

*Norman Ward*

## WILLIAM ABERHART IN THE YEAR OF THE TIGER

Television has often been blamed for the relatively short honeymoons with the electorate enjoyed by many contemporary politicians, but the leader who set the most remarkable record in our history for finding early and varied trouble belonged to the days of radio. William Aberhart, widely known in Alberta as a radio preacher, moved from political limbo to the provincial premiership in an impressively short period in the early thirties, but was barely settled in his office before the angels began to flee. He took over a province hit hard by depression and drought. He had not the slightest idea how to implement the doctrines of Social Credit, nor could he find reliable experts who could tell him. His cabinet was soon beset with resignations, and by 1937 his followers were divided into loyalists and insurgents. The insurgents by the spring of 1937 were circulating a petition to the Lieutenant Governor urging Aberhart's replacement by another Social Credit member, and almost simultaneously a petition for his recall as a member of the assembly was being distributed under Liberal auspices. The nadir was perhaps reached a little earlier than that: in March of 1937 the Social Credit caucus reportedly opposed his acceptance of an official invitation to the coronation of George VI unless he paid his own expenses.<sup>1</sup>

The richness of Aberhart's life has already received attention in familiar sources long in print, such as John A. Irving's *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta*, C.B. Macpherson's *Democracy in Alberta*, and James Mallory's *Social Credit and the Federal Power in Canada*. Many interesting details, available in documents more recently made available, deserve more exposition than they have yet received. The Social Credit party's desire to have one favourable daily newspaper and radio station

in Alberta, for example, was a normal ambition that any party might have had; but Aberhart, unlike most leaders, contrived to achieve the goal in a manner that irritated and damaged many enthusiastic followers.

The original deal which made the Calgary *Albertan* and CJCJ available to the party was straightforward enough: the leading entrepreneur involved, George Bell (a man of whom Rt. Hon. James G. Gardiner was to speak ill even when being interviewed on his death-bed) simply helped arrange a stock sale which permitted interested Social Crediters to buy shares on which the party had an option due to expire May 15, 1937. The *Albertan* avowed its commitment to Social Credit on its mast-head, and for a time Bell and his associates wrote warm and almost sycophantic letters to Aberhart. Aberhart, for his part, scrupulously refrained from interfering in either management or the editorial policies of the paper, used CJCJ for his religious and political broadcasts, and made one major attempt to succour the *Albertan* as an economic venture: disappointed with its circulation among the faithful, he urged a cabinet colleague to try to get 50,000 new subscribers by persuading members of the party's many cells not only to purchase it but to enlist three recruits each. Aberhart employed his broadcasts to the same end.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately for all concerned, the electorate — possibly because of simple destitution — did not come through. One constituency organization in Acadia did take the whole operation sufficiently seriously to resolve that the *Albertan* should be in the hands of the Social Credit League and not possibly unreliable MLAs, but that was the only organized action. (It provoked a singular response from Aberhart: "In my opinion, action putting control of a newspaper in the hands of an elected Social Credit body would be tantamount to handling it over to the opposition. Political intrigue would inevitably step in. Policies of this kind have ended in disaster on every previous occasion upon which they have been tried.") By 1937 the newspaper, still available to Social Crediters if they would only buy shares, was in financial difficulties although it had paid a dividend in 1936; the Liberals were beginning to wonder if perhaps they might take it over. James Gardiner, when consulted, said he knew of no money outside of Alberta available for the purpose.<sup>3</sup> Proposals to expand the paper with a special Edmonton supplement, or a German edition, were both rejected, mainly because

of the cost but partly, in the second case, because Aberhart was cool to encouraging citizens to use anything other than "the language of the land". The *Albertan*, finding itself increasingly free of any possibility of Social Credit ownership (only one-sixth of the necessary money had been raised when the party's option expired) was by 1937 publishing editorials critical of "drastic Douglas methods", to which Aberhart replied that the paper would not consider the proposals drastic if it but understood them.

By 1938, the year of the tiger in the Chinese zodiac, Aberhart was beginning to hear from needy supporters who had, at his suggestion, invested their savings in shares in the *Albertan*. "If it had not been for you," he was told by one disgruntled follower who had expected Social Credit to work, "I would not have put my life savings in this paper." "I bought these through you preaching over the air," another averred, while yet another, on relief, sought legal advice in an attempt to retrieve her savings. The stock was in fact worthless, for which Aberhart could only apologize, and he did. The party's experiment in trying to own a friendly newspaper joined the growing list of Social Credit's initial non-accomplishments, and the *Albertan* went its own way. Its general manager, commenting on the government's basic policies, wrote to a correspondent in 1938: "There does not seem to be much use in the Government fooling itself any longer, or trying to fool the people who support it."<sup>4</sup>

The *Albertan* was not Aberhart's sole problem in 1938: he also came within measurable distance of being dismissed by the Lieutenant Governor. He approached that potential feat, not easy of accomplishment at the best of times, through another route which probably only Aberhart could have found. His near-dismissal was not a partisan matter, in which an unprincipled representative of the monarch sought to rid himself of a premier whose views he considered dangerous. Nor was it in essence the product of a constitutional impasse which required the opening of a rarely used safety valve. Aberhart, who was in fact a champion of the monarchy in general and the Lieutenant Governorship of Alberta in particular, got into trouble because the legislative assembly, after years of backing and filling, finally moved for the closure of Government House by reducing to zero the vote for its maintenance.

The abolition of the Lieutenant Governor, and his ejection from his residence, are of course separate issues, and neither was unknown to Alberta politics. Just the year before Aberhart came to power one Alberta newspaper had occasion to report one MLA on the Lieutenant Governor: "Captain Dakin, himself a veteran skipper, recalled that in the old days sailing ships had figureheads weighing five to seven tons, on their bows. These had been done away with in modern times. We are coming to that and should discontinue figure-heads."<sup>5</sup> Government House, by legislative action, had been put on the market unsuccessfully as early as 1925, and in 1934 a leading Conservative, eyeing the impact of drought and depression, urged that Alberta should not go it alone but that all four western provinces should do away with gubernatorial mansions. Aberhart, that is, did not create but inherited some uneasy traditions concerning the Lieutenant Governor and his house.

Nonetheless, he seems to have taken full advantage of the opportunities afforded him. Paradoxically, as noted above, it was no opposition group but a faction of his own caucus which first sought to bring the Lieutenant Governor's powers to bear on him. The insurgents who were unhappy over his reluctance or inability to implement Social Credit theories circulated in the spring of 1937 a petition asserting that Aberhart no longer had the confidence of enough MLAs to carry on, that another leader could be found in the Social Credit caucus, committing the signers to support the new leader, and asking the Lieutenant Governor to give all this his "official consideration".<sup>6</sup> Aberhart survived the crisis, but the notion that so unusual a premier could perhaps be removed by unusual methods seems to have taken root. In September of 1937 James MacKinnon, then the fledgling Liberal MP for Edmonton West, and the party's only member from Alberta in the House of Commons, conceived the notion that if Aberhart re-introduced into the provincial legislature bills already disallowed by the Dominion government, and if the Lieutenant Governor refused assent to them, and if Aberhart asked for a dissolution, and if his advice was rejected, the Lieutenant Governor might dismiss Aberhart and summon E.L. Gray, the provincial Liberal leader, to the premiership. James Gardiner, whose reaction to all this, as the Liberal's western mentor, was sought by MacKinnon, had none which has survived.<sup>7</sup>

In April of 1938, when the neighbouring province of Saskatchewan,

Gardiner's home territory, was gearing up for a general election in which Aberhart was planning to mount a major offensive on behalf of Social Credit, well-informed Liberals in Alberta believed that his campaign was to be financed by a special grant voted by the assembly for other purposes. Could this improper use of funds, they asked Gardiner, form grounds for dismissal of the premier? Again Gardiner left no written reply, and the reason for his silence in both these non-dismissals was almost certainly, as his opinion in the third and most important incident revealed, that he thought the proposals emanating from Alberta were nonsense.

The record of the legislative assembly of Alberta in regard to Government House was, as suggested above, a spotty one, and somewhat confusing: in one session the members voted both to close the Lieutenant Governor's residence and to grant the supplies to maintain it. In 1938 they took unequivocal action and eliminated all grants for its upkeep. Government House, as the press widely reported, would have to be closed. Unfortunately, nobody thought to tell the Lieutenant Governor, who presumably had no more reason than anybody else to believe what he read in the papers, and he remained in occupation. When, finally, he was formally given three days' notice to vacate, he took the view that it was physically impossible to move out over the weekend allowed him and he received a short extension. The government meanwhile, without funds to maintain Government House into a new fiscal year, variously removed from the Lieutenant Governor his chauffeur, house and garden staff, and secretary, and had his telephone temporarily disconnected.

The Lieutenant Governor, John C. Bowen, although destined to serve thirteen years, was in 1938 fairly new to his job, to which he had been appointed the previous year on the recommendation of Gardiner and MacKinnon. He had nonetheless a lofty view of the importance of his office, and insisted that Government House could be snatched out from under him only by a properly drafted order-in-council, which he himself would have to sign. The government was at first reluctant but finally capitulated, and on May 7, 1938, the order-in-council was published. It authorized the Minister of Public Works "to take such steps as may be necessary for the purpose of obtaining immediate vacant possession of the said house and premises, together with such furnishings, goods and chattels therein or thereon as are the property of

the province." Bowen signed and moved out, first to the MacDonald Hotel and then for a few months to the home of Senator W.A. Griesbach, who was off matching opinions with the Australians.

Publicly, Bowne did not challenge the government's right to dispossess him, claiming only that it must be done in the right way. Privately, he was so upset that he had to take to his bed, where he brooded over possible courses of action. Deprived of even a secretary, he considered the humiliation of his office; "he feels", a faithful correspondent (and Liberal organizer) reported on May 14 to James Gardiner, "that the King's representative has been insulted to a point that might lead to grave consequences if allowed to go unchallenged."<sup>8</sup> The local Orangemen, among others, agreed.

Two days later Gardiner was sent a second letter. It was from the Liberal leader, E.L. Gray, who had just been asked "if I would be prepared to form an emergent government." Gray, a neophyte in politics, was to see Bowen again shortly, and desperately needed the advice of both Gardiner and W.L. Mackenzie King. "When I was first approached," he told Gardiner, "I was opposed to the idea. The situation is, however, so serious that I am inclined to believe it is my duty to step in. I feel that if something drastic is not done the Social Credit forces may have a solid western block in the very near future."<sup>9</sup>

Gardiner, in the van of Saskatchewan campaign to prevent that from happening, had no doubts. He told Gray on the telephone, and confirmed by letter, that any such move as that proposed by Bowen would be "very ill-advised".<sup>10</sup> Though several leading Alberta Liberals thought that the closing of Government House constituted Aberhart's revenge for the Lieutenant Governor's part in the reservations of legislation, and a few dreamers believed a coup might mean the end of Social Credit, (while the Lieutenant Governor himself felt he must either dismiss Aberhart or resign) nothing of immediate import happened, possibly because the Alberta Liberal party was broke, its organizer unpaid. Aberhart and Bowen stayed in their respective offices, and Gray went on to lead his party to virtual oblivion.

As for Government House, it stayed closed for years. Though sundry groups proposed to make of it a sanitorium, a nurses' home, a geriatric centre, an office building, and a provincial museum, and parts of its grounds were let to a market gardiner named Eddie Mah, it was not used again until wartime exigencies led to its re-opening first as a

dormitory for air personnel, and then as a home for veterans; by that time its furnishings had been auctioned off in a spectacular sale. In due course it was used again as the headquarters of part of the planning staff for the Museum and Archives of the Province of Alberta, near whose building it still stands. In the meantime another home has been purchased for the Lieutenant Governor.

#### Footnotes

1. The insurgents' petition is in Rt. Hon. J.G. Gardiner's papers (hereafter *Gardiner Papers*), Archives of Saskatchewan, No. 50446; the recall petition is described in No. 50111; the coronation story in No. 48668.
2. See papers of Hon. William Aberhart (hereafter *Aberhart Papers*), Archives of Alberta, File No. 1266; individual items in the file are not numbered.
3. *Gardiner Papers*, No. 51224-6.
4. *Aberhart Papers*, File No. 1266.
5. *Government House, 1925-31*, File No. 0625, Archives of Alberta; items are not numbered.
6. *Gardiner Papers*, No. 50446.
7. See *Ibid.*, No. 51004.
8. *Ibid.*, No. 48832.
9. *Ibid.*, No. 50413.
10. *Ibid.*, No. 48821.