

Contents

List of Illustrations / vi
Acknowledgements / vii
Abbreviations / viii

Introduction / 1

- CHAPTER 1 Unions and Politics: 1880s–1894 / 9
- CHAPTER 2 Rising Radicalism and Militancy: 1895–1920 / 35
- CHAPTER 3 Communists and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in the Interwar Years / 64
- CHAPTER 4 Favourable Winds: 1939–1953 / 93
- CHAPTER 5 Social Credit, New Movements, and NDP Government: 1954–1975 / 113
- CHAPTER 6 A New Reality: 1976–1990 / 146
- CHAPTER 7 The Left after 1991 / 170

Conclusion: Looking Forward / 197

Glossary / 204
Notes / 218
Bibliography / 253
About the Author / 273
Index / 275

Introduction

BRITISH COLUMBIA IS A province with a long, vibrant leftist tradition, but like elsewhere in the world, the left has been under serious attack since the 1970s. Neither the hard-won institutions nor the ideals of the left have fared well. The density of union membership is declining, governments spend less enthusiastically on social programs, and competitive, private enterprise is advanced by influential voices as the best way to operate education, pension, and health care systems. The optimism of leftists that existed in BC as late as the 1980s — the feeling that history was moving in a positive direction — has dissipated. In the ongoing struggle among competing ideas and competing institutions to shape the future, the left is not setting the agenda.

Setbacks are not new to the left. The first significant stirrings of a left in BC came in the 1880s, when political and union activists mounted a challenge to the emerging industrial capitalist order, but the initiative was in retreat by the mid-1890s. In the first two decades of the twentieth century a new wave of militants and radicals, in an array of unions and

2 *The Left in British Columbia*

political parties, confronted employers and governments, culminating in the great upheaval of the years from 1916 to 1920. Again hopes were dashed, defeated by business leaders and governments. The left rebuilt, and in the 1940s had sufficient legitimacy and influence to force a shift that produced three decades when history tracked leftward. In this era, the BC left cheered a government-run unemployment insurance program, legislation supporting collective bargaining rights for unionized workers, and hospitalization insurance. Pension payments became richer, and public-sector workers won full union rights. Medicare arrived in the 1960s.

The New Democratic Party (NDP) formed the government in BC in 1972, the first time that a leftist political party had been in power in the province. The traditional left also diversified, intersecting with radical university students, committed environmentalists, women seeking equality in the workplace, and lesbian and gay activists, all of whom created new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. The broad-based Solidarity movement challenged the anti-left legislative agenda of the Social Credit government in 1983, when thousands of British Columbians took to the streets in towns and cities across the province.

Solidarity was an impressive, though temporary, mobilization of the left, but times were changing. In the 1980s the provincial left was increasingly on the defensive, and the neo-liberal right, which was ascendant across the western world, took a stronger hold. In 1987 the Alberta-based Reform Party, the most vigorous expression of the New Right sensibility in Canada, was formed at a Vancouver convention, and it would have much influence in BC. In the new political climate there were still successes — the New Democratic Party governed the province from 1991 to 2001, the human rights agenda was advanced for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, and environmentalists made headway on some fronts — but overall the right was dominant, pulling the whole political spectrum rightward. The current NDP pursues a guarded course in difficult times.

The moderation of the NDP, the shrinking union movement, and the weak appeal of radical political expressions have led many to conclude that the traditional left, built by unions and political parties, is now irrelevant, its past only of interest to historians. With major political parties

concentrated at the centre of the political spectrum, it is argued, variations in policies are minor. From this point of view, governance is merely about providing pragmatic solutions to problems in a liberal capitalist society. The market economy, though needing minor adjustments, is essentially seen as sound. Further, in the last forty years the most dynamic and interesting challenges to the entrenched order have come from social movements fighting for rights for LGBT individuals, for women, a healthy environment, and a new role for Indigenous peoples. These movements do not look to the unions or the NDP for guidance; indeed, relations between new social movements and the left are often testy.

It is also argued by some that the left–right political division in many modern societies is obsolete because the problems of the past that preoccupied the left — concerns about security and material well-being in a world where many people lacked basic goods, educational opportunities, protection at the workplace, and access to healthcare — have been largely solved. Citizens, especially younger people, in many affluent countries now subscribe to a post-materialist value system, it is claimed, searching for self-fulfillment, personal growth, enjoyment of the environment, and a rewarding lifestyle. As such, the concerns of an earlier era that focused on the economic plight of workers and their families are old-fashioned and unimportant.¹

The dismissal of the left, however, is overdrawn for a number of reasons. For one, wage and salary labour remain at the core of our economic system; even when employees are called “associates,” have university degrees, sport unconventional attire, or enjoy on-site gyms at work, there remain unequal power relations between employers and employees. Workers still need protection to ensure their rights are respected. Secondly, economic inequality remains in prosperous societies, and the gap between the wealthy elite and the rest is widening. Homelessness, poverty, and the working poor are continuing realities. In addition, the welfare state, which provides ordinary people access to education, healthcare, and insurance against loss of income, as well as financial security in old age, is not a given; it faces powerful enemies and needs constant defence. Another reason, as the years since 2008 have shown, is that liberal capitalism is fragile, and analyzing it and considering plausible alternatives — a major

preoccupation of the left — remain important tasks. Further, there are questions about the limitations of capitalism, a system dedicated to profit-making, in achieving a secure, natural environment that benefits the people as a whole. Corporate strategies do not necessarily correspond to the interests of the environment or the larger population.

The left continues to distinguish itself from opponents that to varying degrees accept and even celebrate economic and social inequality, militarism, and a view of the world that puts the interests of business and the marketplace first. The left supports unionism, speaks to equality issues, and harbours the potential for more ambitious policy directions in a less difficult political time. Finally, the left remains relevant because it seeks a broad, alternative social vision, going beyond single issues and the resolution of particular grievances, integrating social, economic, and environmental themes. The history of the left in BC, then, is not just a discussion of a world gone by, it helps us understand current predicaments.²

Defining the left with precision is not straightforward.³ For one thing, the left includes diverse values, ideas, strategies, and institutions. Social democracy and communism, reformers and revolutionaries, unions and radical women's groups have all found a home in the left. They are often in conflict. Revolutionaries attack reformers for lacking commitment and zeal, for being too close to the status quo, and for not being true leftists, while reformers write off revolutionaries as unrealistic dreamers.

Defining the left is also problematic because it had a different complexion in different historical periods. For example, neither LGBT rights nor climate change were in the minds of leftists in the first years of the twentieth century. In the 1930s, unlike today, communism in Canada had a prominent profile. One strategy to cope with the diversity and variability is to focus on one individual, event or institution — perhaps, a socialist politician, a particular strike, or a miners' union — and use this perspective to suggest aspects of the broader left. The goal in this book, however, is to be inclusive, to consider the sets of relationships that constitute the historical left over time rather than the details of one element in a defined period. This means accepting a vibrant, internally dynamic, changing,

tension-ridden left, a conception of the left that is necessarily somewhat blurry and murky at times, where the various components are stumbling or marching, depending on the circumstances, in the same general historical direction.

Fuzziness has advantages. It recognizes the complexity of the left and highlights the fact that its meaning is contested, even by those who see themselves as part of the left. As is the case with many political concepts, such as democracy, liberalism, freedom, and socialism, the fact that the left is not clearly fixed makes it interesting, with different agents appropriating the notion for their own purposes. Embracing a multi-faceted left also encourages the perception of the left as living and changing, not a static dictionary entry. The left becomes a sensibility operating in the real world, where the idea of the left is a serviceable, heuristic guide to understanding the world and informing political action. This realm, where terms are sometimes unstable and meanings variable, is the politics of everyday life, living politics.

The left may be broad but it is still built around defining principles and ideals. Intertwined at the heart of the left are values related to equality and community, as well as physical, social and environmental security, human dignity, democracy, and a decent standard of living for all. None of these notions is uncomplicated. Does equality mean just racial equality, or does it include gender equality and economic equality? Does economic equality mean curbing the excesses of the wealthy, democracy in the operation of businesses, or an equal sharing of the rewards of the economic system? Obviously, equality has different connotations in different eras: the vision of equality constructed by white, male, skilled workers in the 1880s did not include gender or racial equality. Over time, however, the left has become more inclusive. Understandings of security, democracy, dignity, and a decent standard of living are also contestable. The elasticity of these terms should not cause consternation. The left project has been and continues to be about working out the limits and possibilities of these issues.

Critically, at the core of the left is the belief that many or even most injustices are rooted in the nature of the economic system, a system, it is argued, that rewards the few with wealth and power and creates wide

disparities between those at the top and the rest of society. The goal of the left, representing the people, the working class, or the 99 percent, depending on circumstances and the era, is to wrest economic and political power from a group known variously as the interests, the bourgeoisie, monopolists, the establishment, or the 1 percent, again depending on circumstances and the era. The left in BC emerged as a response to a new capitalist order in the late nineteenth century, and it is attention to this economic dimension that helps distinguish leftists from progressives and liberal reformers, who largely accept the existing economic, political, and social order. Unlike leftists, they believe that a bit of tinkering, a few improved government policies, or a new business plan by a corporation, regarding the environment or LGBT rights, for example, can set things right. It is not that leftists are against progressive causes — they are usually major supporters, at least in the long run. The achievement of racial, gender, and sexual equality in mainstream liberal capitalist society is lauded, as are the struggles for a healthy environment, but inequalities linked to the economy, capitalism, and social class remain. Leftists, then, demand deeper and wider change. In the real world, though, which is messy and not amenable to simple classroom definitions, the division between the moderate left and progressive liberal reformers is not always precise, whether in the 1880s, the 1970s, or now.

This book focuses on institutions, especially unions and political associations, that attempted to implement leftist ideals and values. Unions are prominent in the history of the BC left. They are operated and controlled by working people, and, because of their crucial place in the production system, their actions have the potential to alter dramatically relations between employers and employees in the economy and thus transform society. All unions and unionists have not been notably leftist, of course, but overall the union movement was and is a major institution in the struggle for change. In British Columbia history, the health of unionism, particularly in the private sector, is a good measure of the general state of the left at any given time; when the left is vigorous it includes a demanding, growing union movement that challenges employers and their influence.

Political organizations, like unions, have come in different shapes and sizes, and because their ideologies and strategies varied, they often have been in conflict. Much of this text is about sorting out the relationships among political associations and unions in the left. A glossary of political and union terms at the end of the book offers help in keeping the players straight.

The core left has always had links with movements that focus on particular issues, most notably those committed to racial exclusion in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, and to anti-racism, women's and LGBT rights, environmental health, peace, and Canadian nationalism in the twentieth century. In some cases, new organizations were formed because unions, which focus on employed workers, and leftist political parties, which rely on compromise to serve the needs of a wide variety of interests, had proven unsatisfactory. The environmental and women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s did not fit neatly into earlier conceptions of the left, and many modern activists pushing progressive causes found a home within liberal or even conservative parties, created new organizations, or shunned party politics altogether. But all progressive movements contained a left contingent that pushed for more extensive social change. Leftist personnel and values flowed through these many organizations, even though the movements and groups retained their own integrity and travelled their own paths. At a deeper level, however, the left project is about subsuming social movements, about weaving economic, social, and environmental ideas and organizations into a larger whole in order to shift the direction of history leftward. Unions and political parties have traditionally been at the forefront of doing so, but in the future, other institutions, such as a refashioned environmental movement, may emerge to lead a leftist crusade.

The struggle continues for the left. As I write, workers' rights, having been eroded after years of Liberal government provincially and Conservative government federally, remain in jeopardy. Governments have also weakened environmental regulations and social welfare programs. Internationally, the economic collapse of 2008 cut deeply and temporarily reinvigorated discussions of corporate greed, the unfairness of economic disparity, the benefits of strict public management of financial and business

institutions, and the positive role of government. On the streets and in public urban spaces across the province, protesters, often youthful, participated in the international Occupy demonstrations in the fall of 2011, attacking the inequities of the modern order. Proposed massive pipeline projects, linking Alberta oil fields and the Pacific coast, have faced broadly based protest, instigated by the environmental movement, the NDP, and First Nations. Just what future will be created, of course, remains to be seen.