

## **The Manitoba Political Tradition**

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The topic of “Manitoba political tradition” was devised by Paul Thomas as a means of adding a little history and an historian to a meeting dominated by political scientists. But what does it mean? A tradition can be defined as a custom handed down from ancestors to posterity but, in the Manitoba case, no single statement of principles derived from experience has ever won widespread acceptance. Indeed, when I asked former premier Duff Roblin for his thoughts about a provincial political tradition he replied, “I don’t think there is such a thing. You’ll have to invent one.”<sup>1</sup>

Where did the idea originate? The term “political tradition” enjoyed a brief flowering in the 1940s with the appearance of Richard Hofstadter’s The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It. It has been used only rarely in the intervening decades, chiefly because it is regarded as elitist, simplistic, or both.<sup>2</sup> Critics have argued that the quest for a single approach to a community’s public affairs fails to take into account the many differences that exist in any society. Hofstadter’s defence was that, in “plac[ing] political conflict in the foreground of history,” generations of observers had ignored a perspective at least as important, and probably more important, than the power of difference. Simply put, societies that have managed to stay united must have been able to transcend disagreements: “the fierceness of the political struggles,” Hofstadter wrote, “has often been misleading.”<sup>3</sup>

Hofstadter sketched what he believed were the conditions necessary for peaceful transitions in governments and fruitful debates about policy. The United States, he wrote, had achieved a consensus on economic matters: “The range of vision embraced by the primary contestants in the major parties has always been bounded by the horizons of property and enterprise.” This range of vision included “the rights of property, ...the right of the individual to dispose of and invest it, the value of opportunity, and the natural evolution of self-interest and self-assertion, within broad legal limits, into a beneficent social order...”<sup>4</sup> Hofstadter argued that societies in “good working order have a kind of mute organic consistency” and that the key political figures within those communities, whom he described as “practical politicians,” may

dispute particular points but “share a general framework of ideas which makes it possible for them to cooperate when the campaigns are over.” These people of action were accountable to large followings and must be distinguished from “alienated intellectuals” who were not required to muster majorities in democratic contests. Studies of twelve such practical leaders and groups of leaders comprised the book.<sup>5</sup>

There is strength as well as weakness in Hofstadter’s approach. Its merit lies in its emphasis on the compromise that must occur in any democracy if a government is to retain legitimacy and authority. Its weaknesses lie in the implied assumption that a single “tradition” can prevail over a long period of time and the explicit assertion that a community’s eventual acceptance of political arrangements is accompanied by the erasure of profound differences. This paper contains both support for and opposition to Hofstadter’s original approach. First, it surveys secondary literature in history and the social sciences to establish the range of academic views concerning the province’s political culture and, in the process, to emphasize the power of *difference* in provincial life. Second, it reports on my interviews with some well-informed, politically-experienced Manitobans, most of whom would respond sympathetically to Hofstadter’s emphasis on consensus. And third, it outlines an historical approach that moves beyond difference and consensus, thereby establishing an inclusive interpretation of the provincial community’s political tradition.<sup>6</sup> In short, it offers an historian’s version of what students of politics label “political culture.”

### ***I Manitoba’s Scholarly Literature: The Power of Difference***

Most observers of the Manitoba polity have focused on the differences that have shaped this diverse community. First among these is the population itself. Manitoba is home to Aboriginal people who can claim, directly and indirectly, six thousand years’ connection to this place. They belonged to several different language groups, adopted several different economic strategies, and developed several different cultural perspectives. Manitoba is also a home to immigrants. The earliest migrations from Europe during the fur trade sustained widely-dispersed communities of mixed European and Aboriginal heritage, French and English and Michif-speaking Métis. By 1870, when the western interior was annexed by Canada, and Manitoba became a province in its own right, the community had known important differences for some

thousands of years.

A tiny polity measuring about one hundred miles square, “the first new province of the Dominion” included fewer than fifteen thousand residents, four-fifths of whom were Métis. Migrants in the next three decades, including British Canadians from Ontario, German-speaking Mennonites from Russia, Icelandic Protestants, French Canadian Roman Catholics and a dozen other peoples swelled the population to about 250,000 at the beginning of the twentieth century. A tidal wave of immigration from Britain and Europe as well as other parts of the globe then multiplied the total to about 700,000 by 1930. This flow was reduced to a trickle during the Depression and the Second World War, but incoming Europeans pushed the provincial population to over 900,000 by 1960. And a slow, steady influx of migrants, both from Europe and the so-called global south (including the Philippines and south Asia), has raised the total to 1.2 million in 2008.<sup>7</sup> Manitoba is a community distinguished by these recurrent waves of immigrants and by its relatively modest population increases over the past century and a half.

In spatial terms, too, the province is constructed upon difference. It has customarily been divided into three zones based on geology, vegetation, and history. The largest area, the “North,” is associated with the Precambrian rocks and boreal forests that extend diagonally from the southeast corner to the northwest and cover more than eighty percent of the territory. Home of Aboriginal people and resource development enterprises, its population is less than 100,000. A second zone is associated with the mixed-grass prairie and aspen parkland of the southern fifteen percent. This is farm country, and its service towns, once numerous and now fewer in number, are linked by railways and highways to world markets for wheat, canola, hogs, cattle, and other farm products. Population: less than 300,000. The third zone is a comparatively-limited urban and suburban space, the area of the Red River settlement that became the province’s administrative and economic hub, Winnipeg. Its population includes about 700,000 in the Census Metropolitan Area, and another 100,000 in the city’s shadow, a diameter of about 100 km.<sup>8</sup> In sum, there is not now nor has there ever been uniform social composition or homogeneous economic structure in the territory of present-day Manitoba.

Histories of Manitoba politics typically dwell on conflicts. The list of such disagreements includes Catholic-Protestant differences over public funding of schools, French-English

differences over official languages, British Canadian - continental European differences over school language policy, Jewish identification of anti-Semitism in public institutions, Aboriginal-white differences over matters of Aboriginal self-government, and differences between whites and visible minorities over racist discrimination and anti-racist human rights legislation. This list could be extended to include rural-urban differences over public spending priorities (highways vs. urban infrastructure, for example) and provincial regulation of local affairs (including conflicts over such matters as land drainage and hog barns). Equally prominent are worker-management differences over such fundamental issues as industrial relations law, union organization, and workplace contracts. Strikes have constituted important moments in political life, particularly one crucial work stoppage, the Winnipeg general strike of 1919. Gender differences and family matters, too, have been fundamental sources of dispute in public affairs, including women's right to vote, specific laws concerning spousal rights to property, provision for children's pre-school day care, and gender discrimination in education and the professions. This list is not complete but its very length, and the extended catalogue of academic references lying behind each item, establishes an important generalization: the academic literature on provincial politics has been especially focused on issues wherein two parties clearly disagreed.

In addition to the analyses of particular conflicts, academics have written several sweeping interpretations of Manitoba politics. A 1955 essay by the dean of Manitoba historians, William Morton, concentrated on formal party politics and relations between the two levels of government. Morton argued that the province, and the prairie region, had experienced a period of colonial subordination between 1870 and the early twentieth century, during which time the national government controlled the keys to economic development, including public lands and natural resources, railway policy, and immigration regulations. This colonial era was succeeded by several decades of agrarian radicalism that reached a climax when farm communities, then accounting for over half the provincial population, elected an independent farmer government (it and its successors held power from 1922 to 1958), and sent farmer members of a third party, the Progressives, to the federal parliament in Ottawa. Morton suggested that a third moment in political history commenced when electors turned to "utopian" parties, socialist and social credit groups, that embraced what he described as "untried methods" in their quest for "ideal ends."

Morton's three-phase approach to prairie political history – colonial protest, agrarian protest, utopian protest – became a standard interpretation for a generation of students. It still stands as a plausible statement about aspects of the Manitoba past between the 1870s and 1950s.<sup>9</sup> His central arguments, concerning prairie citizens' feelings of inferiority within confederation, were repeated in many works in the following years. The differences between Manitoba and central Canada thus constituted another theme in academic treatments.

Tom Peterson, a University of Manitoba political scientist, published his masterly essay on provincial political life in the 1970s. He emphasized the cultural and economic differences within provincial society. He was especially preoccupied by what has been called the "fault line" separating elite British and northern European groups from less-favoured southern and eastern Europeans in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> He employed traditional Marxist language about classes and posited a circumstance in which the "lower classes," "the non-British," the "poorer class" faced off against "the Ontario British," the "prosperous," the "culturally more secure," "Manitoba's traditional ruling group." His interpretation, which is simplified here, was not crudely Marxist, though his presentation did embolden others to make bald statements about conflict between two classes in the province. Rather, Peterson posited an evolution – "a sequence" – of political cleavages which changed character (shifting from cultural to economic causes) between the late nineteenth and late twentieth century.

Peterson emphasized that the British-heritage citizens arrived earlier, whether from Ontario or the United Kingdom, settled on the best land in the province, built the major business institutions, and controlled the government; continental Europeans were left with the poorest land and deferred to British leadership. He believed that the main protests against the unfairness of this circumstance came not from leaders of the continental European-origin groups, despite their lesser share in provincial wealth, but from British workers who brought with them experience of socialist and labour resistance movements in their homeland. Only in the 1960s, Peterson suggested, did the cultural factors recede in importance and local political practice begin to approximate what he described as "the British pattern." By this, he meant that political debate eventually focused on "hierarchy vs. equality," the most important political cleavage separated "rival income groups," and the goal of the rival groups was "to protect or improve their

respective economic positions.” It should be underlined that Peterson, a well-informed, critical observer, also noted that “articulate class consciousness was far from widespread” and that “there was no neat division in the electorate along class lines.”<sup>11</sup>

A third influential interpretation, also by a political scientist, Nelson Wiseman, employs the same historical evidence but places greater emphasis on the ideological views of the various immigrant groups. Writing in 2007, and following Peterson in broad outline, Wiseman suggests that a “collectivist ideology and culture” existed in a “distinctly coherent political region” called the “Midwest,” an area embracing Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The latter province, which he calls “the Ontario of the prairies,” Wiseman says was shaped by migrating Ontarians who brought with them “their tory-touched and liberal Grit biases....” Manitoba’s “fundamentally liberal farmers” were British in orientation, he writes, not American. The same could be said for the two powerful factions in the province’s major city. In Winnipeg’s South End lived Ontario-origin business elites who were moneyed, well-connected, and British in their sympathies. In the West End, North End, and several poorer suburbs, resided workers led by British labourists. Continental European migrants lived “on the periphery of the political system...” and often ended up in more radical movements, culminating in the founding of a branch of the Communist Party. If the British group, led by wealthier farm and business households, was able to control the provincial Legislature for the thirty-six years after its first surprise election victory in 1922, it was because the constituencies were so skewed in distribution that one rural vote equaled two, three or more city votes, and because Aboriginal people were “systematically disadvantaged.”<sup>12</sup>

Saskatchewan’s composition differed slightly from its prairie neighbour in Wiseman’s descriptions, but the two provinces also shared a great deal. Wiseman suggests that a social democratic consensus, a “collectivist ideology,” was more successful in Manitoba and Saskatchewan than in other parts of the country, perhaps because its “collective ideal and culture ... fits well with the co-op tradition in the Midwest.” It was not just a prairie phenomenon, he notes, because the NDP acted as an “integrated national and provincial party... linked to a broader national and international social democratic movement...,” training workers and leaders for campaigns and for the jobs generated by election victories. He also argues that the focus of this collective ideal shifted significantly over the course of the twentieth century, as it moved

from its roots in the *Social Gospel* in the first quarter to *social planning* in the second, *social security* in the third, and a wide variety of *social movements* in the fourth. He concludes that the Midwest's ideological composition was distinctive within the Canadian polity. Clearly, Wiseman regards social democracy as a fundamental aspect of the Manitoba political tradition.<sup>13</sup>

Political tradition, as concept, proposes the existence of legacies from past societies that shape behaviour, outlook, and institutions in the present. Morton, writing in the 1940s and 1950s and viewing the region on the national plane, suggested that the prairie provinces were shaped by Canada's region-based inequities. Peterson, who thought in terms of a provincial political system, argued that the cleavages within Manitoba society were initially ethnocultural but evolved into money-based debates in the 1960s and 70s. Wiseman, both in 1981 and in his 2007 book, emphasized the immigrant composition of the Manitoba and Saskatchewan populations and depicted this "Midwest" as a bastion of social democracy in a country that contains a variety of political cultures. Each, Morton's regional, Peterson's class-related, and Wiseman's social democratic interpretation, identifies a component of the Manitoba political tradition.<sup>14</sup> Each builds upon the work of many other scholars in the humanities and social sciences. And, in terms of the provincial political sphere, each emphasizes an aspect of difference: for Morton, between prairie and other Canadians; for Peterson, between two groups of Manitobans; and, for Wiseman, between Midwest and other Canadian ideologies and between two social camps within Manitoba. Taken in conjunction with the picture of population, geography, and historical narratives, the academics' picture of Manitoba can only be described as one built upon the theme of difference.

## **II Participant Observers and "Accommodationist" Influences**

Richard Hofstadter built his picture of a political tradition upon the careers and actions of political leaders. To capture a similar perspective in Manitoba I interviewed five individuals connected to New Democratic Party governments (including a senior civil servant, two former premiers, and the directors of a survey research company), and five individuals who held leading roles in the Conservative and Liberal parties, including three former Conservative premiers. In employing this approach, I was particularly interested to discover what experienced individuals with differing political opinions might see as the underlying principles and conditions shaping

public conversation and public arrangements in Manitoba.

The first theme that stood out in the observations of this diverse group was a surprising insistence upon the degree of consensus in Manitoba's public sphere, at least in the last half-century. Despite their experiences in vigorous and heart-felt disputes over a wide range of public policies, they did not see the provincial government as a forum of profound disagreements. Though they acknowledged the litany of conflicts that has preoccupied historians and political scientists, many of the interviewees were at pains to emphasize the paramountcy of "conscious accommodation" in provincial political life. Duff Roblin, former premier, said: "I'm not sure that we are less extreme than other places but one thing I would say is that there's less political bitterness here, less acrimony between the parties. My experience is mainly with D. L. Campbell. And my policies were as different from his as they could possibly be, but we never exchanged a harsh word. We gave the other fellow credit for good intentions and we didn't make disagreements into personal quarrels. We stuck to policy." The then-premier of the province, Gary Doer, pointed to specific occasions when leaders of labour and business were able to meet informally to discuss their differences before they became serious ruptures. Paul Vogt, head of the provincial civil service and secretary to Cabinet, acknowledged that cultural and economic cleavages had been real in the past, and were reinforcing rather than cross-cutting, which ensured their roots went very deep. But, despite the possibility of continuing conflict, the various segments of the population had eventually been able to reach compromises. He used the term "accommodationist" to depict this aspect of provincial life.

Were there obvious principles to which Manitobans referred in resolving their differences? These are elusive matters but several of the interviewees did see identifiable tendencies in Manitoba's public life that differed from other provinces. Paramount among these leanings is a middle-of-the-road disposition among both citizens and political leaders. Virginia Devine of the survey firm, Viewpoints Research, said that "Manitoba is less tolerant of extremes..." Her colleague, Leslie Turnbull, also of Viewpoints, said: "In Harris' Ontario and Campbell's BC the governments sought to change the culture (as Margaret Thatcher did) and to ensure that their perspective would dominate. In Manitoba, a government that followed that course wouldn't last long." Gary Filmon, former Conservative premier, shared this view: "I've

always said that we're in the middle of the political spectrum, no matter who's in office. I can't recall any major swings in philosophy when governments changed." Jim Carr, a former Liberal member of the legislature and now executive director of the Manitoba Business Council, agreed: "In Manitoba, the polity hugs the centre. Neither east nor west, neither left nor right, neither boom nor bust, neither rich nor poor."<sup>15</sup>

An aspect of the Manitoba public sphere, these experienced observers said, is its relatively small size. In a community of just 1.2 million people in 2008, said Carr, leaders could be expected to know one another and members of one social group could be expected to recognize the interests and outlook of most other groups. Virginia Devine explained: "It's a smaller place, representatives of the various communities know each other, end up in the same restaurant, their kids meet in games, people work more on getting along, crossing lines of class and income and culture." Jim Carr: "I can't imagine anywhere in the world where the elites move more easily across all lines than in Winnipeg. The Aspers and Richardsons are an example. There was a time when the elites were far more isolated one from the other. This is a function, too, of the size of Winnipeg. It's small enough, and big enough, to enhance such possibilities.... Winnipeg is small enough that one can have access to everybody within a day. Not just the elites but anyone can talk to union presidents or CEOs. [Premier] Gary Doer will return [business executive] Hartley Richardson's call."

These observers also emphasized Manitoba's population stability across the generations, a degree of continuity that many other Canadian centres do not possess. As Leslie Turnbull said: "What strikes me about Manitoba society is that most of the people who live here were born here and have chosen to stay here. (This isn't true in the same way for poorer people; they were born here and had little choice except to stay). But the proportion of residents who were born here is very high – 75-80 %. This contrasts with British Columbia, for example, where only 45-48% of residents were born in the province. People go to BC from other parts of Canada and the world seeking financial improvement. People stay here because of family connections, other personal connections, friends, a strong sense of community – something that is more important than money. They are making a trade-off and economic well-being comes second. Except for people who are poor, who don't have such choices. If you put money first, you move. But family, roots,

friends – that defines Manitoba more. Izzy Asper, when asked why he stayed, said ‘because it’s home.’”

The continuity and the smaller size mean that people are familiar with each other but also that they are readier to make compromises for the sake of social peace. Virginia Devine said: “[there is] not a sharp divide between peoples.” And Leslie Turnbull, who grew up in Montreal and then moved to Winnipeg, was blunter: “It’s a bit of a slog to live here. People recognize that it’s a small place, that they have to rely on the public sector, have to find a way to get along, and that there’s tradeoffs in making such choices. The labour movement recognizes that they have to get along with business and vice versa. And in the NDP, labour and the party don’t fight in the same way that they conflict in other provinces.”

Gary Doer extended this argument when he emphasized the importance of “fairness” as a criterion by which Manitobans measure winners and losers in public debates. Fairness was not the same thing, he said, as equality. The French language crisis, which nearly caused the defeat of a government in 1983-4, he attributed to the fact that people would not permit French to be “more important” than other languages.

This list of characteristics, running from moderation to continuity to accommodation, may sound unappetizingly bland. But, as Nelson Wiseman’s interpretation implies, many of the interviewees added an important qualifier to this picture of uniformity and temperance. Was the Manitoba political tradition merely centrist or was it consistently to the left of centre, whatever that might mean? Former premier Howard Pawley argued for the latter: “Manitoba is more centre-left than most other provinces of Canada, with the possible exception of Saskatchewan. I think the 1919 strike was the earthquake that influenced the province’s political culture. But even the coalition in the Second World War, when [C.C.F. leader] S. J. Farmer was in the cabinet, reflected this centre-left orientation. And the governments of Schreyer [1969-77], Pawley [1981-88] and Doer [1999- 2009] represent a long period of New Democrat governance. Some of the policies that Manitoba followed also were ahead of the rest of Canada. Schreyer’s government was the first to go with home care, auto insurance. Mine was the first to introduce pay equity in the public service, and certain aspects of labour legislation. Even Roblin [1958-67] was very progressive. His government was not conservative in the usual sense of the term.... [It was] more

centre-left in orientation. Campbell [1948-1958] was certainly more conservative. And Lyon [1977-81] deviated [too] ... and therefore was only a one-term administration because he went well over to the right.” Leslie Turnbull made a similar observation: “Manitoba is a centre-left province. If BC is 40/60 left and right, then Manitoba is 60/40. Saskatchewan has changed and is not as left as Manitoba is. The biggest BC win for the NDP was Bob Skelly’s 46% and in the other elections it was much lower. Gary Doer won 50% in 2003 and 49.3% in 2007.”<sup>16</sup>

If the interpretation was offered only by New Democrats, one might dispute its validity. But Gary Filmon, in arguing for a continuity of policy between governments of either stripe, seemed to agree: “When you look at the province’s Conservative party, it’s still a **Progressive** Conservative group, not a Conservative one as it might be elsewhere. And when Doer came in, they compared themselves to Tony Blair – it was the “progressive” model that they wanted. There’s a sense of prairie populism in Manitoba governments, no matter what the actual governments say they do.”

There is a perception among this group of political leaders that Manitobans follow public affairs attentively. They suggest that it is normal in provincial life for a few citizens to belong to the established parties, to attend legislative committee hearings, and to read about public debates, as in any polity, but that the wider electorate also follows major issues closely. Duff Roblin related this attentiveness to an important practice of the legislature: “I think political debate has to be vigorous, that the issues have to be worthwhile, and the positions taken on those issues have to be significant.... We had public hearings after second reading of a bill, and people could make any representation they liked. It seemed to me an eminently reasonable way to proceed. The school issues, for example, were hotly-contested, and the debate was a good thing. Part of the secret of a democratic system is to let people have their say. Don’t cut them off. The purpose of parliament is to let people speak on public issues. There were half a dozen people who came out all the time – always had an opinion and wanted to talk, whatever the issue. Some of the members on our side said it was a waste of time when the same people came so regularly and wanted to throw them out. I didn’t agree – we should hear them all – they’re entitled to that.”

Howard Pawley made a similar point: “there was much more participation by the public in politics in Manitoba compared to Ontario, for example. I was surprised by the difference when

I came to Windsor. We had the highest membership in the [Manitoba] New Democratic Party during my time, the early 1980s, when it was 25,000-30,000, I think. That's partly why we won government in 1981 – the strength of our organization. I felt it was different in Ontario, fewer members in parties, and so on. It's possible that Saskatchewan might have been comparable. And there was much more involvement in rural areas as well as in the trade union movement.... And that was clear in Meech [the Meech Lake constitutional crisis] as well. We had hearings and public input and I told the other first ministers that we would go to the public for review, even if they did not. We were the only one to do so. The same with the Free Trade agreement and the Marital Property Act: we held public hearings.”<sup>17</sup>

The above comments paint the positive and the ideal because I had asked for a political tradition and my interviewees believed that they could see spheres in which a broad provincial consensus existed. But, inevitably, in focusing on the consensus, these leaders spent less time reflecting on the divisions and exclusions that plague every society. One who did pause to reflect on this absence was Leslie Turnbull: “Winnipeg is exclusionary. Aboriginal people and poor people aren't in the circles of those whom I describe as cooperating and getting along. There's a deep division between the North End and South End in the city, and it has become even deeper in the time that I have been here [since the mid-1980s]. This is also true of Regina. The two cities share the title of 'murder capital,' [and] have high numbers of car thefts. This is a terrible circumstance and yet nothing seems to change, year after year – it's as if we put the North End in a box and close the lid. About 20% of the city's residents in Winnipeg are so poor. The present government has done a great deal – incremental things – but has it really changed much? Gary Doer has gone out of his way to be inclusive, to find Aboriginal candidates, and women candidates, and representatives of visible minorities as candidates – does it make a difference? There are two ways to look at it: we've been in power and done a lot; or our values have not been put into practice.”

Though they might appear to some observers to be gender-free viewpoints, much of the commentary failed to acknowledge the significance of women's alternative perspectives on public life. Howard Pawley understood this challenge in policy terms: “I thought Manitoba was ahead of the rest of the country on women's rights, starting with Nellie McClung and the right of

women to vote. In 1976 we were the first province to undo the effect of the Supreme Court ruling vis-à-vis Murdoch on the division of property after marital breakdown. And in the 1980s we moved on pay equity – I think Manitoba was ahead of Ontario in its dealings on pay equity in the public sector, if not in the private sector.” Again, though, it was Leslie Turnbull who identified the very different perspective that was necessary if one was to take women’s participation into account: “The women activists I know seem less extreme here than in Ontario or BC. There’s a tradition of women’s rights and of being in the vanguard of rights for women. The NDP certainly targets women voters and seeks to present its case to them. Women, more than men, believe in the role that government can have in people’s lives. They have the custodial consciousness that men are less persuaded by.” But this was more than a generalized gender consciousness, as she explained when she addressed the influence of women in unions: “The public sector unions that are not in the MFL are an important force – the MGEU, teachers, nurses – and have been successful in shaping the agenda. Because the public sector is used heavily here, and we have very little reliance on private health clinics or private schools, the workers in these sectors can drive the public agenda.”

A political tradition is not just a matter of internal arrangements but also of external relations. Manitoba’s position in Canada is unusual, Paul Vogt said, because the province’s citizens have had experience with so many of the elements that affected other parts of the country. Manitobans have been dealing with ethnocultural diversity since the beginning of the twentieth century; they know the pressures associated with Aboriginal policy and French-English bilingualism; and they are now working to integrate thousands of immigrants from the global south. They live in a middle-ranking province in terms of individual income and public wealth. In economic composition, Manitoba combines manufacturing, resources, agriculture, and services. And, in geographical terms, it sits in the middle of the country. Vogt argued that Manitoba shows greater support for the powers of the central government than some other provinces (including Saskatchewan and Alberta), and is less likely to express regional alienation. Manitoba, he said, was “less a region than it is a broker, as in Doer’s alliances with Quebec and New Brunswick, or as in Filmon’s and Pawley’s roles in federal-provincial relations.”

Were there national circumstances that contributed to a Manitoba political tradition?

Gary Doer's reply, which referred to his experience at federal-provincial discussions, is significant: "You don't start off saying that this is what I want to do – to play a middle role – but we sit between 'plates' – north and south, east and west – we're at the 'heart of the continent.' And we shouldn't allow the situation to be factionalized and regionalized by TILMA [Trade, Industry, Labour Mobility Agreement] and other such deals. Manitoba's role in the nation is to bring the plates together – to avoid the rigidities that come with TILMA in the Alberta-British Columbia deal, or the Ontario-Quebec arrangements. The Cap and Trade approach [to greenhouse gases and global warming] is such a bridge." Doer cited the activities of three previous premiers in this context: "Maybe Lyon played the same role by contributing (through Jim Eldridge's words) to the equalization language in 1981-2, or Roblin in founding the premiers' meetings, or Bracken [1922-42] in the work of the Rowell-Sirois Royal commission....location is obvious and an issue – Manitoba has a higher profile at US and Mexican meetings when they are addressing north-south routes.... Hydro is an on-ramp to the midwest and western states. And north-south links, including Russia, could well be important in the future." In this perspective, an aspect of the provincial political tradition is Manitoba's interest in acting as a mediator and broker when regional and federal-provincial tensions develop within Confederation.

The interviewees suggested that Manitoba was a society of conscious conciliation, driven by a keen sense of what was fair and unfair. They saw the community as remarkably stable and its citizens as committed to collective well-being. They regarded it as a place of intersection because its central location in nation and continent enabled its representatives to act as mediators. These qualities, too, are part of a provincial political tradition.<sup>18</sup> But, as is evident, they offer a picture of the province that differs radically from the picture painted by academic researchers who have laboured diligently to uncover the conflicts that have erupted time and again. Instead, these practitioners concentrate on consensus. Richard Hofstadter would have approved. But which is the appropriate interpretive emphasis, difference or consensus?

### **Part III: A Social and Cultural History of Manitoba Politics**

The province has been home to a number of community groups that possess sufficient coherence, historic depth, and political effectiveness to count as significant factors in its political

history. And its 140-year history falls neatly into three eras which constitute identifiable phases in the story. These generalizations, which are based on social and cultural history approaches, sustain an inclusive interpretation that might be described as a series of “political traditions.”<sup>19</sup>

Eight major groups constitute distinct and lasting forces in the political composition of Manitoba. These include two communities of Aboriginal people, the First Nations peoples and the Métis. Three others, rural residents, urban working people, and French Canadians, each occupy categories by themselves. Given the steady arrival of immigrants, a sixth category should be reserved for the most recent arrivals who are faced with the difficult task of making their way into the established order. Women may not have been central to the history of politics in the generation after Confederation but, because they did acquire greater power after the turn of the twentieth century and continue to shape political decisions today, they belong in a seventh category. Finally, a separate category is necessary for what Tom Peterson called the ruling class and the culturally more secure. Each of these groups has developed means of internal communication and social interaction. Each is long-lived and has managed to establish among its members a clear sense of the group’s place in the provincial past. All must be counted as parts of the provincial political story.<sup>20</sup>

Manitoba was founded by Métis peoples, groups of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry. Their defining moment, the Resistance of 1869-70, remains a living part of the provincial story today. The Métis built an association, L’Union nationale métisse Saint-Joseph du Manitoba, sustained and published a work of history, de Trémaudan’s Histoire de la Nation Métisse dans l’Ouest canadien (1936), struggled to adapt to changing circumstances in the mid-twentieth century as witnessed by the Lagassé report (1959), and then in 1982 won the decisive prize, the naming of their group in the constitution of Canada as one of the three Aboriginal peoples possessing distinctive Aboriginal rights. Whatever the difficulties of their political organizations, whatever the fortunes of specific legal claims, the Métis exercise an important influence in Manitoba political history.

The French community retains an equally-strong group identity. From Archbishop Taché’s invitation to four young Quebec professionals in 1870 to form a cadre of leaders and their subsequent entry into politics, there have been French-speaking representatives in the

legislature. A weekly newspaper was founded as early as 1871 and its successors have continued to this day. In addition to the battles fought over confessional schools and official language rights, the French have maintained a strong institutional presence in the province, including cultural production in theatre, book publishing, radio, and television. The language has been maintained in the face of considerable challenges. The French maintain a significant presence in public life and also should be singled out as a political entity.

Arthur Mauro, the business leader, has argued that there is “a thread of continuity, a sustained tension, between urban and rural Manitoba, producer and trader, throughout the province’s history. This isn’t a black and white story, because throughout this history there were variables that mixed the two.” He makes a point that should not be forgotten: Manitoba was shaped by city-based, British-Canadian business interests during the first two generations after Confederation. The railways, the fur trade, the land market, and the grain trade were, first and foremost, business operations. Their western operations were administered from Winnipeg, a city that possessed regional and even national metropolitan status for Canada’s first century and remains the dominant urban community in the province. Business leaders, as the spokespeople for various economic interest groups, shaped public policy in city and province. Business power has been challenged many times, not least during the Winnipeg general strike of 1919, but the business community’s leaders have been consistent winners when they squared off with representatives of opposing groups.<sup>21</sup>

The other pole in Mauro’s construct, the rural Manitoba group, consisted of farm families. They lost many struggles in the 1880s and 1890s, built their own organizations (Patrons of Industry, Grain Growers, United Farmers) that shaped government policy during the next two decades, and elected an administration in 1922 that survived for thirty-six years. It was a cautious, conservative government, particularly under Premiers Bracken and Campbell (less so under Stuart Garson), but it expressed the outlook of its rural constituency perfectly. As Mauro said, “Campbell didn’t spend a penny unless it was in the bank. To him infrastructure was an expense, not an investment with an anticipated return. His was the farm household’s perspective of public finance; Campbell thought in terms of crop to crop. He had been shaped by the Depression, by the vagaries of farming. His great claim to having contributed to provincial

development was rural electrification. But that aside, he consistently opposed ‘the fat cats at the Grain Exchange, the CPR, and the Bank of Montreal.’” This rural constituency divided in political sentiment after the Second World War, those south of the CPR tending to stay with the Pool and later the Keystone Agricultural Producers, while those to the north who were, as Peterson and Wiseman have pointed out, less likely to be British and to operate grain-only farms, moved to the newly-formed Manitoba (later National) Farmers Union. There were many exceptions, of course, but the pattern did exist. Farmers and rural Manitobans have consistently constituted another element in provincial political history.

A militant critique of business leaders came from urban workers, especially those in Winnipeg and Brandon but also miners and other unionized employees in smaller centres. Their unions began in the late nineteenth century, became powerful organizations during the First World War, and waged a remarkable confrontation with capital in the Winnipeg general strike of 1919. If the strike itself must be counted labour’s loss, the longer term proved that it had burned class consciousness into the minds of both sides and thereby ensured that labour itself would survive as a cohesive political force. Communist and social democratic civic politicians, union meetings and union campaigns, and eventual victory for a New Democratic Party provincial government, communicated critiques of capitalism through the rest of the century. These institutions and the social networks they generated remain important forces in provincial and civic political life because the labour movement and its allies have been able to assemble funds, activists, and articulate spokespersons to represent the workers’ cause.

Manitoba has been the recipient of waves of immigrants commencing in the 1880s, around 1900, shortly after the First World War, again after the Second World War, and in the generations after 1970. The waves differed in place of recruitment and in the cultures of the new arrivals. The host society also changed with the passage of time, especially when established citizens began, in the post-1945 generation, to receive newcomers in a more helpful manner. But every group of immigrants encountered racism and every group tried to influence the state in one way or another. Ukrainian Canadians sought to maintain their language. Jewish Canadians sought the abolition of various restrictive caveats such as the selective quotas in the University of Manitoba medical school. Japanese Canadians sought redress for their wartime expulsion from

their homes in British Columbia and the government's expropriation of their property. The similarities of experience across so many decades underlie the thesis that immigrants, though a group constantly changing in composition, should be seen as another continuing factor in the Manitoba political tradition.

Women campaigned for the vote in the decade before the First World War and won their prize in 1916 after the victory of T. C. Norris's Liberals. They were not as assertive in provincial politics for the next generation, perhaps because their next crucial struggle concerned respect for their labour in the home. But women's issues accumulated again in the 1950s and 1960s as their increasingly prominent place in the professions, their share in the ownership of marital property, and the relation between their wage work and family roles became matters of public debate. Women's distinctive approach to political parties and platforms, and their place in the growing spheres of health care and public sector unions, also ensured their voices would be acknowledged in public life. As a consequence, women, as a group, influenced the course of public affairs throughout the twentieth century.

First Nations people, including both non-status individuals and those recognized as Indians under Canada's Indian Act, also represented a distinct and enduring force in provincial life. United in interest in the 1870s by treaties, the Indian Act, and disfranchisement, the first peoples were excluded from the province's political arrangements for several generations. Only after they organized and protested this exclusion were they recognized as having a legitimate grievance. They won the provincial franchise in 1952 and the federal franchise in 1960. As the 1988-91 Aboriginal Justice Inquiry attested, however, the right to vote did not mean that injustices would cease. Still, Elijah Harper's role in defeating the Meech Lake constitutional amendment and the remarkable success of Manitoba First Nations leaders, including Phil Fontaine and Ovide Mercredi, both of whom became national chiefs of the Assembly of First Nations, testified to the influence of first peoples in political life.

All of the groups listed above had roots deep in the past. All experienced defining moments that reinforced their self-conscious determination to survive and ultimately to prevail. To discuss each on its own, in the manner of Peterson and Wiseman, emphasizes the differences that divide Manitobans into distinct groups. But to lump Manitobans together in a single

coherent community, as the political practitioners might seem to be saying (though this is not, in fact, their message), is to infer wrongly that dissenting groups represent mere tensions, enduring aberrations but not influential alternative views, within a single political tradition. This is not fair to groups that launched what they themselves regarded as profound challenges to a complacent provincial establishment?<sup>22</sup> Besides, each of these groups has endured for an extended time and influences contemporary political affairs. Each, in itself, seen from the perspective of social history, constitutes a significant political tradition.

Another approach to the question of political tradition falls under the broad rubric of cultural history, a branch of the discipline that inquires into communities' collective perspectives. From this vantage point, one might argue that Manitobans have experienced three quite-different political conversations during the past 140 years, each of which constituted a local variation on international themes. The first was rooted in a British-Canadian imperial and colonial outlook between the province's founding in 1870 and, roughly, the outbreak of the First World War in 1914; the second was marked by multicultural and class conflict and endured until the decades after mid-century (the Roblin government of 1958-1967 can stand as the era of transition); the third, an era of integration and accommodation, began in the 1960s and continues to the present.

Manitoba's initial political conversation, or "political culture," was constructed on conflicts between the Métis and British-Ontarian newcomers, between French-speaking Catholics and English-speaking Protestants, and between a "West" possessing newfound economic interests and an "East" determined to shape the growing national economy as it saw fit. These battles were real, culminating in a ministerial crisis in 1879, a struggle over railway policy in the 1880s, a prolonged legal battle over public funding of Roman Catholic schools (1890-1897), and a contest over the status of the French language. The British Canadian, central Canadian, and English language victories were not inevitable but, when they came, they established the ground rules for succeeding generations.

Manitoba grew in population and social diversity during the opening decades of the twentieth century, acquiring the ethnic and class composition that drove its politics for the next two generations. The elections of 1914 and 1915, which saw the Conservatives challenged and

then defeated by the Liberals, illustrated that farm, labour and women's groups were no longer willing to abide by the consensus established after Confederation. Women won their campaign for the vote in 1916. But labour and farm groups discovered their concerns could not be resolved without long and difficult struggles. After the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, unions lost influence and foundered over internal disagreements that preoccupied them for a generation. Farm groups won the provincial election of 1922 and maintained rural dominance in the legislature, but the Great Depression of the 1930s postponed their acquisition of hoped-for rural social amenities, including better access to health care facilities and to electric power. Immigrants from eastern and southern Europe lost the right to educate their children in their own languages in public schools, denied by an act of the legislature in 1916, and endured British-Manitoban social leaders' reluctance to admit them to full membership in provincial society. Ethnic tension, rural-urban conflict, and labour-capital hostility marked this second era of Manitoba politics, just as Tom Peterson suggested.

Duff Roblin's government, 1958-1967, ushered in recognizably-modern Manitoba political arrangements. Inherited tensions over women's status, First Nations sovereignty, French-language rights, income distribution, ethnic cultural expression, and rural vs. urban precedence made regular appearances in political debates. Though such issues constituted crucial policy distinctions at the local level, they did not constitute the organizing themes of political life. Rather, as Nelson Wiseman suggested, the international debate between neo-liberalism and social democracy shaped local political choices. In the language of the Manitoba legislature, "left-wing socialists" (said the Conservatives), opposed "right-wing neo-cons" (said the New Democrats). The Liberals were sandwiched between them, losing saliency in the process. Around the parties and their debates, the pressures associated with integrating increasing numbers of southern hemisphere immigrants and northern Aboriginal migrants into provincial society increased. Fortunately for the community, its multi-sector economy grew steadily, if very slowly, most Manitobans resisted the siren call of out-migration, and such flashpoints as the French-language dispute (1983-4) and the murders of Helen Betty Osborne and J. J. Harper (which provoked the calling of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry, 1988-91) did not result in irreparable breaches of public order.

To suggest that there are three distinct periods in the political culture of the province puts the comments of the practitioners whose views were outlined above in a different light. These experienced leaders stressed the importance of accommodation in provincial politics. Could they have ignored all the groups canvassed here? Surely not. Instead, one can see that their experience in the post-Roblin era, the years since the 1960s, differs dramatically from the circumstances of Manitoba's first century. Quite simply, these recent leaders have experienced a different political environment. This is the perspective that a cultural history can offer. As Tom Peterson argues, by the 1970s Manitobans had attained a "basic unity... [and] in their second century appeared ready for a more straightforward competition between those inclined to reform and equalization and those who expressed the need for restraint and stability."<sup>23</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The concept of "political tradition" is unconventional because it marries the academic disciplines of history and political science, perhaps intending to avoid thereby the assumptions, and the rigour, of both. As used by the late American historian, Richard Hofstadter, it was a liberating concept because it postulated the existence of a consensus beneath the obvious contestation in any society's public life. Is there a Manitoba political tradition?

The preceding pages have outlined disagreements as well as consensus. Students of Manitoba politics have typically concluded that important differences lay at the heart of the provincial political community. The political practitioners whom I interviewed suggest, in contrast, that the community operated on the guiding principles of accommodation and fairness. An historical approach offers a little of both. Distinct groups battling for paramountcy, yes, each of which constitutes a "political tradition" in itself. And three cultural eras: in the first two, between 1870 and the 1950s, disagreements were profound; and, in the third, though the entire community accepted the rules of the political process, significant ideological differences over such matters as government's role in the economy, in the maintenance of social safety nets, and in the enforcement of rules related to reproduction and the family, suggest that political debate was far from over. Hofstadter's quest for a single "tradition" spanning this long history -- 140 years -- is simplistic. It would be unfair to the dissatisfied, and complacent in the face of continuing inequality, not to recognize that privilege has been challenged many times by those

who represent different interests and different outlooks.

**Notes:**

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1. Duff Roblin interview 12 November 2008 [notes in author's possession]
2. One exception is the Canadian political science text edited by R. S. Blair and J. T. McLeod The Canadian Political Tradition: Basic Readings (Scarborough, ON: Nelson Canada, second edition 1993)
3. Richard Hofstadter The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1948, 1967) vii, viii
4. Hofstadter The American Political Tradition viii
5. Hofstadter The American Political Tradition ix, x
6. I recognize that today's social scientists are accustomed to using such concepts as political culture, path dependency, and realigning elections when discussing such problems. Nelson Wiseman defines political culture as evanescent, elusive, but not a mirage – rather “a work in perpetual process” in In Search of Canadian Political Culture (Vancouver: UBC Press 2007) 263.
7. A rough estimate of the ethnic origins of Manitobans, calculated from a Statistics Canada 2006 report which permitted respondents to declare multiple heritages: 57% British (including Irish), 58% European (not including British and French), 17% Aboriginal (including both first peoples and Métis), 6% Visible Minority (Filipino 39,000; South Asia 15,000; Chinese 18,000), in Statistics Canada “Ethnic origins, 2006 counts, for Canada, provinces and territories - 20% sample data” at:  
<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/english/census06/data/highlights/ethnic/pages/Page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo=PR&Code=46&Table=2&Data=Count&StartRec=1&Sort=3&Display=Page> [Accessed 8 January 2009]
8. Statistics Canada “Population and dwelling counts, for Canada, census metropolitan areas, census agglomerations and census subdivisions (municipalities), 2006 and 2001 censuses” at <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/popdwell/Table.cfm?T=303&SR=1&S=3&O=D&RPP=25&CMA=602> [Accessed 10 November 2008]
9. W. L. Morton “The Bias of Prairie Politics” in Brian McKillop ed. Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W. L. Morton (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada 1980) 149-160; first published in Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada Series III, Vol. XLIX (1955) 57-66
10. Tom Peterson “Manitoba: Ethnic and Class Politics” in Martin Robin ed. Canadian Provincial Politics: The Party Systems of the Ten Provinces (Second edition, Scarborough: Prentice-Hall of Canada 1978) 61-119. This is the second version of the article. The first, a shorter version, was published in the book's first edition, in 1972. Paul Vogt used the term “fault line” in our

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interview, 24 July 2008, and so did Gary Filmon in the interview of 12 November 2008.

11. Tom Peterson “Manitoba: Ethnic and Class Politics” 102-3, 108

12. Nelson Wiseman In Search of Canadian Political Culture 213-15, 218, 229, 235. Wiseman estimates the Aboriginal proportion of the population at 14% in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Wiseman wrote a slightly different version of this interpretation a quarter-century earlier, though this analysis, too, emphasized “ideology and ethnicity.” Wiseman “The Pattern of Prairie Politics” first published in Queen’s Quarterly 88, 2 (1981) and republished in R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer eds The Prairie West: Historical Readings (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press 1992) 640-660. According to Wiseman, Manitoba’s political parties reflected the province’s divided social composition. The Citizens’ League, defender of the middle and upper classes, was led by Ontarians; the moderate Independent Labour Party was led by British immigrants. In later decades, Wiseman suggests, following Peterson’s line, continental European immigrants and their children who lived in rural Manitoba were more likely to align with the left-wing Manitoba Farmers Union; In Search of Canadian Political Culture 221. Like many observers, Wiseman regards the 1969 election as constituting a realignment of political representation. The old farm-business alliance lost much of its strength, many of its voters going to the social democratic NDP, which became a mainstream, if left-leaning, alternative that spoke on behalf of such previously-alienated groups as Unitarians, Jews, Slavs and Aboriginal people. [223] It emphasized equality, the absence of discrimination, government-owned and cooperative economic institutions, investment in the public sector, and public health insurance, and social welfare reform. [231] I

In 2009, the Manitoba New Democratic Party quietly celebrated the fortieth anniversary of its first electoral victory in 1969. It had been in power in Manitoba for 25 of these 40 years. Wiseman may exaggerate the strength of the left, and may also exaggerate the right’s weakness, but his definition of a social democratic strain in Canadian political culture that relied heavily on Manitoba and Saskatchewan roots does ring true.

13. Wiseman In Search of Canadian Political Culture 229, 235; David Laycock suggests that a “crypto-liberal” strain of thought was strongest in Manitoba in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Wiseman, 216. A concern for the “regional distribution of the benefits and costs of national growth” was prominent in Saskatchewan. [217-8] Though he does not say so, one could conclude on the basis of Morton’s work that the same concern motivated Manitobans. Wiseman notes that Manitoba, like Ontario, rejected free trade in both 1911 and 1988 (Alberta did not; 219). He adds that Rodmond Roblin criticized direct democracy tactics, a view that did not secure support in Saskatchewan or Alberta but was “marketable in Ontarianized, tory-touched, rural Manitoba;” 219. Also David Laycock Populism and democratic thought in the Canadian prairies, 1910 to 1945 (Toronto : University of Toronto Press 1990)

14. The changing preoccupations of these three academic observers illuminate changes in Canada’s intellectual foundations: note the shift from a concern with institutions of government

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to social and then ideological differences. This shift can be viewed as a transition in conceptual frame from region to class to ideology. Note, too, the decline of interest in conflict between local, space-defined or space-based communities and the increasing interest in internationally-recognized, idea-based sources of difference.

15. Interviews with Duff Roblin, Gary Doer, Paul Vogt, Virginia Devine, Leslie Turnbull, Gary Filmon, Jim Carr [notes in author's possession]

16. Interview with Howard Pawley [notes in author's possession]

17. Jim Carr linked this participation to geographical and social necessity: "Because of our isolation, we couldn't rely on nearby places for symphony concerts or performances of Shakespeare's plays. Manitoba is an act of will."

18. Shannon Stunden Bower "The Great Transformation? Wetlands and Land Use in Manitoba During the Late Nineteenth Century" Journal of the Canadian Historical Association New Series 15, 2004, 29-47 and J. Edgar Rea "The Roots of Prairie Society" in David P. Gagan ed. Prairie Perspectives: Papers of the Western Canadian Studies Conference (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1970) 46-55

19. Readers should be aware that several distinguished historians have distinguished two types of social analyst, the lumper and the splitter. These scholars would describe the Wiseman approach as "splitting" and the political practitioners' approach as "lumping." The subject is discussed in J. H. Hexter on Christopher Hill, in the Times Literary Supplement, 1975, and in Isaiah Berlin's essay, The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History

20. Leslie Turnbull's summary is interesting: "What groups make a difference in the political culture? One tightly-knit, focused, active group is the Jewish community. Another in which everyone knows everyone else, and that is very aware of its interests and causes, is the French. But neither is exerting much pressure, as a group, on the rest of the community. The Jews are active within their own group. And the French constituencies have been migrating outward and are now more consciously "suburban" rather than French. Aboriginal people, the First Nations, are an important group. I'm not sure that the Métis have the same impact. The Labour movement is influential. And the business community. Big businesses try to make things work; [they] see Manitoba as a whole and are less self-interested than the smaller businesses. Farmers are an active community that can be identified with particular constituencies." [Interview with Leslie Turnbull: notes in author's possession]

21. Interview with Arthur Mauro [notes in author's possession]

22. Richard Hofstadter asserted the merits of lumping as opposed to splitting in his book on the American political tradition: "It is in the nature of politics that conflict stands in the foreground, and historians usually abet the politicians in keeping it there...." Hofstadter The American

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Political Tradition ix. Hofstadter emphasized consensus, in doing so becoming a leader among American historians in the post-war decades:

It seems to me to be clear that a political society cannot hang together at all unless there is some kind of consensus running through it, and yet that no society has such a total consensus as to be devoid of significant conflict. It is all a matter of proportion and emphasis, which is terribly important in history. Of course, obviously, we have had one total failure of consensus which led to the Civil War. One could use that as the extreme case in which consensus breaks down.

Jack Pole, "Richard Hofstadter," in Robert Allen Rutland, ed. Clio's Favorites: Leading Historians of the United States, 1945-2000 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press 2000) 73-4 [pp 68-83]

23. Peterson "Manitoba: Ethnic and Class Politics" 109-110