

# *The Good Old Days? W. A. C. Bennett and the Legislative Assembly*

*David J. Mitchell*

**T**he late W. A. C. Bennett, as Premier of British Columbia from 1952 to 1972, was a strong-willed and flamboyant leader whose engaging personality dominated the west coast Legislative Assembly during those years. His attitude toward the House was largely responsible for shaping its reputation as a lively and sometimes raucous body. He steadfastly refused to consider proposals for parliamentary reform and embraced a traditional view of the role of the Assembly. "Wacky" Bennett was frequently criticized for clinging to his "old fashioned" interpretation of the House and its proceedings. This article is based in part upon the reminiscences of Bennett, his colleagues, and his opponents.

As Premier, W. A. C. Bennett was accused of many things, but never of being a great parliamentarian. Bennett's attitude toward the British Columbia Assembly was a constant source of controversy and led to charges that he was a dictator who ruthlessly disregarded the principles and niceties of parliamentary government. Bennett was not, however, a dictator, nor was he a parliamentary despot: he had a deep faith in and veneration for the essential legislative processes, and expounded a clearly defined, albeit restricted, role for the Legislative Assembly.

During his years as government leader Bennett was one of the deans of the Assembly and the only government member to have served in opposition. His personal history had been marked by a series of dramatic and critical moments in the Legislative Assembly. For those reasons alone, he possessed a special appreciation of the role of parliament. Of course, he held a strongly traditional view of the House and its proceedings, and stuck firmly to a formula based upon short annual spring legislative sessions of eight to ten weeks in duration. He developed the perhaps inevitable attitude that the executive and legislative branches of government are in conflict. He undoubtedly would have concurred with the century-old sentiment of Sir John A. Macdonald, who stated that it would be wrong "to waste the time of the legislature and the money of the people in fruitless discussions on abstract and theoretical questions of government."

Bennett was a self-described "blunt businessman," who resisted what he considered to be unnecessary ventilation, and presided over the Assembly with an iron fist. At the same time, he had a good sense of the House: he loved to talk, to beguile, to play to his troops and to the public galleries, to taunt and outrage the beleaguered opposition. Bennett obviously thrived on the special dynamic of the British Columbia Assembly. Crossfire heckling and fetching repartee became a well established part of his political repertoire. On other occasions, he could be so bored and impatient with the session's windy pace that he would permit himself to be disturbed from a catnap or game of gin rummy with a crony in his office only for an especially important recorded vote. He was the Master of his House.

During these years, membership in the British Columbia Legislative Assembly was not a full-time occupation. MLAs' modest salaries reflected that fact. Most members, out of necessity, held part-time or regular jobs at home in their ridings. A year in the life of a provincial member was punctuated by sporadic party activity and continuous, foot-slogging constituency work; and was highlighted by a short and usually controversial spring session of the Legislature. W. A. C. Bennett remembered:

We didn't waste the people's money. We didn't have our session too long – seven or eight weeks and the members could get back to their constituencies. They didn't have to be full-time MLAs and they weren't greedy for money. They took an interest in their constituency, where their voters lived, and in their prosperity and so forth, which was vital. Then, when they came back to the House, they came back fresh again, with new ideas. You get them in there with these long sessions, month after month after month – they hardly know what year they're going to end in really! – with the result that they're all tired and they've lost their zip and they've lost their drive. And not being home amongst their constituents, they're out of touch. And that's the worst thing that can happen in a democracy, in a parliamentary system of government. That didn't happen under my system.

Naturally, not everyone agreed with Bennett's system, one of the most contentious and reviled aspects of which was "legislation by exhaustion." The British Columbia House developed a reputation as one of Canada's liveliest and most entertaining

---

*David Mitchell is Clerk Assistant of the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly. This article is an excerpt from the forthcoming biography: W.A.C. — Bennett and the Rise of British Columbia, to be published in the fall of 1983 by Douglas and McIntyre.*

Assemblies; and never were sittings more infused with raucous and absurd behaviour than when the Premier decided to break the back of an opposition filibuster by letting the members speak until they could speak no more – all night long if necessary. Randolph Harding of the NDP later recalled:

Well, this was a matter, I think, that all legislatures have been faced with. The government had made up its mind that it was not going to change its views, and the opposition had made up its mind that they were going to try and prevent something from going through. And then we would have these marathon debates, which in the long run didn't mean too much. You get pretty tired. I think there is a period of concentration which, once you pass it, why, the effectiveness of the individual goes. It can occur anywhere, really. But Bennett had a habit of insisting that legislation be passed by a certain period and if people were still asking questions or raising objections about some piece of legislation, he would just make them sit right through. And after you'd been sitting two or three nights, you know, for long periods of time, you get tired and a lot of things get by that shouldn't. It's no way, really, of intelligently legislating an important piece of business.

Bennett defended "legislation by exhaustion" by placing it within the context of his system:

Well, there's two ways that you can curtail the length of a session and its debates. One way used in other parliaments is closure, and I never applied the closure rule and never would have. That cuts the debate right off. . . I wanted to give people every chance to talk. So in any of the debates there was never any containment, and the hours were always reasonable, unless the opposition admitted it themselves, and the press knew it, and everybody else knew without a shadow of a doubt that they were putting on a very determined filibuster, just killing time, wasting the people's money and getting nowhere. I wouldn't have a night sitting the first night, or the second night, or the third night. But if they filibustered day after day with repetition, then I let them speak. I didn't apply closure, I just let them talk all night if they wanted to, with no control on time or anything. In all the time I was Premier we only had five really late, or all-night sittings. That's all we needed. I want to tell you it made for great efficiency in the House, because the government members knew that the Premier meant business and the opposition knew that he meant business too and wouldn't stand for filibusters. If you have filibusters, then you do the same thing that nature does – you let the storm blow itself out.

W. A. C. Bennett always had an adept House Leader like Attorney General Robert Bonner to rescue him from the treacherous shoals of parliamentary procedure. But the Premier was generally at home and in command in the legislative chamber. Bonner later reflected: "He had a great sense of the House. He could be dramatic as required. And he could alter the mood of the House simply by going into it, which is quite a personal achievement." As a parliamentarian, Bennett could usually be counted upon for an effective performance. He was, however, no great orator. He rarely completed a sentence; his vocabulary was amazingly restricted; he massacred rules of grammar. His agile mind raced ahead of his ability to speak; and his words often sputtered

out in a confusing, excited entanglement of enthusiastic verbiage. In fact, it has been suggested that Bennett suffered from a slight speech impediment. But this is not to say that he was a poor public speaker: on the contrary, the art of oratory is the art of influencing people; and in that sense, Bennett was a compelling artist. The manner of his presentation was always fascinating. The mumble-jumble of the delivery, along with his indelible grin and chopping hand gestures, were set characteristics of his ritualistic speeches. Opposition leader, Robert Strachan, later recalled:

Bennett was a pretty formidable character in the House, let me tell you. It was very frightening at times, especially when he gave what we called his 'flying fish act.' He gave it about four times a session, he had it letter-perfect and word-perfect and gesture-perfect. And the backbenchers knew all the cues and they would applaud and cheer and hurrah. . . He had all these phrases that rolled off, and he was great. . . he'd go on for about an hour and the place would be in an uproar. He would talk about the P.G.E. Railway as 'the brightest jewel in our crown' and 'this little government. . . ' and he'd go right through their history about all that they'd done and he'd go on about this awful opposition that was 'throwing sand in the gears.' He'd have all the Socreds pounding their desks and their eyes would be sparkling and they'd be grinning from ear to ear. It was quite a show. He hadn't talked about the particular piece of legislation we were on, but that was all right. . . It wasn't great debate, but it was a good circus.

Relatively speaking, these were genteel days when the power of politics in British Columbia could be exercised in an atmosphere free from the poisonous clouds of excessive partisanship and polarization. During legislative sessions, for instance, Bennett and Strachan, or, as they addressed one another, "Mr. Premier" and "Mr. Leader of the Opposition," would have a weekly cup of tea together. But like all successful politicians, Bennett could play Jekyll and Hyde. Back in the chamber, he subscribed wholly to the dictum of Dr. Samuel Johnson: "Treating your adversary with respect is giving him an advantage to which he is not entitled." Social Credit cabinet minister, Dan Campbell, recalled his freshman impression of the Premier in the Assembly:

I thought he was quite dynamic. I can remember one time though, on the floor of the House, when I thought he was too hard on Strachan. And I went up to him and told him that I thought he could have been a little more generous with what he had to say about Strachan. And he just cut me off and said, 'Well young man if you think this is a Sunday school picnic, you'd better go back to Sunday school. Don't stay around here!'

In spite of Bennett's traditional and limited view of the role of the Legislative Assembly, or possibly because of it, the British Columbia Assembly was more vital during the years he served as Premier than it has been since. Legislative sessions were short, snappy events. The media was offered a regular, if seasonal, feast of some fine and bizarre performances. Bennett's administrations were always successful in completing their legislative agendas; but the opposition parties also did a commendable job in their role of watchdog on the executive. Both sides of the House understood the rules and limits of the game, and stretched them accordingly. One of the obvious reasons for the vitality of west coast parliamentary democracy was the character of the members who populated the British Columbia legislature.

This was an era when politicians were personalities, larger than life. There was, for instance, in the government front benches, a striking contrast between Attorney General, Robert Bonner and Highways Minister Phil Gaglardi. Bonner was articulate, urbane, and always well prepared, with a demonstrated air of superiority and a ready laugh – although few laughed with him. Gaglardi was the proven master of spurious bombast. He frequently lifted the dome off the building with his booming voice and stentorian inanities. Up until 1960, Tom Uphill sat in the opposition benches as an independent Labour member. Uphill, a legendary folk figure in west coast politics, was responsible for daily practical jokes: he once distributed copies of a Parisian girly magazine to his dozing fellow-members. If a member was discovered bent over in stitches or

tion ranks would invariably shout in unison: "A plus B! A plus B!" (A reference to the A plus B theorem, an integral part of Social Credit monetary theory as expounded by Major C.H. Douglas in Britain during the 1920s.)

There were others like Bennett's old crony, Waldo Skillings, who finally made it to the House in 1960, and served as an amiable but quick-tempered government Whip. Skillings, who had a reputation for fisticuffs, repeatedly challenged opposition members to "step outside." On one occasion, when the opposition was engaged in a filibuster on the Premier's estimates, Skillings and Bennett decided to have a cup of tea up in the legislative dining room. An NDP member, upon discovering them, began to berate the Premier for shirking his duties and relaxing when he should have been in the House. Skillings could not tolerate such intemperance; he quickly rose, slugged the offending member, and shoved him down a flight of stairs. Surprisingly unharmed, the opposition member climbed back up the stairs, kicked Skillings with great force in the shins, then rapidly retreated from the dining room. Waldo Skillings, limping, pursued; but, perhaps fortunately, could not catch up with him.

There was also the uncelebrated Agnes Kripps, Social Credit member for Vancouver-South, who aroused the House one day by proposing to eliminate the offensive word, "sex," from the Pacific coast vocabulary, and offered for substitution, "BOLT" – for "Biology of Living for Today." Her incredulous fellow-members could hardly believe their ears. "I'm bolt upright just listening to you," cried one NDP backbencher. Poor Mrs. Kripps floundered on, until one of her fellow government members shouted: "It's okay for the bolts but what about the nuts?" Flustered and off pace, Kripps tried vainly to silence the wildly bemused House by pleading to the Chair: "Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, won't you please bang that thing of yours on the table?"

The various Speakers who served the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia while W. A. C. Bennett was Premier were accorded the independence and respect necessary to fulfil the customary duties of their office. One area, however, about which the Premier was adamant was legislative reform. Procedures in the House had not been altered since 1930; changes that were being adopted or experimented with in other legislatures were simply not considered. The Premier liked things the way they were, and made his time-honoured point of view well known. Bennett was opposed to the institution of a daily oral question period, and could not see the benefit of a regular or complete *Hansard* service. Legislative committees met infrequently during legislative sessions, matters of substance only rarely being referred to them. The Premier could not see – or did not want to see – why the House should have the services of an independent auditor general when his own controller general was already inspecting the government's books. He could not understand the rationale for improving members' services and facilities or increasing their pay – they were representatives of the people, and therefore should live like ordinary people. The opposition hammered continuously on the need for House reform, but the government's ears were deaf to proposals to change a timeworn system which worked to its satisfaction.

Years later, Bennett defended his stand on this issue: "The questions that are asked in a question period are not the questions of the day; they are partisan, political ques-



**Bennett, seen here with Lieutenant Governor George Pearkes, had a clear, albeit restricted view of the Assembly's role. (British Columbia Provincial Archives)**

inexplicably rolling in the aisles of the legislative chamber, it was usually because he had just deciphered a hand-written message from old Tom. There was Robert Strachan, with his beautiful Scottish brogue and his quick sense of outrage. In most political cultures, Strachan would eventually have become Premier; but W. A. C. Bennett assured him the unenviable record of almost a decade and a half as Leader of the Opposition. There were old-time Socreds like William Chant, who could be relied upon each session for a major address on Social Credit monetary theory. The opposi-

tions asked for political advantage. And the answers are withheld or, when they are given, are political answers – just trying to score points. They don't get down to brass tacks. Our system was way better than that. We would have a session of seven or eight weeks. The first part of the session is the Speech from the Throne and in the debate which follows every member can get up and speak as long as he likes and say what he likes. Then following that we have the budget and the budget debate – again, freedom to say anything they like on the Budget or anything else. This was a great avenue for new ideas into the legislative forum. Then following that you got into the meat of the session which is the estimates where every minister has to defend his own salary and department's budget and the Premier had to defend the whole government. When I was there the opposition would quiz me back-and-forth. They could get up and speak twenty times, not just ask one question but ask a hundred questions, pointed questions, which are the best. . . . So it wasn't just a few little questions politically asked and politically answered at the opening of each day, killing a quarter of the session when we could be getting work done. Instead, most of the session was devoted to real questions and answers between ministers and the legislature. I wanted a system in British Columbia where we'd have good attendance every day, every member in his seat, every member afraid that he would miss something if he was not in his seat. And I think that made for a better parliamentary system. And I think independent minds would say that the legislature was more dynamic in those years than it has been since. . . . We had a very efficient legislature, a very efficient House. . . . And

I was opposed to a *Hansard* because you must take the wheat from the chaff. We had the *Votes and Proceedings* which are the records of the House and are very important. So a record of what happened in the House was made every day by the staff set up for that purpose. There were no secrets in the House; it was all done openly; everything was recorded. . . . And the reason I was opposed to *Hansard* is because parliament must be a debating society and people must be on the floor of that House to hear the debate – bang, bang across the floor; that's parliament. . . . The best parliament is the debating parliament, where everybody's in their chairs wondering what the next guy's going to say, making notes. The worst parliament you can have is one where a chap says, 'I don't have to be there today, I can be playing cards somewhere, be anywhere, because I'm going to read it all in *Hansard*. I won't miss anything.' So the members don't go into the House at all; they just keep a few in there for a quorum, they pay no attention. . . . So you've killed your thrust of debate; you've destroyed parliament. *Hansard* is destroying the legislature."

It would be difficult to argue that W. A. C. Bennett did not have a well developed sense of how the legislature should function. Naturally, he was criticized for not succumbing to various proposals for legislative reform. Curiously, his view of the legislature was a static one; yet the House he was master of was a dynamic place. One can convincingly argue that the changes which have occurred since Bennett's time have helped render the British Columbia Legislative Assembly a less relevant forum for successive governments and oppositions.