

# THE FIRST GREY LOBBY

## *The Old Age Pensioners' Organization of British Columbia, 1932-51\**

---

JAMES G. SNELL

IN 1927 THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT enacted the first Old Age Pension (OAP) legislation in the country, based on a means test and a minimum age of seventy. As a shared-cost program and as a matter of provincial jurisdiction, the program required complementary provincial legislation before the elderly in any one province could apply. It was no surprise that British Columbia, as the most assertive government in pushing for such federal legislation, was the first province to join the new program, in 1927.<sup>1</sup> Less predictable was the reaction of the west coast elderly themselves. Not only did they begin to apply in considerable numbers — 4,578 British Columbians received the OAP by the end of 1929 and 28,988 by the end of 1949<sup>2</sup> — but they soon began to complain about the design and character of the OAP program and its implementation in British Columbia. Unconsciously borrowing a leaf from the west coast elderly of the United States,<sup>3</sup> the elderly on the west coast of Canada soon came together to articulate this discon-

\* The research for this paper was funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I wish to thank C. G. Gifford for sharing the transcripts of the interviews he conducted with some of the leaders of the organized elderly. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of *BC Studies* for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the background see K. Bryden, *Old Age Pensions and Policy-Making in Canada* (Montreal, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> By the end of 1929, 42.03 percent of British Columbians aged seventy or more were Pensioners; by the end of 1939 there were 13,386 British Columbians receiving the OAP (48.80 percent of those aged seventy or over), and by the end of 1949, the comparable figures were 28,988 and 43.20 percent. See, Canada, Department of Labour, *Fourth Report of Administration of Old Age Pensions (1929-30)* (Ottawa, 1931), 4; Canada, Department of Finance, *Report on Administration of Old Age Pensions 1939-40* (Ottawa, 1940), 11; Canada, Department of National Health and Welfare, *Report on Administration of Old Age Pensions 1949-50* (Ottawa, 1950), 12.

<sup>3</sup> A. Holtzman, *The Townsend Movement: A Political Study* (New York, 1963); J. Putnam, *Old-Age Politics in California: From Richardson to Reagan* (Stanford, 1970); F. Piner, P. Jacobs, and P. Selznick, *Old Age and Political Behavior: A Case Study* (Berkeley, 1959).

tent in a co-ordinated fashion and to work for positive change in the OAP program. The result was the first formal Canadian association for the elderly founded by the elderly themselves, the Old Age Pensioners' Organization of British Columbia (OAPOBC).<sup>4</sup>

Although existing accounts of the history of the elderly in Canada give the organization little attention or credit,<sup>5</sup> the OAPOBC is important for several reasons. First, the founding points to the time at which some of the elderly began to see themselves consciously as a distinct social group with specific and identifiable needs that had a claim to a place on the public agenda. Second, the organization is an important part of the explanation as to why the Old Age Pensioners<sup>6</sup> received better or at least more generous treatment in British Columbia than in any other Canadian province. During the 1930s in particular, most Canadian provinces tightened the application of OAP regulations and reduced the average monthly payment substantially, but on the west coast the average monthly payment level declined relatively little, much less than the cost of living.<sup>7</sup> Third, the OAPOBC's success at dealing with the provincial government and state institutions and the substantial gains it facilitated for Pensioners stands in distinct contrast to the relative lack of success attributed to similar organizations in the United States at this time.<sup>8</sup>

The organized elderly, particularly the OAPOBC, became a significant element in the political history of the OAP program on the west coast; administered in each province through a provincial board, the

<sup>4</sup> A. P. Pross, *Group Politics and Public Policy* (Toronto, 1986), points out that the number and use of pressure groups in the Canadian political system has proliferated since the 1920s, coincident with the expansion of the administrative arm of the state, and that by 1945 pressure groups had become an essential part of the public policy process in Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Bryden, *Old Age Pensions and Policy-Making*, 194; C. G. Gifford, *Canada's Fighting Seniors* (Toronto, 1990), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this article "Pension" and "Pensioner" are capitalized where the reference is to the OAP, so as to distinguish the state Pension program from private pensions.

<sup>7</sup> One measure of this is the average monthly payment level of the OAP. While lower in British Columbia than in any other participating province except Ontario in 1932 (at \$19.16, or 95.8 percent of the \$20 maximum), by 1937 the British Columbia figure was the highest in the country (\$19.04, or 95.2 percent); thereafter it remained at or very near the peak in absolute terms and in percentage of the maximum — \$24.41 or 95.4 percent (of the \$25 maximum) in 1945, \$29.21 or 97.4 percent (of the \$30 maximum) in 1948 (see the annual *Report of the Administration of Old Age Pensions in Canada, 1931-1949*). These figures do not include the provincial supplements in which British Columbia consistently led all other provinces in timing and in maximum amount (at first \$5 and by 1949 \$10).

<sup>8</sup> Only Holtzman, *Townsend Movement*, on the basis of scant evidence, argues that the organized elderly, in his case the Townsend Movement, substantially affected the social security program in the United States. This is disputed by other scholars; see Putnam, *Old Age Politics*; Piner, Jacobs, and Selznick, *Old Age and Political Behaviour*; C. L. Day, *What Older Americans Think: Interest Groups and Aging Policy* (Princeton, N.J., 1990); H. J. Pratt, *The Gray Lobby* (Chicago, 1976), 39-40.

Canadian OAP was structured in such a way as to facilitate a local focus to the organized elderly. The Canadian movement showed itself to be pragmatic, to be able to adapt to changing political circumstances, and to be effective in establishing connections with government officials and politicians at all levels. In short, if “political activity” is defined more broadly than in previous studies of the organized elderly in the 1930s and 1940s — so as to include not just legislation but also the ways in which the legislation was applied and the attitudes and behaviour of other political actors such as the courts, the press, and other organizations — the western elderly were successful at influencing the political process.

Pushed by what they regarded as the arbitrary decisions of the provincial OAP board, in 1932 a small number of Vancouver Pensioners organized the OAPOBC. The OAP was a public phenomenon that large numbers of elderly had, or hoped to have, in common. The other major new phenomena associated with the elderly at this time — mandatory retirement and the founding of residential institutions — were perceived as largely negative developments, not the sort of phenomena offering a group a positive self-image.<sup>9</sup> The Old Age Pension was different; it was, for many, positive, and its central place within the new seniors’ organizations was a reflection of its special role. The OAP was also a public program which an organized interest group could reasonably aspire to shape. The OAPOBC aimed

to protect the rights and interests of Old Age Pensioners or prospective pensioners over 60; to prevent discrimination, avoid technicalities and undue delay in the consideration of applications for pensions; to endeavor to secure and maintain fair and just legislation and executive action at all times in the best interests of Old Age Pensioners; to preserve their status as citizens, entitled to pensions, as [a] social and legal right, and not by way of relief or charity; and enable them to maintain their dignity and self-respect as pioneer citizens of Canada.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Several scholars argue that fundamental to the creation of the new elderly organizations was a sense of status anxiety; see Piner, Jacobs, and Selznick, *Old Age and Political Behavior*, 69–80, 91, 160; A. H. Miller, P. Gurin, G. Gurin, and O. Malanchuk, “Components of Group Consciousness,” *American Journal of Political Science* 25 (1981), 494–511.

<sup>10</sup> Saskatchewan Archives [hereafter SA], V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #46(3), the Old Age Pensioners’ Organization of B.C. (Vancouver, [1938])

The language of rights was present from the start and was a clear manifestation of these elderly's sense of injury and injustice. It is a sign of their search for status and of their strength of purpose that one of the OAPOBC's first steps was to petition successfully for provincial incorporation, under the title British Columbia Old Age Pensioners' Organization (OAPO).<sup>11</sup> In its applied character the OAP program provided many — even daily — examples of the discrimination suffered by the aged poor, and yet that same OAP was the vehicle by which the elderly sought to redress their grievances and to achieve a new status.

The political agenda of the OAPO was made prominent from the beginning. While it declared itself to be “non-political and non-sectarian,” in reality it was merely non-partisan (and even that weakened over the years) and non-sectarian. The OAPO was never non-political. During the 1930s it quickly elaborated its political agenda, exclusively focused on the OAP. First, the OAP regulations should be applied in such a way as to include the largest number of elderly possible under its benefits. Here the OAPOBC found itself to be in direct conflict with the provincial bureaucracy, whose early philosophy and responsibility it was to apply the OAP restrictions rigorously so as to limit the program costs and to direct the Pension benefits only to those qualified elderly truly in “need,” regardless of how favourably disposed officials themselves were. Thus the OAPOBC attacked such restrictions as the twenty-year residency qualification, arguing for greater flexibility to allow temporary absences and to take into account a lifetime perspective rather than just the most recent twenty years. Income determination was also a source of considerable friction since this was the basis for the individual payment level. Particularly difficult was the valuation of realty where, for example, the assessed value no longer reflected the market value of a home in the depressed conditions of the 1930s, or where potentially income-producing property was not in fact generating any income. Finally, and perhaps the matter of greatest contention, the OAPOBC fought against the application of the parents' maintenance legislation, pointing out that the provincial board assigned many elderly parents fictive income from children that in reality was never received by the parents. On these issues the OAPOBC sought to have the existing OAP regulations redefined so that the program could operate more effectively for the elderly.

<sup>11</sup> I use OAPO when referring to the national organization centred in British Columbia and OAPOBC when referring to the organization's activities within British Columbia; they began as one-and-the-same entity, but it is eventually necessary to distinguish between the two. I have largely omitted discussion of the national activities of the OAPO here.

Second, the OAPOBC fought to improve the OAP Act itself. The age of eligibility should be reduced to sixty-five, it was argued, so as to align better the timing of the Pension and of involuntary retirement. The value of the Pension should be raised so that the OAP itself meets the subsistence needs of the elderly, rather than the earlier intention to meet merely a portion of those needs. In the 1930s the convenient measure for the appropriate Pension level was one dollar a day; in the 1940s the OAPO pushed for a higher level — \$40 or \$50 a month. Finally, the OAPOBC argued for a national OAP. British Columbia was home to a disproportionate number of elderly from other provinces and thus frequently witnessed the even greater problems suffered by elderly from elsewhere in Canada. Since the provincial costs for each Pensioner were allocated proportionally to the Pensioner's years of residence in each province over the twenty-year residency period, those elderly who had spent all or some portion of those years in a province as yet without the OAP found themselves with a much reduced payment level or without a Pension altogether. The basis of OAP qualification, argued the OAPOBC, "should be Canadian citizenship, and residence in Canada." If the OAPOBC's early interests were narrowly focused on the OAP, its view of Pension problems was expansive. The OAPOBC fought from the beginning for non-Pensioners and would-be Pensioners, as well as for existing Pensioners, and its agenda always included a national perspective.

The OAPOBC's political purpose found immediate voice in the tactics both of the organization and of the British Columbia elderly generally. Late in 1932 a Victoria-area Pensioner, James Gartley, took the provincial OAP board to court, challenging its reduction of his Pension payment level after the board had discovered that he owned a vacant lot producing no income; Gartley challenged the board's attribution of fictive income on the basis of the vacant lot's alleged market value, arguing that only actual income should be counted in the board's calculations. When he lost at trial level, Gartley appealed to the British Columbia Supreme Court where he also lost. But the comments of the provincial chief justice hearing the appeal were such as to suggest that he found merit in Gartley's argument while holding that technically Gartley had no statutory right to challenge the board's decision.<sup>12</sup> Though not directly linked to the OAPOBC, the case

<sup>12</sup> *Gartley v Workmen's Compensation Board*, (1932) 57 B.C.R. 217; *Victoria Daily Times*, 30 September 1932, p. 15, 28 January 1933, p. 1; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 10 December 1932, p. 6; British Columbia Archives and Record Service [hereafter BCARS], GR1249, box 1, file 7, C. W. Craig to Workmen's Compensation Board, Vancouver, 28 January 1933. In other

reflected a militancy and a tactic that was characteristic of the organization and was soon apparent in the OAPOBC's own strategy. The OAPOBC from the beginning had a solicitor, who donated his services, and as early as 1932-33 the association offered to take up "all cases of members who have been unjustly treated" by the provincial board.<sup>13</sup> Gartley's initiative suggests that this militancy was shared among many of the elderly at large.

In late 1932 the OAPOBC organized its first provincial legislative petition, a classic tactic among pressure groups representing those who feel that their views are inadequately reflected in government. The petition was aimed at the federal regulations under the Act and called for an end to the calculation of fictive income from adult children. The ambition behind the petition is revealing. Copies were sent to every town in British Columbia but not elsewhere, and Pensioners and other interested persons were urged to collect as many voters' signatures as possible; the target was twenty thousand names. The relative lack of newspaper attention and the absence of any province-wide organization to sustain the petition suggest that the campaign was a failure, though the federal bureaucracy was certainly aware of the campaign.<sup>14</sup>

The political focus of the organization was central to its mission and to its activities. Regular monthly meetings of the OAPOBC branches underlined the participatory character of the movement. Meetings frequently adopted resolutions declaring the members' discontent and setting out the specific problems and proposed solutions regarding the OAP.<sup>15</sup> Copies of the resolutions were dispatched to appropriate provincial and federal ministers as well as British Columbia federal Members of Parliament. In 1937 the Vancouver branch, which operated as the centre of the movement until the later founding of a provincial council, prepared a brief for the interprovincial conference on the OAP and persuaded the British Columbia government to submit the document.<sup>16</sup> When no response occurred, the OAPO drafted a letter for every Member of Parliament, setting out the organization's proposals for OAP reform in 1938. This was followed up through correspondence with both federal and provincial governments

---

provinces the elderly occasionally showed similar initiative in standing up publicly for what they perceived to be their rights; see, for example, *Montreal Daily Star*, 21 February 1938.

<sup>13</sup> National Archives of Canada [hereafter NA], RG29, v130, #208-3-5, E. R. Vipond, Vancouver, [1932-1933], appeal for membership.

<sup>14</sup> NA, RG29, v130, #208-3-5, "Notice" (requesting return before 1 February 1933); *ibid.*, undated petition to the Government and Parliament of Canada; *Calgary Herald*, 2 March 1934.

<sup>15</sup> NA, RG29, v130, #208-3-5, OAPO resolutions, [Vancouver], 5 August 1933, 7 April 1934.

<sup>16</sup> BCARS, GR1249, v1, file 9, E. S. H. Winn to G. S. Pearson, [Vancouver], 23 June 1937.

in a struggle to sustain the OAPOBC agenda. Early in 1940 the Vancouver branch organized the first national petition of the OAPO; on reasonably short notice and despite relatively weak organization, almost sixty thousand signatures were collected before the petition was presented to Parliament. The sense of accomplishment from this petition and the psychological boost that its numerical success provided are suggested by the comment of one leader: "We are all well satisfied, as a result of our united efforts since last fall, that our movement has stepped right out in front." Resolutions were often supported by trade unions, city councils, social service organizations, or even provincial legislatures before being dispatched to the target government.<sup>17</sup> Direct electoral activity was also tried, placing direct pressure on elected politicians to adopt favourable public positions. This single-minded political focus of the OAPO's early meetings had disadvantages.

Many members did not fully share the OAPOBC leaders' level of energy and commitment to political activism. It was not that the members disagreed with the OAPOBC's political stance, but that some members wanted more, some had a different agenda, and others were unwilling to devote so much time to political effort. One group of members demanded a broader political agenda, expanding beyond the Old Age Pension to address other needs of the dependent elderly. Early in 1937 some of this group, led by G. W. Ribchester, split off from the OAPOBC to found the Old Age Pensioners' Benevolent Association (OAPBA) in Vancouver. The OAPBA took with them the OAPO's entire agenda regarding the Pension program. What the new organization added to that agenda were issues previously rejected by the OAPOBC: a burial allowance and free medical care for Pensioners. Operating as a friendly society as well as a political pressure group, the OAPBA almost immediately after its founding gathered enough funds to begin a burial fund for members.<sup>18</sup> Beyond carrying out in a somewhat less assertive manner lobbying tactics similar to those of the OAPOBC, the OAPBA also incorporated social activities designed to appeal to a broader set of needs of its members. Picnics

<sup>17</sup> SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(2), J. J. Whiting's speech, [Saskatoon], 10 October 1945; *ibid.*, #49(1), Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B. C., 14 January 1940, 26 May 1940, 6 June 1940, 19 August 1940; *Western Producer*, 25 September 1941, p. 12, 23 October 1941, p. 11; Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 1940, 780, 2603-2605. A copy of the petition is in SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #46(3), "Petition to Improve Conditions for Old Age Pensioners."

<sup>18</sup> Even the continuing members of the OAPO could recognize some of the potential benefits of co-operative group action; see for example *Victoria Daily Times*, 5 November 1938, magazine section, p. 5.

were organized, and occasional dinners were arranged to bring members together simply to facilitate socializing.<sup>19</sup> The OAPBA continued for several years before fading away by the mid-1940s. But the desire of other, less politically motivated elderly for their own social organizations continued to be manifested in a number of new groups and by the gradual adaptation of the OAPOBC branches to more diverse meetings and appeal.

Groups such as the OAPO tended to be dominated by a small number of individuals with a common set of skills and outlook. In their earlier years they tended to have been active in political (though not necessarily partisan) organizations such as farmers' groups or labour unions.<sup>20</sup> These individuals shared a particular outlook, having the requisite skills and knowledge to operate in such groups and believing that by working in such organizations meaningful change could be effected. This essentially positive outlook, along with the personal self-esteem gained through their work,<sup>21</sup> sustained the leaders through the long periods when no headway seemed to be made and imbued the organization with the optimism that was essential for sustaining the movement and for its eventual success. The work could be very time-consuming. When J. J. Whiting, for example, was president of the Vancouver branch of the OAPOBC, he was an *ex officio* member of the branch executive committee, an *ex officio* delegate to the provincial council, and a member of the provincial executive committee; he had one to two OAPOBC meetings every week, apart from handling the individual concerns and correspondence and consultations with various authorities all of which was part

<sup>19</sup> City of Vancouver Archives [hereafter CVA], clippings file, fiche #6938-1, 18 and 20 January, 6 July 1937, 10 January 1939, 10 January, 18 March 1940; SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #46(3), B.C. OAPBA Programme and Publication 1939-40. There were other politically-oriented organizations of the elderly in this period — the B.C. Pensioners' Friendly Aid Society in Vancouver, the Canadian Social Security Association in Vancouver — and there were others organized by the reform-minded non-elderly to address the needs of the elderly, such as the Victoria Senior Citizens Campaign Council.

<sup>20</sup> For example: A. J. Carter was secretary of the Fernie District Labour Party and of the local branch of the OAPO in 1942 (SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #46(1), Carter to McNaughton, Fernie, B.C., 14 August 1942); J. W. Hope of New Westminster had been a railroader, 1941 president of a Vancouver local, and in retirement worked with the Standard Railway Unions' local conference committee in Vancouver; J. J. Whiting of Vancouver had also been a railroader in England and Saskatchewan, and had been "mixed up" in trade union work, including the Agricultural Labourers' Union, in England and then in the farmer's wheat pool movement and the rural municipal convention in Saskatchewan (SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(2), Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 6 May 1942; *ibid.*, #46(2), 13 June 1943; *ibid.*, #49(2), clipping of *Burnaby News-Chronicle*, 23 June 1949; *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 16 October 1945, p. 3; *Pensioner*, August 1950, p. 2).

<sup>21</sup> J. J. Whiting confided that "somehow I get quite a kick out of it [the OAPO work];" see SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(2), Whiting to McNaughton, Vancouver, 6 May 1942.



of his job.<sup>22</sup> The leaders had been political activists in their earlier adult years and tended simply to continue this activity as they acquired elderly status.

The prime mover of the OAPOBC in its early days was Edward R. Vipond, the organization's co-founder and first provincial president. On turning seventy in 1932, Vipond had sought a Pension only to have his application rejected on the ground that his several sons were capable of supporting him; according to the provincial OAP board, a Pension would be awarded only if Vipond took his sons to court under the Parents' Maintenance Act and the court decreed that the sons were unable to support him. Angered and upset, Vipond consulted a lawyer, G. V. Pelton, and after some discussion they arranged a meeting of interested persons to establish the OAPOBC.<sup>23</sup> Over the next several years Vipond busied himself promoting the association and its concerns across the province and in Ottawa. Vipond sent the federal pension authorities a variety of propaganda: copies of letters purporting to reflect common viewpoints among the British Columbia elderly; a statement of OAPO objectives; annual OAPOBC resolutions. Some of Vipond's letters in the early 1930s blatantly attempted to play on the electoral vulnerability of an increasingly unpopular federal Conservative government. Many of the OAPOBC members were long-time Conservatives, he informed the federal minister responsible for the OAP, but "all are prepared to merge with those of the most radical turn of thought, in condemnation of your callous and brutal tendency towards the old and helpless people of this province." A sample letter of support for the OAPOBC from one new member, and forwarded to Ottawa, described the writer's enthusiastic support for the Conservative party in the 1930 general election and his subsequent disenchantment; in the face of the government's "cruel indifference to old people," the latter were "being forced into voting 'red'."<sup>24</sup> The letters were nicely calculated to play on Conservative party fears by 1933.

Also important in the early years of the OAPO was the other co-founder, Vancouver solicitor Gerald V. Pelton, the only identifiably

<sup>22</sup> SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(2), J. J. Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 11 June 1944.

<sup>23</sup> *Pensioner*, December 1951, p. 6. For a discussion of the parents' maintenance legislation nationally, see J. G. Snell, "Filial Responsibility Laws in Canada: An Historical Study," *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 9 (1990), 268-77.

<sup>24</sup> NA, RG29, v130, #208-3-5, E. R. Vipond to W. A. Gordon, Vancouver, 4 August 1933; *ibid.*, A Cresswell to Vipond, Vancouver, 28 July 1933; *Vancouver Daily Province*, 20 January 1945, p. 5. Vipond died in February 1945, but he had not been active in the OAPOBC for several years previously.

non-elderly member of the association (aged forty-four in 1932). Pelton's motivation is unclear and his later career suggests that there may have been considerable self-interest involved.<sup>25</sup> In 1941 a civil servant commented that Pelton's interest in the OAPO "is the monetary gain for himself." J. J. Whiting described Pelton and used him to outline the duties of a solicitor for any OAPO branch:

Every branch should have an attorney who is willing to do some work on behalf of the members at a reduced remuneration, and of course he would need to be a man whose sympathies were entirely in accord with the movement, and if possible one who was not particularly tied to any government or political party. Mr Pelton is a liberal in politics but where the interest of the organization is concerned you would not know it. and the difference in the treatment of the old age pensioners in B.C. as compared with other provinces is very largely due to the efforts he makes on our behalf. And while he does a lot of work for which he receives nothing directly he picks up quite a lot of odd cash, by drawing up of wills, settling of estates and so on, for all of which his charges are extremely modest. He will take an affidavit for our members for any purpose for 25c. He will help a person to have his application for a pension made out in order and so on, and when asked what his charge is he says, 'Oh you just give me a dollar when you get your first cheque.' He always attends our meetings and usually he will have something of interest to tell us, of some difficulty he has been able to straighten out with the authorities.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever his personal gains, Pelton worked hard for the OAPO, acquiring considerable expertise on the OAP Act and regulations. He was active, particularly in the first decade of the organization's existence, in recommending amendments to the regulations and in intervening on behalf of a number of applicants before the British Colum-

<sup>25</sup> Born in 1888, Pelton had political aspirations. He ran as an Independent CCF candidate in an unidentified election, using his position in the OAPO as the basis for an explicit appeal to the elderly for their support (he was not listed as a candidate in any British Columbia riding between 1935 and 1950). In 1945 he was defeated in Vancouver Burrard in the federal general election under the banner of the Liberal party. In 1969 he was suspended from the British Columbia Law Society and subsequently charged with multiple counts of conspiracy, breach of trust, and theft from estates entrusted to him. He pleaded guilty and at age eighty-one was sentenced to three years in prison. See CVA, clippings file #7293.

<sup>26</sup> NA, RG29, v128, #208-2-3 pt.2, V. D. McElary to J. W. MacFarlane, Vancouver, 22 September 1941; SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(1), J. J. Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 19 August 1940. In 1939-40 the OAPOBC paid Pelton \$200 for his work; see, *ibid.*, 21 January 1941.

bia OAP board.<sup>27</sup> Undoubtedly Pelton's influence was the most important factor in the OAPO's aggressive use of the law and the legal system on behalf of the elderly. Though the actual number of court cases instigated by the OAPO was small, the threat of litigation was often employed to push the provincial board to adopt a more flexible attitude to prospective Pensioners.<sup>28</sup> A letter-to-the-editor of the *Province* bragged that Pelton was "ready at any time to examine applications for pensions by members of the organization, checking them over and giving advice where such is necessary, without any fixed charge for doing so." By the mid-1940s Pelton's work for the OAPO had declined considerably in amount and significance, though he still supported the movement.<sup>29</sup>

In the late 1930s the OAPO began a drive for national organization despite its relatively limited appeal and provincial structure to date. By 1938 there were still just five branches, all concentrated in the south-west corner of the province (Vancouver, New Westminster, Victoria, Nanaimo, Chilliwack). The annual membership fee was only one dollar, but for the elderly poor this was not an insignificant sum. The actual membership of the OAPO at this time is not known, but the regular monthly branch meetings drew respectable crowds. In 1938 the central OAPOBC appointed an organizer, Ben Stone Kennedy, who travelled to different communities seeking to stir up interest and helping to found new branches and to increase the membership.<sup>30</sup> In the late 1930s the OAPOBC began to establish a more effective organizational structure, a development that was consummated by 1942. A provincial general council (consisting of the president of each branch) was founded; each branch had the right to send two delegates to the annual general meeting. Central funding was established, contributed on a proportional basis by each branch and to be used to further the common purpose of the OAPO.<sup>31</sup> A further sign of growing maturity was the 1941 establishment of the OAPO's own magazine, *The Pensioner*, which quickly came to play a vital role in communicating among the various branches both in British Columbia and across the country. The sense of shared problems and shared successes among individual members encouraged an important feeling of group iden-

<sup>27</sup> NA, RG29, v130, #208-3-5, G. V. Pelton to OAP Department, Vancouver, 24 June 1933; *ibid.*, W. S. Edwards to Dickson, Ottawa, 30 October 1934.

<sup>28</sup> See for example *Victoria Daily Times*, 8 August 1934, p. 3; *Vancouver News-Herald*, 7 August 1934, p. 2; CVA, clippings file, fiche #6938-1, 10 September 1934.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from L. H. Browne, *Vancouver Daily Province*, 25 November 1936, p. 21; *Pensioner*, April 1951, p. 2, May 1951, p. 3, June 1952, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 13 July 1938, 11 November 1938.

<sup>31</sup> *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 13 June 1946.

tity among readers and provided local leaders with useful information and ideas about developments elsewhere.

This expansion was inhibited by several factors. The OAPOBC suffered from meagre funds. It was costly to send out organizers, even where their services were volunteered. As late as 1947, the provincial council of the OAPOBC carried out its work with just \$802.50 in revenue for the year. The 1938 initiatives for expansion received positive responses from interior communities such as Kamloops, Penticton, Vernon, and Greenwood, but the OAPOBC could not afford to send anyone to these towns. When the OAPOBC drew increased attention in 1940, partially in response to the growing level of newspaper support, large numbers of letters from individual elderly made their way to the OAPOBC, which was frustrated in its inability to afford the postage for responses.<sup>32</sup> Also, the leadership tended to lose its energy and vigour to the general physical problems of aging. One leader in 1942 articulated a common theme:

Membership is increasing, but one thing is lacking, we must enroll [*sic*] a younger membership to do the work of the organization, age & infirmity does not allow the old folk doing the work, to get this the time of meeting must be altered to evening, thus allowing the younger people an opportunity to attend & take part in the work.<sup>33</sup>

Such problems inhibited the effectiveness of the OAPOBC and slowed its expansion.

Nevertheless expansion did occur, particularly during the 1940s. By 1942 three more branches had been officially opened — in Fernie, Penticton, and Duncan — so that geographical diversity was finally beginning; as well, there were some unaffiliated groups.<sup>34</sup> Existing branches reported growing numbers of members and of people attending regular meetings. During four months of the winter of 1942-43 the Vancouver branch grew from 370 to 525 members; meetings were attended by upwards of three hundred persons and the halls were so crowded that there was standing room only.<sup>35</sup> The sort of

<sup>32</sup> *Pensioner*, August 1947, p. 2; *Vancouver Sun*, 20 December 1940, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #46(1), T. Chantry to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 16 May 1942.

<sup>34</sup> SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #46(1), T. Chantry to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 17 January 1942.

<sup>35</sup> SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(2), J. J. Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 7 February 1943.

missionary zeal of the leaders is suggested by one person's comment that new branches would soon be set up in the greater Vancouver area "and those of us who can must kind of nurse them along until they can look after themselves, in other words if you have anything to sell and folks wont come to buy it, 'well we must take it to them.'" The OAPOBC, he went on in a later letter, "will be a God-send to thousands."<sup>36</sup> Some of the more experienced leaders on the lower mainland travelled out to various communities on request to speak about the OAPO and to help with organizing new branches.<sup>37</sup> Observers from elsewhere were quite impressed with the level of achievement of the OAPOBC; in April 1945 a Saskatoon visitor returned from a visit to the west coast, commenting: "The B.C. people are very active and the movement seems to be going very strong."<sup>38</sup> By the end of 1948 the OAPOBC claimed a membership of 9,200 in the Vancouver area alone, though this probably exaggerated the association's numbers. The provincial council divided the province into five regions and appointed an organizer for each; their duties were not only to assist in the founding of new branches, but also to visit the various established branches in their region, advising and encouraging especially the weaker ones. Thirty branches had been established since 1932, four of which had become inactive. Many of the new branches were centred in the greater Vancouver area, or at least in the southwest corner of the province, but there were also branches in such scattered sites as Dawson Creek and Kamloops.<sup>39</sup> By 1951 forty-five British Columbia branches of the OAPO had been established; new branches had been added in the Vancouver area, on Vancouver Island, in Lillooet, and Chilliwack (re-established), but several branches had folded due to a lack of local support. The work of the organizers was crucial in this continuing expansion; in the case of Chilliwack and Abbotsford, for example, the regional organizer made eight visits to each community to assist the new branches in gaining a firm footing. The OAPOBC claimed a 1951 membership of between five thousand

<sup>36</sup> SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(2), J. J. Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 6 July, 12 September 1943.

<sup>37</sup> SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(2), J. J. Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 20 February, 11 June 1944.

<sup>38</sup> SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #47, McNaughton to E. Baker, [Saskatoon], 6 April 1945.

<sup>39</sup> SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(2), J. J. Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 26 January 1949; *Pensioner*, September 1948, p. 2, December 1948, pp. 15-16. The five regions were the Victoria area, Vancouver Island, the Vancouver area, the Lower Fraser Valley, and the Upper Fraser Valley.

and six thousand (approximately 15 to 20 percent of the provincial Pensioner population).<sup>40</sup>

In its first two decades the OAPOBC adopted a variety of political tactics. In the early years, petitions were important, not only for drawing political attention to the organized elderly's views, but also for stimulating the public at large and the elderly in particular. Throughout the entire period the forwarding of resolutions was a constant technique for keeping their views and problems before their elected representatives. Direct pressure was also placed on elected politicians to adopt a public position in favour of the OAPOBC's proposals. One letter solicited a British Columbia MLA's views on the 1935 resolutions

for the guidance of members of the Organization in exercising their franchise on election day. . . . Recent figures show that there are at present somewhat over 100,000 Old Age Pensioners throughout Canada, of whom there are about 8,000 in British Columbia, and as most of the Old Age Pensioners have several adult relatives, they represent a very large voting strength in every constituency.<sup>41</sup>

From time to time, individual OAPO members pointed to the large numbers of elderly voters and urged them to use their electoral strength to pressure politicians to adopt desired policies. More realistic were occasional all-candidates meetings, where the needs of the organized elderly were brought home to the candidates, and questions to candidates sought to elicit their position regarding the OAP and indirectly to remind them of the demands of the organized elderly. There is no evidence that any of this activity had any direct success, but it did remind those in power of the existence of the dependent elderly and of their needs.

The later 1930s witnessed an increased assertiveness on the part of the organized elderly.<sup>42</sup> No longer content, for example, to solicit the views of politicians through letters or to hear from individual politi-

<sup>40</sup> *Pensioner*, March 1950, p. 2, August 1950, p. 2, May 1951, p. 2. This proportion of Pensioners is very similar to that in California, where approximately 20 percent of those receiving public assistance in the early 1950s belonged to the major organization; see Piner, Jacobs, and Selznick, *Old Age and Political Behavior*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> BCARS, GR1249, box 1, file 5, G. V. Pelton to A. M. Manson, Vancouver, 29 August 1935; *ibid.*, Manson to E. S. H. Winn, Vancouver, 30 August 1935.

<sup>42</sup> The timing was coincident with the efforts at provincial and national expansion and may have been determined by an infusion of new leaders, such as Ben Kennedy, J. J. Whiting, and J. W. Hope.

cians as speakers at their meetings, OAPOBC branches adopted more aggressive tactics. Approaching the 1940 general election, the Victoria branch arranged an all-candidates meeting, where the OAPOBC articulated its agenda and demanded a response from each political hopeful; none of the candidates was willing to disagree that the OAP should be improved. The Vancouver branch sent to many newspapers across the country two questions which it asked be published and put to office-seekers by voters concerned for OAP reform.<sup>43</sup> Members were urged to write letters to provincial and federal politicians pushing for OAP reforms. Branches also began to appeal to the press more effectively, putting their views before the public through letters-to-the-editor and facilitating in-depth articles about the OAPO and about the problems of the dependent elderly. Tag days were planned, both as fund-raising events and as a way of dramatizing the social problems of many Pensioners. On one tag day in January 1942,

it rained all day cold & fog making things very unpleasant for those on the streets, however we got \$90.00 the public were shocked & repeatedly was heard the statement, it is terrible these old folks should have to beg on streets, & is this what our soldiers are fighting for, the Govt. should be ashamed. . . . The Tag Day was [a] success morally and financially. The Public are surely behind the O.A. Pensioners.<sup>44</sup>

The Vancouver newspapers were particularly sympathetic to the plight of the elderly, carrying frequent articles about the OAPO and about the plights of the elderly faced by the problems of the OAP as set out by the OAPO. The city press was very opposed to the application of the parents' maintenance legislation, calling the provincial OAP board "Our Gestapo for the Aged" (an especially emotive phrase in the depths of the war) and referring to the legislation as "legalized blackmail." The treatment of the dependent elderly had to change, argued the *Vancouver Sun*:

<sup>43</sup> *Victoria Daily Times*, 6 March 1940, p. 5; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 7 May 1942, p. 18; *Vancouver Sun*, 7 August 1939, p. 20; *Western Producer*, 15 February 1940, p. 11; SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(2), J. J. Whiting's speech, [Saskatoon], 10 October 1945. The two questions sought commitments from candidates to lower the eligible age to sixty-five and to increase the payment level to \$1 a day.

<sup>44</sup> *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 6 September 1941, p. 4 (G. A. Dyson), 12 February 1942, p. 4 (Dyson), 14 March 1944, p. 4 (Dyson), 22 November 1945, p. 4 (Dyson); *Victoria Daily Times*, 10 September 1941, p. 8 (Dyson), 3 March 1943, p. 3 (Dyson), 21 March 1944, p. 4 (Dyson); *Vancouver Sun*, 7 July 1941, p. 12, 29 July 1941, p. 17; SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #46(1), T. Chantry to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 17 January 1942; *Pensioner*, May 1951, p. 2.

We have got to realize that suspicion begets suspicion, that honor begets honor, that the rights of a man and woman do not dissolve and vanish when they are no longer able to work. Once that is understood, we shall as a nation go ahead to remove the shame and stigma from our treatment of the aged. We shall call off the gestapo from their enforced and ignominious spying and probing into the lives of old men and women.<sup>45</sup>

The paper vested basic Judeo-Christian principles ("Honour thy father and thy mother") and fundamental issues of morality in the debate about the character of the OAP program, and presented what were intended to be heart-wrenching stories about the plight of individual elderly. Most accounts appealed to romantic images of the family and of delicately negotiated parent-child relationships shattered by the harsh demands of the state.<sup>46</sup>

The rhetoric was stirring and the ideas were often logical from the perspective of the needs of the elderly, and while their immediate political impact was undoubtedly slight, they did serve to maintain and enhance group solidarity. In January 1949 a leading grey activist, J. J. Whiting of New Westminster, urged the elderly to begin preparing for the upcoming federal election. In every constituency the elderly should organize "a vigilance committee" who would challenge candidates regarding seniors-centred policies. Almost all elderly had the vote, he reminded his readers, and many of the elderly would not be alive at the following election: "So, if need be let us break with our particular political party, and vote for the right, for in any case we have 'nothing to lose but our chains.'"<sup>47</sup> The danger in repeatedly raising specific electoral targets and goals was that failure was so obvious when it occurred that disillusionment and disenchantment could easily occur.

A favourite political tactic, and one whose success or failure was much less easily discernible, was the letter-to-the-editor. This tactic points to the relatively limited geographical perspective of the OAPO in the early years and its slight financial resources at all times. This was one of the most persistent forms of publicity for the OAPO,

<sup>45</sup> *Vancouver Sun*, 3 December 1940, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Vancouver Sun*, 8 November 1940, p. 1, 9 November 1940, p. 17, 9 December 1940, p. 18; *Vancouver Daily Province*, 30 November 1940, p. 8; *Victoria Daily Times*, 30 November 1940, p. 18. At the OAPO's prompting, the *Sun* reprinted some of its articles in pamphlet form for distribution to eastern newspapers and to Members of Parliament; see, SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(1), J. J. Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C. [late November 1940].

<sup>47</sup> *Pensioner*, January 1949, p. 4.



beginning with E. R. Vipond, and the local press in Vancouver and Victoria (and perhaps elsewhere) demonstrated considerable sympathy, at first simply by publishing the letters, and later by following up the letters with articles about the OAPO and about the problems of the elderly. The noticeable support of the British Columbia press was attracted by this letter-writing tactic. The letters were not always cogent or even intelligent, but they did persistently draw attention to the OAP and to the needs of the elderly poor. In the fall of 1934, for example, Vipond blamed the notorious political influence of Quebec for depriving "half of the old people of Canada . . . [of] their legal rights of a small pension." This legalistic language was repeated often, reflecting the fight for and claim to status that the OAPO reflected. Another member of the OAPOBC executive wrote to one Vancouver newspaper that the OAPO sought to "preserve their [the elderly's] status as citizens, entitled to pensions as a social and legal right, and not by way of relief or charity, and enable them to maintain their dignity and self-respect as pioneer citizens of Canada."<sup>48</sup> The local press was not only willing to publish these letters, but often manifested increasing sympathy for the elderly's plight, joining in the campaign for OAP reform.

The British Columbia press' adoption of the viewpoint of the OAPO continued into the war and the increasingly harsh economic conditions faced by the dependent elderly. As the OAPOBC stepped up its campaign to increase the value of the Pension, mounting a petition campaign in the winter of 1939-40, the local newspapers added their strong voice with stories of the pathetic financial plights of the elderly, usually painted in terms of individual Pensioners for maximum effect. The *Sun*, for example, carried an account of how "the little white-haired lady with the big brown eyes" was "almost" able to make her \$20 Pension cheque last a full month. Since her room rent was \$11, the woman was forced to keep her other expenses within \$9. The "gallant little old lady" did so by eating only two meals a day and restricting her diet largely to inexpensive carbohydrates and occasional vegetables; she rarely ate meat any more. Nevertheless she remained the embodiment of selflessness, knitting socks and sewing at the Red Cross for refugees. "She isn't bitter about it all. Just puzzled," commented the *Sun*. "For thirty-three years she has lived in Western Canada, worked hard and has done what she could for others. Now towards the end of each month, when her pension is spent and she has no food, she has to be careful

<sup>48</sup> Letter from L. H. Browne, *Vancouver Daily Province*, 25 November 1936, p. 21.

about walking around in case she faints.”<sup>49</sup> It was clearly easy for the press to paint a sympathetic, if patronizing picture of the elderly. With support like this it is no wonder that the OAPOBC felt itself making headway, and it is not surprising that the British Columbia government was the first to break the \$20 Pension maximum with a \$5 bonus in the spring of 1942, followed by several other provinces in the following months.

Paralleling the OAPO's direct use of the press was the tendency of individual elderly to assert their own views in the press of this period. When the *Western Producer* began to open its pages to Pensioners and their interests, literally hundreds of elderly began to write in as elderly, identifying their needs and points of view. This was true of the press in general,<sup>50</sup> and the elderly were noticeably effective at painting a pathetic, emotive picture of themselves so as to generate sympathy and support. In 1944, for example, a ninety-year-old Vancouver Pensioner wrote to a local newspaper complaining that older Pensioners such as himself were unable to benefit from recent regulations expanding the allowable amount of employment income. “There are many pensioners like myself who are too old and feeble to earn a cent . . . leaving us so helpless, we who now require a trifle of comfort in our declining years,” he wrote. The elderly could do more than plead for aid, however. They were quite willing to challenge authority aggressively where appropriate. This same man used the rhetoric of World War Two to castigate the government official involved: “Even Hitler would be more humane than that, for he would have us all lined up and shot and put out of our misery, as he would think it a sin to grow old and useless.”<sup>51</sup> Assertiveness and the sense of representing an identifiable and deserving group are important characteristics of this use of the press. The employment of the press in this way may well have been a factor in the increasing popular support for a more generous OAP program in Canada in the 1940s, although that trend

<sup>49</sup> *Vancouver Sun*, 14 November 1940, p. 2, 31 July 1941, p. 5, 17 November 1941, p. 5; CVA, clippings file, #6938-1, 1 August 1941; *Victoria Daily Times*, 7 April 1942, p. 2; SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49 (2), J. J. Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 25 January 1942. Newspapers in other cities were also supportive, but not so intensely as those in Vancouver; see, for example: the discussion of the *Winnipeg Tribune* in *Western Producer*, 21 April 1949, p. 21; the *Toronto Star*, 6 March 1946, p. 4, 29 August 1946, p. 6, 13 February 1947, p. 9, 26 February 1948, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, the clippings in NA, RG29, v128, #208-2-3 pt.2.

<sup>51</sup> “A 90-Year-Old Pensioner,” in *Vancouver Daily Province*, 16 March 1944, p. 4. See also, for example, SA, T. C. Douglas Papers, R33.1, XVII, 636 (17-5j), T. Chantry to Douglas, Burnaby, B.C., 20 October 1947. Use of analogies with Adolf Hitler were quite common.

was national while the organized elderly had a more limited coverage.<sup>52</sup>

For the OAPOBC the press campaigns were not merely about propaganda as an end in itself; they were about changing the OAP process. Propaganda could help to set a positive environment, but in itself it was unlikely to bring about change. One mechanism for change was the courts, and G. V. Pelton, the honorary solicitor of the OAPO, led the way in attempting to use the legal process to further the interests of Pensioners. For the OAPO these cases were a means to underline the state's enforcement of parents' maintenance legislation and to try to force the Pension authorities to adopt a different approach, particularly regarding fictive income. In the fall of 1941 the OAPOBC persuaded eighty-four-year-old Mary Burnett to challenge the board's refusal of her OAP application on the ground that her two adult children were able to support her. When Mrs. Burnett withdrew the case at the request of one of her daughters, Pelton sought a second test case, persuading James E. Murray to let his case be taken to court. Murray, on behalf of himself and others, challenged the OAP board's calculation of fictive income.

The Murray case was even more directly confrontational than Burnett's. Listing Mr. Murray and six other OAP applicants by number only, the writ also claimed action on behalf of "all persons having a similar grievance" and as such was one of the very earliest class action suits (itself an indication of the growing sense of group identity among the elderly).<sup>53</sup> The eighty-year-old Murray lived in Salmon Arm and received \$10 a month from each of his two sons, and Murray applied for a Pension to bring his income up to the allowable maximum of \$360 a year. The OAP board judged that the sons could reasonably pay their father more money, but the father disagreed and pointed out that the board had not exercised its power to take the sons to court under the Parents' Maintenance Act; instead, the board charged Murray with the additional but non-existent income and rejected his Pension application. The case thus effectively challenged the issue of fictive income from adult children that had bothered the OAPO for so long. The press entered the contest firmly on the side of the elderly whom it depicted stereotypically: he "cannot reasonably be expected at the

<sup>52</sup> Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, polls of 25 November 1942, 29 May 1943, 30 November 1946, 14 October 1950, 24 February 1951.

<sup>53</sup> In Murray's case the outcome of the litigation is uncertain, as the case was not reported. However, it is very unlikely the courts recognized the case as a class action suit, since such legal claims were severely limited until very recently; see L. Nissen, "Class Actions in Canada," *Saskatchewan Law Review* 48 (1983-84), 29-56.

age of 80, feeble and unable to move about readily, to engage in litigation with his children, Murray contends, with the estrangement and damage to his own health and mental repose which would result."<sup>54</sup>

Another group of cases challenged the state's power to cancel a Pension when the Pensioner/applicant transferred property to a third party. Henry Lee, of Parksville on Vancouver Island, had been in receipt of a monthly \$20 Pension for six years when it was cancelled in the fall of 1941, on the ground that he had transferred his farm property to a third party. Lee and his brother owed the third party over \$2,500, contracted for payment of a mortgage and taxes, and Lee agreed to transfer his property to extinguish the debt. At trial level the provincial supreme court held that Lee's property transfer had been involuntary and that the federal legislation required payment of a Pension to all qualified persons and that the provincial board had no proper authority to suspend Lee's Pension. It was further held that a Pensioner could use the courts to compel continuation of Pension payments. This was upheld on appeal, one justice commenting on what he termed "common knowledge":

For years some people struggled to obtain legislation authorizing and providing for the payment of old-age pensions to aged persons, who might need them, against arguments by some persons that the payment of old-age pensions was a matter of Dominion obligation and by others that it was a provincial obligation and by others that it was no obligation at all. Finally, the Dominion Parliament and some of the provincial Legislatures co-operated and the legislation was passed and we have it before us. I think such legislation creates a legal obligation to certain aged persons, but, in any event . . . to those aged persons who have applied for and obtained a pension.<sup>55</sup>

The finding severely limited the discretion of the board to suspend an existing Pension and was a significant victory for the OAPO.

<sup>54</sup> *Vancouver Sun*, 24 December 1941, p. 9. In this, the *Sun* hit on one of the obvious disadvantages to the elderly of these legalistic tactics. The often lengthy and expensive procedures of the law, with their emphasis on an adversarial process, are not well designed to meet the needs of the elderly. The elderly are vulnerable regarding family support, have limited funds, and often cannot reasonably expect to live long enough to see the end of a lawsuit, much less enjoy any of the potential fruits of victory.

<sup>55</sup> CVA, clippings file, fiche #6938-1, 24 January 1942; *Rex et rel Lee v Workmen's Compensation Board*, [1942] 1 D.L.R. 488 (BCSC), [1942] 2 D.L.R. 665 at 695 (BCCA).

The decision placed important new leverage in the hands of Pensioners. The Pension of Emily Smedley, a widow, had been suspended in mid-1940. Her married daughter, who with her husband and child lived in Mrs. Smedley's home and shared the expenses, was unable to support her, but her daughter's husband had acquired Mrs. Smedley's modest home (assessed at \$1,300 but valued at just \$400 because of extensive repairs that were needed) at a tax sale, an inexpensive way of avoiding formal direct transfer of the property. Emily, suffering from diabetes, remained in the house with her daughter's family where she gained her daughter's much-needed care. The OAP board regarded this procedure as simply a devious property transfer and refused to pay the Pension, so the case proceeded to the courts. Before the hearing, however, the provincial board reached a settlement with Emily Smedley, restoring her Pension retroactive to the beginning of 1943.<sup>56</sup> Whether or not Smedley used the *Lee* decision directly, it undoubtedly put pressure on the board to adopt a stance more favourable to individual Pensioners.

One of the major, if quiet, achievements of the OAPOBC was its work with the provincial OAP board which handled all applications for new old age pensions and annually reassessed the needs of each Pensioner. In the 1930s relations between board officials and the OAPOBC were strained at best. State officials, believing themselves to be highly knowledgeable about the needs of the elderly, could see no necessity for any third party "watchdog" and, indeed, clearly felt offended and probably threatened by the OAPOBC and the implications that the board was unsympathetic and often lacked understanding of the problems of the elderly. The competition between the expertise of the OAP officials and that of the Pensioners themselves is suggested by one official's objection to co-operating with G. V. Pelton, who was drawing up the 1937 OAPOBC brief for presentation by the provincial government at the interprovincial meeting on the OAP program. To provide Pelton with some of the information requested would be very time-consuming, the official objected:

I understood from you [the responsible Minister] that Mr. Pelton was only to outline to you in a brief the Old Age Pensioners' Association viewpoint as to what should be done to meet their needs. Without any

<sup>56</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 26 February 1943, p. 6; CVA, clippings file, fiche #6938-2, 26 February 1943; NA, RG29, v144, #208-5-9 pt. 4, H. L. Greenwood to J. W. MacFarlane, Vancouver, 8 January, 9 March, 3 April 1943.

egotism, I think it might be said that we have a greater knowledge of the true situation, having pioneered the whole [OAP] movement in Canada and having had to do with the many thousands of applications that have been presented.<sup>57</sup>

With the “victories” of the OAPOBC in the courts and in provincial government policy in the early and mid-1940s (the granting of a cost-of-living bonus, the near cessation of attempts to enforce the parents’ maintenance legislation, and the end to most claims against Pensioners’ estates), some of the specific grounds for friction between the officials and the organized elderly disappeared. As well, the two may have come to a more mature appreciation of the constraints under which each operated and a better realization that both sought the best interests of the needy elderly. OAP board officials began to appear at OAPOBC branch meetings and wrote occasional informational articles for the *Pensioner*, explaining how various elements of the OAP program worked and answering members’ questions.<sup>58</sup> Officials listened to the comments of the organized elderly and tried to respond, as in the example of the problems of the institutionalized Pensioners around Victoria. Both the board and the OAPOBC were headquartered in Vancouver, and the contact between the two was considerable and increasingly friendly. Individual officials established their own personal links with the OAPOBC, best exemplified by Dorothy Spurr; when Spurr retired as a chief clerk at the OAP board, she quickly joined the Victoria branch of the OAPOBC, becoming a very dynamic publicity secretary.<sup>59</sup> Given “the strong position of power enjoyed by the bureaucracy on aging issues” — both in the application of existing legislation and in the development of new policies — this increasing rapport between provincial officials and the organized elderly can be seen as a political achieve-

<sup>57</sup> BCARS, GR1249, v1, file 9, E. S. H. Winn to G. S. Pearson, [Vancouver], 23 June 1937. Another official dismissed the Pensioners’ organizations as having a small membership relative to the total number of provincial Pensioners; see NA, RG29, v128, #208-2-3 pt.2, V. D. McElary to J. W. MacFarlane, Vancouver, 22 September 1941.

<sup>58</sup> As Pross, *Group Politics*, and A. P. Pross, ed., *Pressure Group Behaviour in Canadian Politics* (Toronto, 1975) argue, organizations such as the OAPOBC are important to the state bureaucracies, legitimating their activities, helping client citizens make use of the state programs and services, and acting as an intermediary between the public and the state; if the OAPOBC was “using” the provincial bureaucracy, the reverse was also true. Officials of municipal agencies too began to appear at branch meetings, discussing the sorts of support offered through local welfare offices, explaining the new health care programs as they were introduced, or working with the local elderly to shape the new housing or recreational programs that began to be implemented by local governments in the late 1940s.

<sup>59</sup> Canada, Joint Committee, *Minutes and Evidence*, 992.

ment of major significance for the organized elderly and for the development of public policy on aging.<sup>60</sup>

Another area of political activity for the organized elderly was their indirect influence on the political process through other, better recognized or better situated organizations. The concerns of the elderly were already of considerable importance to such groups as trade unions or the Royal Canadian Legion, and new if limited awareness spread to other groups and institutions as well, through the activities of the organized elderly. Local clergy were frequently invited to speak at branch meetings, raising the consciousness of the churches regarding the concerns of the elderly. The contacts with organized labour were facilitated on a personal level through several leaders and members. More formal contact was also maintained. For example, over a seven-week period in 1947, the Secretary of the OAPOBC addressed a Vancouver meeting of the Marine Workers and the International Woodworkers of America, spoke to the convention of the auxiliary of the International Woodworkers of America in Nanaimo, interviewed the secretary of the Victoria trades and labour council, was a speaker at the convention of Vancouver Island International Woodworkers of America, and gave a radio address in conjunction with the Canadian Legion.<sup>61</sup> His constant contact with organized labour cannot help but have raised their awareness of the problems of Pensioners, and may well have advanced the more specific political proposals of the OAPOBC. As well as being recipients of aid from service organizations, such as the Lion's Club or the Rotary, local branches helped to maintain the awareness of the elderly's needs among such groups.

OAPO branches were moderately effective in attracting the support, or at least the attention, of local politicians. Town councillors, welfare officials, mayors and provincial legislators were often speakers at meetings, local Members of Parliament less frequently, though a few, such as Independent A. W. Neill (Comox-Alberni), worked closely with the organized elderly and often acted as spokespersons. There was occasional discussion of fielding OAPO candidates in elections, but no candidates ever sought election under the OAPO banner.<sup>62</sup> The organization contented itself with lobbying and pressure

<sup>60</sup> H. J. Pratt, "Aging policy and process in the Canadian federal government," *Canadian Public Administration* 30 (1987), 74; W. P. Browne, "Some Social and Political Conditions of Issue Credibility: Legislative Agendas in the American States," *Polity* 20 (1987-88), 309.

<sup>61</sup> *Pensioner*, June-July 1947, p. 3, February 1948, p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> CVA, clipping file, fiche #6938-1, 9 June 1941; *Vancouver Sun*, 12 May 1941, p. 4, 9 June 1941, p. 17; *Victoria Daily Times*, 9 June 1941, p. 13; SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #49(1), J. J.

group tactics. There are two records that can be examined for the level of contact with individual politicians. The debates of the House of Commons can be used to reflect federal awareness of the organized elderly; comparable provincial records do not exist for this time period. During the twelve years 1940-1951, members referred to the organized elderly and to their arguments infrequently but in every year except 1942 and 1945; quotes were used from the *Pensioner* and the *Western Producer*, but particularly from other sympathetic newspapers, petitions, resolutions, and letters from the elderly and their organizations were mentioned. In 1949, for example, four different Members of Parliament (representing Vancouver, Henderson, Bryce, and Stewart) cited the OAPOBC (just once) and five specific urban dailies (including the two major Vancouver newspapers). This was one of the better years for the use of information generated by or influenced by the organized elderly, and demonstrates the level of awareness of the organized elderly and their viewpoint on the part of federal legislators.

The second set of records is the reports of local monthly meetings carried in the *Pensioner*.<sup>63</sup> Over the three years systematically examined, 1947-49, there was a gradual increase in the attention attracted from Members of Parliament and members of provincial legislatures. In 1947, seven parliamentarians made a total of eight appearances at various OAPO branches; during the following two years the figures were five/seven and ten/ten. As well, in the later two years instances were noted where elected representatives paid for memberships in the local OAPO branch, made monetary donations, and felt it necessary to send formal regrets when unable to attend a particular branch event. The number of mayors attending OAPO meetings was reasonably steady (three to five each year), but the number of town councillors rose markedly: five making five appearances in 1947, sixteen/nineteen in 1948, ten/seventeen in 1949 (not including one event when "members of the city council" of New Westminster attended the OAPOBC branch banquet). Representatives of state social service

---

Whiting to McNaughton, New Westminster, B.C., 27 May 1941. In keeping with Pelton's political aspirations, the OAPO intended to make him its candidate in the October 1941 provincial election.

<sup>63</sup> Since copies of the voice of the OAPO are extant only beginning in 1946, it is useful only for the last quarter of the period under examination. Nor is it a complete record even for those years. It is important that for many branches the submission of reports of monthly meetings was sporadic and the reports themselves were often sparse in detail. Therefore the reported contacts with political figures represent only a minimum. The contacts reported are for all branches, not just for those in British Columbia.



agencies paid increasing attention to the organized elderly. Four officers made five appearances in 1947; five/seven in 1948, and eight/fourteen in 1949. Most striking was the OAPO branches' ability to gain the attention of the local clergy, though only of Christian denominations. There were eight clerics at branch meetings in 1947, sixteen in 1948, and thirty-one making thirty-two appearances in 1949; what is more, in the latter year, an Anglican bishop was named patron of one branch, another branch appointed its own chaplain, and a third elected a cleric as president. Contacts with other institutions were also increasing. In the various branches in 1949, among the various speakers were the International President of the Lions' Club, representatives of the Fraternal Order of Eagles and of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, the chair of a local hospital finance committee, and a newspaper editor. In Saskatoon two representatives of the Old Age Pensioners of Saskatchewan were elected to the Community Chest, and in Vancouver Pensioners appointed five representatives and two alternates to the Local Council of Women. In sum, the existence of the organized elderly was being brought to the attention of a number of authorities and influential institutions, and there are signs that the importance of the elderly's organizations was being recognized.

Yet while such activity is impressive in one light, there were real limits as to what the OAPO might reasonably have been expected to accomplish and what it did accomplish. Its achievements were marked by a steady, clear-sighted leadership and a grasp of political reality that is striking among persons with often limited formal experience. J. W. Hope of Vancouver indicated a perceptive grasp of the political reality of the OAPO's position in 1946. In a dispute with another member about whether the movement should accept a particular proposal of the federal government as a compromise, he wrote:

The perspective I have regarding the question of acceptance is that there is no point in the question do we accept these proposals, if they are less than our objective. If they reach our objective our acceptance is in our cessation of demand, acceptance indicates consent and satisfaction. However those objectives are not to hand.

At the present stage we are in position neither to accept or reject. The choice is not ours. We have no status of choice. We are not sitting at the [federal-provincial] Conference. We are not on strike and negotiating any agreement. We merely have to receive whatever is

granted. Whether we are satisfied that is another matter. Accept infers consent and satisfaction; we may have neither, yet receive. . . .

We are not in position to "Compromise" with Governments all we can do is agitate for what we need to live decently after building up this country. Take whatever they give us and strive to lift our standard of life. There is no occasion to either spit in the faces of our Governments or to lick their boots.<sup>64</sup>

Here spoke a leader of the group whose sense of identity and whose claims to "justice" were secure enough that extravagant rhetoric or tactics were not employed as compensation for weakness. The absence of naiveté, the political understanding and the reasoned insights of Hope are striking, partially accounted for by his own trade union experience. The wide range of political activity undertaken by the organized elderly is impressive. Theirs was a broad-spectrum, even scatter-gun approach suggesting limited political sophistication, but a modestly experienced, pragmatic, remarkably effective leadership was able to accomplish a great deal.

The organized elderly were a positive political force in the 1930s and 1940s. The OAPBC's influence over the articulation of general government policy was indirect and meagre, but their capacity to influence the local definition and application of policies related to the elderly was increasingly significant. This was to become characteristic of Canadian seniors' groups in the decades to come.<sup>65</sup> One scholar has suggested that in Canada vigorous regionalism keeps innovation constantly on the public policy agenda.<sup>66</sup> At least in the case of old age pensions, that vigorous regionalism can be seen to have several elements. A jurisdictional dimension gave the British Columbia government and bureaucracy a position of constitutional power from which they were able significantly to shape the development of public policy at both the provincial and federal levels regarding old age pensions. Long before the local elderly showed signs of organizing, the British Columbia government was pushing its federal counterpart to initiate old age pension legislation. That same jurisdictional dimension gave

<sup>64</sup> SA, V. McNaughton Papers, A1, #48, J. W. Hope to A. Douglas, Vancouver, 30 June 1946.

<sup>65</sup> K. Kernaghan, "Politics, Public Administration and Canada's Aging Population," *Canadian Public Policy* 8 (1982), 69-79; Kernaghan and O. Kuper, *Coordination in Canadian Governments: A Case Study of Aging Policy* (Toronto, 1983); D. Lewis, cited in M. Novak, *Aging and Society: A Canadian Perspective* (Scarborough, 1988), 328.

<sup>66</sup> C. Leman, "Patterns of Policy Development: Social Security in the United States and Canada," *Public Policy* 25 (1977), 280-81.

the organized elderly of British Columbia a more accessible political target for their lobbying activities. The existence of the organized elderly in British Columbia may well have been important in inhibiting reductions of OAP payment levels during the 1930s, and there is clear evidence that the OAPOBC employed the courts and the law to induce the provincial bureaucracy to alter the application of OAP regulations in significant ways. The organized elderly were certainly very effective in gaining coverage in and the support of the local press. The local successes of the OAPOBC fuelled their organizational move beyond provincial boundaries, stimulating the organization of the elderly elsewhere in Canada. The history of the OAPOBC offers a small example of the impact of vigorous regionalism at work on the public policy agenda of the 1930s and 1940s.