

Another Look at Social Credit and the British Columbia Electorate

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In his article, "Social Credit and the British Columbia Electorate," Professor Mark Sproule-Jones raises questions about the adequacy of the "class cleavage" and "anti-elitist" interpretations of voting behaviour in British Columbia advanced by Martin Robin¹ and Edwin R. Black,² respectively. Noting that those responsible for these interpretations rely mainly on "personal impressions," Sproule-Jones examines their conclusions using the results of an analysis of census data and finds them seriously wanting. He introduces as an alternative explanation of voting patterns the concept of "sponsored ideology," a phenomenon which he feels results in independents and weakly identified partisans gravitating to Social Credit at election time.

It is the thesis of this article that Professor Sproule-Jones has not established his conclusion that "class, as measured by occupation, displays no consistent relationships with party preference,"³ and that, in general, class analysis is of little use in understanding B.C. voting patterns. An examination of his empirical arguments reveals certain inadequacies which call into question the finality of his conclusion. Our criticism of these arguments is aided by an analysis of survey data. Finally, believing as he does that further research is desirable, this survey data was also used to examine the alternative explanation advanced by Sproule-Jones.

Do Voting Patterns in B.C. Reveal a "Class Cleavage?"

Part of the problem in answering this question lies in securing agreement on what constitutes a "class cleavage." If British Columbia had only two parties at the provincial level, one of which obtained a substantial

¹ See his, "The Social Basis of Party Politics in British Columbia," *Queen's Quarterly*, 72 (1966), reprinted in Hugh Thorburn (ed.), *Party Politics in Canada*, 2nd Edition (Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1967), pp. 201-211.

² See his "British Columbia: The Politics of Exploitation," in Ronald A. Shearer (ed.), *Exploiting our Economic Potential: Public Policy and the British Columbia Economy* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), pp. 23-41.

³ Sproule-Jones, p. 37.

majority of the middle and upper class votes and the other a substantial majority of working class votes, there would probably be little argument. The larger these majorities were, the sharper the class cleavage would be considered to be.

In a multiparty situation, however, the question becomes more complex. In such a situation, scholars are usually concerned with whether social class can be used to help predict a person's vote, that is, whether different social classes distribute their partisan preferences in different fashions. For example, using survey data, one normally looks to see whether a majority or a plurality of the members of a particular social class support a particular party and/or whether this level of support is greater than that in the electorate as a whole. Thus, if a party receives 30% of the votes in a particular election, but 60% of the votes of the working class, we have grounds for inferring that social class membership affects party preference. Even if a party does not receive a majority of the votes of the working class, if it receives a higher proportion of working class votes than of any other social class group, we may still argue that class membership is related to support for that party, although the "class cleavage" is not as pronounced.

Sproule-Jones does not clearly state what he would consider to be class-related voting behaviour. He implies on page 36 that voting in B.C. can't be "explained" in class terms because survey evidence shows that although manual workers, particularly trade union members, support the NDP, other occupations "split evenly among the other three parties." However, the study by Jean Laponce⁴ cited in support of this statement does not contain that interpretation.

Laponce is concerned to find those characteristics of supporters of each of the parties which set them apart from supporters of other parties, not with the partisan choice of social groups. To say, for example, that most of a party's supporters are trade union members does not necessarily mean that most trade unionists support that party. That can only be established by looking at the partisan preferences of trade unionists.

Even if the statement were true for parties other than the NDP (evidence is introduced below which suggests it is not), the implied definition of class-related voting behaviour is excessively restrictive.

Another criterion, the number of "significant" relationships between occupation and party preference, is suggested on page 37 where he states that "when the party preferences were regressed against the occupational variables, *only* [my emphasis] 16 out of a possible 28 were

⁴ *People vs. Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), pp. 63-67.

found to be significant at the level of .10." He concludes from this (also on page 37) that "the census data show that class, as measured by occupation, displays *no consistent relationships* [my emphasis] with party preference." Thus, even though a majority of the occupational variables have statistically significant coefficients, several of them indicating relationships suggested by Robin and Black, the author summarily dismisses them.

However, the dismissal is not complete, for further along on page 37 he implies that another criterion is determining, the size of the regression coefficient. "Only one of the regression coefficients exceeded 0.50 . . . indicating that the other 15 significant regressions displayed a relatively weak association." He does not alter his conclusion about the lack of importance of social class even though the coefficient in question indicates pronounced support for the CCF on the part of skilled labour, probably the most important generalization made by Robin as well as other students of B.C. politics.⁵

There are two major problems with this argument. First of all, regression coefficients do not measure the strength of association between dependent and independent variables. They measure the nature of the relationship. When a regression equation is evaluated, the regression coefficients indicate what the effect on a given party's vote would be of a change in the proportion of the population of a census tract having certain characteristics. For example, the coefficient relating the presence of "transport and communication, craftsmen, production process and related workers" to CCF support is .87. This means, for example, that, other things being equal, a difference of 10% in the proportion of this group in different census tracts would produce a difference in expected CCF vote of 8.7%.

Secondly, the appropriate measure of the contribution of social class (in this case measured by occupation) to the explanation of party support is the squared multiple correlation coefficient, which the author does not provide in his article. That statistic would tell us what percentage of the variance in a party's vote is accounted for by occupational differences. Since the author used stepwise regression analysis, he could have used the increase in "variance explained" produced by successive inclusion of variables as a rough measure of the relative importance of each. He does provide us with the order with which variables entered the equation, but

⁵ See for example, Walter Young, "The NDP: British Columbia's Labour Party," in John Meisel (ed.), *Papers on the 1962 Election* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), pp. 181-200.

inspection of his Table II will show that this ordering is not identical with an ordering by the size of the regression coefficient.

However, even with appropriate revisions in the analysis, as a test of the class cleavage interpretation, the regression analysis is wanting in that it doesn't compare the role of social class in explaining partisan choice to other social characteristics such as religion, ethnic origin and rural or urban residence. This is meant as a general point since the authors Sproule-Jones is criticizing are convinced of the importance of social class, or at least, in Black's case, social status. If Sproule-Jones can show that even when isolated from other social characteristics social class is unhelpful to the student of voting behaviour in British Columbia, he need go no further. It is our contention that he has not, in fact, done this.

In an effort to bring more empirical data to bear on the question of the relationship between social class membership and partisan choice we have analyzed a survey administered by John Meisel and associates to a national sample following the 1965 Federal Election. The sample was constructed by selecting names at random from the federal voters' lists. The total sample was 2113, but we are interested only in the British Columbia respondents who numbered 128. Of course, the B.C. sub-sample cannot be considered statistically representative of the B.C. electorate, but it does include respondents from different areas of the province and seems to contain an adequate mixture of voter types.

Among other things, respondents were asked to specify what party they identified with on the provincial level, how strongly they held that identification, and how they voted in the 1963 provincial election. Table I compares the distribution of reported vote in the sample with the actual voting results. The correspondence is close, but not perfect, as we would expect given the fact that we are analyzing only part of a nationally-representative sample.

TABLE I
Sample Vote Distribution and Actual Results
of 1963 Provincial Election

<i>Party</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Actual</i>
Social Credit	43.0%	40.8
CCF/NDP	28.0	27.8
Liberal	17.0	20.0
Conservative	12.0	11.3

Nevertheless, when party identification is cross-tabulated with occupation, education, and self-assigned social class membership (Tables II-IV), social class differences do appear to affect party identification. The tables presented here include only those who identify with a party, but the results are not materially altered when independents and those who refused to answer the party identification question (21% and 5% of the sample, respectively) are included. The class cleavage is not complete, but the relationships indicated in the tables are strong enough to make us reluctant to accept Sproule-Jones' conclusions with regard to the role of social class.

In Table II, we see that Social Credit is favoured by the largest proportion of each occupational group except for "professionals" and those in "service occupations." In those groups, the Liberals and NDP, respectively, are favoured by an equal number. However, Social Credit does somewhat better among "owners, managers and business executives" than among "professionals" (as also suggested by Robin) but not better among "unskilled labourers," who Sproule-Jones feels correspond to the "unorganized working class" identified by Black, than among "skilled workers" (contradicting Black's expectations). Both of these results can also be inferred from Sproule-Jones' analysis.

The NDP does better among those in manual occupations compared to non-manuals, doing better among those groups, especially "skilled labour," than among the entire group of identifiers. The Liberals and Conservatives do somewhat better among those in upper status occupations, although the Liberals show surprising strength among "unskilled labour." If there were no relationship between occupation and party identification, we would expect the percentages listed under each occupational group to approximate those listed under the "total" column. This is clearly not the case, at least for non-Social Credit identifiers.

TABLE II
Provincial Party Identification and Occupation

<i>Party Identification</i>	<i>Prof.</i>	<i>Owners*</i>	<i>White Collar</i>	<i>Skilled Labour</i>	<i>Unskilled Labour</i>	<i>Service</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
Conservative	0.0%	8.3	14.3	13.0	0.0	0.0	33.3	13.7
Liberal	42.9	25.0	23.8	4.3	28.6	14.3	5.6	16.8
Social Credit	42.9	50.0	38.1	43.5	42.9	42.9	50.0	44.2
NDP	14.3	16.7	23.8	39.1	28.6	42.9	11.1	25.3
TOTAL	(7)	(12)	(21)	(23)	(7)	(7)	(18)	(95)

*Owners, Managers and Business Executives

TABLE III
Party Identification and Education

<i>Party Identification</i>	<i>Primary or Less</i>	<i>Some High School</i>	<i>Some Post-Secondary</i>	<i>Total</i>
Conservative	13.6%	15.0	7.7	13.7
Liberal	4.5	16.7	38.5	16.8
Social Credit	45.5	45.0	38.5	44.2
NDP	36.4	23.3	15.4	25.3
TOTAL	(22)	(60)	(13)	(95)

TABLE IV
Party Identification and Self-Assigned Social Class

<i>Party Identification</i>	<i>Upper & Upper Middle</i>	<i>Middle Class</i>	<i>Working & Lower Class</i>	<i>Total</i>
Conservative	33.3%	14.9	7.9	13.8
Liberal	33.3	17.0	13.2	17.0
Social Credit	33.3	51.1	36.8	43.6
NDP	0.0	17.0	42.1	25.5
TOTAL	(9)	(44)	(38)	(94)

This interpretation is supported by the results in Table III, although education is perhaps a less reliable indicator of social class than is occupation. Thus, the NDP does better among those with only a primary school education. Higher education is productive of more Liberal support, and, to a smaller extent, lesser Social Credit support.

In preparing Table IV, we had the opportunity to assess the effect of subjective class identification, and here the middle class orientation towards Social Credit and the working class orientation towards the NDP stand out. Respondents were asked "if you had to pick one, which of the following five social classes would you say you were in — upper class, upper-middle class, middle class, working class, or lower class?" Because so few respondents chose the first and last alternatives, the responses were combined to create the three-way division in the table.

A majority (51.1%) of middle class identifiers claimed allegiance to the Social Credit Party, while a plurality of working class respondents (42.1%) identified with the NDP. Although there were only nine respondents who claimed to be in the upper or upper-middle classes, they split

their identifications among the Conservatives, Liberals and Social Credit. None claimed an attachment to the NDP.

On the basis of survey evidence then, we would be reluctant to conclude that social class and party identification in B.C. are unrelated.

The "Sponsored Ideology" Alternative

Although our results lead to our questioning the need for it, Sproule-Jones offers an alternative explanation for Social Credit success in B.C. Stressing the fluid social structure in the province, perhaps due to rapid immigration into the province, and a consequent lack of "intermediate" groups mediating between political elites and the masses, he introduces the notion of "sponsored conceptual ideology." By this he means that parties, rather than tailoring their appeals to "voters' predispositions," define the "salient electoral issues" themselves and construct their appeals on that basis, which in turn feed back onto the salient electoral issues. In his words:

... the Social Credit Party has consistently defined the issue alternatives for the electorate in ideological terms, as a battle between "free enterprise and socialism," and the actions of the electorate may be interpreted as a response to such a "sponsored" ideology. It appears, moreover, that this sponsored ideology is of the "conceptual type," in that voters are asked to evaluate all political objects in terms of this one dimensional ordering.⁶

Although it is difficult for this writer to conceive of an appeal more clearly based on a class cleavage or more likely to exacerbate such a cleavage, our survey data does allow us to examine some of the arguments Sproule-Jones advances on behalf of this thesis.

He notes from his Saanich survey that a large proportion of the sample identify with the Social Credit Party, Social Credit identifications are more strongly held, and suspects, although he has no data to confirm it, that "the Social Credit Party has had a net partisan advantage from election to election in pulling over more of the weakly identified NDP, Liberal and Tory voters, and more of the Independents, into a winning electoral coalition than has any of its opposition parties."⁷

First of all, our data show (Table V) that Social Crediters are not remarkable for the tenacity with which they identify with their party. They have fewer "very strong" and "fairly strong" identifiers and more "not very strong" identifiers than does the NDP. Moreover, the distribu-

⁶ Sproule-Jones, pp. 44-45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

tion of Social Credit identification strengths is not unusual when compared to the distribution in the entire sample of identifiers.

TABLE V
Strength of Partisan Attachment

Identification Strength	Party Identification				Total
	Conservative	Liberal	Social Credit	NDP	
Very Strong	30.8%	25.0	31.7	33.3	30.9
Fairly Strong	46.2	43.8	43.9	54.2	46.8
Not Very Strong	23.1	31.3	24.4	12.5	22.3
TOTAL	(13)	(16)	(41)	(24)	(94)

TABLE VI
Party Identification and 1963 Provincial Vote

1963 Vote	Party Identification					Total
	Con.	Liberal	Social Credit	NDP	Independent	
Conservative	66.7%	7.7	2.7	0.0	22.2	12.1
Liberal	0.0	84.6	5.4	0.0	16.7	16.2
Social Credit	33.3	0.0	86.5	0.0	44.4	43.4
NDP	0.0	7.7	5.4	100.0	16.7	28.3
TOTAL	(9)	(13)	(37)	(22)	(18)	(99)

Somewhat more convincing is the fact that Social Credit identifiers appear to be less faithful to their party at election time (Table VI) compared to NDPers.⁸ None of the NDP identifiers defected in the election of 1963 whereas 13.5% of Social Credit identifiers voted for other parties — many of them for the NDP. Social Credit appeared to be differentially attractive to Conservative identifiers, perhaps because the party is so weak and did not contest all constituencies. Of course, these figures may suffer from errors in recalling past vote, although that kind of error normally results in an over-report of voting for the winner, in this case Social Credit.

⁸ The fidelity of NDP identifiers has been documented in other studies based on larger samples giving us more confidence in our results. See for example, Wallace Gagne and Peter Regenstreif, "Some Aspects of New Democratic Urban Support in 1965," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 33 (1967), 529-550, especially pp. 541-543. Although Social Credit identifiers were not studied, 92% of NDP identifiers intended to vote for their party compared to 76% and 68% for Liberal and Conservative identifiers, respectively.

Table VI also contains another interesting datum, partly confirming Sproule-Jones' expectations, but when viewed from another perspective the confirmation is not so startling. That is, a plurality of those not identifying with any party indicated that they supported Social Credit in 1963, but the proportion was only slightly greater than Social Credit support in the sample as a whole. Only the NDP attracted fewer Independents than would be expected given its general level of support.

However, we have been considering party identification and voting at only one point in time. If Sproule-Jones is at least partially correct, we would expect Social Credit to have done somewhat better among those who have switched party allegiance. Thirty-nine or 41.4% of the identifiers in our sample indicated they had once identified with another party, compared with 38.5% in the nation as a whole. Social Credit identification is strongest at least in the sense that very few switchers (two) indicated that they were formerly Social Crediters (Table VII).

TABLE VII
Present and Former Identifications of Switchers

<i>Present Identification</i>	<i>Former Identification</i>				<i>Total</i>
	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Social Credit</i>	<i>NDP</i>	
Conservative	0.0%	15.4	0.0	0.0	5.1
Liberal	14.3	0.0	0.0	20.0	10.3
Social Credit	50.0	53.9	0.0	70.0	53.8
NDP	28.6	30.8	100.0	0.0	25.6
Independent	7.1	0.0	0.0	10.0	5.1
TOTAL	(14)	(13)	(2)	(10)	(39)

TABLE VIII
Class Identification of Identifiers and Switchers

<i>Social Class</i>	<i>Social Credit Identifiers</i>	<i>Switched to Social Credit</i>	<i>NDP Identifiers</i>	<i>Switched to NDP</i>
Upper Middle	7.3%	9.5	0.0	0.0
Middle	58.5	57.2	33.3	40.0
Working	34.2	33.3	67.7	60.0
TOTAL	(41)	(21)	(24)	(10)

Although the number of switchers is too small to permit completely reliable generalizations, Social Credit was differentially attractive mainly to former NDPers. By differentially attractive we mean that Social Credit attracted relatively more NDPers than it did former Liberals and Conservatives.

However, it is useful to speculate on the reasons why people switched party allegiance. It has been found elsewhere⁹ that people who switch party allegiance frequently tend to move to that party generally associated with their social group. Again we must be cautious given the small number of switchers in our sample, but it appears from Table VIII that social class may have had something to do with switching in B.C.

Very few people switched to the Conservative and Liberal parties on the provincial level, so they have been omitted from the table. However, most of those who switched to Social Credit considered themselves to be middle class just as do the bulk of Social Credit identifiers. For the NDP, most of those switching to that party claim working class membership as do most NDP identifiers. Both former Social Crediters moved to the NDP; both were in skilled labour occupations and claimed working class membership.

It does not matter for our argument whether those who switched did so because of their class identification or switched for some other reason and then adopted the class identification appropriate for their new party identification. In either case, social class and party identification seem to be related.

In sum, our analysis indicates that social class has an important influence on party identification in British Columbia, particularly when subjective class identification is considered. We do not have the data which would allow us to see whether the effect of class is declining over time. However, nor do we see how Sproule-Jones' alternative formulation implies a reduced role for social class.

⁹ See Gagne and Regenstreif, pp. 547-548. Also see Lynn McDonald, "Party Identification, Stability and Change in Voting Behaviour: A Study of the 1968 Federal Election in Ontario," in O. M. Kruhlak, *et al.* (eds.), *The Canadian Political Process* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), pp. 267-283.