

Bennett II: The Decline and Stumbling of Social Credit Government in British Columbia, 1979-83, by Stan Persky. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1983. Pp. 272.

As this review is being written, the B.C. legislature is once more in turmoil. Verbal abuse, temporary expulsion and filibuster mark its proceedings and convey to the outsider a sense of pandemonium. Stan Persky's most recent account of Bill Bennett and his Social Credit government suggests that this is the way of the political world in British Columbia; for *Bennett II*, a sequel to *Son of Socred* published in 1979, depicts the cut and thrust of government and opposition from the late 1970s until the eve of the most recent general election, although, unfortunately, it does not include the results of that contest or the tumultuous events thereafter.

Contrary to constitutional usage, Persky insists on calling this period Bennett's "second term," a misnomer not altogether inappropriate to the episodic atmosphere of provincial politics he describes. By his own admission the book is "a popular account," based largely on the mass media for its sources. This does not mean it is without substance, only that it lacks scholarly pretension, as is superficially evident in the absence of footnotes but genuinely regrettable in its failure to analyze the multitude of facts presented or to explore the larger issues of provincial politics implicit in the quixotic actions of the Bennett government.

Persky disdains to label either the politics of his account as soap opera. But features of that particular form of drama are much in evidence: the non-development of character, the repetition of events (like the Bourbons, no one seems to learn anything from experience), a huge cast of players (memorable only for the alliteration of their surnames — in the "dirty tricks" chapter on Socred attempts at managing the news, there are Keen and Kelly, Kempf and Campbell, Meyers and Mitchell, Lenko and Levi), a penchant for actions outrageous and irresponsible (in both the constitutional and non-constitutional senses) and a love of turgid but predictable prose. As well, Persky's own command of metaphor, simile and easy adjective too often echoes the political world he attacks — for its crassness, demagoguery, partisanism and bad faith — and impedes more than it informs his commentary.

Despite unremitting criticism of Social Credit in power, *Bennett II* is not a partisan diatribe. It examines and condemns the government according to its own ends (for example, BCRIC — the British Columbia Resources Investment Corporation, the Japanese coal deal to develop

northeastern B.C., Pier B.C.) and means (for example, the redistribution fiddles, the restraint sham, the media manipulation). The condemnation rests on two counts: the Socreds' political as well as administrative mismanagement of public affairs and their sponsorship of policies whose costs and benefits were inequitably distributed. The first criterion should (but Persky recognizes does not) especially humble Social Crediters, since it was of their own device: Social Credit claimed a special ability at running businesses efficiently, a talent they proclaimed the "socialists" conspicuously lacked. The second, which the NDP opposition and just about everyone who had not taken an oath of office shared, criticized the government's free-wheeling approach to policy decisions, devoid of perspective or planning but open to special interest manipulation. If ever there was a genuine desire on the part of the Socreds to introduce an element of people's capitalism (disregarding for the time being what that animal might look like if found), then limited vision, administrative ineptitude and a wealth of political cronyism discouraged its realization.

These are hard judgments, and their tireless repetition (about the only breather is a few kind words on Bennett's role in the final months of the constitutional discussions) has the literary effect of overkill. Eventually the reader comes to wonder if the record can really be this bad. Assuming the facts do not lie, is there any exit from the chicanery that passes for politics here? There is, but Persky does not take it, preferring instead to cite one more fact, one more piece of evidence of Social Credit's disqualification for public office.

Persky takes the politicians more seriously than they take themselves; he applies standards of conduct that do not apply, or that must be applied to a lower order of behaviour, in B.C. politics or in provincial politics generally. Because the author never looks ahead or back or around, there is no way of telling how typical or unrepresentative of provincial governments Social Credit is in British Columbia. Provincial terrain everywhere offers shallow soil for constitutional government to take root or to flourish. In the western provinces in particular the legislatures have not customarily been the forum in which political debate or decision occur. Rather it has been in the farmer's organizations or on the radio or the modern "hot-line," where politics is discussed and in the consultations with special interest groups where priorities are determined. If this moving of debate and decision out of the legislatures, and carrying it to the people or to interested "publics" constitutes demagoguery, then it is demagoguery not confined to British Columbia.

This would be a better book, though admittedly a different one too, if the author had opted for more analysis and fewer details. Consider, for example, his praise for the press corps whose "tasks . . . could not be better performed by anyone else, not even the official opposition." What tasks? How were they different from those of the official opposition? And why, for that matter, is the official opposition so muted throughout the book? What is the relationship of the Vancouver press (which is the only one mentioned) to the rest of the province?

Or, more generally, how is political opinion formed or transformed in the province? Very little is said here about politics outside the klieg lights of metropolitan British Columbia. There appears to have been only one by-election in the whole period under review (there is no index by which to check, nor tables to determine the length or dates of sessions) and that contest Social Credit won. In light of the indictment the author has compiled, how is the victory to be explained?

The administrative mores of Social Credit dismally fall short of the model Persky applies to gauge political conduct. Cabinet's overruling of the Land Commission, thereby allowing agricultural land to be used for industrial or commercial but always profitable and suspected partisan purposes, is roundly condemned. The cry of one minister about "what is so wrong with elected people having the last say," is noted but not discussed, nor is another minister's charge that the NDP "think they invented democracy." And yet, much of the book's argument would seem to confirm that in fact there are two versions of democracy abroad in British Columbia: the one the moribund model of responsible government which Persky laments, the other the direct, at times even extra-legislative, rule that Social Credit provides and which the electorate sustains.

The strength of *Bennett II* is that it describes the peculiar features of this province's politics; its weakness is that it fails to explain them.

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The Klondike Quest. A Photographic Essay, 1897-1899, written and edited by Pierre Berton. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1983. Pp. 240, illus. \$50.00.

Historians and other academics have greeted Pierre Berton's forays into their domains with decidedly mixed opinions. His aim is at the mass market and his method is to tell a story well; neither of these is a hall-