

The Failure of Liberal Reform: Hugh Robson as Manitoba Liberal Leader, 1927–1929

B A R R Y F E R G U S O N *

In an era of tumultuous changes to the party system, Hugh Robson led the Manitoba Liberals from March 1927 to January 1930. The issues he dealt with were not just staple questions like provincial rights, economic development and social policy, but also critical matters regarding partisan alignments and the relations between provincial and federal party branches. These were important issues in the inter-war decades and are recurring themes in party politics. A focus on Robson as a politician is a study of his experience with crucial aspects of party politics in the early 20th century.

Several important studies of the inter-war period have examined the transformation of party politics and the difficulties experienced by the Liberals throughout the Prairies. Focussed on the promise and failures of political party and policy transformation, including the eclipse of Manitoba Liberals, these works have overlooked Hugh Robson's own agenda and the possibility that the Manitoba Liberals might have survived the 1920s as an autonomous and positive force.¹ A full interpretation of Robson is hindered by the absence of his personal papers, but a careful reading of other personal papers and

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¹ W L Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, 2nd edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968) [*Manitoba: A History*]; John Kendle, *John Bracken: A Political Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); Robert A Wardhaugh, *Mackenzie King and the Prairie West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Norman Ward & David E Smith, *Jimmy Gardiner: Relentless Liberal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); David E Smith, *Prairie Liberalism: The Liberal Party in Saskatchewan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); G A Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

numerous secondary sources enables a partial if not full reconsideration of his experience as Liberal leader in the late 1920s.²

This essay will describe the party system of the 1920s and investigate Robson's two and a half years as party leader. It will contribute to a reconsideration of the broader issues of Manitoba party politics in the inter-war period.

Hugh Robson's experience until he was 55 years of age did not suggest any inclination towards partisan politics. By the time he was chosen Liberal leader, he had already had a prominent career as a lawyer, judge and tribunal member. He was known as a capable legal and administrative practitioner and as a commercial lawyer with scholarly inclinations. His service was varied, the most visible being selections as chair of the Manitoba Public Utilities Commission between 1911 and 1914, and of the Dominion Board of Commerce in 1919–20. Boards such as those made decisions based on policy with quasi-judicial authority. But they execute government policy, not make it. The Manitoba board has been a lasting part of government, while the Federal one was dismantled as a failure, as Robson warned in his resignation of 1920.³

Robson participated in three Manitoba public inquiries in the 1910s.⁴ Commissions of inquiry are temporary administrative agencies of government. Whether 'judicial' inquiries into wrongdoing or 'investigative' studies of policy

² The main records consulted are from Library and Archives Canada, "William Lyon Mackenzie King Papers" & "Diaries", and Archives of Manitoba "Ralph Maybank Fonds." An array of political biographies and political party studies are based on the King and Maybank Papers as well as other private papers that round out the portrayal of Hugh Robson's political career.

³ Tom Traves, *The State and Enterprise: Canadian Manufacturers and the Federal Government 1919-1931* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) at 56, 60–61; see Robert Borden Papers – Board of Commerce Correspondence 1919-20, Robson to G.E. Foster 23 February and 1 March 1920), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C4359).

⁴ H A Robson, "Commission to Investigate [...] the Council of the City of Winnipeg" (Winnipeg: King's Printer, 1911); W A Perdue, A C Galt & H A Robson, "Report of the Royal Commission appointed to investigate charges made in the Statement of C.P. Fullerton, KC" (Winnipeg, 1915); H A Robson, "Royal Commission on the Winnipeg Strike" (Winnipeg: King's Printer, 1919). See also H A Robson, "The Accounting of Public Utilities" Proceedings, Dominion Association of Chartered Accountants (4 September 1913).

matters, commissions recommend but do not compel action.⁵ In both areas, Robson gained considerable direct knowledge of public policy, but not about electoral politics. Robson also practised law, served in the 1920s as solicitor of the Union Bank before its merger with the Royal Bank, and edited three hefty volumes of legal cases.⁶

By the time Robson jumped into politics, the political party system had been torn apart at the provincial and national levels. The specific circumstances strongly conditioned his room to manoeuvre. Across the Prairie Provinces, farm organizations rebelled against the two-party system. They reshaped the conduct of provincial politics and government. They advocated democratic and economic reforms inspired by liberal and populist ideas and nostrums. Democratic reforms ranged from support for women's suffrage and strengthening regulatory agencies to proposals for the recall of representatives, legislative initiative and use of referenda. Economic reforms included greater regulation of businesses, above all the railways, but also support for farmers' credit and marketing organizations against private business as well as the longstanding opposition to the tariff. Agrarian reform gave a shock to the political order in the 1910s and 1920s.⁷

⁵ There is a vast literature. Particularly clear are the following: Innis Christie & Paul A. Pross, "Commissions of Inquiry: Introduction" (1989-90) 12:3 Dal LJ at 1-18; Barbara Lauriat, "'The Examination of Everything': Royal Commissions in British Legal History" (2010) 31:1 Stat L Rev at 24-46; Gregory Inwood & Carolyn M. Johns, eds, *Commissions of Inquiry and Policy Change: A Comparative Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

⁶ See Dale Brawn, *The Court of Queen's Bench of Manitoba 1870-1950: A Biographical History* (Toronto: Osgoode Society and University of Toronto Press, 2006) at 232-46; Dale Brawn, *Paths to the Bench: the Judicial Appointment Process in Manitoba* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014) at 134-35. On the Bank see Duncan McDowall, *Quick to the Frontier: Canada's Royal Bank* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993) at 157-8, 160. The three books edited by H A Robson and J B Hugg are: H A Robson & J B Hugg, *Cases on Company Law* (Toronto: Carswell, 1916); H A Robson & J B Hugg, *Leading Cases on Public Utilities* (Toronto: Carswell, 1916); and H A Robson & J B Hugg, *Municipal Manual* (Toronto: Carswell, 1920). Legal scholar Wesley Pue states they were bereft of 'any clear statement of educational philosophy': Wesley Pue, "Making Manitoba Lawyers, 1885-1931" in G Blaine Baker & Jim Phillips, eds, *Essays in the History of Canadian Law in Honour of R.C.B. Risk* (Toronto: Osgoode Society and University of Toronto Press, 2005) at 525.

⁷ W L Morton, *The Progressive Party* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950); the still-useful book Walter D Young, *Democracy and Discontent: Progressivism, Socialism and Social Credit in the Canadian West* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978); David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

National party politics were shattered in the Great War. Conflicts about economic and military policies were so intense that the national political party system broke apart in 1917. Conservatives and Liberals in English-speaking Canada formed a national coalition, the Unionist or National government. This move split both parties and introduced regional, ethnic and class conflicts that reverberated for decades.⁸

The party shake-up ushered in agrarian parties. Within this 'Progressive' movement, there was a crucial and ultimately fatal division. One group were political idealists seeking to transform the parliamentary system based on populist democratic principles. The other were policy reformers critical but not dismissive of traditional politics and the Liberal party.⁹ The Progressives never agreed among themselves about either their parliamentary or their policy goals and ultimately fell apart. The two leaders of the federal Progressives were Manitobans, Thomas Crerar (1921-22) and Robert Forke (1923-26). Both were capable agrarian business men, both were in the reformist camp and both returned to the Liberal fold. Their return to the Liberals was the result of an effort by Prairie and national Liberals to convince farmers that the Liberals had changed its ways to adopt the economic agenda of tariff and regulatory reform minus the populist agenda for democratic reform.¹⁰

Manitoba was at the centre of the Prairie reform movements. It was the most established Prairie Province, in many ways the leader of the Prairies throughout the era. Its population base and agriculture were strong and its economy most diverse. Winnipeg was the biggest Prairie city by far, influential due to its concentrate of commerce, industry and administration in transportation, the grain trade, manufacturing and wholesale and retail business. Economically and politically, the province was by no measure the laggard it became in later decades. Manitoba was also strongly disposed towards protests against national policies, above all the much-resented railway,

⁸ John English, *The Decline of Politics: The Conservatives and the Party System* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); Robert Craig Brown & Ramsay Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974).

⁹ For the classic account, see *Manitoba: A History*, *supra* note 1. See also Friesen, *supra* note 1 at 367-74 (for a deft summary of the deeper political themes). Even more detailed is David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) at ch 2.

¹⁰ See *Manitoba: A History*, *supra* note 1; Friesen, *supra* note 1. The key accounts of federal politics on the Prairies are: Wardhaugh, *supra* note 1; J E Rea, *T.A. Crerar: A Political Life* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997); see also Ward & Smith, *supra* note 1.

settlement and tariff policies of the Dominion government as well as federal control of natural resources.¹¹

Manitoba participated in overthrowing the two-party system. At the federal level, Manitobans supported the Unionist coalition in 1917 (14 of 15 seats) and elected strong contingents of Progressives in the twenties (Progressives went from 11 in 1921, 7 in 1925 and 4 in 1926). Voters slowly returned to the two traditional parties during the post-war decade, although Winnipeg's industrial North End supported Labour candidates to the House of Commons, (1 in 1921, 2 in each of 1925 and 1926).¹²

Provincial politics underwent a similar change. The provincial Liberals had come to power in 1915 when the Conservative government under farmer-grain merchant Rodmond P. Roblin resigned in disgrace over charges of corruption, particularly "toll-gating" money from the construction contracts for the Manitoba Legislature Building and Courts of Law. Robson had a close view of the matter through service on one of the two inquiries called into the legislature building scandal.¹³

Led by T.C. (Toby) Norris, a farmer and auctioneer from the southwest Manitoba town of Griswold, the Liberal government was a particularly active reformer-farmer administration. Like all the Prairie governments of the period it coped with the rapid growth of settlement and associated economic issues. The response meant comparatively heavy expenditures through school and road construction and support for local government services. Norris' Liberals were in the vanguard of provincial activism by passing democratic reforms including women's suffrage, referendum and initiative legislation as well as social and economic reforms including mothers' allowances, workers' compensation, factory inspection and arbitration acts, and a variety of farm

¹¹ *Manitoba: A History*, *supra* note 1; see also Friesen, *supra* note 1.

¹² Detailed Manitoba election results are in Elections Manitoba, "Historical Elections", online: *Elections Manitoba* <<https://www.electionsmanitoba.ca/en/Results>> [perma.cc/W92K-6K2Y] and summarized in Barry Ferguson & Robert Wardhaugh, *Manitoba Premiers of the 19th and 20th centuries* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2010) at 420. General statistical material on the Manitoba and the Prairies is gleaned from the sections on population, economy, and society in Statistics Canada, "Historical Statistics of Canada", online: *Statistics Canada* <<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-516-x/3000140-eng.htm>> [https://perma.cc/GEN8-2U9B]. The specific affiliations of some MLAs were not always easy to determine: Elections Manitoba by convention does not identify MLAs by party except in the big Winnipeg riding.

¹³ See Ferguson & Wardhaugh, *ibid* at 117-38 (for a good and brief account of the Roblin regime).

credit measures. The Norris government was also responsible for the final legislative gutting of bilingual schooling aimed at both French-language and other European-language instruction, popular among the British Canadian majority.¹⁴

The Norris government was in office when long-simmering disputes between labour and industry in railway-related industries over wages and working conditions blew up into the General Strike of May and June of 1919. The general paralysis and extravagant threats from labour and business leaders meant it loomed as a challenge to the existing political and social order. Hugh Robson encountered the Strike, not only as a resident of Winnipeg but later as a one-man commissioner for the province, an appointment unpopular with Winnipeg business. His report was sympathetic to the social conditions of working people and it largely sustained labour's goals if not strategies. He explained that the strike was the result of the price inflation, wage stagnation and insecure conditions of employment. He argued that innovative but not-proclaimed provincial labour legislation on conciliation would have averted the confrontation. The report had little impact in an era of polarization.¹⁵

The Norris government was reduced to minority government in 1920. It lost rural support as Liberal activists and voters moved to the new United Farmers. The Farmers proclaimed a litany of 'Progressive' reforms. The Liberals also experienced challenges from business and labour in Winnipeg. The loss of Liberal voters and MLAs to the burgeoning Farmers movement concluded in the pivotal election of 1922. The result was the election of a leaderless United Farmers' Party with 24 of 55 Manitoba seats. The distribution included a hodgepodge of 7 Liberals, 6 Conservatives, 6 Labourites and 9 of varying partisan description while 3 riding elections were "deferred."¹⁶

The victorious United Farmers cast about for a leader. After some scrambling, they convinced the Principal of the Manitoba Agricultural College,

¹⁴ An excellent review of the activist Norris regime is Ferguson & Wardhaugh, *supra* note 12 at 139–63.

¹⁵ On the Strike and Robson's role, see the most recent of many books on the topic: Reinhold Kramer & Tom Mitchell, *When the State Trembled: How A.J. Andrews and the Citizens' Committee Broke the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) at 74, 186, 196, 204 and 348. The sympathies and balance of his views are in H A Robson, "Royal Commission on the Winnipeg Strike" (Winnipeg, King's Printer, 1919) 4–5, 6–9, 24ff, 9–10, 17, 30–31.

¹⁶ The decline of the Norris government is examined in Ferguson & Wardhaugh, *supra* note 12 at 152–55. The election results, which took months to resolve, are also found in Ferguson & Wardhaugh, *supra* note 12 at 450.

John Bracken, to take the job. Ontario-born and educated, Bracken had spent his adult life as an agronomist and college administrator on the Prairies. He had not shown any prior interest in politics but he soon demonstrated a capacity for administrative skill and political resolve that rallied the Farmers around a workable legislative programme. Bracken was by outlook a non-partisan and a conservative, but he was a formidable and calculating leader. He knew what the United Farmers aimed at and how to secure their goals of efficient administration, economic development and agrarian predominance.¹⁷

The Bracken government ultimately gained 28 of 55 seats, and survived due to Bracken's clever balancing act between Liberals, Conservatives, Labourites and others. No one was inclined to work together in opposition and most cooperated with the ruling Farmers. The regime emphasized 'economic government' as it cut capital spending and carefully raised taxes to slay the annual deficit and attack long-term debt. The United Farmers proclaimed the virtues of 'pragmatic, businesslike, and non-partisan' administration. The cautious policies and effective political magic of "Brackenism", as his approach was dubbed, was to concentrate on rigid fiscal controls and moralistic claims about their methods and goals. Important public issues, such as demands for better educational and municipal finance, wheat board and other agricultural marketing legislation and for natural resource ownership and resource development, were addressed but limited by the fixation on fiscal prudence.¹⁸ The one area of governmental activism, economic diversification through natural resource development, was constrained by Manitoba's lack of jurisdiction until 1930 and by Bracken's opposition to public ownership.¹⁹

The opposition Liberals grappled with internal debates between 'fusionists' who sought accommodation with the Farmers' movements and 'die-hards' who relished conflict with them.²⁰ Federal Liberals under Mackenzie King's leadership saw that their best path to power was through support from the Prairie progressive movement. King himself emphasized cooperation with the Progressives through a strategy of cooperation leading to cooption. Prairie

¹⁷ The deliberations of the United Farmers and Bracken's emergence are examined in detail in Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 26-36, and summarized in Ferguson & Wardhaugh, *supra* note 12 at 168-70.

¹⁸ "Brackenism" is explained in Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 35-39, and described in *Manitoba: A History*, *supra* note 1 at 383.

¹⁹ See the indispensable Jim Mochoruk, *Formidable Heritage: Manitoba's North and the Cost of Development, 1870-1930* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2004).

²⁰ The standard accounts are: Kendle, *supra* note 1; Wardhaugh, *supra* note 1.

Liberals like Toby Norris in Manitoba and Jimmy Gardiner in Saskatchewan had a tougher challenge. To them, the Progressives were a fundamental threat to their political survival. They vigorously defended their own activist form of Liberalism against the reformism of the Progressives. Gardiner and Norris were seen as troublemakers by federal politicians trying to maintain good relations with the Progressives.²¹

By the mid-twenties, Mackenzie King's cooption strategy had worked. The federal Liberals had absorbed most of the Progressive forces and won what was in effect a majority in the election of 1926. In contrast, Manitoba's Liberals struggled to remain viable while the provincial Conservatives continued to regain support. The provincial Liberals remained uncertain about the alternatives of cooperation or opposition. Their uncertainty was based more on whether cooperation offered a path for returning to power rather than faith in nonpartisan politics.

The provincial and federal branches of the Liberal Party were neither separate nor unified until well into the 1930s. The federal party had greater resources and of course wielded governmental power throughout the twenties. It had greater financial resources and party organizers and it had the power of patronage, much valued despite the moralism of Prairie reformers. Mackenzie King was recognized as party leader by provincial Liberal leaders.²²

In Manitoba, John Bracken may have been firmly in office as the head of the Farmers' movement, but his majority was based on continual negotiation. His problems were serious enough that he contemplated from time to time resignation from office, citing everything from bouts of illness to weariness with the political struggles. Bracken appears never to have doubted his superior capacity to head the government.²³

Hugh Robson entered electoral politics in the midst of this continuing instability. Throughout 1926, John Bracken made noises about negotiating an alliance with the Liberals. As led by Toby Norris, rural Liberals remained obdurate in opposition to this possibility. Winnipeg elements of the party were more sympathetic to cooperation or fusion. The Winnipeg fusionists included

²¹ Robert A Wardhaugh, *Mackenzie King and the Prairie West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

²² The Liberal Party's nominal unity and effective disunity in this period is examined in Reginald Whitaker, *The Government Party: Organizing and Financing the Liberal Party of Canada, 1935-1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) at 7-8, 13ff, and on the centrality of client-patron relations at xi-xxiv.

²³ Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 87-88, 105-106.

most Liberal MPs, an influential circle around the *Manitoba Free Press* editor, John W. Dafoe, and the ‘Young Liberal Clubs of Manitoba’, a group of younger businessmen and professionals.

Liberals debated over whether legislative support for Bracken could lead to participation in the cabinet. This debate led to increasing pressure on Toby Norris, averse to legislative fusion, to relinquish the leadership. Starting in early 1926, prominent Young Liberals looked around for potential leadership candidates once Norris retired. It identified a list of fifty or so including Robson. No one really stood out, save perhaps the Portage lawyer, Ewan A. McPherson, a former Liberal MLA and federal Liberal candidate. He stated that while he was keen on serving in the legislature or government, he ‘detested’ campaigning. McPherson ran successfully for the federal Liberals in Portage in 1926, defeating Conservative leader Arthur Meighen.²⁴

The ‘Young Liberals’ sparkplug was Ralph Maybank, a veteran of the Great War and a Winnipeg lawyer then in his mid-thirties. Maybank and his circle were principally motivated by the fusion strategy championed by Mackenzie King and his close ally, Charles Dunning, Saskatchewan MP, cabinet minister and the dominant federal Liberal on the Prairies. Maybank consulted with Dafoe’s circle of prosperous establishment Liberals such as Albert Hudson and T.A. Crerar. Dunning and Hudson encouraged Maybank’s Young Liberals to fight for provincial Liberal cooperation with the Farmers.²⁵

In early 1926, John Bracken began a series of discussions that went on for three or four months over how to draw the Liberals into the government. Maybank was brought into discussions with Bracken. This proposal cut out Liberal leader Toby Norris and his cadre of MLAs, who remained dead-set against any cooperation. Maybank complained that Bracken was furtive about setting up meetings, but ‘frank’ enough once they met. Maybank noted that he was cautioned by Hudson not to be drawn into any specific agreements with Bracken.²⁶ Bracken said he had considered asking H.A. Robson to enter the

²⁴ See Ralph Maybank Fonds – Mutch to Maybank (28 January 1926, 26 July 1926 and 1 August 1926), Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba; Ralph Maybank Fonds – Maybank to Mutch (26 January 1926), Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba. In 1932 McPherson joined the Bracken government as Minister of Finance.

²⁵ The activities of the ‘Young Liberals of Manitoba’ are well-documented for the period of 1926 and 1927 in a detailed series of memos written by Ralph Maybank: see Ralph Maybank Fonds “Political Memoirs [sic Memos]”, Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba. The “Memoirs” were preserved only up to the end of 1927.

²⁶ Ralph Maybank Fonds “Political Memoirs [sic Memos]” – Maybank Memo (26 March 1926),

cabinet. Bracken needed both Liberal supporters to stabilize his majority and a strong legal ally due to the imminent retirement of Attorney General, Richard Craig, whose legislative skills Bracken depended upon.²⁷

Written evidence is absent, but it seems clear that Bracken was prepared to encourage Liberal support without offering anything specific unless and until they agreed to join the government. There is no evidence that Bracken had direct talks with Robson. Bracken's view of cooperation was based on a firm insistence on the continued distinction between Liberals and United Farmers.²⁸ It dawned on Maybank that Bracken was far more elusive about cooperating with the Liberals than he initially indicated and that the Premier gradually became less intent on the proposal.

Dunning and Hudson encouraged Maybank to speak with Robson. Robson was critical of the influence of 'the stand-pat element of the party' and the 'chamber of commerce types', both averse to cooperation. Maybank observed that Robson made a strong first impression but that he tended to lose lustre upon repeated exposure. The circumspect A.B. Hudson had admitted his own similar reaction to Robson earlier in the year and remarked that he felt sure that Robson would not contest the leadership.²⁹ Robson remained a person of interest, aware of the activities of both federal and provincial Liberals. But he was neither an MLA nor a party insider and therefore not a central figure in the discussions.

The Manitoba Liberals continued to consider their options. A matter that shook up Manitoba Liberals was the influence of Jimmy Gardiner, newly-elected Premier of Saskatchewan. Gardiner was aggressively anti-fusion, and strongly anti-Charles Dunning. He was eager to supplant Dunning as standard-bearer of the Liberal Party on the Prairies. Gardiner was a very effective campaigner and he did not respect provincial boundaries. His interventions threatened the plans of the fusionists to cooperate with Progressives at both the federal and provincial levels. His enthusiasm and effectiveness encouraged the provincial die-hards to stand against cooperation.³⁰

Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba.

²⁷ *Ibid*; see also Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 41, 48.

²⁸ Ralph Maybank Fonds "Political Memoirs [sic Memos]" (28–29 March; 8, 14 April; 25, 28 June; 9, 12 July 1926), Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba.

²⁹ Ralph Maybank Fonds "Political Memoirs [sic Memos]" (28 June and 28 December 1926), Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba.

³⁰ Ward & Smith, *supra* note 1 at 66–69; Wardhaugh, *supra* note 12 at 131–34.

In early 1927, Norris announced he would resign as party leader. For two months Manitoba Liberals searched for suitable candidates, but few were eager to step up. They had to act since the province was facing an election after five years of United Farmer government. Over the course of February and March several names were bruited about, but those willing to contest the race had their limitations. A Winnipeg MP, Joe Thorson, was interested but an ally of Jimmy Gardiner and therefore opposed to fusion. Edward Greenway of Crystal City, son of former Premier Thomas Greenway, was weighed down by the burden of his father's anti-separate schools and anti-French policies in the 1890s. Ewan A. MacPherson remained attractive to diehards and fusionists alike but he had been elected federally. Others had little prestige or profile. By the time the Liberals met on 30 March 1927 – a Wednesday – to hold a leadership selection, five candidates emerged, including several people who had already indicated an interest such as Dr. Andrew Myles, a Winnipeg dentist and lawyer, Fred Hamilton, a Winnipeg realtor and financial promoter, and Frank Simpson, a Dauphin lawyer, plus a surprise late nominee, Hugh Robson of Winnipeg.

According to Maybank, Robson had agreed to run only after the preferred candidate of the Young Liberals, Winnipeg lawyer E.D. Honeyman, had demurred. Robson had agreed to nominate Honeyman but then was convinced to let his own name stand. The *Manitoba Free Press* reported that Robson garnered the most enthusiastic applause during the introductions. The delegates overwhelmingly backed him. All accounts play up his sudden nomination and selection, yet it was no secret that he had considered entry into politics in 1926. Robson admitted to Maybank that both Dunning and Gardiner had encouraged his candidacy. Indeed, early in March of 1927 he had written to Mackenzie King, in response to communication from the Prime Minister's group, with his own rather negative view of party prospects. Robson concluded, however, that they should not be 'downhearted' as long as they could avoid becoming 'submerged' in the Farmer administration. Such was the mien of the new leader.³¹

Robson promised an aggressive policy agenda to the Liberal convention and in private to Maybank's group of would-be movers and shakers. Maybank admitted that Robson's speech showed he would run a 'very spirited campaign' against Bracken and that he had an 'imaginative' policy plan. A bemused T.A.

³¹ Ralph Maybank Fonds "Political Memoirs [sic Memos]" (11 April 1927), Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba; "Judge Robson Chosen Provincial Liberal Leader", *Winnipeg Free Press* (31 March 1927) 1; Mackenzie King Papers – Robson to King (3 March 1927), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2299).

Crerar, viewing developments as an ex-Progressive contemplating a return to the Liberal fold at the federal level, regarded Robson as able and energetic. Even John Dafoe thought Robson would run a strong campaign, though with little prospect of success. Crerar worried that Robson began to show a tendency to be influenced by Saskatchewan's Jimmy Gardiner and other 'bitter-enders'.³²

As an election strategy, Robson made it clear from the outset he was not sympathetic to the fusionist side of the party. Early in his leadership, Robson gave a statement to the press promising that the Liberals would be 'entirely free from alliances' and therefore stressing a return to partisan rather than the non-partisanship advocated although not always practiced by the Progressives.

A pamphlet version of his campaign speech, *The Revival of Liberalism*, delivered in mid-May, had the hopeful subtitle of "Manitoba Can't Wait."³³ The text is remarkable in staking out a position different from and indeed opposed to the very conservative fiscal approach and cautious policy proposals of the Farmer government. It was also more directly political than the dry administrative tinkering he had engaged in during the previous decade.³⁴

Robson vigorously defended Norris' Liberal administration. He argued that Norris had advanced active government, providing for instance essential loan programmes to farmers, stronger funding to local governments overwhelmed by population growth, and the vital extension of social services. Robson mocked the Bracken administration for limited funding of local government, which merely transferred the tax burdens to them, and for moralizing about horse racing and liquor sales revenues while raking in the money. He emphasized the fundamental importance of resolving the issue of natural resources ownership, arguing that Manitoba must press hard for a settlement in order to gain a stronger revenue and jobs base. He argued that Manitoba should follow the examples of Ontario and Quebec, which, under Liberal provincial governments, had directed provincial growth. As he put it, Manitoba must act as the 'owners in fact' of the natural resources in the new

³² Dafoe Papers – Dafoe to Clifford Sifton (12 April 1927), Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Archives. See also T A Crerar to Kirk Cameron (1 April and 18 May 1927), cited in Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 65. Crerar was right to worry about the aggressive Gardiner: see Ward & Smith, *supra* note 1 at 68–69.

³³ See H A Robson's speech, *infra* at 279 ("The Revival of Liberalism" (13 May 1927), Winnipeg, Manitoba Legislature Library).

³⁴ *Ibid*; *contra* snippets in Robson's 1919 Royal Commission Report and his account of public utilities administration in H A Robson, "The Accounting of Public Utilities" in *Proceedings, Dominion Association of Chartered Accountants* (4 September 1913) at 6–7.

areas acquired since expansion of provincial boundaries in 1912. The province should plan now for further natural resource development in mining and hydro-electric power. Manitoba also possessed what he described as a ‘Muskoka of our own’, the recreational areas in the Shield country east of Winnipeg that should lead to tourism as an industry.

In sum, Robson described an expansionist policy in keeping with an optimistic view of economic possibilities and the role of government. He mocked the crabbed approach to fiscal and development policy characteristic of the Bracken regime and its fundamentally neutral or negative view of the positive state. Whether or not his aggressive stance would have inspired or worried Manitoba voters, it certainly marked a strong bid for brand delineation that separated the Liberals from the cautious Farmer-Progressive forces.³⁵

After his selection as leader, Robson told Mackenzie King that he had few illusions about the situation but reiterated that fusion was dangerous. King did not discourage Robson but referred him to the fusionist Dunning for advice. In the run-up to the provincial election, Robson reiterated to Mackenzie King his determination to avoid ‘entanglement’ with Bracken and also complained that some federal Liberal MPs and other federal Liberals were prone to ‘fraternize’ with Farmer government representatives. This position worried Maybank, who was informed on several occasions by Charles Dunning that Robson resisted all advice to avoid directly confronting Bracken. During the June campaign, Robson worked vigorously on behalf of Liberal candidates throughout the province. In the view of *Free Press* editor, John W. Dafoe, who was a strong supporter of the ‘fusion’ strategy, the election campaign was chiefly a contest between Progressives and Liberals. While he did not think Robson’s Liberals were making any inroads against Bracken’s ‘Progressives’, he hoped they might ‘compel Bracken to make terms with them’ after the election.³⁶

The election of 28 June 1927 changed little. The Liberals slipped from 8 to 7 seats and its popular vote declined from 23 to 21 percent. Robson and the popular Mrs. Edith Rogers, a prominent social policy activist and for years the

³⁵ Robson Statement in *Manitoba Free Press*, 18 April 1927 as cited in Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 65. See also H A Robson, *ibid* (the “Revival of Liberalism” speech).

³⁶ Mackenzie King Papers – Robson to King (3 March, 5, 23 April, 2 and 25 June 1927), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2299); Mackenzie King Papers – King to Robson (20 April 1927), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2299); Ralph Maybank Fonds “Political Memoirs [sic Memos]” (16 April, 17 August 1927), Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba; Dafoe Papers – Dafoe to Clifford Sifton (7 June 1927), Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Archives.

lone female in the legislature, were elected from Winnipeg's ten-member riding. Bracken's group, now officially dubbed 'Progressives', won a bare majority of 29 (one up from 1922), while the Conservatives led by the capable Portage La Prairie MLA, Fawcett Taylor, doubled their representation to 15.

Robson and his band had lived to fight again, but not from a stronger position. Robson claimed to Mackenzie King that the campaign had aided in 'curbing the Progressive movement' and argued that the Progressives remained a more dangerous threat to the Liberals than the Conservatives despite Tory gains. In the aftermath, Maybank and his crew met with Robson, who seemed to be somewhat taken aback by the results, chiefly the Tory success. Robson described Bracken with some 'venom' as a 'Tory', and expressed disappointment at the failure of many Liberals, including several within the Bracken caucus, to step away from the Progressives. Robson conceded that full-scale attacks on Bracken would not help in the upcoming legislative sessions, and stated that he would have to control MLAs who thought otherwise, including both Toby Norris, easily re-elected in Lansdowne, and Edith Rogers, returned in the ten-member Winnipeg riding.³⁷

The Winnipeg newspapers were kinder to Robson. The *Tribune* described the Liberals as having fought an 'exceedingly able' campaign under Robson, while arguing that Bracken had not really gained a majority. The *Free Press* which brought out a 'Diamond Jubilee' edition to celebrate Confederation the day after the election, reported that the Bracken regime 'appears safe' but noted that the election of 'new blood' suggested a livelier legislature than the previous one.³⁸

Robson spent the rest of 1927 weighing conflicting views of Manitoba and Federal Liberals about appropriate party strategy. Maybank wrote volubly about these debates. He noted that Robson emphasized the importance of good relations with Mackenzie King and his chief strategist, the federal party president, Senator Andrew Haydon. Robson still felt the tugs of both die-hard and fusion wings but he needed financial and tactical advice from the national organization. Maybank reported that Robson stated that he would try to limit his opposition but felt Robson often indulged in 'lambasting' Bracken. Maybank's suspicion was that Robson would try to leave the leadership as soon

³⁷ Mackenzie King Papers (30 June 1927), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2299); Ralph Maybank Fonds "Political Memoirs [sic Memos]" (18 August 1927), Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba.

³⁸ "Bracken Has Largest Group", *Winnipeg Tribune* (29 June 1927) at 1. "Bracken Government Appears Safe", *Manitoba Free Press* (29 June 1927) at 1.

as he could find an appropriate judicial position. Maybank was increasingly put off by what he described as Robson's 'coldness' towards the Young Liberals.³⁹

Robson continued to search for a strategic as well as a policy stance. He maintained cordial relations with King, chortling at the poor quality of federal Tory leadership candidates at their Winnipeg Convention held in mid-October. He reminded King on a few occasions that it was important to find a solid appointment for Toby Norris, who was not wealthy and who was growing 'embittered' at the lack of party assistance to him. King encouraged these discussions with Robson, even asking him to accompany the volatile but effective Jimmy Gardiner to Ottawa for meetings with the Prime Minister.⁴⁰

Far from aligning himself with die-hards or fusionists, Robson was working to avoid a fixed stance. He denied to provincial Liberals that he was close to Gardiner, and he claimed greater sympathy with Dunning. But he did seek counsel and even favour from each. Dunning made sure that Robson received legal work on the Hudson Bay Railway project. At the same time, Robson encouraged assistance and advice from Gardiner. Early in his term, Robson wrote to Gardiner that 'we understand each other and know the situation so please do not hesitate to do or suggest anything you see fit and don't wait for us.' Gardiner encouraged Robson before and after the 1927 election to fight hard. 'There is only one way to eliminate the Progressives', he wrote to Robson in September of 1927, 'and that is by defeating them.' He went on to state that it was impossible to 'negotiate' with them, a judgement that Robson would later have reason to test. Robson did not endorse Gardiner's ferocious stance, and when Gardiner moved to 'declare war' on the Dunning wing of the Federal Liberal party, Robson did not support him. Mackenzie King finally intervened in early 1928. He advised Gardiner to ease off in his attacks and to appreciate that in Manitoba at least the Liberals did not seek all-out conflict with the Progressives. King referred to the views of 'Judge Robson' to argue that cooperation with the Progressives was necessary to promote the Liberals and to avoid a Conservative surge.⁴¹

³⁹ Ralph Maybank Fonds "Policital Memoirs [sic] Memos" (18 August, 7 and October 8 December 1927), Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba. Maybank's 'Memos' ended in December of 1927.

⁴⁰ Mackenzie King Papers - King to Robson (1 October 1927), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2299); Mackenzie King Papers - Robson to King (12 October and 2 December 1927), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2299).

⁴¹ Letters from Robson to Gardiner (2 April 1927), Gardiner to Robson (21 September 1927), and King to Gardiner (3 March 1928) cited in Ward & Smith, *supra* note 1 at 68-70.

King assured Robson in early 1928 that an appropriate appointment would be found for Norris. Robson argued that Norris' resignation from the legislature would open the riding of Lansdowne and present an opportunity to cooperate with the Bracken Progressives in finding a candidate to their mutual satisfaction. To Robson the by-election would be a useful test. King agreed with him and expressed pleasure that Robson saw the 'wisdom of the Progressives and ourselves being gradually welded into one fighting force.' Soon thereafter a place was found for Toby Norris on the federal Board of Railway Commissioners.⁴²

As a neophyte in electoral politics, Robson continued to see the benefits of good relations with both sides of the fusion/diehard debate at the federal as well as provincial levels through his consultations with Dunning and Gardiner. They were the two most successful Liberals on the Prairies. They had survived the non-partisan/progressive revolt, they had become provincial premiers, and they had credibility in both provincial and federal Liberal circles. Robson soon enough realized that the Manitoba Liberals were caught in a unique situation in which neither Gardiner's bellicose style nor Dunning's conciliatory approach seemed to lead towards a successful party identity or electoral success. Whether Robson could find a way between those two approaches was for him and his fellow MLAs to determine.

Robson's formal debut was in the new Legislature elected in 1927. His first speech to the Legislature was delivered just after the session began on 1 December, the long delay between the June election and the session a good indication of Bracken's disinterest in legislative scrutiny. The *Manitoba Free Press* in its 'Under the Dome' column, described Robson's address as 'reasonable' and 'thoughtful'. It was fully in keeping with his election pamphlet and other statements given in the spring prior to the election in that it was neither conciliatory nor passive. Robson repeated his argument in favour of greater public spending. He emphasized party support for old age pension benefits, a cost-shared programme then being negotiated between Ottawa and the Provinces. The *Free Press* commented that Robson was 'not an orator but a competent public speaker'.⁴³

Later in the session Robson, not a prohibitionist, continued to criticize the so-called 'liquor bill' regulating liquor sales, remarking that the 'strong

⁴² Robson to King (4 January 1928), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2306); King to Robson (7 January 1928), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2306).

⁴³ "Under the Dome", *Manitoba Free Press* (7 December 1927) at 11.

prohibitionist' government was happy to carry on a liquor traffic worth \$3 to \$4 million in revenues. In line with his criticisms of Bracken's 'pay as you go' approach to fiscal policy, Robson was pointedly critical of the parsimonious treatment of local governments and education. His Winnipeg colleague, Edith Rogers, raised the absence of policy towards unemployment and relief in the city, discretely avoiding the topic of liquor sales although she was a well-known temperance advocate. He mocked the deficit-obsessed Brackenites for starving the municipalities and the provincial university, among other institutions. Robson also criticized the increasing 'delegation' of legislative authority to government officials and away from the legislature. This argument was tied to his scorn for the government's mushy plea that all parties should 'cooperate in all matters of public interest'. Robson observed that it would be much easier to cooperate if the text of legislation was provided to MLAs in advance of debate rather than to the newspapers.⁴⁴

Robson had a competent debut session and the Liberals devised an effective legislative role. The clash of approaches to government was obvious. The challenge would be whether the differences between Liberals and Progressives would boost Liberal fortunes and Robson's. As he had done from the start of his political career, he continued to consult with Mackenzie King over both tactics and policy.⁴⁵

In 1928 and 1929, Manitoba politics centred on the crucial issues of natural resource development and the related issue of the transfer of natural resources to the province. The two issues were the policy matters that Bracken and the Progressive government pursued strongly and they were ones Robson's Liberals also grappled with.

The control of natural resources was a constitutional issue of great significance. The transfer had been mooted for years but talks had bogged down. Natural resource ownership had considerable potential fiscal importance for the Prairie Provinces, but it also required consideration of compensation for previous decades. By the late twenties, both the federal government of Mackenzie King and the provincial regime of John Bracken were eager to resolve the matter.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ "Ivens Delivers Attack on Breweries During Debate on Liquor Bill", *Manitoba Free Press* (13 December 1927) at 1.

⁴⁵ Robson to King (2 December 1927), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2299); Robson to King (4 and 18 January 1928), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2306).

⁴⁶ King Papers - John Bracken to King (13 January, 26 February 1927), Ottawa, Library and

In early 1928, Robson pointed out to King that Bracken's efforts to recruit him into the provincial government were partly motivated by the goal of a natural resource transfer agreement, which would be to Bracken's credit. He also pointed out Bracken was counting on immediate federal capitulation in order to improve the government's budgetary situation.

Robson supported the transfer of natural resources but urged caution since there were certain dangers in a comprehensive agreement. Any changes in Manitoba's constitutional relations with Canada impinged on the 1870 Manitoba Act and Bracken and Robson, among others, knew that other clauses in that legislation pertained to the now abrogated rights regarding denominational schools (which in 1870 meant separate Roman Catholic and Protestant schools) and the status of the French language. (They might have added that the Metis Land Reserve had also been truncated, but Metis questions were not discussed at that time.)⁴⁷

The francophone community was quiescent, but aware of the issues. Alerted by the 'French Roman Catholic' community, including J.E.P. Prendergast of the Court of King's Bench, Robson warned of dangers in opening up the Manitoba Act. He cautioned Mackenzie King that the matter of Roman Catholic educational rights might well spill out if changes to natural resource ownership were to occur. His warning, particularly his announcement that Judge Prendergast had been making noises about the matter, was greeted with alarm in Ottawa. Mackenzie King and Justice Minister Ernest Lapointe were 'disturbed' and 'amazed'. King wrote in mid-May that 'this is a case of being protected from our own friends.' He told Robson that he could not think of 'any single thing in which the Conservative Party or the Progressives would take more delight' than a Manitoba judge's involvement in current politics. The separate school issue was 'the most dangerous of all questions' for Liberals in Manitoba, although he was almost certainly thinking that it was a danger with national implications, since Ernest Lapointe too was agitated over the matter. King hoped Robson would work toward 'restraining the Judge'. Robson took

Archives Canada (C2298); King Papers – King to Bracken (19 February and 21 April 1927), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2298).

⁴⁷ The most recent account of Manitoba's entry into Confederation and the *Manitoba Act* is R Wardhaugh & B Ferguson, "Resisting Canada's Will: Manitoba's Entry into Confederation" in *Reconsidering Confederation: Canada's Founding Debates 1864-1999*, Daniel Heidt, ed (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2018) at 145-70. A brief summary of the original rights and their 'abrogation' is Raymond Hebert, *Manitoba's French Language Crisis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) at 3-18.

King seriously, reported that his ‘friend here’ knew the grave dangers and would keep quiet.⁴⁸

Robson avoided the deeper constitutional implications, although financial compensation for school lands including lost denominational schools, did become a part of final settlement. The issue did not harm the Robson-King relationship, despite King’s sometimes-schoolmasterly tone, and their consultations over policy issues continued based on Robson’s detailed and frank letters about dealings with Bracken.

On the question of the natural resources transfer, Robson pointed out to King that Bracken was proceeding as if the ‘Transfer is imminent’, misleading the public by announcing in February of 1928 a department of Mines and Natural Resources and using the natural resource transfer as leverage to seek formal Liberal support of the Progressives. Robson argued that the King government should move to a form of arbitration rather than accede to what he saw as Bracken’s calculated ploys to shore up his majority and gain control over natural resources. When he reiterated his recommendation in late May of 1928, he pointed out that ‘arbitration’ would take the onus off the Federal government and reveal whether the ‘dormant religious-language questions’ would blow up.⁴⁹

The matter was referred to ‘arbitration’. A commission of inquiry was called, headed by W.F.A. Turgeon, a respected Saskatchewan judge and a francophone. It was charged with a narrow focus on the fiscal aspects of the natural resource question, specifically ‘what financial readjustments should be made for the placing of the Province of Manitoba in a position of equality with the other Provinces of Confederation in respect of the administration and control of its natural resources as from its entrance into Confederation in 1870.’ The report carefully avoided any and all contentious constitutional guarantees in the *Manitoba Act*, concentrating on matters of ‘financial accountability’ and avoided the furies of religious and language rights. The report stated that a strictly accurate accounting was impossible, arguing that ‘equality of treatment’ was its goals. Admitting that Manitoba ‘was not treated

⁴⁸ King Papers – Robson to King (25 February, 1 and 23 May 1928), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2306); King Papers – King to Robson (19 May 1928), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2306). On Lapointe see L.R. Betcherman, *Ernest Lapointe: Mackenzie King’s Great Quebec Lieutenant* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) at 142.

⁴⁹ King Papers – Robson to King (25 February, 21 April, and 25 May 1928), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2306).

as a Province with respect of the natural resources within its boundaries', Turgeon advised it should now receive compensation for past fiscal losses and subsidies for lands permanently lost, notably school and railway land grants. The Commission rejected as spurious Dominion arguments about offsetting costs such as for Treaty 'annuities' as a result of the Indigenous land claims 'surrenders'. The final bill was for \$4.58 million plus a sliding scale of annual subsidies starting at over \$600,000 and rising with population growth. It was delivered on 30 May 1929.⁵⁰

Control over natural resources was crucial to economic development and diversification. Apart from strict economy in government, and protecting the farmers' interests, Bracken's other economic goal was resource development. The Manitoba government supported projects for copper-zinc mining in Flin Flon, pulp and paper at Pine Falls and hydro-electric power on the Winnipeg River and in the north. Bracken's approach was very conservative, focussing entirely on encouraging private sector development with few resource revenues. The agenda, hard enough to realize given the problems government and business would have in negotiating new entries into international resource industries, was even more difficult since Manitoba did not have jurisdiction over minerals, forests or waterways.⁵¹

Robson had already objected to the Bracken approach, although he did not pursue his objections in any systematic way. He remained sceptical of Bracken's capacity to orchestrate mining, pulp and hydro projects rather than opposing the goals themselves. He tried to press not only for the natural resource transfer – both behind the scenes with his federal Liberal counterparts and in the legislature – and proposed a public power approach that stood out in the conservative world of Manitoba politics. In regard to northern hydro power, 'a development either wholly or partially by public investment must be undertaken. Robson gained no political traction in the Manitoba of his day.'⁵²

Pressure on Robson to pursue the fusionist strategy did not go away. He had explored the potential of cooperation electorally in the crucial Lansdowne by-election that followed Toby Norris' resignation. The by-election was held in the fall of 1928. The Liberals and Progressives jointly supported a candidate, Donald McKenzie, who entered the Bracken cabinet. To Robson it was an

⁵⁰ W F A Turgeon et al, "Report of the Royal Commission on the Transfer of the Natural Resources of Manitoba" (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1929) at 3, 7, 8, 22, 43–5.

⁵¹ Mochoruk, *supra* note 19 at ch 8 (on the period of 1925 to 1930).

⁵² *Ibid* at 357–58; see "Robson Says North Needs Hydro Power, *Manitoba Free Press* (8 November 1928) at 4.

experiment in cooperation with Bracken. The situation was helped by Mackenzie King's intervention in the form of warning Jimmy Gardiner in no uncertain terms that the Saskatchewan Premier should not cross provincial borders to campaign or encourage a battle with the Progressives. King pointed out to Gardiner that Robson himself had agreed that the best hope for fending off the Conservatives was through cooperation at both the federal and provincial levels. Robson admitted he had had to restrain 'energetic' Liberal 'die-hards'. The by-election was a success in that McKenzie was elected handily. He then served for a decade as a provincial cabinet minister.⁵³

One of the Bracken government's development plans was orchestration of a major hydro-electric power project at Seven Sisters Falls, on the Winnipeg River 90 km. east of Winnipeg. The power project was a private sector venture but it required both provincial and federal government approvals. For the Bracken government it was a key aspect of its resource development strategy, linked with its support for the just-completed Pine Falls Pulp & Paper mill and to the supply of power to rural customers, as well as to support for the privately-owned Winnipeg Electric Company, the main supplier of electricity to Winnipeg's industrial and residential users. Robson and his Liberals supported the project but with reservations. He was critical of the Bracken government for providing sketchy details about the financial guarantees and for the awkward juxtaposition of private and public sector interests. He was also critical of the King government, specifically the Dept. of the Interior, for its slow ways in reviewing and approving the project, a criticism he made more than once about the federal department. But before it was completed, the Seven Sisters Falls project shook Bracken's government and Robson's leadership in remarkable ways.⁵⁴

During the Lansdowne by-election campaign, the provincial Conservative leader, Fawcett Taylor, had accused Bracken's Progressives of accepting \$50,000 in campaign funds from private business interests. To Robson, the charge was campaign hyperbole, but to Bracken it was a wound that festered throughout

⁵³ Ward & Smith, *supra* note 1 at 69-70; Wardhaugh, *supra* note 12 at 139-141; King Papers - Robson to King (12 July 1928), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2306).

⁵⁴ "Under the Dome", *Manitoba Free Press* (15 February 1928) at 13; "Robson States Views on Power Development at Seven Sisters Falls", *Manitoba Free Press* (18 May 1928) at 6. See King Papers - Robson to King (21 April, 1 and 18 May 1928), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2306); Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 70-84; "Power Site Bill Passes", *Manitoba Free Press* (15 May 1929) at 1; Mochoruk, *supra* note 19 at 342-43, 357-58. Mochoruk argues the power deal was favourable to Manitoba electricity users and the Province.

the fall and winter. The wound burst in early 1929 and had a major effect on Manitoba politics. Bracken, who experienced a period of ill-health over the winter, addressed the issue in late January of 1929 by creating a provincial inquiry, chaired by Court of King's Bench chief justice, Daniel A. McDonald. Soon after, the Legislature reconvened. There, Bracken claimed Taylor's charges had led to the widespread view that Bracken himself had received bribes. He forced Taylor to admit that there was no evidence of Bracken's personal corruption. The results, played out in the press for several weeks in the spring of 1929, showed no more than indiscrete and relatively minor speculation in the form of limited share purchases by five MLAs, Progressive cabinet ministers, W.R. Clubb and W.J. Major, plus Socialist John Queen, the Speaker, P.A. Talbot, and Conservative J.T. Haig. The two cabinet ministers resigned pending the inquiry. In its report tabled on 30 April 1929, the inquiry exonerated the government and the individuals who purchased shares. Minor private speculation was seen as an indiscretion, not even besmirching the moral reputation of the Progressives.⁵⁵

While the drama raged in the Legislature and subsequent inquiry hearings, Manitoba's Liberals found themselves in a position of great unease. It had nothing to do with their own political morality or policy stances, and everything to do with the self-serving scheming of John Bracken. Despite their mutual cooperation in 1928, Robson had reported at the end of the year to Mackenzie King that he 'has had a hard time trying to control an element in our party that is fiercely anti-Bracken.' Not only did many Liberals 'dislike Bracken personally', but the Bracken government was at times 'so useless it is impossible to help them'. Robson concluded that he wondered if Bracken had 'sense enough to let us in with him.' His summation does not coincide with the judgement of contemporary observers like Crerar and Dafoe, who claimed that the failure to reach agreement was due to Robson's personal dislike rather than the combination of Liberal caucus hesitation and Bracken's unwillingness to make a clear or favourable offer. Yet, if Robson's own words may be trusted, he confined himself to criticism of Bracken's actions and his colleagues' views.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ The matter is explained in Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 89-101. The climactic event in the Legislature is described in "Under the Dome", *Manitoba Free Press* (16 February 1928) at 15; "Bracken Will Ask for Confidence of Legislature", *Manitoba Free Press* (16 February 1928) at 10.

⁵⁶ King Papers – Robson to King (26 December 1928), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2306). See Ward & Smith, *supra* note 1 at 70; Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 68.

In the midst of his difficulties over the Seven Sisters project in early 1929, including the suspension from duties of Clubb and Major, Bracken entered into his most serious effort to entice Robson into the cabinet. He was aided and abetted by leading federal Liberal sympathizers, John W. Dafoe being the most influential. Dafoe, who had expressed limited private regard for Bracken and whom he did not associate with, thought that Robson, with whom he appears to have had virtually no contact, was the chief impediment to the goal of fusion. Dafoe described Robson as ‘stubborn’ and ‘vain’ in resisting the opportunity of entering the government. He advised Mackenzie King and other senior Liberals, including his publisher, Clifford Sifton, about the matter.⁵⁷

Encouraged by Dafoe and others, Mackenzie King set the project going. Stating that he did not wish to ‘interfere’ in Manitoba politics, King wrote to Robson explaining that as the federal leader of the party he thought the moment was at hand to bring about a ‘joining together’ of the Liberals and Progressives. King argued that any form of ‘honourable cooperation’ would benefit Liberalism at both levels. He pointed out that the Brackenites supported federal Liberals in the province, that Bracken’s current problems did not reveal dishonourable behaviour, that participation in the cabinet would enhance governance and of course prevent the rise of the Tories at either level. Besides, he thought Bracken was not likely to continue in office for long due to another of his many bouts of ill-health.⁵⁸ King believed that Bracken was teetering on resignation, a view held by other prominent Liberals such as Dafoe and Hudson. They all hoped that if Bracken quit or fell, the Liberals could seize the moment, but only if they were aligned with the Progressives. Otherwise the Tories might well take over.⁵⁹

As these machinations began, Bracken wrote to Robson on March 6, 1929. As Kendle’s book on Bracken carefully puts it, the Premier ‘opened the possibility of cooperation.’ The written document – cited fully in Kendle’s

⁵⁷ Dafoe Papers – Dafoe to Grant Dexter (12 June and 12 October 1928), Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Archives; Dafoe Papers – Dafoe to King (24 February 1929), Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Archives; Dafoe Papers – Dafoe to Sifton (20 March 1929), Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Archives.

⁵⁸ King Papers – King to Robson (4 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2313); Maybank Fonds “Political Memoirs [sic Memos]” (8 December 1927), Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba.

⁵⁹ King Papers – King to Robson (4 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2313); King Papers – Taylor to Haydon/King (14 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2309).

study as one of the very few political letters Bracken retained – was a marvel of indirection. Its most explicit statement offered the suggestion that he would like to explore to ‘whether a greater measure of cooperation between our two groups cannot be worked out’. Bracken then denied that the government needed shoring up. He concluded with the observation that cooperation might be considered but solely in order to best serve the ‘public interest’ of the province. Masterful in its cautious phrasing and opaque allusions, the letter seemed to both offer to discuss an offer of cooperation and deny the importance of an offer.⁶⁰

The Prime Ministerial letter had been hand-delivered by a federal organizer, Thomas Taylor. The national party president, Senator Andrew Haydon, sent Taylor to press Robson on the federal party’s goal of co-opting the Progressives. Robson replied post haste. He pointed out that Taylor, who had made a previous western tour on behalf of the national party, still ‘seems overly youthful’ and had not impressed the locals. He rejected Taylor’s view that the ‘troubles of Manitoba Liberals can be blown away with a breath’. He assured King he would take seriously the strategies Taylor brought with him and act with discretion while doing so. But he remained suspicious of Bracken’s negotiations and extremely concerned that cooperation would tear apart the Manitoba Liberals.⁶¹

Meanwhile Taylor was busy lobbying. He reported via an extraordinary daily log sent by telegram to Senator Haydon and shared with Mackenzie King. Writing as ‘Longbury’, Taylor documented his efforts to push the provincial Liberals into a coalition. Taylor consulted with leading fusionists like Dafoe and Hudson, huddled with Premier Bracken, and dined with Hugh Robson. The grandees like Dafoe expressed their support, but their influence was limited. Taylor admitted Bracken seemed ‘suspicious’ about him but convinced himself that Bracken would work towards coalition if he were sure the Progressive caucus, which contained some Tories, would agree. Taylor found Robson to be genial but hesitant to push the party and totally unwilling to break with it to join a Bracken government on his own. His reports were vivid but they did not indicate a high level of professional detachment or personal

⁶⁰ Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 96, n 34; The almost total absence of personal letters by Bracken in his 300 boxes of papers is noted in Kendle, *ibid* at xi.

⁶¹ King Papers – Haydon to King (5 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2307); King Papers – Taylor to Haydon (8 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2309); King Papers – Robson to King (8 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2313).

respect. When Robson headed off for a brief holiday in Minneapolis in mid-March, Taylor charged he was ‘running away from everything’. When Robson announced his strong reservations about joining the Bracken cabinet, Taylor said he ‘acts like a mule’.⁶² King seems to have taken Taylor’s reports as credible enough, particularly the view that Robson was somewhat ‘weak’ under pressure, but King was not prone to tolerate those who resisted his goals.⁶³

If Robson had been hesitant in the past to consider joining Bracken’s cabinet or fusing their two groups, nothing about the current situation reassured him. He led a Liberal caucus and party that were suspicious of Brackenism, and he was critical of Bracken’s policies and methods. His past dealings with Bracken had been frustrating, even though the Liberals had for the most part supported the Progressives after the 1927 election. Bracken held out a vague offer to enter into closer ties, but vague it remained. No wonder, as the critical Taylor reported to his Ottawa masters, Robson was not enthusiastic about fusion with Bracken. Pushed by Taylor and others, Robson talked the matter over with a range of people. Even Jimmy Gardiner, persuaded by Taylor, sent an emissary to assuage Robson about coalition. Robson went so far as to agree to talks if the Liberals at their late March ‘convention’ were to strongly support the move.⁶⁴

Manitoba Liberals conferred at the Marlborough Hotel on March 19, 1929 with about 200 delegates in attendance. Robson had returned to Winnipeg from Minneapolis the day of the meeting. Two resolutions were voted on. The delegates agreed to consider Premier Bracken’s ‘proposal’ by striking a committee consisting of Robson and five others to examine the possibility in light of the party’s ‘platform’ and ‘other terms’ of possible agreement. The delegates shelved a stronger resolution in favour of legislative unity, with Robson warning against rushing into formal cooperation. The *Manitoba Free Press* report was above the headline, ‘Liberals Convention Favors Coalition’, but its story revealed the details of cautious support and considerable reservations expressed by delegates, especially Hugh Robson. Reading the

⁶² King Papers - Taylor Reports (7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14 and 15 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2309).

⁶³ Mackenzie King Diaries (14 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada.

⁶⁴ King Papers - Taylor Reports (9, 12 and 14 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2309); King Papers - Haydon to King (12 and 14 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2309).

headline but not the story, Mackenzie King gleefully recorded his satisfaction with the outcome.⁶⁵

Robson promptly conveyed the results to King. He explained that the Liberals ‘cannot bring about a merger as proposed because we could not ratify the actions of the Government’. Meanwhile, they had given a ‘polite answer’ and Robson and Bracken would consult further on the possibilities while the Liberals would continue to maintain ‘friendly’ legislative support for the Progressives. If Mackenzie King was disappointed, he did not indicate this to Robson. He continued to argue that retaining Progressive support was crucial to Liberal fortunes in Manitoba and that the alternative was the success of the Tories at both levels.⁶⁶

Premier Bracken soon announced in the legislature that the two parties would enter into discussions. Labour MLA John Queen reminded the legislature about Robson’s previous critique of the Seven Sisters Falls project. Robson remarked that the prior Norris government had presented more ‘humane legislation’ than the Bracken regime. Queen advised Robson to bring the proverbial ‘long spoon’ in supping with Bracken. But the Liberals continued to vote with the government.⁶⁷

Discussions between Bracken and Robson occurred during April and May. Robson informed Mackenzie King that legislative relations were ‘of a very friendly nature’ and that talks were ‘harmonious and hopeful’. In May, he informed King that he was satisfied with the report of the inquiry into the Seven Sisters Falls project which allowed the two stock speculators, Clubb and Major, to re-enter the cabinet.⁶⁸ Then matters seemed to drift. Robson’s reports to King were increasingly about the impact of federal policy and administration on Manitoba and on the prospects of provincial Liberals in Saskatchewan.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ “Liberal Convention Favours Coalition”, *Manitoba Free Press* (20 March 1929) at 1; “Hertzog Faces Defeat Because of Labour Split”, *Winnipeg Tribune* (20 March 1929) at 2; Mackenzie King Diary (19 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada.

⁶⁶ King Papers – Robson to King (21 and 22 March 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2313); King Papers – King to Robson (22 April 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2313).

⁶⁷ “Bracken Party to Appoint Committee”, *Manitoba Free Press* (21 March 1929) at 1.

⁶⁸ King Papers – Robson to King (29 April, 9 and 18 May 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2313).

⁶⁹ King Papers – Robson to King (7 June, 3 July, 1 and 2 August 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2313).

Once the government received the reports from the MacDonald inquiry and the Turgeon commission, Bracken's legislative and political position became stronger. His health improved and in September he began a two-month European vacation. There was no more talk of coalition or fusion. While Bracken swanned around the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands, Robson stewed over the Manitoba situation. He reverted to his old propensity toward exasperation with Bracken and he wrote to King in September that Bracken's 'attitude was purely a type of pre-War Prussian arrogance'. He confessed he 'simply cannot understand the man.' In reply King tried to calm and encourage Robson to hold on.⁷⁰

Robson's political efforts continued, but he conceded to King that he was now working to rebuild his legal practice. That sounded like a move to resign. He went on to state the Liberals simply could not 'acquiesce' in the government's legislative activity. He enclosed a *Free Press* clipping reporting that Bracken's response to a municipal government delegation seeking better financial support was to call for an 'expert commission'. To Robson, the response was merely sloughing off inadequate provincial support to the municipalities, which Robson did not agree with.⁷¹ Bracken's policies indicated unwillingness to accept Liberal proposals.

A few days later Robson informed Bracken he was 'breaking off relations' over fusion between the Liberals and Progressives. Once he made that pronouncement, the partisan manoeuvring only increased. Bracken, among others, then advised Mackenzie King to find a judicial position for Robson in order to clear the provincial field. Robson gave up the party leadership in early January 1930 when he accepted a post on the Court of King's Bench, a post opened up by J.B. Prendergast's elevation to Chief Justice of Manitoba. He had returned after twenty years to his previous role on the bench.⁷²

Provincial party politics remained anything but congenial when economic calamity descended on Manitoba, the Prairies and the rest of Canada. The international market and price of wheat had already begun to collapse, and for

⁷⁰ King Papers - Robson to King (12 September 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2313); King Papers - King to Robson (19 September 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2313).

⁷¹ King Papers - Robson to King (28 September 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada (C2313); "Suggests Appointment of Expert Commission", *Manitoba Free Press* (12 September 1929).

⁷² Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 104; LAC, Mackenzie King Diaries (29 November and 13 December 1929), Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada; Wardhaugh, *supra* note 12 at 153.

the next decade the entire Canadian and indeed international economy fell into depression. All of the incremental gains of the previous ten years were lost and prudent Manitoba, like the more extravagant governments of Saskatchewan and Alberta, slid toward insolvency, averted only by successive federal bailouts.⁷³ The costs of twenty years of province building based on inadequate tax bases, lack of natural resources revenues and debt financing had been sewn into the ground like dragon's teeth that bore fiscal monsters in the thirties. No economizing could slay them.

The party machinations continued. The Liberals were unable to find a successor to Robson for over a year, when Murdoch Mackay, a well-known Transcona physician and Liberal MLA, was selected leader. Soon after, he led the party into a formal coalition with the Progressives and thereafter the group was known as Liberal-Progressives. Bracken did not relinquish his hold on office until January of 1943 when he abruptly turned from his alliance with the Liberals in order to become leader of the federal Conservatives. He had grown exasperated with Mackenzie King and the Liberals and was convinced he could reorient the federal Conservative, starting with a name change to 'Progressive Conservatives'. He soon learned otherwise, losing the 1945 federal election.⁷⁴ Manitoba's Liberal-Progressives governed until 1958 under the energetic Stuart Garson (1943-48), Bracken's talented minister of Finance, and then under cautious Douglas Campbell (1948-58), who headed a regime that was even more conservative than Bracken's.⁷⁵ The return of orthodox party politics in the election of Duff Roblin's Conservatives in 1958 freed the Liberals from its coalition preoccupations of thirty years. The party, with the brief exception of a period from 1988 to 1990 as Official Opposition, has remained a minor player in provincial politics.

⁷³ The fiscal crises of the Prairie Provinces were subject to careful evaluation by the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, which was in turn based on reports from the Bank of Canada in 1937: *Royal Commission Report Book 1 Canada 1867-1939*, (Ottawa: King's Printer 1940) at 160-77.

⁷⁴ Kendle, *supra* note 1 at 183-37.

⁷⁵ See Raymond Blake, "Stuart S. Garson" in Barry Ferguson & Robert Wardhaugh, eds, *Manitoba Premiers of the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2010) at 194-211; see also James Muir, *ibid* at 214-34 (on "Douglas L. Campbell").

Hugh Robson's two years as Liberal leader have received no attention except as a subordinate figure in the larger party battles of the 1920s. He has been stuck with the labels of those who opposed him: 'elderly', 'weak' or 'stubborn'. Robson undertook serious efforts to strengthen the Manitoba Liberals in two dimensions as he tried to rescue the Manitoba Liberals from the vise formed by the new federal and provincial party systems. Each initiative shows activity not decline, seriousness not weakness, flexibility not obstinacy.

Regarding policy, Robson recognized that under Bracken the Farmer-Progressive movement had subsided from reformism into conservatism and Robson saw the chance for alternative policies. He drew on the Norris record and his own evaluation of Manitoba's policy needs. He set out a positive agenda in areas ranging from fiscal policy to natural resources, social services to administrative practices. He also used his Liberal connections to goad the federal government to rethink its policies. In all areas, he pointed to significant alternative practices.

In regard to party strategies, Robson maneuvered to find a distinctive role for the provincial party. Under him, the Liberals tried to avoid tactics that benefitted either federal Liberal or provincial Progressives. Robson addressed Bracken's variable interest in cooperation, culminating in the talks of 1929 that ended when Robson became unnecessary to Bracken. Robson's Liberals were not convinced their subordination to or alignment with the Progressives served their party interests or Manitoba's political needs. Indeed, pushing the provincial Liberals towards fusion, as others did, divided, distracted and ultimately drained them of purpose.

Robson may be criticized for failing to develop fully-formed policy alternatives or a strong enough organizational base. Sustaining those criticisms requires much deeper appraisals of party policy and organization than have yet been applied to late twenties Manitoba. Robson was not the only Liberal in the Prairies to experience severe problems and the Liberal decline in both Alberta and Manitoba turned out to be permanent. Only in Saskatchewan, where Jimmy Gardiner's policies of fierce policy conflicts and ferocious organizational efforts held sway, did the Liberals remain a force. Any possibility that Robson would be guided or assisted by Gardiner's approach was thwarted when federal Liberals quashed their collaboration. In Manitoba's case, the Liberals were caught between federal and provincial governments that pushed their own agendas and squelched the provincial interest.