

# The Provincial Party

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The history of British Columbia has been marked by persistent attempts to reform provincial politics. Since 1920, these have frequently taken the form of advocating the election of an efficient non-partisan government unrestricted by organizational ties to federal parties or political "machines." One significant attempt to achieve this goal may be seen in the history of the Provincial Party. Organized in 1922, the party ran forty-one candidates in the 1924 provincial general election. It elected three members to the Legislative Assembly, gained 24.2% of the popular vote,<sup>1</sup> helped defeat both the leaders of the Liberal and Conservative parties and was credited with deciding the result in thirty-three of the forty-eight provincial ridings.<sup>2</sup> Though the party soon disintegrated, its limited success offers evidence that, even in a period of relative economic and social stability, British Columbia voters were not committed to the traditional two party system. A reform party, promising the elimination of machine politics and governmental inefficiency, could obtain considerable electoral support.

The Provincial Party had its origin in the convergence of two political developments in British Columbia in 1922. One of these was the failure of a group of dissatisfied Conservatives to force the resignation of the party leader, William John Bowser. The other was a movement among the United Farmers of British Columbia into the field of direct political action. The frustration of their individual efforts led to union and the formation of the Provincial Party with the first group providing most of the leadership and the second, a nucleus of popular support.

Discontent within the Conservative party had been growing for a number of years. Bowser, a Vancouver lawyer and long-time power in the government of Sir Richard McBride, had become party leader and

<sup>1</sup> H. A. Scarrow, *Canada Votes* (New Orleans: Hauser Press, 1962), p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> *Victoria Colonist*, August 3, 1924.

Premier with McBride's retirement in 1915. Because of economic recession, a lack of sympathy with reform movements, a fatal weakening of party unity and an unappealing personality, Bowser and his government were defeated in 1916.<sup>3</sup> The failure of Bowser to regain office in the 1920 election or even to improve significantly his party's popular vote, despite a marked decline in the Liberal government's popularity, increased party disunity.

By 1922, this internal dissent became public. Reflecting this, the *Victoria Colonist*, the self-appointed conscience of the Conservative party, called editorially for party reorganization.<sup>4</sup> The Kamloops Conservative Association demanded Bowser's resignation.<sup>5</sup> The Vancouver Young Conservatives echoed this cry and laid plans to seize control of the party organization and to elect a new leader at the party's next annual convention.<sup>6</sup> Over the next months, both the rebels and Bowser's supporters worked to gain the votes of the convention delegates.

The dissidents' major problem was to find an alternative leader capable of satisfying the demand for change without alienating the regular party supporters. The most frequently mentioned possibilities were two British Columbia Conservative Members of Parliament, Simon Fraser Tolmie<sup>7</sup> and Henry Herbert Stevens.<sup>8</sup> However, Tolmie flatly refused any nomination and Stevens hesitated until the last moment before accepting without enthusiasm.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, Bowser was a familiar figure with a strong claim to the loyalty of the staunch Conservative. An aggressive and competent parliamentarian, he was, as leader, in a position to control much of the party organization and the selection of delegates. His immediate position was further enhanced by the by-election victory of the Conservative candidate in Cranbrook in August.

Under the circumstances, the dissident Conservatives did surprisingly

<sup>3</sup> B. R. D. Smith, "Sir Richard McBride" (unpublished Master's thesis, Queens University, 1959), p. 319.

<sup>4</sup> *Victoria Colonist*, Jan. 9, 1922.

<sup>5</sup> *Vancouver Province*, April 11, 1922.

<sup>6</sup> *Victoria Colonist*, April 14, 1922.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Fraser Tolmie, Saanich farmer, civil servant and veterinary; elected Member of Parliament, Victoria, 1917, 1921, 1925, 1926, 1936; Minister of Agriculture, 1919-21, 1925; Leader of British Columbia Conservative party, 1926-33; Premier of British Columbia, 1928-33.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Herbert Stevens, broker and accountant; elected Member of Parliament, Vancouver, 1911-25; Minister of Trade and Commerce, 1921; Minister of Customs and Excise, 1926.

<sup>9</sup> *Vancouver Sun*, August 22, 1922.

well. Bowser won confirmation of his leadership with only 51.8% of the convention vote.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, two anti-Bowser Conservatives, R. L. "Pat" Maitland and John Nelson, were elected president and vice-president of the British Columbia Conservative Association. While the result of the voting illustrated the extent of discontent within the party, it also ensured that, because of Bowser's victory, reform from within the Conservative party was unlikely.

During the same year, a movement of political reform also began in the United Farmers of British Columbia. The U.F.B.C. had existed since 1917 as an apolitical association representing the farmers. Following the principles of Henry Wise Wood, it had concentrated on economic organization.<sup>11</sup> Individual locals had supported candidates in federal and provincial elections but the provincial body, unable to accept the tariff policies of the National Progressive Party, had consistently rejected the idea of entering politics.

But, by 1922, a vocal minority began a campaign in favour of direct political action by farmers. Led by R. A. Copland, U.F.B.C. president, and supported by the two most influential farm journals in the province, the *Farm and Home* and the *United Farmer*, the political activists contended that farmers could not improve their economic situation as long as the government was in the hands of business-dominated political parties such as the Liberals and Conservatives.<sup>12</sup>

At the 1922 U.F.B.C. annual convention, the majority decided that the provincial organization should not engage in political action nor form a farmer's party. However, the advocates of political action did gain one concession. The convention agreed to the formation of a committee of the provincial executive which would encourage locals to support parliamentary candidates. Greatly exceeding its powers, this committee later issued a platform and announced plans for the creation of a Farmer-Progressive party to enter the provincial field. In November, a meeting of "fourteen insurgents"<sup>13</sup> appointed a chairman and an organizer. The political activities of the farmers went no further than this, because of a shortage of funds and because the leaders were drawn into the plans to organize the Provincial Party.

<sup>10</sup> *Vancouver Sun*, August 23, 1922.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret A. Ormsby, "The United Farmers of British Columbia," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* XVII (1953), p. 61. Cited hereafter as *UFBC*.

<sup>12</sup> Ormsby, *UFBC*, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum on the Provincial Party, undated, T. D. Pattullo Papers (Victoria: Public Archives of British Columbia). Cited hereafter as *Pattullo Papers*.

Details of the merger are obscure but it seems clear that the link between the two groups was John Nelson, editor of the *United Farmer*, the official journal of the U.F.B.C. Nelson was typical of many British Columbians in that, while formally a Conservative, a frequent correspondent of Arthur Meighen and vice-president of the party's provincial executive, he considered "the introduction of party lines in provincial politics was a matter more of expediency than of conviction."<sup>14</sup> At the 1922 Conservative convention, he had been a vocal opponent of Bowser.

Since then, he had apparently gained the active support of Sir C. H. Tupper<sup>15</sup> and Major-General A. D. McRae, a millionaire British Columbia businessman not previously active in politics, in forming a new provincial political party. At a dinner in December, McRae and Nelson revealed their plans to a select group of prominent Vancouver residents. As a result, a delegation of McRae, Nelson, Percy Bengough, the secretary of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, and three businessmen was appointed to travel to Vernon, the site of the U.F.B.C. convention, to explore the possibilities of a merger.

The political committee of the U.F.B.C., already deeply in debt, readily accepted the proposed union, voted themselves out of existence and entered a provisional executive, consisting of eight farmers and six businessmen, to organize the new party. The combined group immediately presented a tentative platform to the U.F.B.C. convention but were unable to gain official endorsement.

The convention did not accept the Provincial Party's manifesto for two reasons. A majority of the delegates were still not convinced that political action could solve their economic problems. Equally important, many were suspicious of the motives of the movement's leaders, particularly McRae and Nelson. McRae, who was supplying most of the funds for the new party, was suspected of buying his way to political prominence. John Nelson, according to his competitor, *Farm and Home*, had sought to defeat Bowser, not because he wished to reform provincial politics, but because the Conservative party had failed to adopt his newspaper as the official party organ.<sup>16</sup>

How just these accusations were is impossible to ascertain. Without

<sup>14</sup> John Nelson, *The Canadian Provinces* (Toronto: Musson Book Co., 1924), p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> Sir Charles Hibbert Tupper, son of Sir Charles Tupper; held federal cabinet posts under Mackenzie Bowell and his father; retired from active politics after R. L. Borden chosen federal leader; moved to Vancouver to practice law; supported the McBride government until 1907; supported H. C. Brewster and the Liberal party in the 1916 provincial election.

<sup>16</sup> Ormsby, *UFBC*, p. 8.

question, both men were personally ambitious to gain political power but this is true of most politicians. At the same time, there was a genuine disillusionment with the provincial Liberals and Conservatives.<sup>17</sup> While the inspiration for forming the Provincial Party may have been a product of personal ambitions, its growth and electoral support indicates it was also the result of sincere conviction.

Despite this initial setback, the new party quickly began to build. Under the chairmanship of McRae, the executive held a banquet at the Hotel Vancouver to explain its platform to six hundred invited business and professional men, farmers and labour leaders. Speaker after speaker argued that British Columbia's financial problems were the result of the cynical bargaining for votes inherent in the party system. They called for reform by means of a non-party union government which would concentrate its efforts on governing efficiently, reducing the provincial debt and rationally developing the provincial resources. Free from the artificial distinctions of party labels, such a government would attract and give scope to the best men in the province.<sup>18</sup>

By the end of the meeting, enough enthusiasm had been generated to bring about the formation of an advisory Committee of One Hundred to build a province-wide organization. During the next few months, McRae and his associates covered the province, meeting "various degrees of enthusiasm."<sup>19</sup> Whatever else these tours accomplished, they provided a constant source of publicity for the new party. For example, McRae's challenge to Premier Oliver to debate the question of the excessive provincial debt and Oliver's indignant rejection of the proposal made headlines in all of the major provincial newspapers. As a means of publicizing the party and its leader, the speaking tours were successful.

Even the defection of J. A. Armishaw, a prominent advocate of political action by the farmers and one of the original executive of the Provincial Party, did not slow its growth. Announcing his repudiation of the Provincial Party, Armishaw stated that:

The new party is a direct abuse of the confidence it sought from the farmers and is a gigantic attempt to exploit not only the farmers but the whole Province as well. . . . This is no people's movement.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> George Kidd, manager of B.C. Electric Railway, Vancouver, to J. Davidson, secretary, B.C.E.R., London, Jan. 22, 1923, British Columbia Electric Railway Papers (Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library), Box 65.

<sup>18</sup> *Vancouver Star*, Jan. 30, 1923.

<sup>19</sup> J. Castell Hopkins, *The Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1923* (Toronto: Canadian Review Co., 1924), p. 175. Cited hereafter as *C.A.R.*

<sup>20</sup> Ormsby, *UFBC*, p. 70.

He failed to take any large number of farmers with him out of the party and the warning he voiced was soon drowned by a sustained and extraordinarily professional publicity program.

In May 1922, this campaign began with the publication of a laudatory article in *Maclean's Magazine*. While the article contained little of substance, contenting itself with attacking the extravagance of the "old-line" parties in contrast to McRae's business success, it caused apprehension among the party politicians in British Columbia.<sup>21</sup> Such national publicity indicated the Provincial Party was not merely an ephemeral revolt but a well-financed, carefully prepared movement with knowledgeable backers.

This impression was confirmed with the appearance, in the same month of a newspaper-style broadsheet, *The Searchlight*. A thoroughly professional publication, probably edited by Nelson, it featured attention grabbing headlines and cleverly written articles coupled with effectively presented charts, diagrams and quotations. Its sole purpose, and one to which it rigidly adhered, was to present the views of the Provincial Party. Through the use of addressograph machines and free distribution, Nelson and McRae directed *The Searchlight* to a wide audience. Though not proven, *The Searchlight's* claim in its last issue to have equalled the circulation of the *Vancouver Province* is not improbable.

The contents of *The Searchlight* were well and carefully coordinated to present the case for the election of a reform-minded non-partisan government. Under the slogan of "Put Oliver out and don't let Bowser in," *The Searchlight* argued that:

The provincial Liberal and Conservative machines have joined forces to maintain, not party government, but partisan misrule; to maintain a disgraceful partnership whereby they are tricking their loyal supporters in the two parties; and by their united efforts, to prevent disclosures and reform at the hands of the citizen organization, the Provincial Party.<sup>22</sup>

In support of this indictment, *The Searchlight* attacked various government enterprises, particularly the construction of the Pacific Great Eastern Railway. In impassioned prose, it combined rumour, fable and fact to create a picture of governmental stupidity, mis-management, impropriety and scandal under both Liberal and Conservative governments. In each of the first four issues, *The Searchlight* "proved" that British Columbia politics were in the hands of men dedicated only to retaining power, that

<sup>21</sup> Memorandum on the Provincial Party, Pattullo Papers.

<sup>22</sup> *The Searchlight*, no. 2, p. 5. None of the issues were dated although their contents indicate the approximate time of publication. Thus they are identified by issue number.

elections were sham battles and that the province would soon reach economic collapse unless its government was reformed.

Having laid the foundations of its case, *The Searchlight* exploded what was obviously hoped to be their political bombshell. Issue number five presented an affidavit from an ex-government auditor, E. J. Rossiter, contending that Premier Oliver had knowingly allowed Northern Construction to claim inflated and unjustified costs while building a portion of the P.G.E. *The Searchlight* argued that Oliver's actions were:

capable of but one construction — that he is using this enterprise . . . — to entrench himself in office. . . . The common involvement of the leader of the Opposition and himself in a sinister attempt to keep the most important facts from the people is again evident.<sup>23</sup>

The new evidence created a stir. With great fanfare, issue number five was reprinted seven times.<sup>24</sup> A mass meeting in Vancouver, presided over by Birt Showler<sup>25</sup> and addressed by Tupper, McRae and E. P. Davie,<sup>26</sup> demanded a Royal Commission to investigate the charges. The next two issues of *The Searchlight* publicized the meeting and presented another affidavit from a sub-contractor for Northern Construction with further evidence of inflated costs.<sup>27</sup>

Not satisfied with Premier Oliver's announcement of an official audit of the P.G.E.'s books, the Provincial Party continued their agitation at their first annual convention in Vancouver in December. The convention adopted a petition to the Lieutenant-Governor, reiterating all the previous charges and a new allegation that Bowser and William Sloan, Liberal Minister of Mines, had accepted \$50,000 in political contributions during the 1916 election from persons associated with the P.G.E. The petition contended that:

As a result of these two payments, the promoters of the P.G.E. Railway Co. were assured of protection in any event of the ensuing general election and

<sup>23</sup> *The Searchlight*, no. 5, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> This figure in itself means little but there was obviously an increased demand for *The Searchlight* and extensive comment in the provincial newspapers.

<sup>25</sup> Birt Showler, an officer in the Teamster's Union, Vancouver; both he and Bengough were representatives of the craft unions and not active in the various Labour-Socialist political movements.

<sup>26</sup> E. P. Davie, lawyer, Vancouver; both his father and uncle had been Premiers of British Columbia.

<sup>27</sup> *The Searchlight*, no. 7, p. 4.

as a result of such contributions, protection and favourable treatment have been fully accorded.<sup>28</sup>

So specific was the accusation and so great was the publicity given to it that Oilver was forced to act. Still contending that all the charges were merely the work of political adventurers, he, nevertheless, appointed Mr. Justice W. A. Galliher as a Royal Commissioner to investigate the finances of the P.G.E.

In addition, the convention consolidated the party's program and organization. The three hundred delegates formally adopted the original January platform. Reflecting the influence of the Progressive movement in Canada, a block of delegates attempted to have the party adopt a system of legislative recall. This motion was defeated but another resolution from the floor requiring all candidates to swear they would enter no coalition with any other party before or after the election was adopted. While this motion also shows a Progressive influence, its immediate purpose was to convince the electorate that there would be no fusion with the Conservatives.

The most noteworthy event of the convention was the announcement by McRae that he would not stand for the leadership of the party, on the grounds that he had contributed \$39,897.33 of the total party expenses of \$47,548.25. Quite correctly, he felt this left him open to the accusation that he was attempting to buy his way to power. His withdrawal came as a surprise to the delegates and the public. In view of the speed with which the executive decided to forgo a leadership contest, it seems likely that it had advance notice. However, McRae's statement did provide a dramatic series of headlines in the provincial newspapers. He was elected President of the General Association of the Provincial Party and committed to run as a candidate. The question of an official party leader was left to be decided by the legislative caucus after the election.<sup>29</sup>

From the standpoint of its participants, the convention was a success. The new party had demonstrated it had supporters in almost every area of the province and there was substantial agreement on party policies. While McRae's refusal of the leadership did not eliminate the widespread belief that he controlled the party, the convention had not been openly dominated by the leadership; debate had been free and frank. The repu-

<sup>28</sup> *The Searchlight*, no. 8, pp. 23-4. Sloan brought a slander suit against McRae who was unable to support the accusation. Nevertheless the specific nature of the allegation suggests that the Provincial Party really thought they had discovered the truth.

<sup>29</sup> *The Searchlight*, no. 8, p. 19. A similar gambit was used by the Non-Partisans in 1933 and Social Credit in 1952.



diation of any coalition was consistent with the party's self image as a pure reform movement. Most importantly, the publicity given the convention and the appointment of the P.G.E. Royal Commission helped to establish the Provincial Party in the eyes of the public as politically significant.

This impression was further strengthened during the hearing of the Galliher Commission. Aided by the aggressive tactics of C. H. Tupper, the Provincial Party gained widespread publicity for their allegations despite the refusal of the Commissioner to admit hearsay evidence related to the bribery charges. Denials of wrongdoing by Oliver, Bowser and Sloan were ineffective because they were neither under oath nor subjected to cross-examination. As a result, the testimony consisted of a series of contentions and denials which inflamed rather than satisfied public curiosity. Though the Commission exonerated the government in unusually sweeping terms,<sup>30</sup> the controversy did not end.

Oliver proclaimed the Galliher Report had vindicated the policies of his government and, on these grounds, announced a provincial election for June 1924. The Provincial Party, through speeches and *The Searchlight*, contended its charges were not disproven or refuted. Emphasizing Northern Construction's inability to produce its ledgers for the critical year of 1920 and the Premier's failure to explain the marked divergence between estimated and final costs of construction, the Provincial Party attacked the value and the honesty of the Commissioner's conclusions. Over the next few months, they succeeded in convincing many British Columbians that "beneath the findings lay trouble which had been skillfully, and deliberately, covered up."<sup>31</sup>

By the final weeks of the election campaign, the Provincial Party's confidence was growing. In the final edition of *The Searchlight*, an editorial, probably written by John Nelson, tried to show how the election of the Provincial Party was politically feasible. The editorial claimed, with considerable justification, that the new party would attract all the votes cast in 1920 for Soldier and Farm candidates as well as other Independents. With less confidence, it argued that to this total would be added a large vote from Labour and disenchanted Liberals and Conservatives. In all, the party could obtain 30 to 35% of the total vote sufficiently spread throughout the province to elect a government. While this calculation was clearly aimed at convincing the voters that ballots for Provincial Party candidates would not be wasted, it also reflected the belief that the

<sup>30</sup> C.A.R., 1924-25, p. 447.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Ramsey, *The PGE* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1962), p. 190.

party would be able to shatter the two party dominance which had existed provincially since 1903.

This sentiment was the result of the party's success at the constituency level. By election day, the Provincial Party had nominated forty-one candidates; nearly all were respected, property-owning, local residents untouched by party machine connections and supported by active local committees. *The Searchlight* and McRae's organizational abilities and financial backing were important factors in the party's growth. Most impressive seems to have been the involvement of the "rank and file" as evidenced in an extensive person-to-person canvass carried on during the last week of the campaign. So effective had the party's appeal become that both the Liberals and Conservatives concentrated their attacks on the Provincial Party rather than each other.

While the election results did not approximate the predictions of the optimistic, the Provincial Party did score a limited but discernible success. It elected three candidates: D. A. Stoddart, Cariboo; George Walkem, Point Grey; A. McC. Creery, Vancouver. McRae was narrowly defeated in Vancouver only after the advance poll was counted. Both Oliver and Bowser were defeated in their ridings and the Provincial Party, with 24.2% of the vote, was credited with being the decisive factor in thirty-three of the forty-eight constituencies.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, the Provincial Party failed in its stated purpose. It failed to oust the Liberal government even though it did wipe out the government's majority. In effect, it had merely split the anti-Liberal vote, ensuring that the Conservatives with sixteen seats would remain in opposition. Because of the election of three Labour and Independents members, the Provincial Party representatives did not even hold the balance of power in the Legislature.

Its failure to replace either of the old line parties soon revealed the essential fragility of the Provincial Party organization. Within a month of the election, McRae circulated a questionnaire to the local associations suggesting, among other items, the possibility of coalescing with another party while retaining the party's popular support. At the same time, Bowser, under pressure from the legislative caucus, reluctantly resigned as Conservative leader, thus leaving the way open for a reconciliation of the party insurgents.

By December, the disintegration of the Provincial Party became public. Angered by the support of the Liberal government by the party's M.L.A.'s and McRae's failure to attend any meetings, a number of the party's

<sup>32</sup> *Victoria Colonist*, Aug. 3, 1924.

Victoria members walked out of the local association's meeting, proclaiming that "the Provincial Party movement was a mistake."<sup>33</sup> While their remarks may have been premature, events proved their judgment was accurate. McRae withdrew gradually from the party until, in 1926, he was elected Conservative Member of Parliament for North Vancouver. The three party M.L.A.'s showed little unity, voting more as individuals than as members of the same organization. Public interest and party organization dwindled. By 1928, the party's executive acknowledged the obvious by announcing it would nominate no candidates and would release its elected representatives from any obligations. Stoddart and Creery finished out their terms and retired from politics. Walkem sealed his informal adherence to the Conservatives by joining the party officially.

Thus the Provincial Party faded ingloriously from the provincial political scene. Despite the opinion of Tupper that it had scored a great moral victory,<sup>34</sup> it is difficult to credit the Provincial Party with any significant alteration of British Columbia political behaviour. Oliver was re-elected and continued to govern. Bowser continued to be a power in the Conservative party until his death in 1933. Patronage and machine politics continued, the provincial debt rose and the P.G.E. remained a source of scandal and expense.

The failure of the Provincial Party lay in the limited nature of its appeal. Despite the backing of two craft union leaders, Birt Showler and Percy Bengough, the party did not attract the Labour vote which came largely from the more radical industrial unions.<sup>35</sup> Equally important, the expected mass defection of Liberals and Conservatives failed to materialize. The attack of the Provincial Party did reduce the Liberal vote by 6% and the Conservative by 2% but this was insufficient to cause a major upset. Interestingly, despite the publicity campaign and the participation of many individuals, the total vote declined by 10,000,<sup>36</sup> a possible indication that the issues stressed by the Provincial Party were not of great concern to the entire electorate. The conservative nature of its program appealed largely to the literate property owner and, for this vote, the new party was competing with two long established parties. In effect, the Provincial Party was capable only of crystalizing the voting strength of the various independent political factions, an unstable foundation on which to build an enduring party.

<sup>33</sup> *Victoria Colonist*, Dec. 4, 1924.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), p. 487.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater* (Vancouver: B.C. Federation of Labour, 1967), p. 95.

It was because of this fundamental lack of unity that the party disintegrated. The Conservative rebels were primarily interested in forcing a change in the leadership of that party. The farmers were, in part, seeking government aid in reducing their debts and expanding their markets. The business supporters sought more economical government. Some supporters sought patronage, others sought to eliminate it. Undoubtedly still others had less obvious motives, such as personal pride, self-interest and concern with declining social status. While all these disparate groups could unite on a program of "throw the rascals out," they could not remain united, particularly after an electoral defeat and the loss of their leader and organizational genius.

Yet, the Provincial Party, ephemeral and unsuccessful as it proved to be, was an important political manifestation. It demonstrated that even in a period of economic and social stability, a substantial minority of the voters were actively dissatisfied with the entire system of party politics in the province. They were prepared to work and support a totally new party, not only because the Liberal and Conservative parties had weaknesses, but because the Provincial Party promised efficient government by men unrestricted by party allegiances. The appeal of the non-partisan party was illustrated in the 1924 election. Over the following decades, this sentiment frequently recurred in British Columbia provincial politics.