

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Following the outbreak of World War Two, the Provincial government devoted most of its time and talent toward furthering in every way the war effort of the Federal government.

At the same time the political pot was boiling in the province of Alberta, as the opposition looked forward to an election which they knew must be held by the fall of 1940. It had become obvious to the public generally that the support for the Aberhart government was increasing and the result was that the movement known as the Independent Movement was brought into being by the Liberals, Conservatives and the U.F.A. uniting. Throughout the Province meetings were being held and all those who opposed the Aberhart regime were invited to attend. It became obvious that the election in most Alberta constituencies would be fought between two candidates, Social Credit being represented by one, while everything else was represented by the opponent.

The election held on March 24 saw a change in the Legislature. Even with the combined opposition supporting one man, the Aberhart forces still retained thirty-five seats, while, the opposition won twenty-one seats, made up of nineteen Independents, one Liberal and one Labour. Redistribution had reduced the total number of seats. The lone Liberal, J. H. Tremblay, represented the constituency of Grouard, a long-time Liberal stronghold, while Angus Morrison, a popular Labour leader of that day from Calgary, defeated Joe Unwin to regain for Labour the Edson constituency which they had held for many years prior to 1935. Among the Independents elected were two future Lieutenant Governors, one a Liberal, J. J. Bowlen; the other, a Conservative, J. Percy Page. One Cabinet Minister, the Honorable Solon Low, was defeated, but the Vegreville seat which had been won for Social Credit by Mr. George Woytkiw, was made available to him upon Mr. Woytkiw being appointed to the Chairmanship of the Debt Adjustment Board.

The remaining three years of the Aberhart regime, therefore, saw much less controversial legislation and the successful carrying out of the Treasury Branch program. Mr. Aberhart, however, continued his efforts untiringly to bring about, within the limits of provincial autonomy, various programs designed to help in any way the achievement of economic security with a maximum amount of individual freedom for our citizens.

Knowing by this time that the Social Credit forces would have to secure a majority of the seats in the Federal House in order that full benefits of a Social Credit program could be brought about, Mr. Aberhart devoted many hours of time to devising the strategy which would result in a Canada-wide organization similar to the Alberta Social Credit League. Throughout Eastern Canada, however, the publicity which had been given by the news media to Social Credit had created in the minds of many people the conclusion that the word "Social" had to do with Socialism. It was with a view to overcoming this erroneous concept that the name Democratic Monetary Reform Organization was accepted at a week-long Social Credit Convention held in Winnipeg in 1941 which saw Mr. Aberhart elected as its President.

One of the Vice-presidents chosen at this meeting was a business man from the City of Winnipeg. It was only natural that without the background of Social Credit education the Alberta people had enjoyed, honest conflicting opinions would be expressed by many people in other provinces. After some length of time the Vice-president from Winnipeg declared himself to be at variance with the Alberta sector and the press was certainly making the most of any statement he made.

Mr. Aberhart asked the Honourable Solon Low and me to travel to Winnipeg with a view of solving the difficulty. Upon our arrival at the Fort Garry Hotel, we contacted the man in question, hoping he would spend the afternoon with us. He invited us to his home, an invitation we accepted. Our discussions continued until two in the morning, by which time no conclusions had been reached, other than that a break-away by this man from the organization was inevitable.

We were several miles from the Fort Garry Hotel and the temperature was about forty below zero. The war was on, gasoline was rationed and taxis ceased to run after midnight, except in emergencies. Our host owned a car but his gas tank was nearly empty, and service stations were

closed, so we were faced with a long walk in freezing temperatures, our only hope being to hitch a ride with one of the late motorists still on the streets. Thumbing a ride at that hour in the morning we soon found to be useless and after we had walked several blocks feeling the intense cold, we decided to try to stop the next driver by holding hands across his pathway and endeavoring to wave him down. Three or four drivers ignored us and in every case honked the horn, signalling to us to get out of the way. Finally one stopped. We explained to the driver our predicament, whereupon he explained that he and the gentleman with him were garbage collectors and that in the panel delivery he was driving were several barrels of garbage. He told us that if we did not mind riding in the enclosed vehicle with garbage, he would gladly give us a ride to within four blocks of the Fort Garry Hotel. As we climbed in among the barrels, my friend Solon turned to me and said: "At this hour of the morning under these conditions, I have no pride. Have you, Alf?" We thanked the driver most heartily as we alighted from among the garbage barrels and somehow the air seemed fresher during our four-block walk. When we told our story to Mr. Aberhart, he remarked:

"What a fellow doesn't have to do to put Social Credit over!"

Being a firm believer in a united Canada, he was anxious to do everything possible to establish a strong Social Credit organization in every province, each being autonomous in its own area but united for the purpose of establishing a Social Credit regime at the Federal level. He always maintained that to bring this about it would be necessary to have a strong Social Credit organization in the province of Quebec. In the Alberta provincial legislature were a number of French speaking members and Mr. Aberhart constantly encouraged them to take advantage of every opportunity they might have of speaking in the Province of Quebec. To this end, also, he undertook to study the French language, hoping to be able to speak in French for at least a small portion of his address whenever the first opportunity presented itself.

It was during the 1943 Session when I called upon him in his office that I found him listening attentively to records in the French language. On this occasion he said to me: "We must do everything possible to convince these fellows in Quebec that we are all Canadians and that while we may differ in the problems of our provinces, we must work unitedly for the one fundamental change in our monetary system, which, when accomplished, will bring about the solution to most of our problems and establish a strong Canadian nation."

It must have seemed to him at times that the whole world was against him. The insurgency had undoubtedly caused him much distress and in addition to this, two matters of lesser importance showed how unappreciative and even vindictive some segments of the public can be towards a man with whose politics they cannot agree.

The first of these occurred in 1938 when it had been decided in Caucus that Mr. and Mrs. Aberhart should accept the invitation to attend the Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in London. Immediately the cry arose within the Legislative Assembly and without, that the money to be used for this purpose could be better spent on behalf of the people of Alberta. Speaking at a public meeting at High River on April 22, the Honourable W. A. Fallow, facing a rather hostile audience, stated that he himself had made arrangements for the trip of the Premier and that if the public was so insistent upon the government not spending an anticipated two thousand dollars, Mr. Aberhart would be prepared to pay his own expenses. Even though announcements had been made that the other provincial premiers and their wives would be attending the Coronation, at public expense, the political opposition to the same honor for the Aberharts continued to the point where at last Mr. Aberhart announced that the trip for him and his wife would not be undertaken.

The second such episode occurred about three years later when arrangements had been made by officials of the University of Alberta to honor Mr. Aberhart with a Doctor of Laws degree in recognition of his outstanding work as Premier and Minister of Education on behalf of education itself. Much publicity was given to the story and Mr. Aberhart looked forward to presenting the Convocation address. However, the basest form of politics intervened again and a secret vote of the members of the University Senate deprived him of this honor. On this occasion, however, even some newspapers which had been the bitterest critics of Mr. Aberhart described this act as being

unwarranted and disgraceful.

Despite these acts which undoubtedly were perpetrated for no other reason than to embarrass and even unnerve him, he was always able to regard them as petty low-down politics at its worst and to rise above them in such a way as to keep his eyes firmly fixed upon the objective he had set out to achieve.

Following the insurgency, Mr. Aberhart came to realize that the members had fought for a cause, the same cause that he himself had so vigorously espoused and on many occasions, I know from personal experience, he called several to his office and thanked them for their co-operation at the right time when it had looked several times that the breach could never be healed.

He watched carefully the performance of his members and listened to their speeches with much interest. Any member making a speech he considered to be outstanding was always commended in a note delivered to the member's desk the moment his speech was ended. Perusing old records a few years ago I came across several such notes, all of which I now cherish greatly, not so much for what they say but for the fact that even though I had been an outspoken insurgent, he was able to demonstrate in no uncertain way that great Christian virtue of forgiveness he so abundantly possessed.

At every annual Social Credit Convention, delegates looked forward to the address which would be given by Mr. Aberhart on the evening of the banquet. As I recall them, they were always designed to inspire each delegate to the point where he would return to his constituency more determined than ever to work in the interests of the Social Credit cause. Even the title given to each address was intriguing and designed to fulfill a purpose.

The last such address was given by Mr. Aberhart at the fall convention in the Macdonald Hotel in 1942. I have often wondered in recalling this occasion whether or not he had a premonition concerning his passing a few months later. He emphasized in his speech the great responsibility which rested upon the shoulders of each and everyone in a truly functioning democracy and made reference to the strenuous eight years he had experienced and he called upon the younger people in the movement, especially, to seek the truth and to propagate it on every occasion.

Making reference to the famous poem "In Flanders Fields" written by John McCrae, a young soldier killed in World War One, he entitled his speech "To You the Torch is Thrown."

It became obvious during the regular spring Session of 1943 that Mr. Aberhart was tiring under the heavy load he carried over the past ten years and as the Session drew to a close, he journeyed to Vancouver where he expected to rest and recuperate during Easter holidays before returning to his office. I was entering the Parliament Buildings just as he was leaving for what turned out to be the last time. I asked him how he was feeling and he replied: "Alf, I did not know a man could feel as weak as I do and still walk around. I am looking forward to a little rest at the Coast. Try to have your Board program for the year well in hand when I return, as I believe we have an interesting and important year ahead of us." I shook his hand and wished him well. However, fate intervened and instead of enjoying a holiday he found it necessary to enter a hospital in Vancouver where his condition was diagnosed as serious. On May 23 we were shocked to hear that he had passed away. He was laid to rest in the City of Vancouver on May 26.

The train journey to the West Coast of Cabinet Ministers and members was a sad one, as we contemplated the future of Alberta without the leadership of this great man. I was privileged to act as a pallbearer, while his protégé, Ernest Manning, destined to become Alberta's Premier five days later, spoke during the service in an unfaltering voice as he paid tribute to the memory of this great Canadian, his friend and mentor.

Memorial services followed throughout Alberta with most of the churches being filled to capacity and over-flowing. At every one tears flowed freely and unashamedly as men and women

alike recalled the fight Mr. Aberhart had put up on behalf of the common man. Thousands knew him personally and had benefitted from that acquaintance. Newspapers which had always condemned him were prepared to give him credit for his untiring efforts on behalf of mankind, while, in most cases, recalling that they had not been supporters of his cause. One of the daily papers of the province, the *Edmonton Bulletin*, expressed accurately the public attitude toward Mr. Aberhart by saying that he was hated; he was loved; he was never ignored.

Any story of Mr. Aberhart would be incomplete without making reference to his tremendous sense of humor. I am sure it served him well in carrying him over many rough spots and I know that he regarded a good sense of humor as being one of God's greatest gifts to any man.

After his passing he became the topic of conversation whenever Social Credit members met. Many related stories of their association with him and in every case someone would recall one of his anecdotes or the occasion on which he thoroughly enjoyed someone else's.

I recall vividly a personal experience which I think bears repeating. The Legislature was in session, a Caucus was to be held on Thursday morning and Mr. Aberhart was to address a gathering of school superintendents on Wednesday evening. He had left the Legislature about four o'clock to go to his office to make preparation for the evening's address and shortly afterwards I received a call to go to his office. When I arrived, he greeted me by saying, "Alf, I am told you are the best storyteller in the Legislature." I said: "Mr. Aberhart that may be a doubtful honor, considering that my stories are not always of the parlor variety." He said: "Well, I'm speaking to the school superintendents tonight and I think that by this time they have heard my fund of stories and I wondered if you could give me a new one I could tell." I told him it would be easier at the moment to think of one he couldn't tell, whereupon he said: "You know, I've been listening for the past few days to nothing but school grief and I could enjoy any kind of story with a good point to it." I asked him if he had heard the recent one concerning the two Cockney ladies talking over the back fence to each other on the morning following the blitz. He said: "No, that's a new one; let's have it." I said, "Well, the story goes that one woman said to the other: 'Hi, Martha, one of these days we could be blown into maternity and we'll never know who done it'." He enjoyed a laugh, during which time I recalled a couple of platform stories and related them to him.

As Chairman of the Caucus, as I was in those days, I sat next to the Premier. The following morning, he leaned over and said: "Alf, your stories went over big last night, especially the one about the two old ladies."

I recall another occasion when D. M. Duggan was the leader of the Conservative party and led his single follower, Mr. John Irwin, in the Legislature. Though political enemies on the floor of the house, Duggan and Aberhart were always friendly during the afternoon coffee break. In those days the M.L.A's had a fifteen-minute intermission, during which time they assembled in the committee room off the chamber where young ladies already waited with a supply of cake, cookies, tea and coffee, supplied by the upstairs cafeteria. As it happened many times, Aberhart and Duggan were sitting side by side, when Duggan, who also had a good sense of humor, started to match wits with Mr. Aberhart. Duggan made some reference to the Social Credit Caucus, asking Mr. Aberhart if he ever used the principal's strap to keep the youngsters in order. Aberhart replied that he thought Duggan had more need to use a strap than he had because in the Conservative Caucus, even if one member disagreed with the leader, this was a split in the party right down the middle, and then said: "Oh, by the way, D. M., where do you fellows hold your caucuses? Do you ride around on a tandem bike just to prove you're both pushing in the same direction?" Duggan enjoyed a chuckle and then said: "You know, Bill, I always thought I could 'sling the B. S.' as well as you," whereupon Mr. Aberhart replied: "I think you can, too, but for some reason or other you can't seem to make it stick."

It was impossible to work closely with Mr. Aberhart without realizing the great talents he possessed and there is no doubt whatever that those who worked closely with him for an extended length of time could ever be the same as they were before that experience. He possessed great talents and everyone was developed to the full and it is true to say that the people of the Province of Alberta benefitted directly or indirectly because this man had lived.