

# FROM CONTENDER TO ALSO-RAN: JOHN DIEFENBAKER AND THE SASKATCHEWAN CONSERVATIVE PARTY IN THE ELECTION OF 1938

*By Patrick Kyba*

**T**he Saskatchewan election of 1938 is interesting for several reasons, not the least of which being the continued emergence of the CCF as a political power in the province and the first attempt of the Social Credit party to win office outside Alberta. Also of interest is the fact that the Saskatchewan Conservative party, which had been the dominant partner in a coalition government just four years previously, did not win a single seat in 1938. It is not difficult to understand why the Conservatives fared poorly in this election given the competition it faced. It is a good deal more difficult, however, to fathom why it fell so far in such a short span of time.

Despite the defeat of every candidate who ran in support of Dr. J.T.M. Anderson's Cooperative Administration in 1934, Conservatives in Saskatchewan had no reason to believe that it would be forty-eight years before they would again participate in the government of the province. Even though they held not a single seat in the Legislature, the Conservatives stood second in the popular vote, were runners-up in well over half the constituencies contested, and faced the fledgling socialist Farmer-Labour party as their only rival in the struggle to unseat the Liberals.

Four years later Saskatchewan Conservatives, on the surface at least, had even more reason to feel confident about their party's chances of a strong showing at the forthcoming election. They had chosen a new and dynamic leader in 1936, John Diefenbaker; they had given him a progressive platform on which to campaign; the indomitable Jimmy Gardiner had left the province for federal politics; Farmer-Labour had transformed itself into the CCF, but was still regarded by many as too radical to trust with power; and the Liberals in both Regina and Ottawa had proven themselves no better able to protect Saskatchewan from the ravages of the Depression than their predecessors.

The vote on June 8th, 1938, however, proved such hopes to be illusory. Conservative candidates<sup>1</sup> failed to win a seat, they ran second in only seven of the fifty-two constituencies, and won just over twelve percent of the popular vote which put the party in fourth place behind the victorious Liberals, the CCF, and a new opponent, Social Credit. This was indeed a dramatic decline in the fortunes

of the party which, in all but a few years in the early 1920s, had been the principal threat to the Liberals' stranglehold on power in the province.

The major reason Diefenbaker gave for the terrible defeat was that fear of a Social Credit government stampeded the electorate into voting for the Liberal party.<sup>2</sup> The challenge from the new "third" parties must not be discounted, but their presence in the campaign does not in itself explain the poor performance of the Conservative party. The party's rapid descent to near oblivion which occurred between the 1934 and 1938 elections was the product of many factors, and again the major questions to be answered are not just why the party lost the election but why the party lost so badly.

The greatest threat to the Conservative party's claim to be *the* logical alternative to the Liberals came, of course, from the CCF. Although the party had finished behind the Conservatives in popular vote in 1934, it did elect five members and was now entrenched firmly in the Legislature as His Majesty's Loyal Opposition. Therefore, and in the conditions of the Depression, the CCF could and did assert that its socialism distinguished it from both the Liberal and Conservative parties and that to turn to the Conservatives in order to defeat the Liberals would be no change at all. Furthermore, the party possessed an active and dedicated organization and its attempts to recruit new members appeared to be meeting with some success. As William Turner, the Secretary of the Conservative Association of Regina, wrote to Diefenbaker in January of 1938:

The CCF are showing considerable activity—claim to have ten paid organizers in the field and to be receiving good support for the newspaper they propose to publish until after the elections. Certain it is that they are receiving fairly good collections as a result of their appeal for funds for radio broadcasting, membership, etc., and that Socialism is much more appealing to many farmers today than anything else. Many of the municipal councils and school boards are composed wholly of CCF workers, or supporters, and so far as the southern part of the Province is concerned, possibly 75% of such bodies are so controlled. All of which must be anything but heartening to the Liberals and to a lesser extent, to ourselves, as well.<sup>3</sup>

The Conservative leadership did recognize the threat from the CCF but did little to minimize it. In fact, as shall be shown later, their actions probably added to the CCF's total vote. Furthermore, the top echelons of the CCF, also understanding the electoral ramifications of a split opposition vote, ran only thirty-four candidates in 1938, nineteen fewer than in 1934. The party's growing strength was such, however, that its popular vote dropped only marginally and it elected ten of the thirty-four to retain its status as Official Opposition.

Although it was the CCF which succeeded eventually in pushing the Conservative party into the political wilderness for decades, in 1938 Tories perceived themselves as under siege from an equally ominous force—the Social Credit. Under the inspirational leadership of William Aberhart, the Social Credit had swept to power in Alberta in 1935 and when the new Premier announced in early April, 1938, that Saskatchewan would be the next target of his battalions he sent a cold chill through the Conservative organization. As one long-time Conservative warned Diefenbaker:



Lord, man, I am afraid of those Social Creditors. They are, especially in this Province, a worthless lot of adventurers, but owing to the latest mistakes of Jimmie Gardiner, they are on the crest of the wave of enthusiasm and boldness since the Edmonton victory. . . . They go about quoting the Bible and Prophet Aberhart on every occasion. AND YOU CANNOT ARGUE WITH THEM. They shut you up by saying that the people of Alberta should know and look what they have done.<sup>4</sup>

Diefenbaker did not take long to react. The very same day he sent letters to constituency associations urging them to nominate before Social Credit did and he also put pressure on the federal party to provide him with the funds to combat this menace. He asked F.W. Turnbull, a former MP and faithful party organizer and fundraiser, to appeal to R.B. Bennett:

Please point out the necessity of action to Mr. Bennett, tell him of the threat made by Mr. Aberhart through a representative at the Battleford Convention yesterday, that the Social Credit party intend to bring in one hundred speakers to overrun this Province and to nominate in every Constituency, and that if the avalanche is to be held back, assistance must be forthcoming *at once*.<sup>5</sup>

There is no doubt that Diefenbaker and the Conservative organization understood the threat posed by Social Credit. They knew that their party could be undercut by a new party of the right, one which promised voters a "sure fire" way out of the Depression and one which had never had to shoulder the burdens of office during the Dirty Thirties. They knew the problem, but could do very little about it. The Social Credit hierarchy would not enter negotiations similar to those long underway between the Conservatives and the CCF not to split the anti-Liberal vote, although there is evidence that local Social Credit members in some constituencies did agree to unite behind a single opposition candidate be that person Conservative or CCF. In many constituencies prominent Conservatives defected to Social Credit. For example, Diefenbaker was informed of this situation in Rosetown less than a month before the election:

Have just learned today that Mr. Nat Given, of Delisle, has been closeted with the leaders of the Social Credit group here, including Hon. E.C. Manning, who is visiting in the City today.

We are of the opinion here, that Mr. Bill Loucks, of Delisle, who is Mr. Given's brother-in-law, is in the same boat.<sup>6</sup>

Across the province, Social Credit ran forty candidates and elected two with close to sixteen per cent of the popular vote. It was neither the "avalanche" that Aberhart had predicted nor Diefenbaker feared, but it was sufficient to come third and to drop the Conservatives to fourth place in the party standings

Despite the competition from the Liberal, CCF and Social Credit parties, the Conservatives might have stood a fighting chance in 1938 had the party not been virtually bankrupt. The problem was not a new one. As early as August, 1934, Turnbull advised R.B. Bennett that:

Our organization in Saskatchewan is pretty bad. Five years of Co-operative Government has taken its toll. We need both publicity and finance. The Co-operative Government took control of finances from the Conservative Association. There are no funds available for anything, and the chances of getting substantial amounts is not large.<sup>7</sup>

Turnbull's final comment proved prophetic. The severity of the Depression made it almost impossible to raise money within the province and financial assistance from outside would not be forthcoming. By 1937 the party could no longer afford to pay its Secretary and closed its central office. Attempts to develop party strategy failed as key officials could not afford to attend meetings. Senator William Aseltine wrote from Rosetown, in response to Diefenbaker's announcement of a planning session to be held the following week in Saskatoon:

I will be glad to attend if at all possible but at the present moment do not see how I can be there.

I have notified several but none of them have [sic] the price of the ticket. Even our constituency president and secretary are dead broke and have not contributed anything towards the money we're supposed to collect. They are very willing and hard workers but the average crop of wheat was less than one bushel to the acre in this constituency and that means no one has any money.<sup>8</sup>

Even the party President, H.E. Keown, a lawyer from Melfort, missed important meetings because he could not afford the cost of travel, lodging and food. As he advised Diefenbaker in January of 1938:

In further reference to the meeting in Regina I find it absolutely impossible to get down. I checked over my bank book today and find I have a credit of \$38.00 and how I am going to get through the rest of the month and the balance of the winter God only knows, as I have borrowed on my Insurance policies and everything else. If you desire I am quite willing to hand in my resignation, but I do not see why the President is forced to pay his own expenses when travelling in the party's interest.<sup>9</sup>

Attempts to raise a campaign fund also failed and for the same reason. According to A.E. Westbrook of Rouleau—"we have no money and no organization, and it seems impossible to even collect the \$50.00 promised by us at the Council meeting in Regina, early in the winter."<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, attempts to organize several constituencies failed as well. As Keown lamented to a party member from Maple Creek: "I am quite aware that we should touch every constituency and the only reason that we have not done so is owing to lack of finances."<sup>11</sup>

Pleas for help from the national party grew increasingly shrill as the campaign began. By mid-April the party was desperate for funds and Diefenbaker and many other prominent Conservatives constantly implored Ottawa for money. As Keown advised E.E. Perley, MP for Qu'Appelle:

Our great difficulty at the present time is that we have no finances whatsoever and I would appreciate your doing something in Ottawa, as unless we receive monies at an early date we will have to throw up the sponge. Diefenbaker is under a very heavy expense and I have been carrying the burden for the whole Province and in my financial position I cannot do it.<sup>12</sup>

Even Dr. Anderson had to go cap in hand to Arthur Meighen for assistance:

I have been wondering if you could help me here, not personally but by a word to one or two who might be interested. I have not been able to contribute much financially and if we could get even a few hundred dollars it would see me through the campaign.<sup>13</sup>



There is no evidence that Anderson obtained the help he requested, but both Keown and Diefenbaker leave absolutely no doubt that the provincial party did not receive the funds it needed from the federal party to wage a respectable campaign. Keown wrote R.J. Manion shortly after his election as leader of the national party to inform him that the provincial party had fought the 1938 election on less than \$5,000, that the provincial party was now in debt to the tune of \$2,500 with no way of clearing it, and that Diefenbaker had paid \$2,000 for candidates' deposits out of his own pocket.<sup>14</sup> Diefenbaker, for his part, has written:

Now, with the election upon us, we had no money for the campaign. Local contributions ranged from small to nil. Finally, I appealed to friends of the Party in Eastern Canada for assistance . . . no Conservative money was forthcoming. I got one thousand dollars in outside help, half from an Edmonton lawyer and half from a Calgary businessman. One by one my candidates drifted away. They had lived through the drought, and the vast majority of them did not have enough money to pay their deposits, let alone to fight an election. With a personal loan from the bank I covered the election deposits of twenty-two of our candidates. Our credibility as a practical alternative to the Patterson government fast diminished in these circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

He also claims that the Regina headquarters of the party received five thousand dollars from Eastern sources the day after the election, but that none of it was turned over to him to apply against the debts he had incurred on behalf of the party.<sup>16</sup>

In circumstances such as these it is not difficult to understand why morale at all levels of the provincial party dropped to an all-time low. Without money, literature could not be printed and distributed, radio time could not be purchased, and the party could not draw the electorate's attention to its platform, a selection of policies which both provided an attractive alternative to those of the Government and also showed the Conservatives to be as progressive as the CCF in light of the circumstances in which the province found itself in the Depression. For example, the platform approved in convention in 1937, included among its several planks protection for debtors "whereby debts shall be reduced so that the creditor shall share with the debtor the loss occasioned by crop failures and abnormally low prices" and "which shall prevent the home or homestead of any citizen residing in Saskatchewan being taken from him either by mortgage foreclosure or tax proceedings;" promised action "to encourage the voluntary development of co-operative organizations," "to study the . . . feasibility of the introduction of a system of crop insurance or alternatively a system of acreage indemnity;" and "to amend and strictly enforce the Minimum Wage Act to the end that all employees will receive a fair wage for their labour;" and stated outright that "the Conservative party approves of the need for health insurance, State medicine and hospitalization, and undertakes to fully investigate the various forms thereof and to bring in legislation in accordance with the results of such investigation."<sup>17</sup> The platform would not have won the election for the Conservatives by itself, but the party's inability to publicize it further hurt its chances on election day.

Lack of finances also meant that organizers could not be hired and, above all, potential candidates could not be convinced to run. The response to

Diefenbaker's efforts to organize the party at the constituency level in the year prior to the election was not encouraging. By way of example, his contact in the Battlefords wrote:

I regret to have to inform you that in my opinion, the chances of successful organization in this constituency are very poor. . . . At the present time there is practically no organization, and there have been so many desertions from the ranks of the party that it is almost impossible to get in touch with men who could assist the rural polling subdivisions and organization work.<sup>18</sup>

From Bengough he was told that "the organization of Bengough is in a hopeless muddle,"<sup>19</sup> and from Melfort came the news that "organization surely can be considered, in regard to the immediate past, as more or less of a joke."<sup>20</sup> Local Conservative organizations had deteriorated to the point that by the end of 1937 Keown had to inform Diefenbaker that:

Unfortunately we have not got a full list of the officers of the various constituencies although I have at all times been keeping my list up to date where there has been a re-organization. The unfortunate part is that a number have not sent in a list of their officers after their re-organization.<sup>21</sup>

The situation did not improve much as the election approached which made the task of getting candidates into the contest even more difficult. This letter from the President of the Torch River Conservative Association one week before the election summarizes Diefenbaker's predicament. "Last Sunday morning we had a meeting of our Executive and as there were no funds available and as we realized we had no chance of winning this seat we decided not to nominate."<sup>22</sup> After the election Diefenbaker complained to a friend in Regina that:

As you know, for months prior to the Provincial election, I tried to get candidates in the field, but it was impossible on account of lack of finances, and in some cases of a desire on the part of some Conservatives to defeat the Liberals regardless of the designation of the opposing candidate or the views held by him, and, as I see the situation, our task must be to bring these people to the realization of the fact that unless Conservative candidates get into the field we shall never be in a position to form a Government.<sup>23</sup>

This double-barrelled problem would bedevil every Conservative leader who succeeded Diefenbaker until the time of Dick Collver forty years later. As it turned out, Diefenbaker could find only twenty-three candidates to stand with him as "straight" Conservatives, not enough to form a government even if all were to be elected. This point was not lost neither on Liberal strategists during the campaign nor, it would appear, on many Conservative voters on election day.

It may well be, however, that in this context John Diefenbaker and the Conservative party were to some degree the authors of their own misfortune. The simple fact of the matter in 1938 was that, as in every provincial election since Saskatchewan joined Confederation save one, the Conservative party was in no position to compete with its stronger Liberal rival. It lacked finances, organization, candidates and, above all, a widespread base of committed supporters who would vote Conservative regardless of the circumstances. It is perhaps not surprising then that some Conservatives at all levels of the party sought alliances with anyone and everyone who could help defeat the hated



Liberals. The idea of cooperation to achieve political ends was not new to the party. Indeed, it fought the first two elections in the province's history not as the "Conservative" party but under the banner of "Provincial Rights" in an attempt to unite all those who opposed the conditions of union imposed on Saskatchewan by the Liberals in 1905. Conservatives could also point to the success of the Conservative-led Union Government during the First Great War.

Finally, the benefits of cooperation with other parties was evident in the unremitting efforts of Dr. Anderson to come to an arrangement with the Progressives and Independents from the time he accepted the Conservative leadership in 1924 and throughout the 1929 election which led to the Conservative-dominated Cooperative Government, the first and only non-Liberal administration ever in the province. Union of all those opposed to the Liberals could overcome many of the weaknesses inherent in the Conservative party, might keep the Tories competitive with the CCF, and just might bring down the Liberal Government of W.J. Patterson. Unfortunately for the Conservatives, the idea of cooperation proved to be a double-edged sword.

Any hope of an arrangement with Social Credit was squelched quickly because of Aberhart's opposition to the idea and the confident intransigence of the provincial executive. However, an agreement with the CCF seemed possible and indeed one was reached prior to the election which saw Conservative and CCF candidates in opposition to each other in only fifteen seats. The road to the agreement was long and tortuous and it is difficult to know which party took the initiative and at what level. What is indisputable, nonetheless, is that an arrangement between the two parties was made before election day and that the negotiations took place at the constituency, provincial and national levels.

The idea of cooperation with the CCF to defeat the Liberals seemed to take root amongst individual Conservatives in the constituencies in the spring of 1937. From that time and until the election campaign Diefenbaker received dozens of letters from supporters which conveyed the following sentiment. "I am convinced that in this part of the country and probably all over the province there is utterly no use of going ahead unless all forces opposed to the present administration can be united."<sup>24</sup> "Personally I see no possible chance of victory unless we can amalgamate some way or other with the opposition parties."<sup>25</sup> During the same time, George Williams, the CCF leader, also received letters from several of his followers urging him to come to some agreement with the Conservatives not to fight against each other at the next election.<sup>26</sup>

It would appear that this idea struck some more prominent members of both parties even earlier. The first mention of an "arrangement" in either party's archives is the following letter from Arthur Kendall, a Conservative organizer, to Diefenbaker in January of 1937:

I spent one day on the train with Andy McCauley, CCF member for Cut Knife—he was very friendly and is very anxious personally to see a working agreement established between the Conservatives and his party. . . . I believe that some arrangement might be made to our mutual advantage, but we should tread lightly and plan wisely before any move is made.<sup>27</sup>

## **TAKEN FOR A RIDE**

THE SALES TAX, alias The Education Tax.

# **Abolish this Nuisance Tax by VOTING CONSERVATIVE**

STAND PAT WITH PATTERSON OR  
ASSIST THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY TO PUT ITS  
POLICY INTO EFFECT BY VOTING CONSERVATIVE.



*Diefenbaker Centre Archives, #202*

John G. Diefenbaker during the Saskatchewan provincial election campaign, 1938. Slogans from Conservative election pamphlets were strongly directed against the Liberals.

**Liberal Promises have gone with the wind.**

## **VOTE CONSERVATIVE FOR ACTION.**

Restore the Dignity and Decency in  
the Conduct of Public Affairs.

Answer Liberal Arrogance and abuse  
**BY VOTING CONSERVATIVE.**



Certainly, by the summer H.E. Keown was "of the opinion that possibly in a number of constituencies some action should be taken,"<sup>28</sup> and Dr. Anderson preached the benefits of cooperation to anyone who would listen. There is no evidence of any direct contact between Diefenbaker and Williams or their emissaries at this time. The former had declared his opposition to a formal alliance between his party and any other. The latter objected strenuously to any talk of fusion of the two parties and was suspicious of any other arrangement with the Tories because he believed the CCF to be the stronger party of the two and did not need help from anyone.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the two did leave the door open to further discussions at the local level in accordance with the differing circumstances of their constituency organizations and the negotiations did continue, albeit in a haphazard fashion.

Had the matter been left to Diefenbaker and Williams it is likely that the marriage of convenience which occurred eventually might never have come to fruition. However, the prospect of defeating the Liberals by keeping the opposition vote as united as possible proved very attractive to some powerful Members of Parliament from both parties, in particular E.E. Perley of the Conservatives and M.J. Coldwell and T.C. Douglas of the CCF, and they intervened in the affair. By late January, 1938, E.E. Perley wrote Diefenbaker to say that "I am more convinced than ever, we must go through with the arrangement and nothing must be left undone in carrying it out."<sup>30</sup> Two-and-a-half weeks later he reported that "in my conferences with Douglas and Coldwell, I have found them one hundred percent behind the scheme. . . ."<sup>31</sup> By mid-March a "tentative" list of constituencies had been drawn up which gave eighteen to the Conservatives, twenty-one to the CCF and left thirteen to be allocated later. The negotiations were not always easy. Diefenbaker went along with the process and offered only minor objections to the CCF claim to some seats. George Williams, on the other hand, proved more of a stumbling-block. According to F.W. Turnbull, who was involved in the discussions with the provincial CCF leader:

George claims the CCF are the dominant party in the Province, and that we should recognize that we are distinctly inferior. He expresses the belief that the CCF will have a clear majority in the next house and I presume, for that reason, does not intend to give us a clear field in very many seats. He apparently figures about eight seats for us. . . . It is hard to negotiate with a man without any balance.<sup>32</sup>

Williams' obstinancy moved Perley to urge Coldwell and Douglas to pressure him to be more tractable and, in fact, Douglas did write Williams to point out that:

If we make it too tough on fellows like Perley and Diefenbaker . . . we may very well have a Conservative in almost every constituency, with strong financial backing from the groups here [Ottawa] who are endeavouring to get the Conservative Party on its feet again.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of April Perley again wrote Diefenbaker to advise him that Douglas and Coldwell were still having their "difficulties" but that he was sure they were "working in good faith and not double-crossing us."<sup>34</sup> One of these "difficulties" lay with the carefully guarded independence of the local CCF constituency association. As Turnbull warned Keown:

Conversations with the CCF Leaders have not been one hundred per cent successful. They appear to have difficulty, that does not affect us, with their constituents. They cannot restrain activities of their followers in the constituencies. On the other hand, we cannot arouse [sic] enthusiasm among our followers. In that fact lies the reason why the CCF may elect more members than we do.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the problems, Turnbull was able to advise Diefenbaker three weeks before election day that an agreement had been put together at last.

This arrangement leaves us with Arm River, Cumberland, Hanley, Milestone, Moose Jaw (two seats), Qu'Appelle, and Saskatoon (two seats). It includes Cumberland, which is not much good to us and Moosomin was probably omitted in error.

The following seats are to be left to the CCF in this arrangement: Biggar, Cannington, Cutknife, Gull Lake, Notokeu, Pelly, Swift Current, and Elrose.<sup>36</sup>

He also added that "I do not see how you can comply with all this and still get thirty-five candidates in the field and I do think it is important that you should have thirty-five candidates."<sup>37</sup>

Apparently Diefenbaker could comply or concluded that he had no choice in the matter. The CCF did not run in any of the seats on the Conservative list, nor did the Conservatives contest any promised to the CCF, plus Wadena which was also probably "omitted in error" as it was William's constituency and it had long been understood that the two parties would not run against each other's leader. In fact, after the election Williams wrote Diefenbaker to say that: "I know that in Arm River our people played the game very, very well and they had hoped for a different result."<sup>38</sup> It should be repeated at this juncture perhaps that Diefenbaker did not have thirty-five candidates in the field on election day, the minimum some thought necessary to be a credible alternative to the Liberals. He had twenty-four while Williams had thirty-four. Thus the Conservative party was placed in the position of being a less likely option compared to the CCF in the eyes of those voters looking for change.

As mentioned previously, Diefenbaker made the intervention of Social Credit the principal cause of his party's electoral debacle, although lack of money came a close second in his mind. As he explained to Denton Massey, MP, two days after the election:

Having no finances in the Province, and unable to raise any elsewhere, it was impossible for me to get sufficient candidates in the field to be in a position to form a Government, and that, of course, militated against success. . . .<sup>39</sup>

Lack of money undoubtedly hampered the Conservative campaign, but it was not the only reason why only twenty-four candidates stood as "straight" Conservatives on election day, and Diefenbaker knew it. Long before the campaign began he had plenty of evidence that the Conservative vote was volatile and likely to move to other opposition parties thought more likely to be able to defeat the Liberals, as this letter indicates:

I think that as far as Rosetown-Biggar is concerned it is a waste of time and money for the Conservatives to run. . . . I think we would be away ahead to let the CCF have it here as we sure don't want the Liberals in for another term.<sup>40</sup>



By early April, even Diefenbaker, himself, was writing to friends and supporters that:

I am having a difficult time to get candidates because of the fact that every one seems fearful of a three-cornered fight, and this fear is being instilled in the minds of so many of our supporters, that I am afraid that there is a distant movement towards having CCF candidates, and the result will be that only a comparably small percentage of the seats will have Conservative candidates in the field.<sup>41</sup>

This indeed proved to be the case, and the irony of the situation is that Diefenbaker and the Conservative hierarchy, at the provincial and federal levels, both approved of and participated in a scheme which was intended primarily to defeat the Liberals but instead drove many Conservatives, both potential candidates and voters, from the party. It is doubly ironic that Diefenbaker would have to beg a supporter in Swift Current to find a candidate because "... if we allow all our friends to become CCF or Liberal followers in the meantime where will we ever be in the future"<sup>42</sup> at the exact same time that he was negotiating with the CCF on an allocation of seats between the two parties, an arrangement which eventually left the Conservative party in an inferior position to its chief rival for the position of principal challenger to the Liberals.

One must remember that the core support of the Conservative party in Saskatchewan, never large at the best of times, had been shaken severely by some of the actions of Dr. Anderson and his Cooperative Administration. Indeed, the President of the party, Dr. D.J. Johnstone, resigned his position in 1931 on the grounds that Anderson had abandoned true Conservative principles and the party split with the much larger faction supporting the Premier. Johnstone then led an unsuccessful attempt to remove Anderson as leader of the Conservative party in Saskatchewan and waged an incessant battle for the soul of the party, attacking the Anderson group's "leftist" tendencies on every occasion. Apparently, Johnstone viewed Diefenbaker as no different from his predecessor for, in the midst of the campaign, he made the following attack on the Conservative leadership:

Our left wing Conservatives must be having a dizzy time of it, trying to think up new stunts to keep themselves in the limelight. . . .

Ten years of leftist control of the Conservative party explains the entire political mob that exists outside the Liberal ranks today.

The complete suppression of Conservative views over the past ten years has brought about the disappearance of that party in so far as anything Conservative is concerned.<sup>43</sup>

Many Conservatives in 1938 must have wondered if, in fact, Johnstone might be correct in his views when Dr. Anderson, campaigning for election on a policy of cooperation, stated categorically that "every plank in the CCF platform is ours and there is no reason why the members of the [CCF] party cannot conscientiously support us."<sup>44</sup> Statements such as these by prominent members of the party must have caused consternation in some Conservative circles. They lent credence to the rumours that there would be a fusion of the two parties after the election if both together had more seats than the Liberals, despite

constant reassurances to the contrary from both Diefenbaker and Williams. In addition, if it was perfectly legitimate for a member of the CCF to vote for a Conservative candidate, then logically the reverse should be true. What this meant to Conservative voters was that those who wanted nothing to do with "socialism" would vote Liberal, Social Credit or not at all and those who wanted to beat the Liberals at any cost could vote in good conscience for the CCF in those constituencies which did not have a Conservative candidate, and the Conservatives did not run in as many seats as the CCF. In either case, the Conservative party would be the loser.

That is why the electoral arrangement with the CCF did the Conservative party so much damage. As rumours of the agreement began to spread, Diefenbaker had to play a duplicitous game. Publicly, to keep face and for the sake of party morale, he had to deny any arrangement with the CCF. Privately, in accordance with the terms of the agreement, he had to encourage Conservative candidacies in some seats only while suppressing them in others. It was a dangerous game and served only to divide and dishearten further an already-confused and dispirited Conservative party. Dr. Johnstone's faction aside, not all Conservatives approved of the arrangement. One candidate, for example, Claude Burrows, running for the party in Lumsden, launched this salvo in response to a rap on the knuckles from Perley for attacking the CCF in one of his campaign speeches:

My personal opinion is that this deep political strategy is landing us nowhere, and as far as I am concerned when strategy and principle conflict I will stand on my principles and let the strategy go.

The Conservative party is on trial. It is for some of us to stand up and fight for Conservative principles otherwise the party in Canada is doomed.<sup>45</sup>

Even Keown began to exhibit signs of doubt as the campaign began. In a letter to Turnbull and Diefenbaker, he stated:

To be candid I think we would have been wise right from the start, and I did suggest it, of attacking the CCF and we would not be in the difficulty we are now in getting candidates. I would much rather see five or ten straight Conservatives in the house on the opposition than attempt to form a government such as the last Co-operative Government which damned the Conservative party in the Province of Saskatchewan when we were at the zenith of power for years to come.<sup>46</sup>

Diefenbaker understood the threat to the provincial Conservative party from the CCF. As he wrote to J.M. Robb of the federal party: "The grave danger that the Conservative party faces in this Province is that the CCF will absorb many of our faithful supporters who, in their overwhelming desire to destroy the Liberal Party, will vote for any party that has a chance of success."<sup>47</sup>

The question that arises then is this: if Diefenbaker recognized the long-term threat from the CCF, why did he agree to the arrangement in 1938? Part of the answer may lie in Diefenbaker's deep dislike of the Liberals and the belief shared by many in his party that cooperation with other opposition parties was the only way to defeat the Patterson Government. Ten days after the election Diefenbaker wrote to Howard McConnell, K.C., a former minister in the



Anderson administration, that: "I am more than ever inclined to the view that you have always had that there will have to be a united opposition."<sup>48</sup> In this he received the full backing of his party which, at its convention in October, passed the following resolution:

That this convention authorizes the executive of the Saskatchewan Conservative party to co-operate with all groups in opposition to the Saskatchewan Liberal party to the end that such opposition be consolidated and the province ridged of the present administration at the earliest possible moment.<sup>49</sup>

This convention also rejected unanimously Diefenbaker's offer to resign.

Another part of the answer may rest in the fact that the provincial party had been dependent on the national party for some time and lacked the willpower and resources to resist when Perley and others insisted that an arrangement be reached with the CCF. There is no doubt that such an arrangement had the approval of some of the highest officers of the party. R.B. Bennett himself warned Dr. Anderson that:

If there are large numbers of candidates in the constituencies, the Liberals will be returned. You can be perfectly certain of that. They will stick to their candidates through thick and thin, while other Parties waste their effort by dividing their strength. There should be some understanding, if possible, to prevent the unquestioned opposition to the existing Government finding expression at the polls.<sup>50</sup>

A few days later, in his stricture to Burrows, Perley made it quite clear that "Mr. Bennett is fully acquainted with every move we have made and approves of it one hundred per cent. . . ."<sup>51</sup> At least one long-time and loyal Saskatchewan Conservative placed the blame for the provincial party's poor showing directly on the federal party. F.C. Turnbull wrote Jane Denison at national party headquarters five years after the 1938 election to complain that:

Our weakness in Saskatchewan, both provincially and federally is in large part due to Ottawa strategy which has existed for the past twenty years in keeping our candidates out of the constituencies in order to avoid splitting the anti-Liberal vote.<sup>52</sup>

It appears to be more than coincidence that in 1923 the Liberal party was at the height of its strength in Saskatchewan, with opposition to it divided amongst Progressives, Independents and a Conservative party in disarray.

To the extent that the arrangement with the CCF in 1938 was part of a strategy conceived in Ottawa, a further question arises—why then did the national party not support its provincial counterpart financially? In the absence of any conclusive evidence the answer must, of necessity, be speculative and may consist of several reasons. In the first place, as Diefenbaker claimed, the interests which financed the national party may have concluded that the Liberals stood the better chance of turning back the Social Credit tide. Secondly, as others have suggested, some in the federal party did not like Anderson's experiment in cooperative government and may have distrusted Diefenbaker's commitment to the Conservative cause, especially with Dr. Anderson still active politically. Thirdly, any "understanding" with the socialist CCF was bound to be frowned

upon by the businessmen on whom the national party depended for funds. Finally, it is possible that the federal party, itself suffering from the effects of the Depression, came to the conclusion that the Saskatchewan party did not have a hope of doing well in the 1938 election and thus decided to put its money to better use elsewhere. Whatever the reason, and it may have combined elements of all four, the national party's decision not to provide Diefenbaker with financial assistance sealed the doom of the Conservative party in Saskatchewan in the 1938 election.

The reasons why the Conservative party did not do well in this election are easy to document and most were beyond the control of the party and its leadership. None of the opposition parties could compete with the powerful and well-organized Liberal machine backed by all the advantages of holding office. Nor could the Conservative party cope with the appeal of the "new" parties, the CCF and Social Credit, both of whom promised to restructure the economy to provide financial relief in a time of severe economic depression. The party at least knew of the threat from the CCF and tried to deal with it, but it was taken completely by surprise by Aberhart's decision to finance a full-scale campaign two months before election day. Finally, the party could not control those of its members who left the party of their own free will because of their experiences with the Anderson and Bennett governments during the Depression.

One might also claim that the Saskatchewan Conservative party was in such a sorry state that no leader could have turned it back into a contender in the twenty months that Diefenbaker had before the election. Five years of neglect during the Cooperative Government and another two still led by a man who had no liking for strong partisanship had left Conservative constituency associations moribund. The Conservative organization was a hollow shell, an organization which existed on paper only. That it kept going at all is a tribute to the dedication of a few determined men such as John Diefenbaker and Bert Keown who spent much time and money trying to breathe some life into it. Lack of funds made the effort almost impossible and they were not helped at all by the national party. This, in turn, together with the weak local associations, made it difficult to find candidates and to place the party's progressive and attractive platform before the electorate. Perhaps Diefenbaker and other party stalwarts could have done more, but it is not likely that it would have made any difference. As Williams informed J.S. Woodsworth after the election, "We stayed out of a number of seats and gave them a clear field and also gave them considerable voting strength. They failed to show any strength."<sup>53</sup>

The one factor over which Diefenbaker and the Saskatchewan Conservative party did have some control was the arrangement with the CCF referred to above. Despite his desire to defeat the Liberals, despite the possible advantage of not splitting the opposition vote, despite the pressures from Ottawa and elsewhere to reach an agreement with the CCF, Diefenbaker and the provincial party could have refused. The decision to accept the accord proved to be very short-sighted and eventually backfired on the Conservatives. In 1938, the link to the CCF kept potential candidates out of the field, it destroyed the party's claim to be



a credible alternative to the Liberals, it may have been a factor in the national party's refusal to provide financial assistance, and it broke the traditional voting pattern of many Conservatives. In the long term, it helped pave the way for the CCF victory in 1944 which made the Conservative party in Saskatchewan a bit player in the province's politics for the next two generations. The agreement with the CCF is by no means the most important reason why the Conservatives did not do well in the 1938 election. However, it does help to explain why the party lost so badly, and should not be ignored. Nor should it be forgotten that the next five Conservative leaders spent thirty-five years trying to convince one-time party supporters and their progeny to return to the fold.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, the only candidates regarded as Conservatives are those who ran solely under the Conservative banner.
- <sup>2</sup> Diefenbaker Center Archives (hereafter DC), John G. Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 13. See interviews given and letters written after the election.
- <sup>3</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 4, W. Turner to J.G. Diefenbaker, 27 January 1938.
- <sup>4</sup> National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), John G. Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, #003703, A.H. Reed to J.G. Diefenbaker, 5 April 1938.
- <sup>5</sup> NAC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, #003688, J.G. Diefenbaker to F.W. Turnbull, 5 April 1938.
- <sup>6</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 5, J.H. Currie to J.G. Diefenbaker, 11 May 1938. Given had won Rosetown for the Conservatives provincially in 1929 and Loucks had sat as a Conservative MP for the same area from 1930 to 1935.
- <sup>7</sup> NAC, R.B. Bennett Papers, M-1251, F.W. Turnbull to R.B. Bennett, 15 August 1934.
- <sup>8</sup> NAC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, #003226, W. Asetline to J.G. Diefenbaker, 18 December 1937.
- <sup>9</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 4, H.E. Keown to J.G. Diefenbaker, 13 January 1938.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, A.E. Westbrook to J.G. Diefenbaker, 31 March 1938.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, H.E. Keown to A. Burnette, 11 January 1938.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, H.E. Keown to E.E. Perley, 3 May 1938.
- <sup>13</sup> NAC, Arthur Meighen Papers, 095352, J.T.M. Anderson to A. Meighen, 18 May 1938.
- <sup>14</sup> NAC, PC Canada Papers, Vol. 169, H.E. Keown to R.J. Manion, 1 August 1938.
- <sup>15</sup> J.G. Diefenbaker, *Memoirs: The Crusading Years* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1975), 162-163.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.
- <sup>17</sup> Platform of the Conservative Party of Saskatchewan, 1938. Copy in the possession of the author.
- <sup>18</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 5, L.A.C. Panton to J.G. Diefenbaker, 9 June 1937.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, E.L. Elliot to J.G. Diefenbaker, 12 June 1937.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, A.M. Stewart to J.G. Diefenbaker, 16 December 1937.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 4, H.E. Keown to J.G. Diefenbaker, 11 December 1937.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 6, G.W. Magee to J.G. Diefenbaker, 1 June 1938.
- <sup>23</sup> NAC, PC Canada Papers, Vol. 168, J.G. Diefenbaker to W.H. Turner, 7 September 1938.
- <sup>24</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 5, E.L. Elliot (Assiniboia) to J.G. Diefenbaker, 12 June 1937.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, J.K. Rosa (Lancer) to J.G. Diefenbaker, 14 February 1938.
- <sup>26</sup> See letters to Williams in Saskatchewan Archives Board (hereafter SAB), Papers of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, S-B7, File II 86.
- <sup>27</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 4, A. Kendall to J.G. Diefenbaker, 18 January 1937.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 7, H.E. Keown to T.G. Rose, 30 August 1937.
- <sup>29</sup> SAB, CCF Papers, File II 86, G. Williams to J.R. Mayhew, 13 September 1937.
- <sup>30</sup> SAB, PC Saskatchewan Papers, #003572, E.E. Perley to J.G. Diefenbaker, 28 January 1938.
- <sup>31</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 1, E.E. Perley to J.G. Diefenbaker, 14 February 1938.
- <sup>32</sup> SAB, PC Saskatchewan Papers, #003687, F.W. Turnbull to J.G. Diefenbaker, 2 April 1938.

- <sup>33</sup> T.C. Douglas to G. Williams, 26 March 1938. Quoted in D. Smith, *Prairie Liberalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 234.
- <sup>34</sup> SAB, PC Saskatchewan Papers, #003799, E.E. Perley to J.G. Diefenbaker, 29 April 1938.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, #003781, F.W. Turnbull to H.E. Keown, 29 April 1938.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, #003810, F.W. Turnbull to J.G. Diefenbaker, 19 May 1938.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, DC, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 13, G. Williams to J.G. Diefenbaker, 23 June 1938.
- <sup>39</sup> NAC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, #001627, J.G. Diefenbaker to D. Massey, 10 June 1938.
- <sup>40</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 4, W.A. Thompson to J.G. Diefenbaker, 13 February 1938.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, J.G. Diefenbaker to N.R. Craig, 5 April 1938.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 6, J.G. Diefenbaker to J.O. Begg, 6 April 1938.
- <sup>43</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 5, Article in the *Craik Weekly News*, 26 May 1938.
- <sup>44</sup> Taken from *The Regina Daily Star*, 14 May, 1938; quoted in S.M. Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1968), 145.
- <sup>45</sup> NAC, R.B. Bennett Papers, #520278, C. Burrows to E.E. Perley, 4 May 1938.
- <sup>46</sup> NAC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, #003782, E. Keown to F.C. Turnbull and J.G. Diefenbaker, 2 May 1938.
- <sup>47</sup> DC, Diefenbaker Papers, Pre-1940 Series, Vol. 3, J.G. Diefenbaker to J.M. Robb, 13 September 1938.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 13, J.G. Diefenbaker to H. McConnell, 18 June 1938.
- <sup>49</sup> *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 26 October 1938.
- <sup>50</sup> NAC, Bennett Papers, M-1475, R.B. Bennett to J.T.M. Anderson, 23 April 1938.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, #520277, E.E. Perley to C. Burrows, 29 April 1938.
- <sup>52</sup> NAC, PC Canada Papers, Vol. 168, F.C. Turnbull to J. Denison, 13 August 1943.
- <sup>53</sup> G. Williams to J.S. Woodsworth, 23 June 1938. Quoted in D. Smith, *Prairie Liberalism*, 235.

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