

# Elections in British Columbia

*Robert England*

**T**HE provincial election in British Columbia on June 12, 1952 marked the end of an epoch. For eighty years Liberals and Conservatives have dominated the political scene, either in power or in opposition. Suddenly their representation in the Legislation has been cut to a handful, and Social Credit and CCF take their place to battle for office. Most of the Social Credit members will be new to the Assembly, and the House when it meets will present a novel situation, new men and new forces in the political turmoil incident to minority government.

The campaign was quiet, the large poll unexpected, the counting of preferences under the new alternative vote system prolonged and laborious, the cost a half-a-million dollars, and the results startling, confusing and unsatisfactory. For a month Premier Byron Johnson and his Liberal ministers carried on "caretaker" government until it was determined whether the CCF or Social Credit had the largest number of seats, and for days the uncertainty ruled, with the number of seats held by each party becoming equal and a "see-saw" of one or two seats in Vancouver finally deciding the issue.

Premier Byron Johnson has campaigned on a platform asking for return on the basis of the achievements of his administra-

tion and took much credit for the prosperity of the post-war years. As if to write *Finis* to these claims, the loggers and other strikes and shut-downs paralyzed the economy after the elections. Thus do we mark the end of the Coalition of Liberals and Conservatives that had been in office since 1951 and survived the elections of 1945 and 1949.

## II

**I**N 1947 Hon. Byron Johnson took over as Premier from Hon. John Hart, and in the election of 1949 the Coalition had 37 supporters in an assembly of 48 seats. The main opposition came from 8 CCF members, and a few independents. The Liberals in 1941 had 20 seats and at the dissolution in 1952 they had 23 seats and were able to secure support from three, elected as "Coalitionists". In the post-war years the sharpening of political conflict in the federal field and the growth of the internal stresses that afflict all Coalitions in time made it clear that divorce was inevitable. The passing of the Provincial Elections Act providing for the alternative vote system gave each party to the Coalition some assurance that the CCF could not capture the government by a minority vote at the

polls with Liberals and Conservatives cancelling each other out. This hastened the end of co-operation, the personal issues between the leaders developing out of the party rivalry and the anxiety to take credit for achievements and shift blame for failure.

The Province had had, during the three years since the election of 1949, a period of unprecedented prosperity and new capital was pouring into enterprises such as the aluminum and power development at Kitimat—the beginning of a half-billion dollar venture. But the rising cost-of-living, the three per cent tax on consumer goods, the increase in Hospital Insurance premiums, coupled with the co-insurance charge of \$3.50 a day for the first ten days in hospital, increased school taxes on farms and real estate, Milk Board decisions, the priority given to main trunk highways over secondary roads in expenditure, the forest license policy claimed by small independent loggers to favour the large operators, motor licence fees, and a number of minor grievances, provided material for a heavy protest vote. Into this situation came the Social Credit organization, without a British Columbia leader and therefore temporarily led by Mr. E. G. Hansell, Federal Member of Parliament for the Alberta constituency of Macleod. This intervention upset all calculations of the older parties, and the new system of voting undoubtedly encouraged the electorate to distribute their preferences more evenly than they might have otherwise done. Before the first count was complete, the CCF leader, Mr. Harold Winch, had declared that the CCF, if it came to power, would abolish the alternative vote system, which he claimed was designed by the Coalition to keep the CCF out of office.

This system of voting is thus likely to become an issue in party warfare in British Columbia. It has the disadvantage that it is not an easy system to operate, and if absentee votes are allowed, there must be an interval of three or four weeks before the final count can be made, thus in some degree making the government in power little more than a caretaker in the interim.

### III

**I**N single member constituencies the voter's task is simple. He is given a ballot on which he marks after the name of the candidates his preferences by numerals 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. If he makes an "X" or "1" only, his vote is counted, but his ballot-paper is set aside as an "exhausted ballot". Similarly his ballot is exhausted, if the numbering of his choices stops short of all the candidates on the ballot.

All first choices are counted by the Returning Officer and the candidate with an absolute majority over all other candidates is declared elected. The rule is Total Valid Voted divided by two plus one equals absolute majority. If no candidate has such a majority, the second count is delayed until the absentee votes are distributed among the various constituencies when the first choices of these are added. If no absolute majority thus results, the counting of the second choices of the ballots cast in favour of the candidate with the lowest number of votes takes place after distribution of these second choices to the other candidates. This process of eliminating the lowest candidate and distributing the next choices of the votes cast for him is continued until a winning candidate with an absolute majority appears.

In multi-member constituencies in cities, separate ballots with different colours were given voters and preferences were shown on these as if each ballot dealt with a single-member constituency. Thus in a three-member constituency the voter had Ballots A, B and C on which were to be found a candidate from each party, and he would make choices numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. on each ballot. These separate ballots were counted separately and their subsequent handling in the counting of further preferences followed the lines of the procedure in single-member constituencies. There was complaint from the CCF that this method in the multi-member constituencies deprived the CCF voter of the opportunity to give second and third choices to CCF candidates, as he was confronted with separate ballots which, whilst they enabled him to give

his CCF candidate first choices, left him with the candidates of other parties for other choices. Moreover, in a seat where the CCF was strong and the CCF candidate at the top of the poll his surplus and his second choice votes were of no help to his running mates. These objections may be seen as handicaps applying to all parties, and the results of the election seem to suggest that the CCF popular vote was reasonably well reflected in the proportion of members returned, based on the present distribution of seats.

#### IV

IT is important to note that the alternative vote system is not strictly proportional representation. It is the transferable vote applied to the filling of one seat at a time, and it ensures that each member is elected by a clean majority. Thus the alternative or transferable vote system is concerned with keeping a candidate with minority support only from being elected, whereas the purpose of proportional representation is to secure representation for minorities. Thomas Hare, the designer of the original plan in 1859 wanted to treat the whole country as one constituency, giving each elector one vote and providing for election of a candidate who obtains the necessary quota, arrived at by dividing the number of votes by the number of seats to be filled; then transferring votes from a candidate who has obtained the quota to other candidates designated by the voter in his list of preferences. The system has been in use in municipal elections for many years in Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon and Moose Jaw and it has been noted that preferential voting coincides with a marked increase in balloting. In Alberta the number of electors using their franchise doubled when a preference system was adopted. Certainly in the recent B. C. elections the percentage of voters casting ballots has been higher than in previous elections, though the preferential voting was related only to the alternative vote system.

This method may involve the election of candidates upon second choices, indeed

most of the members elected will have won election upon the addition of the second choices from losing candidates. Though such members may be said to represent more than fifty per cent of the electorate, they still represent a minority of first choices of their constituencies. In the multi-member constituencies it is obvious that elected members will not represent minorities. The transferable vote will give a proportional result only if it is applied to the filling of three or more seats, and only if a definite arrangement is made for transfer of votes from winning candidates with more votes than the quota for election. There are many disadvantages in the use of separate ballots in multi-member constituencies under the alternative vote plan, as the selection of the names of party candidates for each ballot is bound to be arbitrary and to throw into juxtaposition on the ballots candidates who may or may not represent sharper personal or party conflict, producing some lack of balance when candidates have been selected by party conventions as teams to oppose other teams. The alternative vote system in multi-member constituencies tends to individualize the contests and in so doing may contribute to blurring of the issues.

In rural constituencies this matters less, as voters are neighbours and wish to make a choice of men as well as measures. Indeed some older party adherents feel that the preferences system weakens not only the categorial response to advocacy of principles and policy, but has encouraged many voters to indulge their personal predilection in voting Social Credit or CCF as they felt they were not risking the defeat of the government candidates as in the straight majority system of previous elections.

Advocates of electoral reform and of systems of proportional representation will no doubt be surprised by the sharp criticism of this first effort at reform in British Columbia by the CCF, which has hitherto liked to cast itself in the role of a progressive party devoted to seeking better ways of expressing the will of the people. But much of this may have been occasioned by the arbitrary set-up of the Provincial

Elections Act, as well as the method employed in multi-member constituencies. The Act provided that "the name of a candidate of the political party represented by the Premier of the Province shall be placed at the top of the ballot-paper" followed by the name of the candidate of the political party constituting the recognized opposition party in the Legislative Assembly. But the succeeding subsections notwithstanding this provision set out the names of the parties, Liberal party, Conservative and CCF, which were to head the ballot-paper in the respective constituencies, bringing the CCF into third place, and in the case of three Coalitionist members the Act required that their names be placed at the top. This sequence as set out in the Act coinciding with a new system of voting by numerals has the appearance of being unnecessarily tendentious. It would have been simpler to have enacted that the name of any sitting member seeking election must be carried at the top of the ballot-paper and all other names alphabetically, if some measure of prestige was to be accorded to experience as a legislator as a matter of public policy, but even here there is much to commend the old rule of listing all candidates alphabetically irrespective of their status or party affiliation.

A more serious objection to the new system is that relating to the delay in reaching a decision, occasioned by the provision for absentee voting. In Alberta, which has the alternative vote in rural ridings, and proportional representation in multi-member city constituencies of Edmonton and Calgary, it is possible to have the results within a day of the election. It is worth noting that, at the last Alberta provincial election, Social Credit swept the rural constituencies but in the cities the proportion of members elected corresponded in the main to the popular vote and it is from these urban areas that the opposition members of the legislature derive. Their next Alberta election on August 5 will provide interesting comparative results with those of British Columbia.

## V

**S**OCCIAL Credit workers seemed to understand and have little complaint about the system in the rural constituencies in B. C. and undoubtedly the influence of Edmonton upon the Peace River Block and the Cariboo and Central B. C. ridings has been a factor in the campaign.

The final list of first choices that were given each party follows:

CCF	230,904
Social Credit	203,968
Liberal	174,629
Conservative	127,549
Christian Democrat	7,123
Labor-Progressive Party	2,436
Independent	1,270
Labor	1,246
Labor Representation	655
Socialist Party	292

These first preferences indicate that under the old simple majority system, a minority government would have been inevitable, since the older parties had repudiated Coalition, and both the CCF and Social Credit had announced their determination not to serve in a Coalition.

When, on July 3, the second and subsequent choices were taken into account, British Columbia was astonished at the results of its new voting system. Only half-a-dozen Liberals and less Conservatives survived, the Premier and several of his Ministers being defeated. The CCF and the Social Credit returns of members elected ran a neck and neck race for days for first place. The counting disclosed that the runner-up in a majority of the seats was the Liberal candidate, who secured many of the defeated Conservative's second choices. Conservative candidates able to remain in the contest did so with the help of Liberal second choices in the main. But the unexpected feature was the way in which CCF and Social Credit second choices favoured each other. Though the CCF had denounced the Social Credit party as neo-Fascist, and the Social Credit had attacked the CCF, their supporters tended to help each other with second choice votes. Thus the real line of demarcation is between adherents

of the older parties and those who favour the newer parties—CCF and Social Credit. The stage is set for a new orientation of political forces in British Columbia. The controversy as to the method of voting has obscured temporarily the nature of the changes that may revolutionize the traditional set-up. Two instances in this election reveal the nature of the main problem that must be faced eventually. The distribution of seats has given the rural ridings the dominant role in the Assembly. The plebiscites on the sale of liquor by the glass and daylight saving have had a heavy affirmative vote, but as the Liberal government surmised, the negative vote was to be found in the rural areas. For this reason the government avoided responsibility and decided for plebiscites. The new government will be faced with these mandates. But it may be remarked the "No" vote in these cases was not only high, but from very limited rural areas. In short British Columbia has become a province of cities, towns and urban-minded people, and the growth of population is accentuating this change at such a rate that representation by population is sure to become an issue at no distant date with a demand for redistribution of seats.

The other instance may now be noted. Under the traditional geographical boundaries of the present constituencies, in the large northern riding of Atlin, Mr. Frank Calder, CCF, (an Indian whom all wanted to see re-elected) won the seat with 544 votes out of a total of 993 ballots cast, while his leader, Mr. Harold Winch, got 22,596 first choices out of a total of 43,839 ballots in Vancouver East. The disparity in these totals is reflected over the whole range of constituencies, as between rural and city ridings. The rural constituencies in the past have had great power in the Legislature, as the holding of these two plebiscites indicate. But this election has made the electorate conscious of the factors involved in representation, and the spot-light will be turned for the next few years on vital questions relating to responsible and representative government.

## VI

IT is obvious that our election machinery was not modern or efficient enough to handle two plebiscites and the registering and counting of preferences promptly. Responsible government would not have passed the liquor and daylight saving problems back to the voters at all, and the large majorities in each case indicates that the elected representatives should have dealt with the issues. As to the alternative vote there is much to commend it in rural ridings, but in multi-member constituencies there seems no good reason why proportional representation should not be adopted, but these expedients will not deal with the fundamental question of representation by population and the need for redistribution of seats. The growing urban population will force this issue to the front as British Columbia enters into its new political climate of urbanism and gospels of welfare.

In the transfer of alternative choices the Liberals received 54,754, the Social Credit 52,166, the CCF 42,296 and the Conservatives 25,310. Exhausted ballots amounted to 93,367, or in other words, nearly 38 per cent of the voters declined to take advantage of the full range of choices available to them. The low number of extra-choices given the Conservatives was due to the fact that the Conservative candidate was often low enough in the count to be eliminated. Dropped were 36 Progressive Conservative candidates, 22 Social Credit, 13 Liberal, 13 CCF and 19 others.

The final count altered but slightly the percentage totals of the vote as shown in the totals of the first choice ballots, but it did alter greatly the distribution of the members elected by parties. The final results showed 19 Social Credit members elected, 18 CCF, 6 Liberal, 4 Conservative, and 1 Labor.

The Social Credit members and defeated candidates met in caucus to elect a leader.

Only two of the members, Mr. W. A. C. Bennett and Mrs. Tilly Rolstan, had ever sat in the Legislature, and both Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Rolstan had been Conser-

vatives. Mr. W. A. C. Bennett was elected leader and will be called upon by the Lieutenant-Governor to form a government. Mr. Bennett of Kelowna is the prosperous owner of a five-store hardware chain, was born in 1900 in Albert County, New Brunswick, of United Empire Loyalist stock, and attended New Brunswick College. He has been a life-long Conservative until five months ago when he joined the Social Credit party.

Meantime a recount has been applied for in three seats, and the results might place the CCF in the lead. It is now probable that the Social Credit will form a government and will meet the Legislature in the early Fall, when it is unlikely the Liberals would vote them out immediately, but in any case the shadow of the coming Federal election falls across the scene and another provincial election in British Columbia cannot long be delayed.

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### *The Ideal State*

The ideal social state is not that in which each gets an equal amount of wealth, but in which each gets in proportion to his contribution to the general stock.

HENRY GEORGE.