

# Recent Social Legislation in Saskatchewan

By W. K. BRYDEN

IT was only in July of 1944 that the new Saskatchewan Government took office and it is early as yet to attempt to assess its policies with any air of finality. Nevertheless, a special session of the Legislature was held in October and November of 1944, and during that session seventy public Bills were passed. Some of these measures dealt only with particular problems of immediate urgency, but others were of a mere general nature and were designed to establish a framework for future action. It is therefore possible to distinguish at least some of the outlines of the Government's social program.

It might be well at the outset to mention the difficulty of making any very satisfactory distinction between the Government's social welfare policies and its general legislative program. Though it may be convenient for analytical purposes to reserve the classification "social welfare measures" for certain types of palliative legislation, it obviously should not be forgotten that welfare ultimately depends on wealth, that any measure designed to increase total wealth is an integral part of a social welfare program and that, indeed, social welfare measures in the narrow sense can only be of limited value unless wealth is maximized.

In order that economic growth may be stimulated the functions of the Department of Natural Resources have been greatly extended to permit it to operate industrial undertakings, to acquire private properties of all types—by expropriation, with compensation, if necessary—and to undertake an aggressive policy of developing the natural resources of the province. Equally important, the former Co-operation and Markets Branch of the Department of Agriculture has been expanded into a separate Department of

Co-operation and Co-operative Development, so that the Government can greatly increase the encouragement which in Saskatchewan has always been given to co-operatives and, in particular, can assist them in carrying out their present program of expanding beyond the distribution and credit fields into the industrial field. In addition, an Economic Advisory Committee has been set up, and the newly created Department of Reconstruction is developing economic and scientific research services.

Whether the Government will, through these policies, achieve its aim of developing and diversifying the economy of the province remains to be seen. There is good reason to believe, no doubt, that results will necessarily be limited in a province like Saskatchewan which is so exclusively dependent on the sale of one staple commodity. The Government itself has quite openly admitted that complete social and economic security cannot be realized by provincial action alone, and its best efforts are regarded as only part of a program which essentially must be dominion-wide in operation. The fact remains, however, that the Government has committed itself to a program of economic development through public and co-operative enterprise, and this program is the basis for the "social legislation" described below.

## Farm Security

In a province like Saskatchewan, where distress during the 'thirties was more acute than anywhere else in Canada, the most urgent problem is undoubtedly that of providing basic economic security, especially for the farmer. The new Farm Security Act goes a long way in that direction, its object being to distribute the risk of farming operations between the farmer and the mortgage holder rather than leaving it all on the farmer as in the past. It incorporates the

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main provisions of the former Limitation on Civil Rights Act, under which the proportion of a farmer's crop available for debt payments was regulated, but it revolutionizes that Act by the provisions which it adds. First, the farmer who resides on his homestead or is dependent on it for his maintenance, cannot be evicted under a mortgage agreement. The homestead is the home and the 160 acres of land on which it is situated. Second, if a man operating land under a mortgage or agreement of sale suffers a crop failure, that is, if he receives a return of less than \$6.00 an acre on his grain crop, principal payments will be suspended for one year, and the principal will be reduced by four per cent or by the amount of the year's interest if that is greater. Interest, however, continues to be payable as if principal had not been reduced. Supplementing the Farm Security Act, a substantial amendment was made in the Exemptions Act so that the farm execution debtor is now able to retain enough of his crop to meet legitimate harvesting costs, necessary living allowances for himself and his family and the cost of future operations, including gasoline and oil and enough seed grain to sow all the land he has under cultivation. In other words, the Government has tried to ensure that no matter how much the farmer is harassed by debt, bad yields and low prices, he will still be in a position to provide a minimum standard of living for himself and his family.

### Labour Legislation

The basic standard of living of the non-farm worker has been protected to some extent by the new minimum wage orders. The coverage of these orders has been greatly extended and a new minimum rate of 35 cents per hour—the highest rate which is at present permitted under the Dominion's War-time Control Order—has been established. A start has been made in increasing opportunities for rest and recreation by the Annual Holidays Act, under which every employed person, except farm labourers, must receive at

least two weeks' holidays with pay after each year of his employment. A separate Department of Labour has been set up to ensure that the labour legislation of the province will be adequately administered and steadily improved.

Undoubtedly the most important labour measure, however, is the new Trade Union Act. The Government has accepted its responsibility for giving minimum protection to the wage-earner, but at the same time it is convinced that no protection can equal that which workers can give themselves through organization. The Trade Union Act, therefore, goes much further than any previous Canadian legislation to guarantee the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively. Unfair labour practices are defined in a thoroughly comprehensive fashion, company unions are completely outlawed and the responsibility for determining whether or not an unfair practice has been committed is vested in an administrative board rather than in the courts. Maintenance of membership and the check-off are compulsory if a union representing a majority requests them, and, in the case of the check-off, if the individual employee consents in writing.

### Health Services

In addition to providing basic security, the Government has also undertaken to provide necessary social services up to the limit of its financial resources. The most important development so far has been in the field of health, where the need is particularly urgent.

Shortly after taking office the Government appointed a Health Services Survey Commission with Dr. Henry E. Sigerist of Johns Hopkins University as Commissioner, and in the Health Services Act legislative authority has been granted for carrying out Sigerist's recommendations for immediate action. When this Act is fully implemented, all people in the province, regardless of income, will receive as a matter of right those services, which, in Sigerist's words, "they need and to which they are entitled at all

times." The services provided will go far beyond the normal public health measures which are traditionally the function of a provincial Health Department. The Government does not underestimate the value of such measures and is taking steps to improve their administration. At the same time, following Sigerist's recommendations, it intends to work towards a full "system of socialized medical services on a provincial scale."

The plan envisaged by the Health Services Act is to be put into effect gradually, and a Health Services Planning Commission has been set up to work out in detail the successive steps through which it will be implemented. To meet the urgent need for improved services in rural areas the Commission is at present working on plans for dividing the province into health regions. Each region will be presided over by a full-time health officer who will be responsible for carrying out normal public health measures and for co-ordinating all other medical services in his region. The basis of the scheme will be, with necessary adaptations, the municipal doctor system which, under the pressure of circumstances, has reached a high degree of development in Saskatchewan and is, according to Sigerist, "the backbone of all medical services" in the province. In each health region, there will be an appropriate number of rural health centres staffed by qualified practitioners and these practitioners will provide the members of the community with regular medical services. In the various regions hospital facilities will be improved and expanded and laboratories and travelling clinics will be established. Up to a point, the residents of the region will themselves be responsible for financing the services with which they are provided, in that they can be required to pay an annual fee of not more than \$10 per person or \$50 per family, but the Health Department will give financial assistance wherever necessary. In urban areas, the problem of providing adequate health services is less acute, but a system of health insurance for the eight cities is proposed. The serious shortage of

doctors, especially in rural areas, is to be relieved by the extension of the medical course at the University of Saskatchewan, and selected medical graduates and registered nurses are to receive Government help in pursuing post-graduate courses in such fields as public health, psychiatry, cancer control and advanced obstetrics.

This plan, it is believed, will result in every person in the province receiving at least the most important health services at nominal cost. The Government itself, however, intends to assume full financial responsibility for certain services. Complete medical treatment is now to be provided free of charge to all old age and blind pensioners and their dependents, and to mothers and children benefitting from Mothers' Allowances. The possibility is being investigated of providing free hospitalization for maternity cases, and the ultimate aim is to establish a complete system of free hospitalization.

### Recreation

The Health Department has also embarked on a long-range recreational program, recreation being conceived in the broad sense as including not only athletics but also social activities, cultural pursuits and handicrafts. The program is to be carried out largely by local initiative with encouragement and co-ordination coming from Regina. Interested communities are to be stimulated to organize recreational councils consisting of business and professional leaders in the locality, and wherever possible district directors and organizers are to be appointed. As a beginning, a recreational program is now being introduced in the elementary and secondary schools, where the organization problems are least difficult, and it is hoped that this will lead the local councils to develop programs for the whole of their respective communities by organizing plant and neighborhood recreational associations. Municipalities are being encouraged to plan community centres for recreation and other activities, possibly as war

memorials. It should be mentioned that there are already about 150 co-operative community halls in Saskatchewan, and these and other similar projects which may be developed will be tied in with the recreational program.

### Education

Education is another service which in Saskatchewan has suffered severely from the ravages of depression. Since any program for rehabilitating the educational system is considered to depend on an improvement in the efficiency and economy of school administration, an Act has been passed providing for the enlargement of school units. Twelve larger units came into operation on the first of the year and it is expected that most of the province will be organized in larger units by the first of next year.

Adult education is considered to be quite as important for the welfare of the community as the education of youths and children. A new Director of Adult Education has been appointed and he has recently inaugurated a "Study-Action Program," which, in his own words, "will not concern itself with academic credits or with subjects," but "will be centred on the actual issues and problems of social living here and now." Field men are to be appointed at key points in the province and it will be their duty to encourage joint study and action on any matters on which interest is developing in their communities. Accommodation will be found for district public information libraries, film libraries and libraries of musical recordings, and films, books, pamphlets and magazine articles will be made available to study groups on subjects in which they are

interested. Extensive use will be made of the radio to re-inforce local effort and the activities of local groups will be supplemented by periodic community conferences. The Adult Education Division is working in close conjunction with the leaders of the new Recreation Movement and with existing agencies of adult education.

### Conclusion

The above, then, are the major social policies on which the Saskatchewan Government has at present embarked. It is conceivable that such policies—particularly the policies in the economic field—if brought to fruition, might result in a high degree of bureaucratic centralization which would pose vital problems of democratic control. It is therefore important to point out that beneath all the policies which have so far been adopted, it is possible to distinguish a strong determination to strengthen fundamental democratic institutions. Agencies of local Government are assisted to become more effective. A measure adopted at the last session will help municipalities to extricate themselves from the burden of debt which overwhelmed them in the 'thirties, and plans are being formulated by the Minister of Municipal Affairs to increase the areas of municipal administration in much the same way as the school units have been enlarged. In such fields as health, recreation and adult education, the Government's aim is primarily to give leadership and direction to local effort, and, in fact, the very emphasis which has been placed on adult education is indicative of a desire to develop an informed public opinion which can be brought to bear on the many problems facing the province.