there can be no real hope for Alberta's future.

