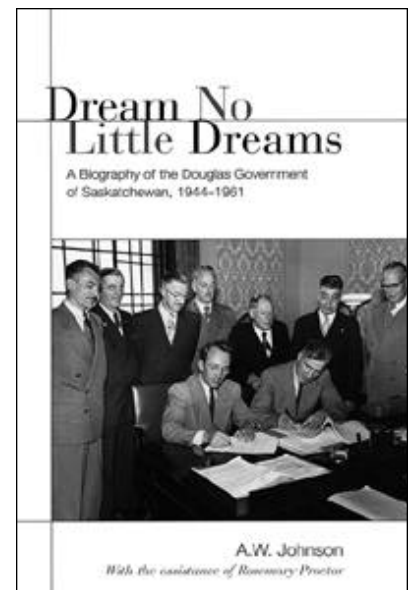


Social democracy in Saskatchewan: Tommy Douglas and the Prairie revolution

A.W. Johnson assisted by Rosemary Proctor. *Dream No Little Dreams: A Biography of the Douglas Government of Saskatchewan, 1944-1961*. Toronto: Institute of Public Administration of Canada and the University of Toronto Press, 2004.

Review by Desmond Morton



Back in the 1980s, almost a quarter-century after I had abandoned a fledgling career in the staff of the Ontario NDP for the security and marginal relevance of academe, I suggested to some former colleagues that New Democrats might be interested in studying the processes of government on the off-chance that they might actually win the power they had purportedly been seeking since the party was reorganized from the CCF in 1961.

The suggestion was badly received. I was firmly reminded that evidence that New Democrats were actually planning to become a government must be electorally disastrous. Back in 1971, when Stephen Lewis had led the Ontario NDP, he had been billed in a leaflet as a potential premier. The document had then greatly eased the labours of fundraisers for Ontario's seemingly-permanent Tory government. The possibility of socialists running Canada's richest province, however inconceivable by any contemporary polling results, opened corporate and private cheque books with gratifying speed. The lesson was learned. If the NDP was to win, it must come as a complete surprise.

Indeed it did. Only a year or so after I had withdrawn my suggestion,

David Peterson called a snap election for September 6, 1990. Having rid themselves of the Tories and learned that Ontario Liberals brought no skill to the art of governing in hard times, a surprising number of voters turned to the NDP. Instead of retiring to private life after another widely predicted defeat, Bob Rae found himself the leader of a 74-person caucus, the first third-party government since the United Farmers won Ontario in 1919. A smart and self-confident politician who had grown up in a civil service family, Rae was not nearly as astonished by his position as the scores of NDP candidates who had expected to return to their classrooms, nursing stations and union offices and who now found themselves transformed into full-time politicians and even ministers.

The one certainty facing any new government, especially one with a radical image, is that the promised land is unlikely to flow with milk and honey. Ontario voters had defeated the Liberals because they were hurting. Premier Peterson, preoccupied with constitutional blueprints, had apparently not noticed. As for Ontario Tories, how could they when Brian Mulroney held

power in Ottawa? Rae and his candidates had keynoted the pain that troubled enough voters to give the NDP a majority. As a result, Rae's new government inherited a province with soaring unemployment, an unexpected deficit, and the worst depression since the 1930s. Unfortunately, Rae's new regime was so busy puzzling over the government machinery they had unexpectedly inherited that they had little energy left over to do much with it. By the time they did, it was too late.

Hidden wherever Harvard University keeps old dissertations was a document which just might have saved the Rae government. In *Dream no Little Dreams*, now published in a new, expanded and enhanced version, Al Johnson explained how Saskatchewan's social democratic provincial government achieved a social revolution despite far worse circumstances than Bob Rae faced in 1990s Ontario. If there is a book of the year in Canadian public policy history, this is the likely winner.

When the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation or CCF swept Saskatchewan on June 15, 1944, with 53.5 percent of the popular vote and 47 of 52 seats in the

legislature, the triumph could easily have doomed the democratic left in Canada. Saskatchewan was then the poorest province in Confederation in 1944. Its public service, untrained and selected by party patronage, had neither taste nor talent for innovation. If a government's solvency is measured by whether it can market its bonds, Saskatchewan was broke. The province owed Ottawa for seed grain supplied

of the furious, continent-wide resistance of the medical profession. With even greater originality, Saskatchewan became the world pioneer of government-run, universal auto insurance, sold with the annual registration plates.

While CCF politicians and Saskatchewan's own people share a substantial part of the credit, Al Johnson explains the role of government, whether ministers, career civil

— were not continued. Oil and gas exploration, over some CCF objections, were left to free enterprise. Public enterprise was plainly never going to produce the profits to finance social programs. Other accomplishments, from education to rural electrification, took time and patience. So did the evolution of a professional and highly competent public service. Part of that process was the education leave at

Hidden wherever Harvard University keeps old dissertations was a document which just might have saved the Rae government. In *Dream No Little Dreams*, now published in a new, expanded and enhanced version, Al Johnson explained how Saskatchewan's social democratic provincial government achieved a social revolution despite far worse circumstances than Bob Rae faced in 1990s Ontario. If there is a book of the year in Canadian public policy history, this is the likely winner.

after the 1937 drought killed the wheat crop. Mackenzie King had cut Saskatchewan some slack as long as it voted Liberal; with the CCF in power, Ottawa simply held the province's transfer payments. Yet the CCF had campaigned on a detailed program of often costly and controversial reforms. The stage was set for the kind of bitter disappointment that Canadian voters these days experience all too often.

Instead, with no particular magic beyond Premier T.C. Douglas's inspirational optimism and the solid core of prairie pragmatism that permeated the cabinet, caucus and the CCF cadres, Saskatchewan's CCF government survived for twenty remarkably inno-

vative years. Except in its first term it faced an active opposition and unending criticism from the province's daily newspapers. Never a "have" province, Saskatchewan pioneered universal hospital insurance in the CCF's first four-year term. Building on free care for tuberculosis and mental illness, with specific experience of universal health insurance in the Swift Current district, Douglas and his successor, Woodrow Lloyd, pioneered Medicare in the face

servants or young men and women like himself, drawn to a remote, impoverished Canadian province to fulfil their own radical ideals. Growing up in Regina in the 1940s, I remember George Cadbury or Morris Shumiatcher, chiefly because they were regularly reviled in the *Leader Post* and at Liberal rallies in the armouries across from our house. Johnson describes Cadbury's contribution to the Economic and Advisory Planning Board, or EAPB, the research-based

Harvard that allowed Johnson to produce the earlier version of this book. That interlude prepared Johnson for his role in the CCF's climactic struggle for universal health insurance, described here from an insider's perspective.

Critics will complain that Johnson is too close to his subject and too close to Douglas and the CCF to be a critic of their style of government. His book may not commend itself to Danny Williams in Newfoundland, Gordon Campbell in British Columbia or Jean Charest's Liberals in Quebec City. Even there, however, Johnson's description of how to move a government in a fresh direction has relevance, enriched by Al Johnson's lifetime experience in both Ottawa and Regina. *Dream No Little Dreams* will not be the last word on

With no particular magic beyond Premier T.C. Douglas's inspirational optimism and the solid core of prairie pragmatism that permeated the cabinet, caucus and the CCF cadres, Saskatchewan's CCF government survived for twenty remarkably innovative years.

guide for Douglas and his Cabinet and the major check on Joe Phelps, his radical and sometimes uncontrollable minister of natural resources, and Shumiatcher's role in giving Saskatchewan a pioneering Human Rights Act.

Over time, the CCF grew less radical. Early experiments with public ownership — a box factory, a woollen mill, a sodium sulphate plant

Saskatchewan's experience of social democracy, but nowhere to date have more complex questions found clearer or more persuasive answers.

Saskatchewan native Desmond Morton, a graduate of NDP back rooms, is the founding director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada and Hiram Mills Professor of History at McGill University. He is the author of 36 books.
desmond.morton@mcgill.ca