

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Aberhart years which spanned the period from August 22nd, 1935 until his untimely death on May 23, 1943 were years of exciting drama, the like of which I am sure has never occurred anywhere in modern history. Almost overnight he had risen from the obscurity of a locally known school principal and evangelist to that of a world figure. Believing that he could bring about a condition during the depression years of economic security for the people of Alberta by changes in the monetary system, he was at once challenged by the entrenched forces of international finance. A lesser man than William Aberhart would have thrown up his hands in despair even before the election of August 22, 1935. He was however, the type of man who, once having determined that a course of action was right, was prepared to face any obstacle placed in his way in order that the people of his Province would be benefited.

A detailed story of his nearly eight years as Premier of Alberta would fill a book as large as this one. I shall attempt, therefore, only to summarize briefly the legislative program which he enacted, and the one he attempted to enact to cure the ills of the depression and to restore to Parliament control over the issuance of currency and credit.

In the field of agriculture, legislation was passed which resulted in the up-grading of livestock throughout the province. During the years from 1905 to 1937, the two previous governments had been instrumental in distributing two hundred and thirty-two purebred sires to farmers to up-grade the beef cattle industry. By 1943, one thousand four hundred and seventy-nine more were distributed and, in addition, this same policy had been expanded to include swine and sheep. In co-operation with the Federal government, nearly seven thousand purebred animals were made available to our farmers. Veterinary service was greatly extended for the benefit of the farmers, while the number of district agriculturists and home economists practically quadrupled.

The poultry industry was also improved greatly and the value of poultry production increased from seven millions of dollars in 1936 to seventeen millions in the last year of the Aberhart regime.

In the field of labor, much progressive legislation came into being during the Aberhart years and in many instances this legislation has been copied by other provinces. The Male Minimum Wage Act of 1936 established the first general order in Canada and basic wages were set up for all except farm and domestic labor. The Hours of Work Act established the schedule of hours and a day of rest during the week. The Tradesmen's Qualifications Act of 1936 guaranteed protection to qualified skilled tradesmen from inferior competition and assured the public of better service. The Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act in 1938 guaranteed to labor full collective bargaining rights and provided methods of settling disputes. The Industrial Wages Security Act passed in 1938 guaranteed the payment of wages of coal miners. The Trades School Regulation Act of 1941 established high standards required of trade schools whether such schools provided practical training or correspondence courses. The Labour Welfare Act of 1943 guaranteed sanitary working conditions for laborers and prompt payment of wages. It provided for regular government inspection of industry to make sure that working conditions were constantly improved.

Much encouragement was given to the co-operative associations and the number of co-operatives rose from fifty-eight in 1935 to two hundred and thirty-seven in 1943. Credit Unions were greatly encouraged and the Credit Union Act was passed in March of 1938. By the end of 1943, one hundred and fifty-one credit unions had been chartered and that year Alberta won a plaque which is given to any state or province showing the greatest increase of credit unions pro rata of population.

In the field of health, William Aberhart and his Minister of Health Dr. W. W. Cross will always be remembered for bringing into being in the Province of Alberta free treatment for tuberculosis, cancer and polio and free hospitalization for maternity cases. In Edmonton today is a large tuberculosis hospital, bearing the name "Aberhart Memorial", and a cancer hospital named in honour of Dr. W. W. Cross.

The Alberta Marketing Act, passed in 1939, assisted in the establishing of cold storage and similar plants, plants for processing poultry products and the establishment of hatcheries. The Provincial Marketing Board came into being in the same year and through its operations small industries were able to increase their operations as never before.

It was then possible for farmers to save anywhere up to thirty-five per cent for the purpose of replacing parts for most implements. The Board purchased large quantities of fertilizers, weed control solutions, hardware and various laborsaving devices, such as stooking machines, at the lowest possible price and

passed the savings on to the farmer. Assistance was given to companies to manufacture farm equipment which previously had to be imported, and during the war the Board was able to supply such necessities as flour and blankets to the Dominion and other allied governments at great savings. One of the purposes in setting up this Board was that it would be an effective device for re-establishing the members of the armed forces upon the completion of hostilities.

The maximum Old Age Pension in 1942 was twenty dollars, with seventy-five per cent being paid by the Federal government, fifteen per cent by the Provincial government and the remaining ten per cent by the municipality in which the recipient lived. Commencing on April 1, 1942, the Aberhart government paid an additional five dollars to all pensioners and when in the following year the Federal government raised the total pension to twenty-five dollars, shared on the same basis as before, the Provincial government continued to add the five dollars, bringing the pension to thirty dollars, at that time the highest in Canada.

The progressive reform of Alberta's school system is the stellar achievement for which Mr. Aberhart will be best remembered. During the early years of the Province's history, school districts were established throughout the farming areas on the basis of a single-roomed school to serve the children living in an area of sixteen square miles. The districts were generally known as "the four by four" districts. By the end of 1935, there were 3,750 such districts. All grades from one to eight, inclusive, with grades nine and ten occasionally being added, were taught by one teacher. In order to provide this very elementary standard, taxation on the farmer's land provided most of the revenue, provincial grants being very small, the total grant in 1935 being only \$1,391,020. Taxation varied from a low of three mills in one district in Alberta, comprised of the best quality farm land, to a high of sixty mills in one of the poorest farming areas, while both gave the same minimum of service.

The previous government had undertaken studies which had resulted in recommendations to combine fifty or sixty such school districts in one large one, the idea being that the strong would help the weak; taxation would be more equalized, while at the same time high schools could be built in strategic points throughout such an enlarged area where high school facilities could be brought within the reach of our rural boys and girls.

Strange as it seems today, these recommendations forty years ago met with almost universal condemnation. Naturally, those districts which were financing on a low mill rate opposed most bitterly a program which would undoubtedly raise the costs of education to them, and the small school boards hated to give up their authority. There was no doubt that the government which initiated the study lacked the political courage to inaugurate the recommendations.

Mr. Aberhart had always been a proponent of the change, so when it became his responsibility as Minister of Education, he immediately set about, despite bitter public criticism, to bring into being the large units of administration. Here again he faced strong opposition among his own members, naturally having the support, however, of the fourteen practising teachers fresh from the school room. By the end of his term, the 3,750 small school districts had become fifty large school divisions, each one boasting a number of high schools. To maintain better supervision, he had increased the staff of superintendents from twenty-eight to forty-eight. Legislation was also passed establishing teachers as a professional group and the salaries of rural teachers had been increased from an average of \$722 to \$1,075. The requirements for entrance to teacher training courses was also raised from grade eleven to grade twelve.

By the time of his death he had seen a total of 392 new schools built, arrears of teachers' salaries completely paid, and total school grants nearly doubled, an achievement of which he was justly proud.

In the field of municipal administration, progressive changes were also made. One hundred and fifty small units of administration gave way to sixty larger districts and the ground work was set for the county system of government which later brought about a single local government for all local purposes.

During the early days of the depression, the municipalities had been assisted by the Provincial government in supplying direct relief to our entire population and seed and feed relief to our farmers. All told, the municipalities owed the provincial government an amount in excess of forty-two millions of dollars. This debt was cancelled by the Aberhart government.

To effect savings in insurance premiums, the government established a fire insurance and life insurance program, not to take the place of those of existing companies but, rather, to guarantee to the public insurance at the lowest possible cost, whether purchased from the government institutions or the private companies.

Beneficial changes were made in connection with hail insurance for farmers. The debts of the original Hail Insurance Board which amounted to over a million dollars were paid off and a healthy reserve of three quarters of a million dollars was built up during the Aberhart years.

Motorists were given direct benefits by the operation of a rebate system of automobile licenses, depending upon the age of the vehicle. By the end of 1943 reductions to motorists amounted to almost \$1,100,00.

A Purchasing Agency was likewise established; it purchased in large quantities at discount prices the many things the government is called upon to buy. Savings and discounts in the years 1941, 1942 and 1943 alone amounted to over five hundred and ninety-two thousand dollars, a large sum when we realize that the total government revenues for those years were only approximately twenty-one millions per annum.

Debt legislation which had first come into existence under the U.F.A. government was improved and by the end of the Aberhart years over fifty thousand debtors had been beneficially affected.

The pay-as-you-go policy inaugurated by Mr. Aberhart was paying off in many ways, not the least of which was in the road building program. During his regime, with his capable Highways Minister, the Honourable William Fallow, road building without borrowing one penny proceeded as never before in Alberta's history. Approximately 1,686 miles of road were gravelled for the first time; 715 asphalted and 385 seal-coated. Throughout the municipalities, nearly 2,500 miles of new roads were opened, while over 4,000 miles were graded and just under 1,000 miles gravelled for the first time. In addition, 2,055 new bridges were built.

Under his regime special attention was paid to the development of Alberta's oil and natural gas resources. New policies were established which had the effect of encouraging the search for oil and gas fields and while a major find did not materialize until February of 1947, when the oil field at Leduc was discovered, nevertheless annual production from the fields already in operation increased greatly. In 1936 total oil production amounted to 1,320,440 barrels, increasing each year until the year 1942 saw a total production amounting to 10,143,270 barrels. Royalties were increased from a maximum of 10% to a general royalty of 12 ½ and a maximum of 15. A mineral tax was levied upon the lands held by the C.P.R. and the Hudson's Bay Company.

Popular with the farmers was the legislation which guaranteed to them security of tenure on their land and protected them against disposition by financial interests during hard times. Equally popular was the legislation governing land settlement policy in new areas. This policy allowed the farmer three years in which to develop his raw land before any rent or taxes whatever were payable. Thereafter he was required to pay one-eighth of his crop to the Department, out of which the department reimbursed the municipality the amount of taxes which normally would have been levied. Even this provision did not apply if the crop yield was less than five bushels per acre. A valuation was placed upon the land prior to the farmer's taking possession and at the end of ten years he had the option of purchasing at that price.

Realizing that many of the men who were serving in the armed forces would desire to carry on farming after the war, surveys of raw land were undertaken to determine the quality of the soil for farming purposes and some of these areas, especially in northern Alberta, were set aside for returning veterans. The terms mentioned above were applicable, with the one added advantage being that at the expiration of ten years, title to a half section of land, would be granted to the veteran free of charge.

Only two months prior to his death, Mr. Aberhart spoke in the Legislature supporting strongly a resolution calling for the establishment of a Post-War Reconstruction committee to be completely non-partisan in its composition. Accordingly, the Post-War Reconstruction Act was passed on March 30, 1943 and the original committee named in the Act consisted of N. E. Tanner as Chairman, E. C. Manning, A. J. Hooke, Mrs. C. R. Wood, Alfred Speakman and E. J. Martin, the first four being members of the government side of the House and the latter two being from the opposition.

Several sub-committees were quickly appointed and the general public was invited to make representation to any committee it so desired. One committee under the chairmanship of Alfred Speakman, dealt with Agriculture, Land and Soldier Settlement, and was made up of Dr. Robert Newton, President of the University, O. S. Longman, Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Robert Gardiner, a former Member of Parliament and active in the work of the U.F.A., together with James Jackson, practical farmer and President of the Alberta Farmers' Union.

The Education and Vocational Training committee was made up of Dr. Robert Newton as Chairman, Mr. F. G. Buchanan, a School Superintendent; Mrs. C. R. Wood, M.L.A., welfare worker and ex-school teacher; Mr. G. M. Comrie, Edmonton businessman; and Dr. G. Fred McNally, Deputy Minister of Education.

The committee on Industry was chaired by the Honourable E. C. Manning and the membership consisted of Mr. A. Speakman, M.L.A., and former Member of Parliament in the U.F.A. "ginger group"; Mr. W. D. King, Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry; Mr. Howard Stutchbury, Past President of the Alberta Branch of the Manufacturers' Association and a former Trade Commissioner for the Province; and Mr. Carl Berg, well-known labour leader and an official of the Alberta Federation of Labour and the Edmonton Trades and Labor Council.

The committee on Natural Resources and Conservation was chaired by the Honourable N. E. Tanner, the members being Mr. H. R. Milner, K.C., President of Northwestern Utilities; Mr. C. Stubbs, Secretary of the Western Canada Bituminous Coal Operators' Association; Mr. William Anderson, lumberman of Edmonton; and Mr. H. E. Tanner, representing the ex-servicemen and women of Alberta. An outstanding teacher, he is the same Harold E. Tanner remembered fondly from my Stettler days. Incidentally, Mr. Tanner was an ex-officio member of all committees and sub-committees.

The committee devoted to Public Works was chaired by Mr. E. J. Martin, M.L.A., and comprised Honourable N. E. Tanner, Mr. G. H. N. Monkman, Deputy Minister of Public Works, Chairman of the Highway Traffic Board and a Major in the Reserve Army; Mr. S. G. Porter, a prominent Civil Engineer of Calgary and Mr. J. Fitzallen, Secretary-Treasurer of the Town of Vegreville and an official of the Association of Alberta Municipalities for over a quarter of a century.

The Social Welfare committee was headed by Mrs. C. R. Wood, M.L.A., and was made up of Mr. E. J. Martin, M.L.A.; Dr. A. Somerville, Director of Communicable Diseases and Inspector of Hospitals; Mrs. A. Grevette, well-known for her activities in women's welfare work and honored with the Coronation Medal; and Mr. David Duncan, President of the Consumers' League and Chief Purchasing agent for the Canadian Pacific Railway.

I chaired the Committee on Finance, the members being Alfred Speakman, M.L.A.; Mr. J. F. Percival, Deputy Provincial Treasurer; Mr. L. D. Byrne, Technical Advisor to the Government and Mr. H. E. Spencer, formerly a Member of Parliament in the U.F.A. "ginger group" and a keen student of finance and economics generally.

Before the work of the Post-War Reconstruction Committee was finished, Honourable N. E. Tanner relinquished the Chairmanship and I took his place.

Among the many recommendations which met with the approval of all members of the committee and sub-committees was one pertaining to the establishment of a new department of government, the purpose of which was to implement as nearly as feasible, the total number of recommendations made by the sub-committees. Accordingly, the Department of Economic Affairs was established and I became its first Minister on April 20th, 1945.

The outbreak of war in 1939 gave to many unscrupulous people who had always opposed the Social Credit government an opportunity of pointing out that the name "Aberhart" was Germanic in origin and of implying that he could not possibly be as patriotic as a good Canadian ought to be during the war. However, his actions at this time proved him to be one of the most ardent supporters of the war effort in public office during those years.

He contacted the Prime Minister of Canada, assuring him of the active support of his government in every way possible, during what he foresaw as troublesome years ahead. He immediately guaranteed to members of the Alberta Civil Service who wished to enlist in the armed forces the security of their positions upon their return. In his many broadcasts he urged the general public to support the war effort in every way and recommended to all able-bodied young men that they give serious consideration to offering their services in the armed forces. In his broadcasts, however, he continued to point out the necessity for a reform in our monetary system in order that the public would not be faced with unpayable debts upon the conclusion of hostilities.