

*Succession: The Political Reshaping of British Columbia*, by David J. Mitchell. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1987. Pp. 201.

In his first book, David Mitchell parlayed privileged access to W. A. C. Bennett into a comprehensive and insightful biography of British Columbia's most successful Premier and a detailed, often critical look at his impact on provincial politics. In his second, *Succession: The Political Reshaping of British Columbia*, the benefits of access are still evident, but the result is shallower and often one-sided.

Mitchell takes us from the defeat of Social Credit in 1972, past the resurrection of Social Credit under the leadership of William R. Bennett, through the younger Bennett's career as Premier, to his resignation and replacement by William Vander Zalm. The primary focus is on the beliefs and actions of the province's political and business élites, a focus defended on the grounds that "the only continuity [in British Columbia] is provided by the politics of personality that gives populist leaders inordinate power in shaping the province's future" (p. 9).

Mitchell is clearly an admirer of Bill Bennett. There is little doubt that the former Premier was largely responsible for reviving and modernizing a political party that most observers believed would disappear after the 1972 defeat. However, Mitchell also feels it necessary to defend his record as Premier against critics of the restraint program and other controversial actions. Unfortunately, while he acknowledges the existence of critics, he devotes little space to their arguments, while accepting those of Bennett and his defenders at face value. He even argues that "although his administration had a reputation for being too tough on the poor and disadvantaged, each year it spent an increasing percentage of the provincial budget on social services, health and education" (p. 88). In fact the budget share devoted to these programs peaked in the 1982/83 fiscal year and declined thereafter. Finally, he explains Bennett's decision to resign simply on the grounds that he had accomplished all he set out to do as leader, ignoring the views of some Socreds and the evidence of public opinion polls that Bennett had become an electoral liability.

Mitchell's account of the 1986 succession is the best part of the book. It covers the peculiarities of the party's delegate selection process, the leadership campaigns, and the manoeuvring at the Whistler Convention. The explanation for Vander Zalm's victory, a reaction of the grassroots against the professionals and insiders associated with modernization of the party organization and with Bill Bennett himself, is convincing. Curiously,

the repudiation of Bill Bennett implied by the outcome does not lead Mitchell to reconsider his assessment of Bennett's leadership qualities.

Like many others, Mitchell finds Bill Vander Zalm difficult to fathom. In the same paragraph (pp. 131-32) he is described as someone "who respected the advice of his civil servants and developed strong and enduring relationships with those who worked with him closely" and as the source of complaints by civil servants "that they were never certain of ministry policy until they had read the morning newspaper." If Mitchell is correct, Vander Zalm's political style makes him inherently unpredictable. In contrast to Bill Bennett, "a master at interpreting polls, making a science of the art of politics," Vander Zalm is portrayed as "a master of political intuition, relying almost exclusively on his gut feelings" (p. 189).

*Succession* was obviously written with a popular rather than an academic audience in mind. Nevertheless, one is tempted to ask for a little more detachment from someone whose credentials as a trained historian are advertised on the dustjacket. A focus on personalities makes for entertaining reading, but does not always succeed as analysis. Surely the historical legacy of labour management conflict, instability associated with a resource-based economy, and the stimulus to right-wing cohesion provided by the presence of a strong left party are themselves powerful sources of continuity. Indeed, they have contributed to the polarization which successful politicians are able to manipulate.

Mitchell is undoubtedly aware of these factors. In fact, in the last chapter he suggests that Social Credit rather than the NDP "has been a consistent agent of radical change" in British Columbia and that the province's politics have been "widely misinterpreted" (p. 121). Unfortunately, his analysis is too narrowly conceived and executed to provide convincing support for that conclusion.

*University of British Columbia*

DONALD E. BLAKE