

Simon Fraser Tolmie: The Last Conservative Premier of British Columbia

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In 1928, Simon Fraser Tolmie became the twenty-first premier of British Columbia. As a popular native son and an experienced politician leading a Conservative party with a massive legislative majority in a period of economic prosperity, he seemed assured of a prolonged term of office. Within five years, however, the province was mired in economic depression, the Conservative party and its legislative majority had disintegrated and Tolmie had suffered an ignominious rejection by the voters. The economic crisis of the nineteen thirties, Tolmie's personal deficiencies, and the unstable nature of the Conservative party were contributing factors in this reversal of political fortune.

Simon Fraser Tolmie was the son of pioneer British Columbia families. On his mother's side, he was the grandson of John Work, Hudson's Bay factor, member of the Executive Council of Vancouver Island and early Esquimalt farmer.¹ His father, William Fraser Tolmie, had come to the province in 1833, rising to positions as a Hudson's Bay factor, a director of the Puget's Sound Agriculture Company, a member of the Legislative Council of Vancouver Island and the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, as well as a prominent cattle breeder.² The Tolmie family was clearly part of the "Family-Company-Compact" which was a dominant influence in the development of Vancouver Island and British Columbia.

Born January 25, 1867, the youngest of twelve children, S. F. Tolmie trained as a veterinary surgeon. After his graduation in 1891, he returned to Victoria, taking over his father's farm and acting as municipal cattle inspector. In the following years, he held similar positions with the provincial and federal departments of agriculture while breeding prize cattle on his Cloverdale farm.

Tolmie entered politics more by accident than from ambition. When Sir Robert Borden formed the federal Union Government in 1917, Tolmie

¹ J. B. Kerr, *Biographical Dictionary of Well-Known British Columbians* (Vancouver: Kerr & Begg, 1910), p. 362.

² Joan Mitchell (ed.) *The Journal of William Fraser Tolmie* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1963), p. 385.

was drafted, against his personal inclination, as the Victoria candidate.³ He was elected easily. Two years later when T. A. Crerar left the federal cabinet to lead the National Progressive Party, Tolmie replaced him as Minister of Agriculture.

Although a practising farmer, Tolmie was not an outstanding agriculture minister. His major accomplishment was the elimination of a thirty-year old cattle mange problem, thus enabling Canadian beef to enter the British market. Generally he acted as a public relations man for the department, travelling around the country opening fairs, judging livestock and making bucolic speeches. Administrative detail was left in the hands of his deputy.

After the defeat of Arthur Meighen's Conservative government in 1921, Tolmie accepted his relegation to the opposition benches with equanimity. He retained his popularity and wide circle of acquaintances on both sides of the House while giving complete loyalty to his party and leader. Though he did little of note, he was regularly returned to his seat and was regarded as a competent representative of his Victoria riding.

Perhaps because of his loyalty and affability, Tolmie was appointed by Meighen in 1925 as Dominion organizer of the Conservative party. This position, the exclusive prerogative of the party leader, called for a man who could coordinate the needs of the federal candidates with the activities of the autonomous provincial party organizations. This required tact more than administrative ability, particularly in view of the post's lack of formal authority. The results of the 1925 federal election suggest that Tolmie was not unsuccessful as Dominion organizer but the Conservative defeat in 1926 overshadowed the earlier gains. With the retirement of Meighen and the selection of R. B. Bennett as leader, Tolmie was replaced.

In 1926, the provincial Conservative party was rent with dissension and in dire need of rejuvenation. Since Sir Richard McBride's retirement in 1915, it had lost three consecutive elections. Discontent with the leadership of W. J. Bowser had reached its peak in 1924, leading to the formation of the Provincial Party, the re-election of the Liberals with a minority, and the personal defeat and resignation of Bowser.⁴ At that time, the legislative caucus had offered Tolmie the party leadership.⁵ He had re-

³ Percy Sangster to S. F. Tolmie, Nov. 22, 1932 in S. F. Tolmie Papers (Vancouver: Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library). Cited hereafter as Tolmie Papers.

⁴ I. D. Parker, "The Provincial Party," *BC Studies* VII (Winter 1970-71), p. 17.

⁵ J. H. Scholfield to S. F. Tolmie, June 27, 1924, Tolmie Papers.

fused, pleading a lack of interest and his increased duties with the federal party. For the next two years, the provincial Conservatives drifted under the interim control of R. H. Pooley, unable to call a leadership convention because of the intense federal political activity.

Such a situation could not be allowed to continue if the British Columbia Conservative party was to remain a political force. Immediately following the 1926 federal election, the party called a provincial convention to select a new leader. Tolmie was subjected to increased personal and political pressure to become a candidate but he remained adamant. As the convention date drew near, two candidates, Bowser and Leon J. Ladner, seemed equally strong.

Bowser was the candidate of the regular party organization. He had been a member of the Legislative Assembly since 1903, Attorney-General and second in command to McBride from 1907, Premier in 1915-16 and party leader from 1915-24. To many Conservatives in the province, he was the party's most experienced legislator, McBride's heir, controller of the party organization and dispenser of patronage.

Leon Ladner, though a relative newcomer to politics, possessed attributes likely to improve the party's image and reduce its internal conflicts. Like Tolmie, he was a native of British Columbia, and had been the member of parliament for South Vancouver since 1921. A younger man, his selection would give a new look to a party too long identified with professional politicians. While acquainted with the leaders of the schism that produced the Provincial Party, Ladner had not been involved in the conflict and so antagonized neither the party regulars nor the reformers. Openly supported by the legislative caucus and tacitly backed by Tolmie, Ladner was also the candidate of those who, for a number of reasons, opposed Bowser.

By the start of the convention, neither man had the necessary support to win the leadership. Even Bowser's sudden withdrawal and the switching of his support to Senator J. D. Taylor did not dissolve the deadlock. After seven ballots, though constantly in the lead, Ladner could not obtain the necessary 60% majority required for victory. Facing a possible split which would end the effective life of the provincial Conservative party, Ladner, with the backing of his own supporters and Taylor, proposed that the convention unanimously offer the leadership to Tolmie.⁶

Tolmie, obviously surprised and dismayed, refused, repeating his arguments that he was not financially capable, personally suited, or interested

⁶ Letter from L. J. Ladner, Feb. 5, 1969.

in becoming premier of the province. The frustrated delegates, seeing a solution to their dilemma, would not listen. After an hour long meeting of the party executive, M.P.'s and M.L.A.'s, at which he was offered financial support and appealed to as a loyal British Columbian, Tolmie's very real reluctance was overcome. He accepted the post and the convention dissolved with a massive demonstration of approval, convinced that the Conservative party would form the next government of British Columbia.

In retrospect, the enthusiasm can be understood. The selection of Tolmie had ended the immediate danger of a permanent party split. He was a popular and well-known political figure throughout the province. But the convention had evaded the party's real problem. Since the formation of the British Columbia Conservative party, it had been held together, not by principle, but by power, patronage and personality. As the collapse of the Bowser government in 1916 had shown, these tenuous bonds were insufficient to maintain unity in a crisis. Over the ensuing years, the party had become increasingly fragmented, as the deadlock of the leadership contest demonstrated. Tolmie's election created a superficial unity consisting of no more than the time-honoured desire for office. He was now the head of a party lacking both personal loyalty to him and a distinctive single set of principles. Unfortunately, lulled by the convention's enthusiasm, neither he nor any other Conservative seemed to recognize this weakness or took any concrete steps to remedy it.⁷

In the short term, however, the convention result was satisfactory. Though Tolmie retained his federal seat and seldom exerted his leadership, the party's internal conflicts subsided. Convinced that victory was near, the Conservatives forgot the animosities of the convention and strengthened their organization. At the same time, their political opposition began to decay. The Provincial Party which had so damaged the Conservative cause in 1924 officially disbanded early in 1928. One of its three M.L.A.'s, George Walkem, joined the Conservatives while the other two retired. Labour, which had split the vote in numerous provincial elections, was locked in an internal dispute between its Communist and non-Communist wings and could offer little electoral competition. Thus for the first time since 1915, the provincial general election of 1928 would be virtually a two party contest.

This situation increased the problems of the Liberal party. In the two previous elections, it had formed the government because the opposition votes were split. In addition, its leader, John Oliver, had died in 1927

⁷ Interview with L. J. Ladner, April 15, 1969.

and was succeeded by the humourless, pedantic J. D. Maclean. Although a capable administrator, Maclean could not provide the dynamic personal leadership nor the new policies necessary to revitalize a government too long in office. Bedevilled by rumours of scandal and by conflict with Vancouver over cabinet representation, the Liberal Party's popularity had visibly declined. Nevertheless, an election had to be called.

When the election was announced, Tolmie immediately resigned his federal seat and commenced a whirlwind speaking tour of the province. He campaigned with vigour, humour and confidence and in a period of exceptional prosperity, his promises of government efficiency, tax reduction and economic expansion were well received. An expensive publicity campaign was mounted; well-respected local candidates, most with business or professional backgrounds, were put forward; the party organization functioned smoothly. The result was a Conservative landslide. The new Tolmie administration gained 53.3% of the popular vote and thirty-five of the forty-seven legislative seats. The Liberals were reduced to a twelve member rump.⁸ Tolmie had succeeded where Bowser had failed. He had gained a legislative majority.

Tolmie's perception of his role as premier and party leader was illustrated in his selection of a cabinet. As premier, he deliberately chose to remain free from direct administration, assuming only the minor portfolio of railways. His function was to be akin to that of a chairman of a board, a coordinator. As party leader, he acknowledged the solid support of the metropolitan areas by allotting both Victoria and Vancouver three cabinet posts each. To achieve the customary geographical representation for the rest of the province, he enlarged the cabinet to its statutory maximum of eleven members.⁹ Only two of his ministers were experienced provincial politicians and no Bowser supporters were included.¹⁰

During his first year of office, Tolmie was able to claim two distinct successes. After a number of years of negotiation, the federal government agreed to return to the province the unalienated portion of the Canadian Pacific Railway's land grant, comprising 8,500,000 acres. Moreover, he concluded an agreement with the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railways to survey the natural resources of the territory served by

⁸ H. A. Scarrow, *Canada Votes* (New Orleans: Hauser Press, 1962), p. 224.

⁹ While publicly contending that such expansion would increase efficiency, Tolmie was also concerned with rewarding his supporters. S. F. Tolmie to Senator S. J. Crowe, Oct. 27, 1930, Tolmie Papers.

¹⁰ Passing over the claims of W. H. Dick and J. H. Berry, the most prominent Bowser supporters in the caucus, indicates a deliberate slight by Tolmie or a lack of awareness of the need for conciliation, probably the latter.

the Pacific Great Eastern Railway.¹¹ This, it was fondly believed, would lead to the sale of the provincially owned "white elephant."

In other fields, the government saw its popularity decline. Its failure to introduce new policies was generally accepted as a sign of commendable caution. But the refusal of the Minister of Finance, W. C. Shelly, to reduce taxes by even a minimal amount was sharply criticized since this had been a specific campaign pledge. Even more critical publicity arose over the question of patronage. Tolmie had forcefully rejected the party's demands for a wholesale purge of Liberal appointees,¹² and, in comparison to previous governments, his administration's record on this score was good. Nevertheless, two well-publicized dismissals gave the public impression that the Conservatives' promises to eliminate political favoritism were being ignored.

The dismissal of Norman Watt, a government agent in Prince Rupert, was definitely a partisan maneuver by W. C. Shelly. As a former secretary to T. D. Pattullo, the newly chosen Liberal leader, Watt's political impartiality was questionable but there was no evidence that he had used his position to influence the election. Under pressure from the opposition and some of his own backbenchers, Tolmie set up an inquiry board and reinstated Watt when he was exonerated.¹³

The government's refusal to reappoint Judge Helen G. MacGill, though it received more critical publicity, was a different problem. Judge MacGill had been refusing to sentence female offenders to the provincial Juvenile Home because she believed it to be unsuitable. As Tolmie pointed out privately, she was flouting the law and had ignored the direct order of the Attorney-General to desist.¹⁴ The administration felt it could not retain her under the circumstances. Unfortunately, it did not make its stand clear to the public. Aided by the newspapers and a non-partisan committee of prominent women, the public were persuaded that the Conservatives were punishing this staunch supporter of female rights for her previous Liberal connections.

Pattullo, Liberal leader of the Opposition, fastened on the patronage issue as a means of discrediting the government. He carefully collected and presented, in the form of questions to various ministers, over two hundred accusations that the administration was rewarding its political

¹¹ J. Castell Hopkins, *The Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs 1928-29* (Toronto: Annual Review Publishing Company, 1929), p. 512, 521.

¹² S. F. Tolmie to Senator Smeaton White, Dec. 17, 1929, Tolmie Papers.

¹³ *Victoria Colonist*, Feb. 10, 1930; Feb. 11, 1931.

¹⁴ S. F. Tolmie to J. A. Clark, March 1, 1929, Tolmie Papers.

supporters with government appointments. Although the ministers were able to demonstrate that most of the allegations were unfounded, the resultant publicity, coupled with the earlier incidents, strengthened the view that the Conservatives, despite their promises of reform, had not changed.

The decline in popularity suffered by the Tolmie ministry in its first year of office was not necessarily fatal. Most new governments suffer such a loss when they face the difficulties of converting campaign oratory into practical administration. Usually a government can introduce popular legislation in the pre-election years and regain its favourable image. Unfortunately, the Tolmie government was never granted this opportunity. By 1930, British Columbia was caught up in the Great Depression; electoral popularity was forced to give way to financial necessity.

In retrospect, there were several indications in 1929 that the period of economic prosperity was ending but few British Columbians showed any awareness of their significance. A federal M.P. warned Tolmie that the stagnant condition of the lumber market meant an increase in the numbers of unemployed in the interior.¹⁵ The New York stock market crash commanded much attention from the newspapers but caused no public concern among the province's elected officials. Even a marked increase in relief expenditures in Vancouver and agitation by the unemployed in December 1929, was virtually ignored. Throughout the entire legislative session of 1930, the members made only three passing references to unemployment or declining prosperity. Thus Tolmie, in assuring R. B. Bennett during the federal election that unemployment in British Columbia was not critical, was reflecting accurately public awareness.¹⁶

It was not until the end of the summer and the period of seasonal employment that the decline of the economy became an obvious problem. Finance Minister Shelly warned Tolmie that government tax revenues would be sharply below estimates and previous returns.¹⁷ By September, Vancouver faced a serious influx of unemployed. An estimated 7,000 were already in the city and more came in on every train from the East. One observer counted 1,252 men in a single Vancouver church bread-line.¹⁸ Demands for aid from the provincial authorities rained down on Victoria.

Tolmie's response was both conventional and ineffective. Aided by a

¹⁵ J. C. Brady to S. F. Tolmie, Nov. 16, 1929, Tolmie Papers.

¹⁶ S. F. Tolmie to R. B. Bennett, July 30, 1930, Tolmie Papers.

¹⁷ W. C. Shelly to S. F. Tolmie, May 20, 1930, Tolmie Papers.

¹⁸ Rev. A. Roddan, *God in the Jungles* (n.p., 1931), p. 40.

grant from the federal government, he increased public works spending to create more jobs. Committed to the orthodoxies of a balanced budget, however, he attempted to reduce other governmental expenditures. To ensure stricter financial control and reduce party criticism, Tolmie also shuffled his cabinet. J. W. Jones, Speaker of the House and former Conservative financial critic, became Finance Minister while R. W. Bruhn took over the increasingly important post of Minister of Labour.

But the provincial economy was not susceptible to such pallatives. The total value of production in all industries continued to decline and, with it, the tax revenues. Unemployment and relief costs climbed. Under continual attack during the 1931 legislative session, the government offered only more public works and limited aid to municipal relief funds. To meet these increased expenditures, Tolmie and Jones, as wedded to the balanced budget as his predecessor, Shelly, imposed a one percent increase on virtually all classes of income tax. Obviously this move was unpopular with the public. More crucially, it also brought into the open a hitherto internal conflict between the Vancouver Conservatives and the administration.

The Vancouver Conservative organization had become progressively disenchanted with the Tolmie government since the 1928 election. The lack of patronage and the dominance of anti-Bowserites in the cabinet had long been a sore point. These grievances were aggravated when Shelly and S. L. Howe, Provincial Secretary, led a purge of the provincial executive, appointing their own man, W. H. Blair, as provincial organizer. Blair's appointment and subsequent activities alienated some federal Conservatives, notably H. H. Stevens, and many of the M.L.A.'s. The cabinet shuffle which left Vancouver without a major administrative portfolio widened the breach.¹⁹ With the introduction of the tax increase, the Vancouver Conservative organizations erupted in a wrath of resolutions attacking Tolmie and, in one case, demanding he resign in favour of Bowser.²⁰ Though the agitation soon died down, it was an ominous episode.

By August, the need for more positive action to relieve unemployment became obvious. A government survey showed that 35,842 individuals and families were unemployed and in need of direct relief, a sharp

¹⁹ In the cabinet shuffle, W. C. Shelly became President of the Executive Council and R. L. Maitland remained Minister without Portfolio. Neither man directly administered any department and this was the root of the objection from the Vancouver Conservatives. S. L. Howe, Provincial Secretary and the member from Point Grey, was not considered by the Vancouver group to be their representative.

²⁰ *Vancouver Province*, March 6, 13, 16, 26, 1931.

increase on the previous estimate of 24,000.²¹ Adapting an idea used in Vancouver in 1922, the provincial government hurriedly constructed work camps where the single unemployed could be housed while labouring on highways and other public works projects. Such a scheme, it was thought, would utilize the labour of the unemployed and, since most of the camps were in the interior, ease the relief rolls of the metropolitan areas while removing potential protesters. As with so many of the ideas of the Tolmie government, the scheme produced additional unforeseen problems. The construction and maintenance of these camps cost money and these costs, added to increasing relief payments, created a governmental financial crisis.

By October, Finance Minister Jones was being warned by the Dominion government and Eastern investment dealers that the province would have great difficulty selling its bonds or raising additional loans.²² The situation became critical when the province's requests for financial assistance were summarily rejected by R. B. Bennett as exorbitant. During an unsuccessful trip to Ottawa to appeal this decision, Jones was faced with an ultimatum from the Bank of Commerce, demanding that the existing \$9,000,000 overdraft be immediately funded and, echoing the federal government, that a balanced budget be produced.

Such demands were not unique, though their timing seems suspiciously coincidental. Previous provincial governments had been faced with rigid adherence to orthodox economic theory and insensitivity to the needs of the moment by Eastern financial interests. Nevertheless, the Tolmie ministry's failure to protest these direct attempts to usurp the province's constitutional right to determine financial policy is surprising. Many Western premiers have successfully led political campaigns against "Eastern domination" but, apparently, such a course of action never occurred to Tolmie. His mild reaction, in part, may have been merely the result of his preference for quiet negotiation and his desire to maintain the appearance of unity within the Conservative party. It also suggests the extent to which the provincial government depended upon external and federal aid for its administration. Another factor was Tolmie's concern with a revival of Conservative internal dissent which flared at the same time.

Since the 1931 legislative session, the conflict between the administration and the Vancouver wing of the Conservative party had increased. In

²¹ *Victoria Colonist*, July 12, Aug. 31, 1931.

²² R. B. Bennett to J. W. Jones, Oct. 14, 1931; Ames Company, Investments, Toronto, to J. W. Jones, Oct. 23, 1931, in J. W. Jones Papers (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Archives). Hereafter cited as Jones Papers.

June, George Walkem, the ex-Provincial Party member, privately informed Tolmie he no longer supported his leadership.²⁴ William Dick, another Vancouver M.L.A. and Bowser supporter, began publicly criticizing the party leader and a group of Vancouver Conservatives organized a movement to return Bowser to power.²⁵ Far more serious was an ultimatum Tolmie received from the four Vancouver backbenchers, threatening a mass resignation unless the city was given more financial aid and at least one major administrative portfolio.²⁶

This ultimatum caused Tolmie considerable concern. He knew that the loss of the six Vancouver votes would not defeat his government; it would, however, undermine confidence in the administration, particularly in financial circles. He was well aware that alienation of the Vancouver party organization had cost electoral victories for the Liberals in 1928 and the Conservatives in 1924, for that city provided much of the expertise and financial backing for both parties. As well, the threat might have the tacit support of some of the federal Conservatives who, he knew, were also dissatisfied. If so, Tolmie's position was extremely precarious. On the other hand, he could see no advantage in another cabinet alignment nor was he willing to give in to blackmail. After seeking reassurance through Leon Ladner of federal neutrality, Tolmie firmly and reasonably refused the demands of the Vancouver backbenchers.²⁷

Both the financial and political crises were dampened over the next few months, but at the cost of weakening the government's position in Ottawa and Vancouver. After an abject plea to Bennett and several months of increasingly acrimonious negotiations, British Columbia received sufficient money from the federal government to meet its relief costs without being forced to close the work camps. On the strength of this and the successful refloating of a provincial bond issue on the New York market, the Bank of Commerce eased its pressure. But R. B. Bennett's confidence in Tolmie's administrative ability was further eroded. The Vancouver situation remained unresolved. Restricted by the financial position and his own convictions, Tolmie would not make cabinet changes or increase patronage. Unwilling to resign, the Vancouver members tried to force a leadership

²⁴ George Walkem to S. F. Tolmie, June 5, 1931, Tolmie Papers.

²⁵ H. Langley, Court Stenographer, transcription of the Chain Conservative Association meeting, Victoria, Sept. 28, 1931, Tolmie Papers.

²⁶ N. Spencer, W. Dick, G. Walkem and W. Kirk to S. F. Tolmie, Sept. 19, 1931, Tolmie Papers.

²⁷ S. F. Tolmie to Nelson Spencer, Oct. 9, 1931, Tolmie Papers. In a lengthy reply, Tolmie adroitly defended his financial treatment of Vancouver while justifying his refusal to make further cabinet changes.

contest at the annual Conservative convention in November. This move was defeated but notice had been served that the unity apparently achieved in 1926 within the party was disintegrating.

At the 1932 legislative session, the Tolmie administration was increasingly vulnerable to attack. The provincial economy had reached record lows with no sign of recovery; unemployment was increasing; relief costs were a constant drain; tax revenues were still declining; the provincial debt was rising to a dangerous level; federal-provincial relations were strained; public and party criticism of the government's lack of action was increasing. Most crucially, Tolmie, his cabinet and the Conservative caucus had no ideas or policies to combat these problems. The government could only hope the economy would improve while striving toward the traditional panacea, a balanced budget, an almost impossible task in view of the heavy expenditures necessary for relief.

It cannot be said that the administration lacked for advice. There seems to have been an unending succession of proposals from British Columbians of all types.²⁸ Most of them were impractical. One idea, however, publicized by the *Vancouver Province*, gained the support of many individuals. The *Province* proposed the formation of a non-partisan administration of the best minds in the province to operate the government as a board of directors would operate a corporation. Pointing to the example of the Union Government in Canada in 1917 and the National Government in Great Britain in 1931, the newspaper contended that many of British Columbia's financial problems were the result of the competition of artificial political parties and, as in time of war, the economic crisis called for efficiency, not partisanship. The similarity of these ideas to the platform of the Provincial Party is obvious and, as the 1924 election had shown, they had considerable political appeal. Even some of the cabinet members were attracted to the union idea and the Vancouver Board of Trade gave it strong support. The result of this agitation was that Tolmie was forced to acquiesce in the formation of a committee to investigate the finances of the province.

This committee, commonly referred to by the name of its chairman, George Kidd, was formed in an attempt to duplicate on the provincial level the apparent success of the May Commission in Great Britain.²⁹

²⁸ Study of the Jones and Tolmie papers reveals numerous schemes for ending the depression from a wide variety of individuals. Some of these plans are carefully researched and printed; others are scrawled in pencil on foolscap. Some were attempts to gain the writer government employment; others show wide reading and thought.

²⁹ C. L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars* (London: Methuen, 1955), p. 379.

The necessity for such an investigation was presented to Tolmie in November 1931 and again the following April by a delegation representing twenty-two Vancouver business organizations and headed by lumber magnate, H. R. Macmillan. The delegation offered a list of eight of their members who would serve at their own expense and demanded that Tolmie choose five,³⁰ give them full access to the government's financial records and promise to publish the completed report. With strong reservations, Tolmie consented. In July the report was finished. Finance Minister J. W. Jones, appalled, argued that "it would be disastrous to finances to publish in present form."³¹ Only after the government appended thirty pages of corrections and explanations was it publicly released.³²

In actual fact, the report's financial suggestions were too extreme to be taken seriously by any established politicians. It called for the shutting down of the Pacific Great Eastern Railway, the elimination of the university's appropriation, the reduction of the number of years of free public education, the restriction of all social services, a total ban on all increases in provincial borrowing or taxation for any purpose whatsoever and the reduction of the cabinet, legislature and civil service. The Kidd Report claimed that, by these economies, the provincial budget could be reduced by \$6,000,000. It did not, however, explain how the government was to find the money necessary to pay for the cost of unemployment relief.

Whatever effect the Kidd Report did have came from its concentrated attack on the evils of the party system in the province. It contended that political parties in British Columbia were based, not on any difference in principle, but on competitive spending and expectations of patronage. By selective citation of specific expenditures, the committee was able to present a strong circumstantial case. The details that the report emphasized and its call for a non-partisan administration added impetus to the existing agitation for a union government.

Still Tolmie hesitated, hoping apparently that the Imperial Economic Conference to be held in Ottawa would lead to an economic resurgence and relieve the province's depression. On his return from this conference in September, this hope had vanished. He polled the cabinet and caucus

³⁰ The names submitted to Tolmie were: George Kidd, chartered accountant; W. L. Mackin, finance and real estate; Austin Taylor, financier; A. H. Douglas, lawyer; R. W. Mayhew, manufacturer; H. R. Macmillan, lumber exporter; A. E. Phillips, retired; A. T. Howe, agriculturist. Tolmie Papers. The first five were chosen for the committee.

³¹ J. W. Jones to R. H. Pooley, July 27, 1932, Jones Papers.

³² British Columbia. *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Government to Investigate the Finances of British Columbia* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1932).

for their views on the formation of a union government. Having gained the support of a majority of the Conservative M.L.A.'s and a firm commitment from the *Vancouver Province*,³³ Tolmie offered Pattullo and Bowser positions in an administration under his leadership. Both immediately refused. Nevertheless, Tolmie, basing his decision on the success of the British National Government and his own experience with the 1917 federal Union Government, publicly committed himself to forming a non-partisan provincial government to meet the economic crisis.

Curiously, following the announcement, Tolmie made no concentrated effort to implement the proposal. It may be, as he later suggested, that he wished to let the public digest his idea rather than forcing an immediate election.³⁴ But it also appears that he had no clear plan of action. He did enquire about the possibility of organizing financial support and solicited the names of possible supporters, yet both activities seem hesitant and inconclusive. Particularly unrealistic was the list of prominent British Columbians who might be willing to join a union government.³⁵ This list quite reasonably contained the names of local dignitaries, respected academics and ex-Provincial Party members. But the inclusion of such men as Tom Reid, a federal Liberal who had violently attacked the government's work camps; George Kidd, the chairman of the committee which had condemned the government's financial policies and G. S. Pearson, a Liberal M.L.A. who had persistently criticized the administration's lack of action, shows either naivete or desperation. Nor was there any indication that any of these men had been approached or had volunteered to align themselves with Tolmie.

As the months of inactivity passed, even Tolmie's Conservative support began to shrink. In November, the Conservative convention refused to endorse a union government, referring the question to the decision of each local association. Ominously for Tolmie, it also defeated the executive slate he supported and voted to move the association's offices to Vancouver. This was a clear indication that, contrary to Tolmie's hopes, the Conservative organization and votes would not be automatically transferred to the union movement. Facing the resurgence of the Liberal party as a result of Pattullo's organizational activities and the incipient formation of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, Tolmie's plan for a union government became even more illusionary. Even the *Vancouver*

³³ Memorandum on the 1933 election, Nov. 7, 1933, Tolmie Papers.

³⁴ S. F. Tolmie to J. E. May, Dec. 19, 1932, Tolmie Papers.

³⁵ Memorandum of Suggested Unionist Candidates, Sept.-Oct., 1932, Tolmie Papers.

Province began to seek alternative leadership. Yet Tolmie had no other policy and was facing new problems.

While preparing the budget for the 1933 legislative session, J. W. Jones was again informed by the Bank of Commerce and the Dominion government that, unless the deficit was reduced, no further loans would be available. This time, R. B. Bennett told Tolmie directly that failure to meet his terms would force the federal government to insist that a financial controller acceptable to Ottawa be appointed to restrict provincial expenditures.³⁶ On his way to Ottawa to plead the province's case, Tolmie was informed of the death of his wife.

The weight of these burdens led to a fatal political hesitation on Tolmie's part. It was not until after the legislative session had ended and the members dispersed that he attempted to commit the Conservative M.L.A.'s to support the union movement. It was too late. In February, W. J. Bowser had returned to political life as the leader of a new party, the Non-Partisans. While parading as a non-party organization dedicated to moderate reform, efficient administration and lower taxes, it was, in fact, the Conservative party without Tolmie and his immediate supporters. It split the Conservative organization and vote, attracting thirty-three candidates, most of whom had been elected under Tolmie's leadership in 1928.

Facing the expiration of his five year term of office, without new policies and harassed by the continued desertion of Conservative colleagues, Tolmie continued in his efforts to form a union government. Lacking the support of experienced organizers and wishing to broaden his government's appeal, he was reduced to accepting the advice of a political novice, J. O. Dunford.³⁷ On his recommendation, W. M. Dennies, President of the National Labour Council of Vancouver, was made Minister of Labour and William Savage, a nominal Liberal and head of the provincial Prohibitionists, became Minister of Public Works. Neither man had much support. Whatever slight aid they gave to the public image of the unionist movement was soon lost when W. A. Macenzie and R. W. Bruhn resigned from the cabinet to run as independents. Their defection was accentuated by Jones' later announcement that, while

³⁶ R. B. Bennett to S. F. Tolmie, March 8, 1933, Jones Papers.

³⁷ Dunford, a Vancouver land agent, apparently gained Tolmie's attention by dint of constant correspondence but had not been active politically prior to 1933. Neither he nor Tolmie seemed to realize that Dennies' union had only 5,000 members and that he would not attract the labour vote. Dunford continually overestimated the possibility of a unionist victory.

remaining as Finance Minister until the election, he would stand for re-election as an independent, not a unionist.

Tolmie's campaign was also fatally crippled by lack of funds and the attitude of R. B. Bennett. Tolmie believed that the failure of British Columbians to contribute to the unionist campaign was a result of his refusal to permit patronage. More simply, it may have been a justified reluctance to support an obviously losing cause. This was the attitude of R. B. Bennett. Not only did he refuse to help raise campaign funds for Tolmie's unionist group but he openly advocated that Conservatives vote for Liberal candidates to forestall a C.C.F. victory.³⁸ However realistic the suggestion may have been, it deeply wounded Tolmie. He felt, quite rightly, that Bennett, having failed to support the unionist idea in 1932, was now encouraging the disintegration of the provincial Conservative party.³⁹

With a slate of only fifteen avowed supporters in a field of two hundred and nineteen candidates, Tolmie faced the provincial general election with resignation. Lacking the resources of 1928, he could neither tour the province nor afford expensive publicity. He campaigned mostly on Vancouver Island, offering no new policies and reiterating that the only realistic solution to the economic depression lay, not in visionary schemes, but in continued honest administration and retrenchment. It was a platform of singularly limited appeal.

The election results gave evidence of the extent of Conservative disarray and the political confusion in the province. Despite their catchy "Work and Wages" platform, the Liberal party increased its popular vote by only 1.5% over that of 1928.⁴⁰ Because of the number of multi-candidate contests, however, the Liberals won thirty-four seats in the legislature to form the government. The newly-organized C.C.F., despite some internal conflict and violent opposition, formed the second largest group with seven seats and 31% of the vote. The Non-Partisans, perhaps handicapped by Bowser's death the week before the election, won two seats while the unionists retained only the personal fiefdom of the Pooley family in Esquimalt. In five short years, the Conservative party had gone from an absolute majority in both the legislature and the popular vote to three M.L.A.'s and approximately 19% of the popular vote.⁴¹

³⁸ C. H. Dickie to S. F. Tolmie, Sept. 18, 1933, Tolmie Papers.

³⁹ Memorandum on the 1933 election, Nov. 7, 1933, Tolmie Papers.

⁴⁰ Scarrow, *Canada Votes*, p. 224.

⁴¹ This figure was arrived at by totalling the votes of all candidates who reasonably might be assumed ready to support a Conservative administration.

Rejected by the voters and his own party, Tolmie retired to his Cloverdale farm. Burdened by ill-health and heavy debts from his years in provincial politics, he corresponded with his wide circle of friends but took no public part in provincial or federal politics. In 1936, with the death of the Conservative member for Victoria, Tolmie was re-elected to the House of Commons in Ottawa. Six months later, on October 13, 1936, Simon Fraser Tolmie died, the last leader of the British Columbia Conservative party to be premier of the province.

Tolmie's political career stands as a clear example of what has recently been presented as the Peter Principle.⁴² As a member of the House of Commons, Tolmie was a competent, popular and personally satisfactory representative of his riding. As a minor cabinet minister, he was acceptable. As premier of British Columbia, he was unsuccessful. As a back-bencher and cabinet minister, his warm personality and loyalty were sufficient for the demands of the position. As premier, these same qualities plus a lack of interest in administrative detail and an inability to provide leadership were fatal impediments. Tolmie, wishing always to do the best for the province, was never able to think out a plan of consistent action and ruthlessly implement it. In a period of stability, pragmatic administration could succeed; in a time of crisis, the government was reduced to indecisive and ineffective confusion.

Tolmie's personal deficiencies need not have been fatal to his government had the Conservative party been more united on policy or capable of long term planning. It, however, suffered from the same weaknesses as its leader. The party which Tolmie had so confidently led to power in 1928 was a fragile coalition of disparate elements united only by the desire for office. Throughout its term of office, no one in the Conservative party was able to unite these elements with more enduring bonds. Under the impact of economic crisis, the British Columbia Conservative party disintegrated and was never again able to gain majority party status in the province.

⁴² L. J. Peter, *The Peter Principle* (New York: Bantam, 1970).