

Book Reviews

The 1200 Days: A Shattered Dream: Dave Barrett and the NDP in BC 1972-75, by Lorne J. Kavic and Garry Brian Nixon. Coquitlam: Kaen Publishers, 1978. Pp. 290.

Son of Socred: Has Bill Bennett's Government Gotten B.C. Moving Again? by Stan Persky. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1979. Pp. 319.

British Columbia has come of age. The much vaunted left/right two party system, which our teachers of yesterday told us was the hallmark of maturity, is now ours to savour and enjoy. An additional sign of maturity, partly a response to the general growth of interest in provincial studies in Canada, is the expanding literature dealing with B.C. politics. While our bookshelves are scarcely groaning, they now sport a respectable display of books and journals on British Columbia. *BC Studies* is now in its second decade. The number of graduate theses steadily expands and illuminates the dark spots in our past. An additional welcome indication of this healthy introspection is found in book-length journalistic and descriptive political commentary aimed at the general public.

The 1200 Days and *Son of Socred* fall into this latter category. Persky explicitly refers to the responsibility of privileged academics "to spend more of their time and skills addressing the general public rather than just talking to each other" (p. 8). Neither work has any pretence to be the last word on its respective subject — the NDP period in office from 1972 to 1975 for Kavic and Nixon, and the Social Credit years from 1975 to 1978 of Bennett the younger for Persky. The authors employ no scholarly jargon, and they parade no grand theories before the lay audience they address. Both books are in part personal responses to the intense experience of living in British Columbia in the seventies. The major reference source in both cases is the daily press, supplemented for Kavic and Nixon by extensive interviews with NDP informants. Interviews are much less important for Persky, who is and has been many things, but not yet a Social Credit insider.

Reliance on the press is evident in the organization, style and general approach to both books. Both jump a bit breathlessly from episode to episode, theme to theme, and vignette to vignette with minimum linkage.

Most of the chapters, like decks of cards, could have been reshuffled with negligible damage to the overall presentation. This reflects not only their authors' dependence on the daily press, with its short attention span and discontinuities, but the fragmented nature of the two governments under examination.

The frantic reform ad hockery of a socialist government with a gut reaction against planning is perfectly captured by Kavic and Nixon's pilgrimage through the NDP adventures and misadventures in policy areas from agriculture to welfare. What the various strands and subjects of NDP policy shared in common was that they were never considered in common by the cabinet or the Premier. The NDP had no overriding criteria nor clearly enunciated priorities to help the critic to measure performance against objectives. Their policy output, loosely informed by social democratic sentiment, had the coherence of a smorgasbord.

Persky's subject is equally recalcitrant. After the successful completion of its major task of "throwing the rascals out" in order to "get B.C. moving again," the Social Credit government of Bill Bennett has been unable to engender any kind of compelling or overarching vision. Now in its second term, the government has been unable to take charge and project a sense of mastery. Persky's volume, in spite of the sub-title "Has Bill Bennett's government gotten British Columbia moving again?", is only imperfectly integrated by assessing the Social Credit performance against the imprecise slogan of its 1975 return to power.

The last British Columbia government to have a clear idea of where it was going and how to get there was the Social Credit government of W. A. C. Bennett. Bennett indisputably had a better understanding of what he wanted to do with power than either of his successors in the seventies. The "old man" had a coherent and extensive set of province-building objectives sufficient to keep his government active for most of his twenty-year tenure of office. The curious assumption, widespread in academic circles in the sixties, that the first Social Credit government represented politics without purpose, must seem incredible to the recent and present power-holders in Victoria floundering for an enduring sense of direction. The NDP seems to have exhausted itself in one brief term. By the time of the 1975 election the party was reduced to the leader and the leader was reduced to the slogan "Don't let them take it away!" which, no matter how you slice it, is not a clarion call for the future. Social Credit, in the period covered by Persky, never really extricated itself from the crusade against socialism which, highly useful in attaining power, was only of limited use thereafter.

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These two volumes deal with events which changed the psychic landscape of British Columbians. The simple fact of the election of the NDP, four decades after the party was formed, and after twenty years of Social Credit rule, was far more traumatic to the provincial political system than the 1957 election of Diefenbaker, after twenty-two uninterrupted years of Liberal rule, was to the federal political system. The hitherto persisting reality of the left as the perennial querulous opposition and of its opponents — Liberals, coalition or Social Credit — as the natural and inevitable governors was destroyed at one stroke when the NDP won in 1972. The great taboo had been finally broken; the unthinkable (on both sides) had happened. For forty years the left had been close to power; from at least the mid forties the rhetoric of the political battle had featured a great contest of the 'isms. Stratagems and spoils ranging from the organizational merger of coalition, to the alternative ballot, to the dramatic Social Credit breakthrough of 1952-53 had kept the left on the sidelines as a recurrent threat that in the last analysis was always successfully handled. Until 1972. For 1,200 days the Barrett government wielded immense power, expended massive sums and enacted bushels of legislation. The political identity of British Columbians was changed. The displacement of the Liberals and Conservatives through the elections of 1972, 1975 and 1979 extended and solidified the hold of Social Credit and the NDP on the party system, and made highly probable the return of the latter to power in the not-too-distant future. The 1970s gave British Columbians two possible parties of government, each of which could expect, over time, to sit on both sides of the Legislative Assembly.

Kavic, Nixon and Persky go some way in describing this significant transformation in our political condition, and its meaning, but on the whole they are pursuing smaller game. Both books concentrate on governing office holders, and provide a running political commentary on their policies, typically giving most space to those policy misadventures or lapses of judgment that caught the attention of the media. The authors, however, seldom lift their gaze from an obsessive concentration on the antics of the holders of power to ponder and examine the profound transformation in the provincial party system to which the successive elections of the NDP in 1972 and Social Credit in 1975 contributed. Thus in the Kavic-Nixon book the most politically important and sociologically fascinating development, the coalition of the opposition around Social Credit, is given eight pages, considerably less than is accorded to ICBC. As Reg Whitaker shrewdly noted in reviewing these two books: "Social

democracy in Canada has signally failed to raise the consciousness of the working class, but it has been remarkably successful at raising the consciousness of the bourgeoisie" (*Canadian Dimension*, June 1979, p. 50), to such an extent that the return of Social Credit to power in 1975 — a party, it should be remembered, that was almost universally considered to be on the ropes and destined for the ashcan when the NDP took office — was based on over 49 percent of the total vote, well above the figures typical of Social Credit in its heyday from 1952-1972. By the time of the 1975 election the Social Credit membership of 72,000 gave the NDP the appearance of an elitist, cadre party by comparison.

Persky, in spite of his extensive possibilities for participant observation in the NDP, tells us little of what happened on the NDP side of the political spectrum after the defeat of 1975. In what respects did the party reassess its position? What did the party members at all levels learn about governing and about socialism from a rapid rise and fall almost without parallel in Canadian history? If they did not engage in soul searching and rigorous self-analysis is this because the relationship of the B.C. NDP to the intellectuals and the idea merchants is so tenuous? More fundamentally, the NDP share of the popular vote grew from 34 percent in 1969 to nearly 40 percent in 1972 and 1975, culminating in 46 percent in 1979. This transformation in the NDP electoral base, in conjunction with the experience of governing, tugged and pulled the NDP of the late seventies in new directions that are not analyzed in Persky's account.

To make these observations is not to disparage Kavic, Nixon and Persky for not doing what they did not intend to do. They have provided us with a useful, selective running commentary on the wiles, stratagems, successes and failures of two sets of leaders from 1972-78. They make politics entertaining, and they certainly diminish the awe with which we sometimes invest our leaders. They leave to others the examination of the dialectical interplay between parties and between parties and society as the NDP straddled an increasingly large and heterogeneous electoral base, as Social Credit, on the verge of disappearance, survived and revived to become a new mass party, and as the Liberals and Conservatives were pushed even further to the sidelines. By the 1979 election the combined NDP and Social Credit share of the total provincial vote was over 94 percent, and British Columbians had a very different party system than they had when the decade began.

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Persky's narrative is anchored in a left-wing perspective. In a recent interview he described himself as "one of the guys whose idea of disguis-

ing myself is to come out and announce what I am. . . . I never leave people with any ambiguous sense of where I stand" (*Vancouver Sun*, 6 September 1980).

There is a "ruling class" which means "nothing more mysterious than that 1 per cent or so of the population who hold positions of public power or who own what is euphemistically called 'the private sector' and who, in the process, annually pocket a disproportionate share of all personal wealth" (p. 118). Then there is a "vast entity called 'the state' [which] is, if not a creature, then at least expressive, of the interests of the ruling class." By the state Persky means "all central, regional and local legislative bodies, their attendant bureaucratic instruments, the judiciary, and the coercive forces, which can be armed to the teeth" (p. 119). Next there is "'the ideological apparatus' . . . meaning the entire system by which people come to think whatever it is they think when the Gallup Poll comes to their door [which] tends to propagate and instil the views of that same ruling class. . . ." (p. 119). Not surprisingly, Persky believes that most of the population suffers from a basic "political miseducation" (p. 285), partly due to a school system that reproduces the existing class structure to the advantage of elites.

In an explicit sense Persky's big theoretical picture is far from prominent in his analysis, partly, no doubt, due to the difficulty of blending Marx and Miliband with a style which delights in such chapter headings as "Why did the Chicken Cross the Border? & Other Barnyard Bafflers." Leftism does, however, provide Persky with a comfortable double standard. In his own words: "Although the acts of malfeasance may be similar, the sins of the saints appear differently in the Big Ledger than those of the sinners. The bank account bumbblings of semi-socialists are not the same as those of free-enterprising businessmen, irrespective of the sums involved" (p. 28). This moral stance, a mild and understated version of a pervasive twentieth-century tendency of left-wing intellectuals, deserves a rigorous defence that Persky does not provide. Since in other countries and in other times the indulgent attitudes of intellectuals to the defects of regimes calling themselves socialist occasion little cause for retrospective pride, Persky, on some future occasion, might elaborate somewhat on this innocent little first step he has taken, and on what the limits of the double standard are. A reviewer, for example, might wonder whether it logically follows that the works of those academic saints who promote the left should also be judged by a more lenient standard than those written by misguided and dangerous sinners on the other side.

No reader will assume that *Son of Sacred* was written by a free enterprise admirer of the Bennett government. Nevertheless, Persky, given his professed ideological stance and his delight in employing his extensive repertoire of colourful language — the Social Credit slate in 1975, for example, is described as “consisting largely of turncoats, retreats and opportunists” (p. 61) — is moderate, fair and balanced in his analysis of many of the specifics of the Social Credit performance.

Nixon and Kavic’s theoretical perspective is less easily discerned. They have even fewer theoretical asides than Persky. Both Kavic, the Principal of Columbia College and an historian, and Nixon, a former newspaper publisher and now in the Department of History, Economics and Political Science at Columbia College, however, display a basic empathy with the NDP. Their first chapter, dealing with the historical background, provides a classic indication of the kind of sentimental rhetoric that has moved the faithful for years. Victory followed “40 years in the wilderness of Opposition. . . . [f]orty years in the desert. . . .” (p. 10). When on election night it became clear that the party was in fact going to win this was the signal at various party headquarters “For what? Delirium [*sic*]; pandemonium; euphoria; there is no describing the scene as the wanderers glimpsed their first unexpected view of the promised land.

“The desert years were over.”

Barrett, “who had led them out of the wilderness,” and the party supporters drank beer, “Barrett’s own favourite beverage, and the traditional beverage of the common man . . . the drink that slaked the thirst of 40 years in the desert” (pp. 26-27). As the book winds to a close a subsection appropriately called “The Morning After” sees the “Dreamers once more banished to the wilderness to gather up the shattered fragments and piece together The Dream once again” (pp. 264-65). Somewhat confusingly, on the same election night when the Dreamers packed their bags for the wilderness, W. A. C. Bennett, with tears in his eyes, spoke movingly of the Social Credit victory of his son which ended “three and half years in the wilderness for the people” (Persky, p. 17).

Interspersed between references to deserts and wilderness in Kavic and Nixon there is evidence of a shrewd use of the pocket calculator. Apparently in 1941 a switch of only 792 “ideally distributed votes would have given [the CCF] a majority” (p. 10). In 1945 “a shift of only 2,189 ideally placed voters would have given the party victory” (p. 12), and, not mentioned, would have constituted one of the great election robberies of the twentieth century. In 1952 if all of the very high number of rejected/spoiled ballots had been given to the CCF and had been “prop-

erly distributed in their favour" the party would have again had a majority (p. 29, n. 18), while in 1953 "properly distributed" spoiled ballots would have only given the CCF a minority government (p. 30, n. 25). In 1960 "some 2,000 ideally distributed votes kept them from forming BC's first socialist government" (p. 16), while in 1969 a redistribution of 5,699 votes "in certain seats" would have given the NDP a minority government, and of 7,194 votes a majority government (p. 31, n. 37). It is not clear what we are to make of this editorial gerrymandering since, to take the 1969 election as an example, Social Credit actually received nearly 126,000 more votes than the NDP, and had a percentage lead of 46.8 to 33.9.

Somewhat paradoxically, in view of their evident sympathy for the NDP, Kavic and Nixon have been harshly criticized by Reg Whitaker for writing a "dreadful book . . . [with] its basic premise . . . that the NDP government was a disaster from which the province had to be saved at any cost" (*Canadian Dimension*, June 1979, p. 49). This is an extreme judgment which ignores the authors' attempts to be objective, their general search for a balanced assessment, their repudiation of some of the more pejorative evaluations of the party's record, and their positive citation of the party's accomplishments in office.

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A reading of these two volumes raises a number of questions about the study and practice of politics in British Columbia.

1. If car dealers, particularly of the "used" variety, did not exist for left wing academics to despise, what or who would take their place?

2. The progressive elimination of the Liberals and Conservatives from provincial politics has left British Columbians with the classic British-type party system of two major parties, roughly based on a left-right distinction, that progressive academics from Underhill to Porter and Horowitz have so long championed. Is what we have in British Columbia the "creative politics" which should produce envy in jurisdictions not blessed with similar polarization? Why are so many British Columbians dissatisfied with their political good fortune?

3. What kind of polarization do we have in provincial politics? On the one hand the erosion of support for Liberals and Conservatives has left us with two party contenders who dominate the scene and indulge in venomous attacks on each other. Further, the frenzy, fervour and intensity of emotion which characterize elections leave little doubt about the depth of partisan feeling in the electorate. On the other hand, as the two parties

encompass broader and broader cross sections of the electorate they increasingly overlap and both seek supporters in the middle of the spectrum. As I write, the evening paper confronts me with a grinning Dave Barrett and three senior businessmen under the heading "‘Pragmatism on Both Sides’: Businessmen warm to Barrett" (*Vancouver Sun*, 10 January 1981). Thus, as both of these books make clear, the exaggerated rhetoric of party distinctiveness conceals convergences of the parties in other areas. The Social Credit government of Bill Bennett, as Persky notes, is only a slightly right-of-centre private enterprise government. Kavic and Nixon argue that the 1972-75 NDP government in many ways was closer to its Social Credit predecessor and successor than to other social democratic governments in Canada and elsewhere.

4. In much of the world socialism is viewed as an instrument of wealth creation and economic growth. Yet, as the chapter headings of Kavic and Nixon indicate, this orientation was virtually non-existent in the 1972-75 NDP government. Redistribution and increasing the contribution of the economy to government revenues had a much higher priority. These are obvious if not inevitable policy priorities of a socialist party long in opposition in an affluent province. A further boost to this perspective is provided by the general absence of businessmen or sympathy for their concerns in party ranks. Finally, in the first Bennett era from 1952 to 1972 the incumbent government appropriated the development theme for itself. It was virtually an automatic reactive electoral strategy for the left to concentrate on some of the negative social and ecological consequences of the Bennett development thrust, rather than make the implausible assertion that development would be more impressive under left-wing fostering and tutelage.

If, as seems likely, the NDP moves in and out of office in the future it is probable that economic growth will become a more positive priority.

5. What is the explanation for the laissez-faire administration and policy-making style of the NDP from 1972 to 1975? Macro explanations are suspect. It is doubtful that the NDP style can be fully explained either by B.C. political culture in general, or more specifically by the particular intellectual traditions and evolution of the left as a subculture and ideological orientation. Kavic and Nixon attribute much of the style and nature of the NDP performance to the party having been too long in opposition. While all these factors are of some relevance, a powerful case can be made that a Berger NDP government would have been very different from the Barrett government, and would have been closer in per-

formance, style and tightness of ship to the Blakeney NDP regime in Saskatchewan.

6. Persky concludes that ICBC, after an admittedly rough startup period, has justified itself and is now sacrosanct (pp. 114-16). His positive evaluation seems to be based on a rather narrow consumer-oriented assessment of advantages and disadvantages. If, however, the picture is broadened to include the initial and ongoing impact of ICBC on the political system, then a positive evaluation does not so readily emerge. Such an evaluation would include the trauma of annual rate-setting, the intermittent political intervention by the government of the day, the inevitable exploitation of ICBC problems by the opposition, the search for favouritism for themselves, their constituents and their friends by MLAs, the loss of valuable cabinet time which could be devoted to more important issues, and the political crisis of strikes in a government monopoly. The ICBC has contributed to the insecurity of governments since its introduction in 1973. Future historians may see its major effect as speeding up the turnover of governments. In terms of its overall impact on provincial public life the addition of a functional equivalent of a Post Office to the public sector is not an unequivocal step forward.

7. When will anthropologists, worried about their disappearing subject matter, realize the virgin fields awaiting the deployment of their disciplinary expertise in the Legislative Assembly and cabinet chambers in Victoria?

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Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885-1917, by Carlos A. Schwantes. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1979. Pp. 288.

In 1973, for the first time ever, the Governor of Washington and the Premier of British Columbia exchanged official visits. The American state was represented by a "straight arrow" engineer, the conservative Daniel Evans; the Canadian province by the "earthy social worker," the Socialist Dave Barrett. To many historians, including Carlos Schwantes, these two men symbolized the communities they governed. It is to explain the divergent histories of this economic and social unit, "The Pacific Northwest" — one part of which could produce an Evans, the other, a Barrett — that Schwantes has devoted his book. (Fortunately for Schwantes and his thesis, this visit did not take place a couple of years later when