

Is the NDP Manitoba's Natural Governing Party?

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In the lexicon of Canadian politics, academics and journalists have long associated the term “natural governing party” with the federal Liberal party¹ and reasonably so: the Liberals governed for 80 years, or 72 percent, of the 110 years between 1896 and 2006. In Alberta, the Progressive Conservatives’ unbroken record of majority governments for more than the past four decades qualifies them as well for the appellation “natural governing party.”² This paper asks if the New Democratic Party (NDP) may be considered as Manitoba’s natural governing party. By the time of Manitoba’s next election, the party will have governed in 33 years, or 59 percent, of the 46 years since its initial ascension to office in 1969. A generation of new Manitoban voters in the 2015 election will have known only an NDP government in their politically conscious lives. To them, the “natural” political order will be NDP government.

If a measure of dominance is whether a governing party commands a majority of parliamentary seats, then the Manitoba NDP’s record exceeds the record of the federal Liberals. In the 28 federal elections since 1921 – when the possibility of minority governments first arose with the appearance of third parties in Parliament – the Liberals secured majority mandates in 12, or only 43 percent, of those contests. The Manitoba NDP, in contrast, has won outright majorities in 58 percent of the elections since 1969. If one includes the conversion of a narrow NDP minority in 1969 into a majority as a result of a Liberal MLA’s defection and NDP victories in two by-elections, the score rises to 66 percent. This well exceeds the federal Liberals’ performance. If a natural governing party is an enduring political organization, the ability of today’s federal Liberal party to persevere is open to question.³ The Manitoba NDP, in contrast, is relatively secure.

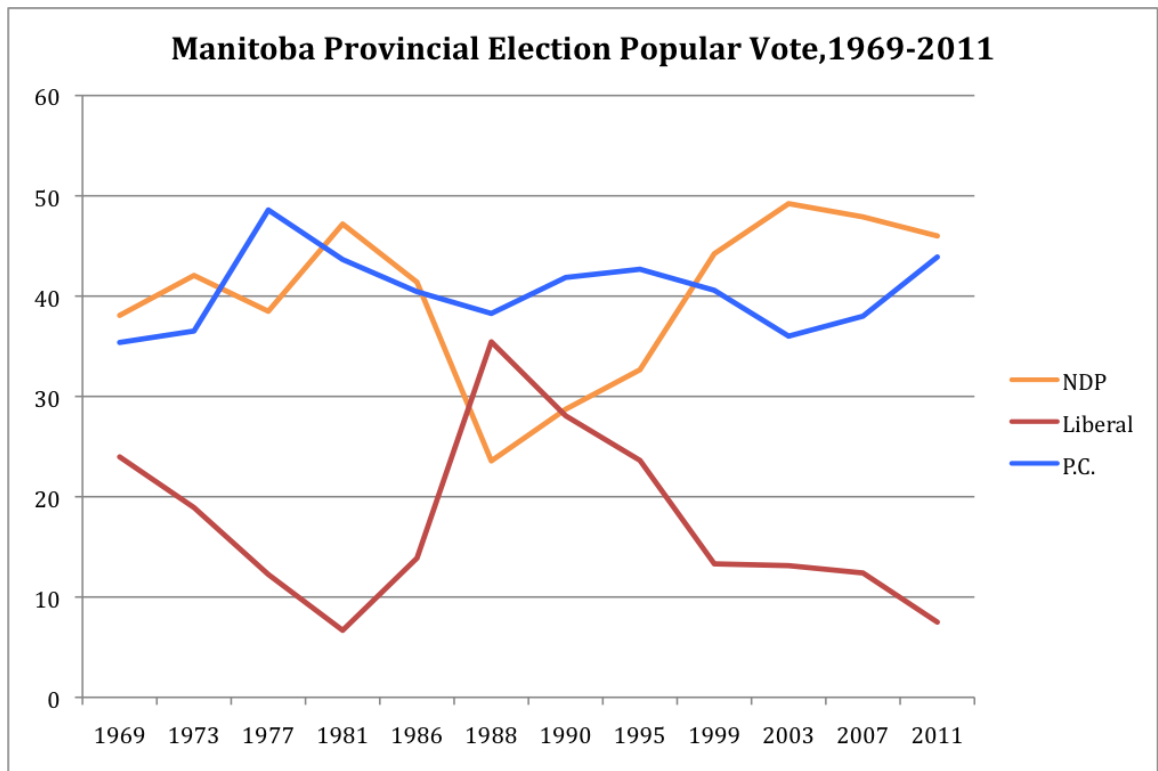
One formulation of the “natural governing party” idea is one-party dominance. One measurement of such dominance is if a party consistently wins an overwhelming majority of seats, e.g. 70 percent, or if it consistently captures a majority of the votes.⁴ The Manitoba NDP’s 37 seats, or 65 percent, of the legislature’s 57 seats in the 2011 election did not match this standard; nevertheless, the party’s performance set the record for seats held by a party in the modern era of Manitoba politics. The federal Liberals, in contrast, have not won an equivalent percentage of seats since the 1940s. The NDP has never captured more than 49 percent of the popular vote, but they have won at least 46 percent in four, or one-third, of the elections since first coming to power. In contrast, the federal Liberals have attained this level of support in only four, or one-seventh, of the federal contests since 1921. By these measures, the Manitoba NDP’s performance compares favourably with and exceeds the performance of the federal Liberals.

Longevity of tenure is another gauge of one-party dominance. By this criterion, Ontario’s Progressive Conservatives, who won 12 consecutive elections between the 1943 and 1985, ranked first among all of Canada’s parties in the last century. A number of those Conservative triumphs, however, in the 1940s, 1970s, and 1980s, were minority victories. Alberta’s Progressive Conservatives have been the indisputable champions in securing consecutive majority mandates; they have won 12 since 1971. The Manitoba NDP is the only other party currently in office to have won four consecutive majorities. The contention that the NDP is Manitoba’s natural governing party therefore is not without some merit.

The contention, however, also has limitations. However ensconced and apparently hegemonic the Manitoba NDP may appear presently, it could possibly be diminished and

humbled, its dominance undone overnight. This occurred to the federal Liberals and, in Alberta and British Columbia, to the long governing Social Credit regimes in 1971 and 1991 respectively. In neighbouring Saskatchewan, the Manitoba NDP's sister party was designated as that province's "natural governing party" a decade ago,⁵ but it has since fared poorly. Most recently, it captured only 15 percent of the legislature's seats, the party's worst performance since 1934 (when it was known as the Farmer-Labour Party). Another limitation to terming the Manitoba NDP as a natural governing party is that it has captured an average of only 40 percent of the vote in the 12 elections since it first assumed office while its durable rival, the Progressive Conservatives, have captured 41 percent. A more nuanced qualitative analysis is therefore required to explain the NDP's electoral supremacy and why the party may be dubbed as Manitoba's natural governing party. Such an analysis must account for why, trailing in popularity, the party has nevertheless repeatedly prevailed.

This paper addresses the NDP's performance and electoral achievements by probing Manitoba's social democratic tradition and by addressing the "hows" and "whys" of the party's success in light of its marginal third party status before 1969. The foci of this study are: agency (the roles of leaders and partisans), an institution (the logic and reward structure of the electoral system), interests (ethnic and pressure groups), ideas (principles and policies), and demographic trends. This study concludes that Manitoba's demographic and cultural evolution has strengthened the NDP. Its re-election prospects increase with time and should entrench it more deeply as the province's natural governing party.



Manitoba's social democratic tradition stretches back to 1895 with the establishment of Canada's first Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Winnipeg. NDP is the current acronym for what began as a reconstructed ILP that emerged in 1920 from the crucible of the province's most cataclysmic political event in the twentieth century, the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. The confrontation captured international headlines and the NDP heralds the Strike in chronicling its own history.⁶ Broken on June 25 of that year with its leaders imprisoned, the Strike crystallized a broad political party on the left that excluded syndicalists and communists. The unionists in the ILP rejected Samuel Gompers's American union philosophy, which precluded organized labour's direct participation in the political arena. A half-century to the day after the Strike's demise, the ILP's political progeny, the NDP, leapfrogged the Liberals and Conservatives to catapult from perpetual third party status to government.

The story of the provincial social democratic party, therefore, is of a remarkable and unlikely arc. Consider the imprisonment of the party's first leader, F.J. Dixon – charged with conspiracy and publishing seditious libels during the Strike – and then consider that Ed Schreyer – the triumphant party leader exactly 50 years later – became premier. A decade later, he became the Governor General. If a leader personifies his party's story, the NDP had graduated from a jail cell to the Crown, from a person deemed by the Crown a dangerous societal menace to someone acting in the Crown's name as its first minister and then to becoming de facto head of state. The party's most successful leader, Gary Doer, who led it to three successive majorities, currently serves in Canada's most senior ambassadorial posting, in Washington. The party and its leaders therefore have gone from the fringes of power and the law to acting in the name of the provincial state and to both embodying and speaking for the Canadian state.

Little was unidirectional, however, about the party's path to power and dominance. Between the Strike and the NDP's first election to office, the party's collapse sometimes appeared plausible. In 1941, for example, it elected only three MLAs and, in the 1950s, it occasionally suspended its constitutionally mandated annual convention for lack of organizational capacity. Two decades later, however, the party had more convention attendees than it had had members in the 1950s.⁷ Party militants kept their social democratic dream alive despite the troughs in party fortunes. Manitoba's social democratic story is therefore uneven but marked by endurance. The party's leadership reflects continuity: the last ILP leader, S. J. Farmer, served as the first leader of a rebranded ILP, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), and the last CCF leader, Russ Paulley, served as the NDP's first chieftain. Similarly, when the CCF transformed itself into the NDP in the early 1960s via the midwife known as the New Party, its personnel hardly changed; the overwhelming majority of Manitoba delegates at the founding conventions of both the national and provincial NDP had been veteran CCFers.⁸ In both transitions, from the ILP to the CCF and from the CCF to the NDP, party leaders and members purposefully accelerated the party's evolution so that it appeared less as an extra-parliamentary movement with some parliamentary representation and more as a parliamentary party with an extra-parliamentary annex.

Leaders and Members

The story of the party's leaders reveals the NDP's deep roots in Manitoba's political culture. Dixon had topped a list of 41 candidates in Winnipeg's multi-member

constituency in the 1920 election, almost tripling the vote for his nearest competitor. Dixon's successor, John Queen, convicted of seditious conspiracy for his role in the Strike, won his seat in the legislature while sitting in jail. He went on to win seven elections as Winnipeg's mayor while remaining an MLA. His successor, Farmer, a former Winnipeg mayor, led the party into a coalition government headed by Progressive John Bracken in 1940.⁹ Farmer became Canada's first social democratic cabinet minister, but after Bracken's Liberal-Progressives defeated a CCF labour bill and Bracken departed to lead the federal Progressive Conservatives, the CCF quit the coalition government. Farmer came to term it "a fool arrangement."¹⁰

Farmer's three successors were, like his predecessors, Anglo Protestants. All were acclaimed as party leader; leading a weak third party had little appeal for the politically ambitious. Under Lloyd Stinson, the CCF held the balance of power in 1958 and flirted, again, with coalescing in government with the Liberal-Progressives, but negotiations faltered.¹¹ His successor, Russ Paulley, epitomized the genetic links among the ILP, the CCF, and the NDP; he had been a member of an ILP youth group, served as the CCF's last leader, and became the NDP's first leader. His successor, Schreyer, had been a CCF MLA and an NDP MP. Schreyer's successor, Howard Pawley, had run unsuccessfully for the CCF on multiple occasions. Ironically, Pawley opposed the creation of the very party he came to lead: "Philosophically, I thought it was wrong."¹² Similarly, Queen had opposed the transformation of the ILP into the CCF in the 1930s. While Queen feared that a broadened party that included farmers would submerge labour's interests, Pawley fretted that organized labour would capture the NDP.

Pawley's successor, Doer, was not born into an ILP-CCF family but like many of his predecessors he was a unionist. Head of the government employees' association, he became prominent in the Manitoba Federation of Labour which was affiliated with the NDP. Greg Selinger, the current leader and the third most popular Canadian premier in 2011,¹³ is the first NDP leader to have become premier without first winning an election. He is also the only Manitoba premier since the 1940s to have been confirmed in that position in an election.

Two of the three NDP premiers preceding Selinger stand out for their accomplishments; the other stands out for his pratfalls. Without Schreyer, the NDP would not have come to power nor likely have become a major party. David Orlikow, an NDPer elected to four levels of government between the 1940s and 1980s described Schreyer's appeal: he was a "leader who personifie[d] in himself, sort of, Manitoba."¹⁴ His rural background and experience as a university instructor attracted both country and urban residents to the party. A chronicler of his administration depicts him as "the perfect candidate for the moment."¹⁵ Schreyer brought former Liberals, Progressive Conservatives, and even Social Crediters into the NDP fold. Despite his laboured and dull speaking style, *Time* magazine selected him as one of its "150 Faces for the Future."¹⁶

The NDP swept into office on Schreyer's coattails, but it was the party's coattails that swept Pawley into the premier's office. No one but Schreyer could likely have led the NDP to victory in 1969; led by anyone in 1981, it would likely have prevailed. Widespread dissatisfaction with the Conservatives made the NDP the default option for voters. Where Schreyer converted a minority position into a majority by luring a Liberal into the NDP caucus and by winning by-elections, Pawley, whose malapropisms often bewildered listeners, saw the same one-time Liberal defector resign from his cabinet.

Soon after, a backbencher whom Pawley had demoted from his position as Speaker and whom he had further alienated – Pawley’s assistant contested the backbencher’s nomination – voted against the NDP budget and brought down the government.¹⁷ Pawley had burnished his reputation by piloting a contentious public automobile insurance (Autopac) scheme as a Schreyer minister. However, Pawley’s government raised automobile insurance premiums just before his government fell and this contributed mightily to the party’s subsequent defeat at the polls. The rebuke was such that Schreyer believed it “to be the end of the NDP as one of the two major provincial parties.”¹⁸

Doer’s path to victory spoke to his skills as well as to the shortcomings of his opponents. Bright, quick on his feet, articulate, a consummate negotiator, and more affable than either Schreyer or Pawley, he took the leader’s post when the party stood at a paltry eight percent in the polls.¹⁹ The media-savvy Doer led the NDP through three successive election defeats, but the party’s seats and popular vote totals rose steadily. “[G]reeted like a hero” at a federal NDP convention after leading the provincial party to power, he described his thinking as “pragmatic idealism.”²⁰ *Maclean’s* anointed him “Canada’s most successful politician,” an assessment confirmed by polls between 2003 and 2006 that showed him to be the country’s most popular premier.²¹ In opposition, Doer had supported Conservative legislation that required balanced budgets; in power he retained a Conservative law requiring a referendum to raise taxes.²² It was ironic that he loosened labour-party relations by legally prohibiting union and corporate financial contributions to parties,²³ because he had headed the largest provincial union. This did not deter unions from effectively continuing to endorse the NDP and Doer urged the federal NDP to maintain the special status of unions in the party by continuing to allot them a quarter of the votes in leadership races, something to which they are entitled in the provincial party.²⁴

In contrast to party leadership, party membership numbers reveal their relative insignificance in relation to electoral success. The party had 5,000 members when it won office in 1969 and 17,000 members when it lost power in 1988.²⁵ In between these years, membership rose to between 25,000 and 30,000.²⁶ In 2011, as the party won its fourth successive term, membership stood at 10,307.²⁷ Magnus Eliason, a founding member, veteran organizer, and candidate for both the CCF and NDP – he had run and lost in 13 consecutive elections before winning a municipal seat – observed, “We just thought it incredible the number of votes we would get in spite of poor organization” and few members.²⁸

Membership numbers have also borne little relationship to the party’s ability to raise money: “With 10,000 members,” the party secretary once observed, “we can raise more money than we did with 17,000.”²⁹ Many analyses of party finance imply a link between finance and electoral performance. The NDP’s success suggests such linkage is tenuous; the party has prevailed despite having often raised less money than the Conservatives. In 2010, for example, Conservative income exceeded NDP income by 50 percent yet the NDP triumphed in the subsequent election.³⁰ Similarly, in the 2007 election, the Conservatives outraised and outspent the NDP by a ratio of 3 to 2, but the NDP won decisively and bested the Conservatives by ten percent in the popular vote.³¹

The Logic and Rewards of the Electoral System

If the NDP is deeply ingrained in Manitoba's political ethos, why was it a marginal third party for most of its history? Part of the answer lies in the rewards of the electoral system, another in the party's orientation. The ILP contested elections in Winnipeg and Brandon only, and it prohibited farmers – every rural newspaper in the province had condemned the Strike – from joining the party until 1927.³² Farmers, via the Progressives, had certainly left the Liberal and Conservative folds but, as a leading Brandon ILPer and later CCF provincial secretary put it, “It was not that old country Scotch socialism that the farmers were talking about.”³³ The CCF's “broadening out” strategy was designed to appeal to those beyond its labour base, to farmers and other rural folk. Support for the party continued to be concentrated in the city however and the party continued to be identified with labour unions.

Although Winnipeg accounted for about 30 percent of the provincial population, the city had only 10 seats in a 55-seat legislature between 1920 and 1949. This limited the party's prospects. In the 1922 election, for example, votes for Labour equalled those for 27 non-labour MLAs but Labour won only six seats. In the 1945 election, the CCF won more votes than the governing Liberal-Progressives and twice as many as the Conservatives but the CCF was rewarded with 10 seats to the Liberals' 25 and the Conservatives' 13. A legislative change in the 1950s lessened the inequalities between rural and urban constituencies but the new law continued to discriminate against the city; it required that the weight of seven urban electors equal the weight of four rural electors. This change, progressive compared to the previous regime, helped the CCF draw to within one seat of the opposition Liberals in 1959.

A more dramatic change came on the eve of the NDP winning power in 1969: a new redistribution act equalized the weight of urban and rural voters. It gave metropolitan Winnipeg 27 of the legislature's 57 seats, and the NDP won 17 of them. The addition of Winnipeg seats at the expense of the countryside assisted the NDP in capturing a near majority of seats on 39 percent of the popular vote.

Since then, Winnipeg has grown, gained more seats, and the NDP has benefitted: in 2011, it won all but five of the city's 31 ridings. The Conservatives, who had some strength in the south end and northeast districts of the city between the 1970s and 1990s, have seen that strength all but evaporate, reduced to one seat in the northeast and three in the city's southwest corner. The NDP now dominates ridings, such as Fort Garry, where they had not previously been very successful.

The party has also benefitted from having a stranglehold on the far-flung northern ridings. They have fewer electors than most constituencies and are often won by narrower margins than are the southern agrarian ridings where the Conservatives prevail. The three northern NDP ridings of Kewatinook, Flin Flon, and Thompson, for example, contained a combined total of 29,818 registered electors in 2011 while the three southern Conservative constituencies of Arthur-Virden, Midland, and Morris had 44,308 electors. The NDP won its three ridings with combined pluralities of 3,262 votes while the Conservatives won their three ridings with combined pluralities of 10,284.³⁴ The ILP-CCF-NDP vote, once inefficiently distributed, became more efficiently distributed than the votes for the other parties. Although the NDP's popular vote advantage over the Conservatives was a narrow two per cent in the 2011 election, it won nearly twice as many seats as the Conservatives. Compared to 2007, the Conservatives gained six percent and the NDP lost two percent of the popular vote but the NDP gained a seat while the

Conservatives gained none. The NDP therefore is well placed to win future elections while losing the popular vote.

The first-past-the-post electoral system stimulates voters to think in binary terms – government versus government-in-waiting. This incentivizes strategic voting. In earlier decades, strategic voting hurt the third place CCF-NDP; to many, a vote for the party represented a wasted effort. As a major party, the NDP has escaped this syndrome. Instead, it now faces the Liberals. In the 1970s and the early 1980s, the Liberals survived partly because of assistance from the federal wing of the party which was in power for much of that time.³⁵ With the federal Liberals reduced to third party status, the fate of the provincial Liberals is dire: in the 2011 election, they managed to win only one seat and lost half their votes, securing less than eight percent of the popular vote.

Voting behaviour since 1969 demonstrates how the first-past-the-post system has reinforced the NDP's position: "There has been an inverse relationship between support for the NDP and support for the Liberals that one can trace all the way back to 1958 – higher support for the NDP has meant weaker Liberal support and vice versa."³⁶ The NDP exploited this dynamic in the 2011 election by not referring to the Liberals in their campaign advertising. The ads appealed subliminally to moderate left-of-centre Liberals to form a common front under the NDP banner to keep the right-wing Conservatives from office. Selinger made this point explicit in the most telling and surprising exchange in the sole televised leaders' debate in 2011: he had Liberal leader Jon Gerrard concede that he had made "a mistake" in voting against one of Selinger's budgets.

The reward structure of the first-past-the-post system has led the federal and provincial NDPs to adopt different postures on electoral reform. Their positions, conditioned by the electoral system, have reflected dissimilar interests. Until the 2011 federal election, the federal CCF-NDP had never won a percentage of seats commensurate with its share of the popular vote. This led the party to urge, as recently as two months before the election, adoption of proportional representation.³⁷ In contrast, the Manitoba party has not bruited the issue of proportional representation because it runs counter to its interests – securing a majority mandate with a plurality of votes.

The prospect and rewards of office have motivated many prominent personalities to carry the NDP banner. That would not have been the case in earlier times. Power, a magnetic force, attracts the ambitious and lures candidates. The party once desperately sought volunteers as candidates and fielded many as sacrificial lambs to swell its rostrum of candidates. Now there is a surfeit of nomination seekers. Since the party is keen to escape potential embarrassment during a campaign, aspiring nominees are required to complete an application form with intrusive personal questions as a condition of gaining permission to contest a nomination. In addition to those experienced in government as cabinet ministers and MLAs, many of the party's candidates in the 2011 election had sat on municipal councils and school boards. The candidates included a former TV anchor, lawyers, engineers, small business owners, farmers, assistants to elected politicians, city employees, as well as the kinds of candidates historically identified with the NDP: unionists, social workers, teachers, and community activists.

Leadership disarray in the opposition parties has also benefitted the NDP. Between 1969 and 2009, the Liberals had nine leaders, the Conservatives six, and the NDP only three. Reinforcing the NDP's current position of strength, both opposition leaders resigned in the aftermath of the 2011 election. The Conservatives may have fallen

victim to what George Perlin termed the “Tory syndrome”: after an election loss many activists, caught in a “minority party syndrome,” believe that changing their leader will reverse their party’s fortunes and they undermine him. After a new and inexperienced leader runs a losing first campaign, he is in turn weakened within the party with many activists agitating for yet another leader to be their party’s saviour.³⁸ This was the fate of Stuart Murray, the Conservative leader who succeeded the last Conservative premier; unable to solidify his authority over his own caucus and party, “grumblings within the caucus over [Murray’s] seeming inability to lift the party out of its doldrums began to surface publicly.”³⁹ Conservative leader Sidney Spivak had suffered the same fate in the 1970s. NDPers, in contrast, have not undermined their leaders, including Doer, even after he had run three losing campaigns. No Conservative or Liberal leader has sustained such repeated electoral rebuffs.

Social Bases of Support

The origins of the party’s leaders and its social bases of support have changed over time. To a man, with the exception of J.S. Woodsworth, all the arrested Strike leaders had been British immigrants. Winnipeg’s ILP-CCF’s aldermen between the 1920s and 1940s reflected the party’s British imprint; in the 1920s, 85 percent were British-born; in the 1930s, 70 percent. Most were Protestants and four were Jews, one of whom was British (as was Woodsworth’s sole fellow Manitoba CCF MP, Abraham Heaps.) Only one of the ILP-CCF aldermen was Catholic and none was of German, Ukrainian, or Polish origins, though these were prominent ethnic groups in the city.⁴⁰ Of the 11 CCF MLAs elected between the early 1930s and early 1940s, seven were British-born and the city’s British-born residents voted disproportionately for the CCF. In contrast, native-born Canadians of British ethnic origins voted disproportionately for the Conservatives and Liberals.⁴¹ Long-serving CCF MLA and unionist Donovan Swailes reflected the party’s British heritage: Leeds-born and accented, he worked as the party’s provincial secretary in the 1940s, contested Winnipeg’s mayoralty as the party’s candidate in the 1950s, and served as the NDP’s provincial treasurer in the 1960s.

In the decades before the NDP’s rise to power, class and ethnicity had driven Manitoba politics.⁴² The long-established Anglo dominance of provincial politics gave way in 1969 to an “Ethnic Revolt” which helped usher the NDP into office.⁴³ Schreyer, of German-Austrian extraction, became Manitoba’s first Catholic premier since the 1870s, the first “ethnic” premier, and the first twentieth century premier to be neither Ontario-born nor of Ontarian parentage. As British immigration declined, the party’s British Protestant veneer wore off. By the 1960s, ethnic and religious identities had weakened; intermarriage, assimilation, secularization, and acculturation contributed to the integration of subsequent generations of Manitoba’s continental European ethnic minorities into the mainstream of provincial politics.

The undoing of Manitoba’s pyramidal ethnic pecking order aided the NDP because the party harnessed the remade cultural zeitgeist of the province more successfully than did its opponents. When Schreyer’s government was defeated, the cabinet contained six Anglos (they accounted for only 37 percent of Manitobans in 1981), four Ukrainians, two Jews, two Franco-Manitobans, a German, a Dutchman, and a Métis. The party’s British genesis is now so obscured that the current NDP caucus chair has no idea if any of her party’s MLAs are British-born.⁴⁴ What is perceptible in recent cabinets

and caucuses are visible minority and Aboriginal MLAs. In this, the NDP has led as well; Schreyer recruited Manitoba's first Aboriginal candidate for office in the 1950s and the party was the first to run and have a Filipino MLA elected in the 1970s. A Filipina, Flor Marcelino, sits in the current cabinet, a first in Canada.

Schreyer made breakthroughs in communities that were either traditionally politically inactive such as Hutterites, who greeted him "almost as a figure of royalty," or conservative, such as Mennonites, who had voted Conservative and Social Credit. Schreyer's own constituency had a particularly large concentration of Mennonites.⁴⁵ Francophones, historically Liberal voters, also swung to the NDP. The party had demonstrated support for them in the 1980s when, in the face of anti-French railings by the Conservatives, it pursued an unpopular constitutional amendment to further entrench French language rights.⁴⁶

As ethnicity's importance has declined in voting behaviour, other cleavages and social movements have come to the fore – environmentalists, feminists, gays and lesbians, and First Nations. The NDP has led in championing their causes. The party elected an unprecedented five women MLAs in 1981 and one of them, Muriel Smith, who had served as the party's first female president and contested the party leadership, became Canada's first female deputy premier. Sidney Green, a former party president, two-time party leadership contestant, and a senior cabinet minister, attributed his marginalization in the party to the influence of the party's militant feminists and its union leaders.⁴⁷ Unlike the Conservatives, the NDP has espoused gender equality in its internal operations; it requires that women compose half of the party's provincial executive.⁴⁸ The party has also embraced an activist policy strategy on social inclusion, childcare, health care, and poverty, issues that resonate with women voters, who have been disproportionately supportive of the party.⁴⁹

A Conservative proposal in the 1960s for a high-level diversion of the Churchill River, which the NDP questioned, aligned the party with Manitoba's nascent environmental movement as well as the First Nations threatened with relocation. A contemporary example of that alignment's persistence was the NDP government's decision to spare the province's boreal forest and the First Nations located there from the construction of a hydroelectric transmission line. The party opted for a substantially more expensive westerly route, which the Conservatives oppose.⁵⁰ Such policies have helped the NDP finesse the appeal of the Green Party, which has never captured more than two percent of the vote. (In contrast, the Greens have snared substantial support, between eight and twelve percent and at some expense to the NDP, in British Columbia's three most recent provincial elections.)

A poll released on the eve of the 2011 election showed that the NDP enjoyed disproportionate levels of support among women, the middle-aged, those with post-secondary education, and lower-income voters.⁵¹ More vocal in championing their interests than the Conservatives, the NDP has assembled a coalition of women, environmentalists, Aboriginals, gays and lesbians, middle class professionals, the poor, public sector workers, unionists, the disabled, and various ethnic and visible minority groups. The party's relative popularity with post-secondary students fits with the party's favourable orientation toward them; Doer's government froze tuition fees for nine years and, although fees are now indexed to inflation, government grants to universities are to be boosted by five percent annually in the coming years, well above the inflation rate.⁵²

The changing nature of the workforce also aids the NDP. Farmers, a constituency historically not sympathetic to the party – it has never won a seat in the agriculturally rich rural south-west – have constantly shrunk in numbers as the provincial population has increased. In contrast, post-secondary students, a constituency sympathetic to the NDP, have constantly increased in numbers: in 1921, five times as many Manitobans laboured in agriculture as there were students 15 years of age or older; by 1971, there were only twice as many agricultural workers as post-secondary students; and by 2001 the two-to-one ratio of farmers-to-students was reversed and accelerating.⁵³

Similarly, the incremental growth of the public sector, encouraged by the NDP and its predecessor parties, has boosted the NDP's fortunes. Vested in their roles, public sector workers are supportive of those who protect them and are sympathetic to augmenting their ranks. There were 6,533 civil servants employed by all levels of government in Manitoba in 1921 and 142,915 in 2001. While the provincial population had less than doubled in that time, the percentage of those working in the public sector had increased by more than six-fold. Well more than half of them work for the provincial government and its crown corporations.⁵⁴

Interest Groups and Media

Organized labour has been an unflinching NDP ally despite NDP legislation that prohibited corporate and union contributions to political parties. The legislation, a minor concern to unionized workers' interests, appears to have hurt the Conservatives more than the NDP; the Conservatives can no longer access hidden corporate contributions via unspecified "trust funds" once administered by friendly law firms and bagmen.⁵⁵ Labour circles successfully lobbied for legislation which authorized arbitration in long labour disputes and which permits unions to be certified without a vote of potential members if a specified percentage of them have signed union cards.⁵⁶ As evidence of Manitoba's relatively favorable environment for organized labour, union ranks declined proportionately less in Manitoba than in any other province during the party's tenure in government. In 2010, 38 percent of the labour was unionized, higher than in any province (after Newfoundland and Quebec) and second highest among public sector workers (after Quebec).⁵⁷

The 2011 election demonstrated the fraternal bonds between unions and the party: the Manitoba Federation of Labour ran radio ads aligning its goals with those of the NDP, and the Manitoba Nurses Union ran ads bemoaning the cuts the Conservative regime had made in the 1990s, implying that more were in store if the Conservatives prevailed. Seven unions, led by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, lambasted the prospect of Manitoba Hydro's privatization, a prospect the NDP effectively associated with the Conservatives.⁵⁸ Manitoba's Professional Fire Fighters Association also weighed in to support the NDP and three of the Association's members were elected as NDP MLAs. In contrast, the Police Association backed the Conservatives.⁵⁹

Business groups, never a significant constituency in the party and skeptical of its redistributionist objectives, have nevertheless become more relaxed with the party. They no longer view the NDP as an intractable threat and at times have applauded it. The party allayed business anxieties by cutting corporate taxes seven times over seven years⁶⁰ and by balancing ten consecutive budgets after the 1999 election. Although peak business organizations such as the Chambers of Commerce prefer the Conservatives, they are

more kindly disposed to the NDP than in the past; during the 2007 election, for example, the Chambers warmly welcomed Doer at one of their functions. The party, in turn, has reached out to business. Its 2011 platform boasted of partnering with multinational giant Mitsubishi in helping to develop electric vehicles.⁶¹ Exemplifying the more comfortable link between business and the party, Mark Chipman, the popularly acclaimed entrepreneur who resurrected the Winnipeg Jets to Manitobans' delight, donated money to the NDP in 2010 (but not to the Conservatives). During the 2011 election campaign and in likely violation of the elections law, he held a joint news conference with Selinger to announce a program targeted at inner-city youth.⁶²

The party has been less popular among farmers, although it has fared better among those in the more northerly and marginal farming districts than those in the richer south-west wheat belt. The president of the province's largest farm policy organization, Keystone Agricultural Producers, ran as a Conservative candidate in the 2011 election and the Manitoba Pork Council disparaged the NDP's water quality regulations.⁶³

Since coming to power, media attitudes to the NDP, like business opinion, have softened. In the NDP's first administration in the 1970s, the province's media leader, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, continuously criticized and vilified the party. The *Free Press* argued its case ideologically (socialism versus free enterprise), politically (through slanted reporting), and mathematically (that the NDP held power only because of its plurality of votes). The newspaper actively encouraged a coalition of Conservative and Liberal voters to undo the NDP. During the NDP's second administration in the 1980s, the *Press's* city editor instructed a reporter "that she had to 'get' a cabinet minister."⁶⁴ The story behind a vote-rigging scandal, which helped to bring down the Conservatives in the 1990s and which the *Press* tried unsuccessfully to suppress, came to light only through the work of an intrepid CBC reporter who garnered a national award for public service journalism. The NDP's new print media nemesis is the *Winnipeg Sun*, but its readers are relatively few, its influence feeble. Meanwhile, the *Free Press* has subdued its anti-NDP bias.

Technological changes have also aided the party, giving it more space to tell its own story and not let opponents define it. The NDP has benefitted from the rise of more broadcast outlets and the Internet, which provides media consumers with unfiltered information which the party can generate to buff its image, especially with the resources offered by being in government.

Conclusion: The NDP as the Government Party

As functions of the provincial state – health care, education, family supports – grew with public expectations, the NDP's social security narrative gained a wider audience. The welfare state expanded to provide services that opponents of the CCF-NDP had once dismissed as utopian, unaffordable, and impractical. The successful introduction of social programs lent the party and its message more credibility. The constituencies which benefitted from these programs – home care workers, teachers, nurses, and civil servants in the provincial and broader public sectors – broadened the party's electoral base. The NDP implanted itself ever more firmly in the provincial political culture as the provincial state embedded itself ever more firmly in Manitobans' lives.

The NDP now positions itself as the custodian of the social safety net. The party can claim, with authority, that a vote for it is a vote for continuity and stability, for defence of the status quo. Such behaviour conforms to what Jared Wesley characterizes as Manitoba's political cultural "code of moderation."⁶⁵ To be sure, the party proposes modest incremental changes which fine-tune or marginally extend some social programs. The thrust of the NDP's message since its first election however has been to contend that it represents a rampart against the Conservatives who, it intimates, would roll back existing social welfare measures.

Buttressing its image as a pragmatic, responsible, and competent manager of the provincial state, the NDP cites its record of fiscal prudence. To counter charges of profligacy, the NDP can point to a decade of balanced budgets before the recession of 2009. In the 2011 election, the party made the Conservatives appear as the improvident spendthrifts; the NDP proposed a return to balanced budgets by 2014, the same year offered by the federal Conservatives in their re-election campaign months earlier and four years earlier than the provincial Conservatives proposed. A charge hurled at the NDP when it was a third party is now thrown back: in response to the Conservatives' health care agenda in the 2011 election, Selinger dismissed the Conservative proposals as irresponsible and unaffordable.⁶⁶

Reginald Whitaker's authoritative study of the federal Liberals during their apogee as "the government party" between the 1930s and 1950s described them as more committed to entrenching themselves within government institutions than to consolidating their distinct partisan identity. This contributed, he concluded, to the "deadening of political controversy, the silence, the greyness," which clothed Canadian political life in the 1950s.⁶⁷ State and party had become enmeshed; senior civil servants such as Lester Pearson and Mitchell Sharp emerged from the bureaucracy to positions of party leadership. The Manitoba NDP experience offers some parallels: Wilson Parasiuk, who had been the deputy minister to the premier and deputy minister to the cabinet's Planning Secretariat, emerged from the bureaucracy to become a powerful NDP minister. Conversely, Harvey Bostrom joined the senior ranks of the bureaucracy as a deputy minister after his career as a cabinet minister.

While the federal Liberals succeeded as a natural governing party by presenting themselves as the "middle road" between the Conservatives on the right and the NDP on the left, the Manitoba NDP has pursued a different strategy in solidifying its hegemonic status: it has benefitted in the context of Manitoba's polarized party system by highlighting ideological fissures between itself and its Conservative opponents. As examples, the slogans of the NDP's first re-election campaign in 1973 was "Keep Your Government Yours" and, in the 2011 election, "Let's Keep Building. Don't Turn Back." Such messages painted the Conservatives as defenders of privileged and reactionary interests. Feeding this ideological discourse of left versus right, Conservative leader Sterling Lyon had vividly derided the NDP as "socialists who follow alien doctrines laid down in Europe in the 19th century."⁶⁸ Under Doer, such a characterization rang especially hollow: the Conservatives had courted him before he decided to run for the NDP. The Conservatives continue to signify their alignment with the entrepreneurially inclined; in the 2011 election, they copied their campaign slogan, "Making Manitoba a Have Province," from the title of an agenda published by the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce.⁶⁹ In contrast, the NDP stressed shielding social programs and Manitoba's

largest corporation, publically-owned Manitoba Hydro, from the dangers posed to them by the Conservatives.

After Pawley's premiership, the NDP moved away from notions of state planning to focus on issues such as productivity, ecology, and community development. This occurred at the same time that "Third Way" thinking was similarly redefining Britain's Labour party.⁷⁰ The NDP's social democratic ideological spine, however, did not bend. By discontinuing a welfare fraud line which the Conservatives had set up, which appeared to vilify welfare recipients,⁷¹ Doer's government reinforced the NDP's image as the guardian of the welfare state. Although welfare assistance rates under the NDP government in the 2000s fell in terms of real purchasing power, the party had no trouble making the Conservatives appear as those who would undermine welfare state supports.

In Manitoba's ideologically-charged and polarized partisan context, quite different from the context in which the federal Liberals succeeded, the provincial Liberals, preaching fiscal responsibility and compassionate social policy, have not been able to offer much that the NDP has not. The Liberals have been marginalized to the NDP's benefit.⁷² Unlike the federal Liberals who played the left against the right and shifted between business liberalism and welfare liberalism depending on where the threat to them was coming from, the Manitoba NDP has captured much of the ideological middle ground as a centre-left party. In addition, the party has benefitted from the quirks of the electoral system, the disarray of the opposition, and a growing constituency of public sector dependents and clients. The confluence of these factors permits credibly classifying the NDP as Manitoba's natural governing party.

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