

The Effects of Coalition Government on Party Structure: The Case of the Conservative Party in B.C.

DONALD ALPER

The Liberal Party and the Conservative Party formed a coalition government in British Columbia in December 1941 following an election in which none of the political parties (Liberals, Conservatives, CCF) received a majority of the seats in the provincial legislature. The election resulted in twenty-one seats for the Liberals, twelve for the Conservatives, fourteen for the CCF, and one Labour candidate was elected.

To form a government the Liberals and Conservatives entered into coalition. The governing alliance was forged for the purpose of achieving short-term objectives which both parties had in common. In the beginning, the coalition's objectives were (a) to prevent another immediate election and to achieve unity in provincial government when the nation's attention was primarily focused on the war crisis, and (b) to block the socialist CCF from coming to power through a split in the "free-enterprise vote" in the event of an early election. The two-party alliance enabled the Liberal Party to retain control of government and allowed the Conservatives to attain positions of power not possible without coalition.

Because the cabinet is the centre of power in parliamentary government, a coalition was negotiated which distributed cabinet positions according to each party's proportion of legislative seats. The Liberals, with twenty-one seats, received five cabinet positions and the premiership. The Conservatives, the junior partner in coalition with twelve seats, received four cabinet positions. The ministries were weighted according to power and importance, and trade-offs were made accordingly; Finance, Labour and Agriculture went to the Liberals, while the Attorney-Generalship and Public Works went to the Conservatives. Both parties retained separate party caucuses and a joint "coalition caucus" was instituted to facilitate communication between the party units in the legislature.

When, after one term in office, the party leaders decided to continue the coalition arrangement (the coalition lasted from 1941 to 1952), the two parties together drew up a joint campaign platform and adopted a procedure for the nomination and renomination of coalition candidates.

The procedure provided that: (1) present coalition MLAs, or adherents of the same party, would run in the seats then held by Liberals and Conservatives; (2) in other constituencies a convention would be held, with equal representation from each party, and the "best candidate without regard to party affiliation" would be sought; and (3) in two-member constituencies, each party would nominate one candidate. In both 1945 and 1949 the coalition won large majorities, winning thirty-seven of forty-eight seats in 1945 and thirty-nine of forty-eight seats in 1949. Representation of the two parties in coalition remained stable through the 1945 election, but in 1949 the Liberals gained two seats while the Conservatives lost one.

Coalition was a governing alliance in the cabinet. However, the other party structures of which the cabinet was only one part — the parties' riding associations, the parties' federal wings in the province, and the parties' legislators who were not in the coalition cabinet — were directly affected by the coalition arrangement. This paper examines the effects of coalition on these structures in the Conservative Party.

Coalition and Conservative Party Riding Associations

Though coalition had been consummated at the governing level, the same had not occurred at the riding level. Both parties' riding associations remained separate organizations with deeply felt rivalries and animosities. Being cadre-type parties, the Liberals' and Conservatives' party structure in the constituency was intermittent, with concentration on preparation of elections, conducting campaigns, and maintaining contact with candidates. The cadre who made up the riding associations tended to be few in number, electoral-success oriented, and highly partisan.

Unity in political parties is always tenuous. The party's office-holders and organizational cadre unite in search of power at elections, but the purposes and motives for doing so are often different. Party activists may be motivated by the benefits of patronage, sensations of victory, or the defeat of an enemy party. Office-holders may be seeking quite different objectives: the satisfaction of holding office, the attainment of status and prestige, or a role in the making of public policy. Coalition in Victoria served the purpose of office-holders, but the requirements of electoral and organizational activity in the ridings made working in coalition difficult for party officials and party activists. There was, for example, the feeling that coalition lessened the importance of party activity in their ridings. Conservatives expressed concern over their loss of function. According to one Conservative Party official, "Should we get out and work, we could

be accused, and probably would be, of working to the detriment of coalition and for the propagation of the Conservative principle.”¹ Said another:

Let me review coalition as it appears here. I feel that coalition is in effect only in Victoria and, while collaboration there is seemingly effective and smooth in operation, there is no vestige of it between Liberal and Conservative associations here. We are regarded as interlopers trying to “muscle in” on private Liberal preserves. . . . We appear no nearer coalition than we ever were.²

Another problem was the feeling the party was losing its identity: “Do we wish to collaborate [with Liberals]? If we [are] in complete coalition what do we become? Can we then retain our identities as Conservatives?”³ One consequence was reduced enthusiasm at the local level. The reaction of one disgruntled Tory is revealing:

At present we are, I feel, outside the pale. The Liberals have their effective organization in full operation: they hold the channels to the powers that be and keep them a closely guarded preserve and we learn of moves and recommendations only after the matter in hand was brought to a, for them, successful conclusion.⁴

According to Russell Walker, the provincial organizer, in many ridings party members became so frustrated they simply opted out of party work altogether.⁵

The problem of maintaining commitment was intensified in ridings where the other party held the seat. Few party workers were enthusiastic about having to sit idle while “opposition” Liberal candidates were re-nominated in ridings held by the Liberal Party in the elections of 1945 and 1949. In the 1945 campaign, Conservatives “revolted” in some ridings and nominated their own candidates to oppose the coalition candidates. The logic of an election fought under the coalition banner meant that Conservatives were supposed to collaborate with the traditional foe.⁶ The fair distribution of patronage by a partnership government was especially difficult to achieve. Because the provincial government makes nu-

¹ Letter, N. Nye to R. L. Maitland (Private), 17 March 1943, *Maitland Papers*.

² *Victoria Times*, 14 October 1943.

³ Letter, N. Nye to R. L. Maitland (Private), 17 March 1943, *Maitland Papers*.

⁴ Letter, W. S. Simpson to R. L. Maitland (Private), 2 August 1945, *Maitland Papers*.

⁵ Interview with Russell R. Walker, 17 July 1973, in Vancouver, B.C.

⁶ *Vancouver Province*, 5 October 1945; *Vancouver Province*, 28 September 1945.

merous appointments and is responsible for making decisions about locally sensitive matters such as the issuance of liquor licences, land development, road construction and insurance contracts, the generous use of patronage and preferments has traditionally been vital in building and maintaining party commitment, especially at the riding level. The coalition made dispensing patronage in an equitable manner difficult, if not impossible. One Conservative association, responding to "Liberals getting preferred treatment," passed a resolution demanding that any future appointments affecting the riding be on the recommendation of a joint committee of Liberals and Conservatives in the riding. Another, upset at not receiving enough patronage, sponsored a resolution that Conservatives withdraw altogether from the coalition.⁷ Others demanded the coalition leadership "step in" to ensure that the party association which held the seat did not receive favoured treatment in the respective riding.⁸ With the Tories holding the fewer seats and therefore fewer cabinet ministries, there developed a deep concern that in general matters affecting both the districts and the selection of candidates, the Liberals were at an unfair advantage. Russell Walker despondently noted that by 1943 "we had been practically absorbed by the Liberals."⁹

The imposition of a coalition umbrella on party organizations in the ridings was therefore a real problem for the party activists. Coalition was expedient at the level of government, but it generated much internal party friction in the Conservative organization.

Coalition and the Federal Conservative Party in B.C.

Both the Liberal and Conservative parties are federally organized. Thus a provincial alliance led naturally to an awkward relationship between the federal and provincial counterparts. How could politicians who were allied provincially relate to their counterparts who were bitter foes federally, and vice versa? Moreover, coalition required that in the interest of "non-partisanship" federal and provincial party members not be involved in each others' election campaigns, organizationally or financially. This was nearly impossible, since federal and provincial organization overlapped and, in the past, generally the same people and resources had been involved in both spheres.

⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 12 October 1943.

⁸ Letter, R. L. Maitland to Mrs. R. L. Maitland (Private), 3 July 1944, *Maitland Papers*.

⁹ R. R. Walker, *Politicians of a Pioneering Province* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1969), p. 220.

The "separation" of the party's two wings severely strained the party's internal fabric. Many Conservatives simply refused to participate in either federal Conservative politics or provincial "coalition politics" rather than attempt to adopt a schizophrenic personality toward the party. Some called for the resignation of the provincial Conservative leader on the grounds that the leader of the party in coalition government was not in a position to also lead the party federally in the province.¹⁰ The *Victoria Times* reflected much of the press reaction by asking in an editorial:

How in the name of common sense can Coalitionist members of the Crown in B.C. declare open party warfare when the next dominion elections come around — appearing on Liberal and Conservative platforms to plead for votes for or against the present [Mackenzie] King administration in Ottawa — and expect the public to continue to have any faith in a non-partisan government in this province?¹¹

The awkwardness of the party trying to remain non-partisan while being a part of a national partisan structure led to the belief that a strong federal hand was necessary to take charge of federal matters in the province. In 1942 federal Conservative leader John Bracken placed B.C. Conservative MP Howard Green in charge of matters in the province relating to the federal party. This led to a serious dispute among B.C. Conservatives involving the status of the provincial leader and his relationship to an emissary who represented the federal leader. The then provincial leader, R. L. Maitland, accepted the arrangement, but his successor, Herbert Anscomb, bitterly resented any intrusion from the federal party. The longer coalition continued, the more federal Conservatives felt outside control was needed if the party was to stay vital in the province.

The effects of the coalition on the federal-provincial party relationship were most evident during the federal elections in 1945 and 1949. Coalition seriously impeded organizational activity for federal candidates. The overlapping nature of B.C. federal and provincial party organization (see Figure 1) meant that many of the same activists provided the riding-level organization for the two wings of the party. If, as in the diagram, the loyalties of party activists from community 101 could be divided between the federal member from federal riding X and the provincial member from provincial riding R, then the problem would not exist. But organizationally the parties are not separate entities provincially and federally. The organization of the Conservative Party (and of the Liberal Party) is

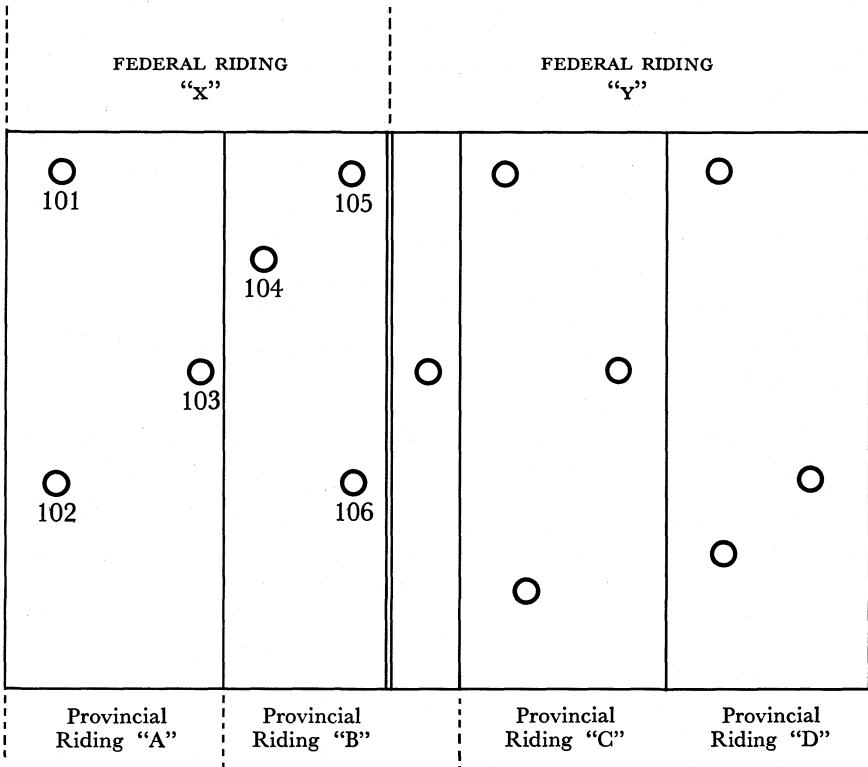
¹⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 27 January 1943.

¹¹ *Victoria Times*, 30 July 1943.

FIGURE 1

A typical case of federal-provincial overlapping political organization in the Progressive Conservative Party of British Columbia.

Figure 1 refers to a normal set of circumstances in the party in British Columbia based on a case of two federal ridings and four provincial ridings. The small circles represent cities or towns each with concentrated voting populations.



so structured as to make the provincial organization the most significant unit. The national organization can be viewed as the superstructure, and constituency organizations the substructure.¹² During a federal election, for example, the candidate from riding X is dependent upon the resources (legwork, money, expertise) from each of the communities 101-106 inclusive. If loyalties are divided between the party's provincial and federal wings, or if in the interest of provincial non-partisanship communities 101-106 fail to work for the party, organizational strength is compromised.

This was not a serious problem between elections, since the "caucus" type Conservative organization in the riding was generally in a state of reduced activity. In the 1945 and 1949 federal elections provincial Conservatives were told by the cabinet *not* to take an active part in the federal campaigns. This was especially a problem in geographically large ridings which depended upon co-ordinated organizational work from the various provincial associations within. It was almost impossible to run an effective campaign without their assistance. The result was that the federal party was unable to run an effective campaign in B.C.¹³ In many federal ridings the only campaign possible was a personalized one which would not publicize the party label at all. Davie Fulton, the federal Conservative MP from Kamloops, described the problem in his home riding during the 1949 election:

In a federal riding such as Kamloops with a vast territory, continuous effective organization was impossible because it was too far for people to come together more than once a year. However an effective organization was possible if the provincial riding associations included within the federal Kamloops riding (Williams Lake, Merritt, Kamloops, Salmon Arm, etc.) were organized, prepared to work for federal candidates, and sent delegates two or three times a year to form the Kamloops federal association. This also meant that representation would be forthcoming from each association within the federal riding. But when these associations were told that they shouldn't work for federal candidates, the situation became impossible.

In ridings in which there was no federal member, no one around to whom [*sic*] people could rally, it was virtually impossible to build up an organization to get a federal member elected.¹⁴

Federal members were bitter about this as they could see the party's

¹² F. C. Engelmann and M. A. Schwartz, *Political Parties and the Canadian Social Structure* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1967), p. 128.

¹³ This opinion was given by Howard Green and E. Davie Fulton, respective interviews, 16 October 1973 in Vancouver, and 1 November 1973 in Vancouver. Also, letter to editor from L. Scott, *Vancouver Province*, 28 October 1950.

¹⁴ Fulton interview, 1 November 1973.

strength sapped from lack of organization and effort. After the 1949 federal election (held just two weeks after the provincial election), which resulted in Conservatives winning only three seats in B.C., attention became focused on what the coalition was doing to the Conservative party in the province, both provincially and federally but especially federally.¹⁵ For most of the federal members and an increasing number of dissident provincial Conservatives, there developed the feeling that coalition was strengthening the Liberal party and therefore being maintained at Tory expense.¹⁶ The unsuccessful attempt in 1950 to replace Conservative leader Herbert Anscomb with W. A. C. Bennett, who had strong federal support, was not unrelated to this fact.¹⁷

The unprecedented action of a party attempting to unseat its leader is a measure of the extent to which a wedge had been driven between the provincial and federal wings of the Conservative Party. In 1951 the conflict in the party over coalition and the leadership of Herbert Anscomb provided the impetus for a new party, one which would be led by an ex-Tory (Bennett), staffed largely by Conservative activists and supporters, and even financed by normally Conservative contributors. Perhaps most important, Bennett was supported, at least tacitly, by most of the Conservative federal MPs from B.C.

Coalition and the Conservative Caucus

Policy-making in the coalition can be characterized as the politics of accommodation, which entailed government by an elite. In fact the focus of actual decision-making power in the coalition was a small elite group, an "inner council" consisting of, for example, Liberal leader Byron Johnson (who was elevated to the leadership when Hart retired in 1947), Conservative leader Herbert Anscomb (who became leader upon the death of Maitland in 1946), and a handful of top cabinet officials.¹⁸

To contain the natural divisive pressures inherent in coalition politics

¹⁵ See my, "From Rule to Ruin: The Conservative Party of British Columbia, 1928-1954" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, November 1975).

¹⁶ Although the Liberal sweep was nationwide, the party was hurt, especially in B.C., where it won only 27.9 per cent of the vote and returned only three MPs. This was their worst showing ever in the province.

¹⁷ See "From Rule to Ruin," ch. 5, especially pp. 303 ff.

¹⁸ This opinion was given by Harold Winch and Henry Drummond, respective interviews, 9 November 1973 in Vancouver, and 24 July 1974 in Burnaby, B.C. Also see, R. W. Brown, "Coalition Adopts 'Committee Management'," *Vancouver Sun*, 5 May 1950.

and maintain stability, centralized decision-making was necessary to the coalition. Successful accommodation of party interests required considerable delegation of authority to the coalition cabinet. The cabinet's ability to make concessions and arrive at pragmatic compromises is heightened if they are not bound by party caucuses.

Stability is also related to centralized decision-making. The more centralized the coalition leadership, the easier it is for the party to remain in coalition.¹⁹ The assumption is that the party activists and office-holders outside the cabinet are less committed to coalition in the long run than are the party leaders. Non-leaders are more interested in the maintenance of party purity for the sake of showing a distinct profile to the electorate. They are also less likely to be appreciative of logrolling and trade-offs. According to one student of coalition behaviour, amenability to compromise decreases as communications are passed downward from leaders in cabinet to parliamentary caucuses and to local party organizations.²⁰

The literature on party coalitions suggests coalition leaders' role perception is also conducive to centralized decision-making. Coalition leaders enjoy positions of power and prestige in the government which they stand to lose if the coalition breaks down. Thus the coalition's leaders develop an interest in keeping the other member in coalition (in two-member coalitions), for the withdrawal of one will result in the other being toppled as well. There is a necessity in coalitions for the leaders to develop accommodationist styles which naturally lead to centralized decision-making.²¹

What was the impact of centralized decision-making in coalition on the Conservative caucus? For one thing meaningful consultation on policy matters between the coalition leaders and the other MLAs was minimal.²² The power of the party caucus was severely reduced since party leaders felt they could not negotiate matters if they were "bound" by earlier party commitments. The caucus became divorced from the policy-making process, thus engendering suspicion of the leaders' motives.²³ Increasingly

¹⁹ S. Groennings, "Notes Toward Theories of Coalition Behavior in Multi-party Systems: Formation and Maintenance," in S. Groennings, E. W. Kelley, and M. Leiser-son (editors), *The Study of Coalition Behavior: Theoretical Perspectives and Cases from Four Continents* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 462.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ J. E. Schwartz, "Maintaining Coalitions: An Analysis of the EEC With Supporting Evidence from the Austrian Grand Coalition and the CDU/CSU," in *Ibid.*, p. 247.

²² *Vancouver Province*, 1 April 1951.

²³ L. Joslin, "Rebellion May Slow Insurance Legislation," *Victoria Colonist*, 10 March 1951; *Victoria Colonist*, 29 March 1951; *Vancouver Sun*, 30 March 1951.

complaints were heard that the party leadership had forsaken the party's primary goals for the sake of continuing the coalition.

The coalition leadership tended to be rigid in terms of turnover and promotion. Cabinet changes were few, usually only occurring in the event of death or election defeat. A coalition cabinet is not the same flexible institution the cabinet is in majority party government. Changes of cabinet membership tend to raise the issue of relationships between the coalition partners, and are best avoided. The elevation of ambitious men like Bennett (he represented the main provincial Conservative opposition to party leader Anscomb between 1941-1952) could not be accomplished unilaterally and therefore was not attempted. The rigidities of cabinet membership in coalition tended to further divorce the leadership of the party in the cabinet from the caucus. This led to an unusual degree of autonomy for cabinet members and a feeling in the caucus that the cabinet was isolated and not really concerned about the party's welfare.²⁴

Conclusion

This paper has shown that cabinet coalition government had a significant impact on the caucus and organizational party structures in the Conservative Party of B.C. The coalition was disintegrative in its effect on the Conservative Party structure both inside and outside of government. The organizational strains induced by coalition were a major contributing factor to the decline of the Conservative Party after the breakup of coalition in 1952. Obviously there is a need to examine more deeply both the coalition and its role in contributing to a new party alignment in the post-coalition period. This rudimentary sketch of the coalition's impact on the Conservative Party structure is presented only as a beginning. Perhaps it will stimulate more research by political scientists on this very important and much neglected period in the province's political history.

²⁴ It is interesting that Bennett, who was a chief proponent of abandoning party lines altogether in the province, presented himself in 1951-1952 as defender of the Conservative Party against self-interested "coalitionists" and "opportunists."