

Henry Black, the Conservative Party and the Politics of Relief

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By Gregory P. Marchildon and Don Black

In November of 2004, a large collection of documents recording the business and political career of early Regina resident Henry Black came to light. The collection, spanning the years 1903 – 1960, had been stored in the Black Block in downtown Regina. It included boxes of purchase orders, bank statements, newspapers, ledger books, letters, income tax forms, employee time sheets, blueprints for early Saskatchewan buildings, orders from British Columbia sawmills, invoices from Manitoba quarries, even copies of eviction notices from the 1920's for long-dead tenants of Henry Black's apartment blocks. In 1931, at the request of Premier J.T.M. Anderson, Black stepped back from his business and agreed to head the Saskatchewan Relief Commission. Black's Relief Commission personal correspondence files were included in the collection found under the stairwell in the Black Block. This article draws heavily from those documents. The letters and documents provide fascinating insights into the political machinations of the 1930s as well as the hard reality of life in a province that was brought to its knees by events outside of its control. Acknowledgement and thanks must be given to Jack Sharp and Al Mannle of Westland Properties – Mr. Sharp bought Henry Black's business from the estate and stored the documents. Al Mannle alerted Don Black to the documents' existence.

From 1931 until 1934, Henry Black was the Chair of the Saskatchewan Relief Commission, the largest organization of its type in Canada during the Great Depression. Because of his business acumen as well as his impeccable Conservative credentials, Black was entrusted by the Conservative coalition government of J.T.M. Anderson to lead an organization that distributed about \$35 million worth of relief, equal to approximately \$525 million in 2005 dollars.¹ In the

Commission's first year alone, it distributed relief to about 305,000 people – very close to one-third the Saskatchewan population of 921,785 in 1931.² A volunteer chair, Black donated almost all of his time and energy to managing this unprecedented

that the Commission distributed \$18,734,995.05 in 1931-32, \$3,290,192.60 in 1932-33, and \$9,312,277.60 in 1933-34 (up to 31 May). While the total amounts to just over \$31 million, the Commission continued in operation until August 1934. In "The Saskatchewan Relief Commission, 1931-1934," *Saskatchewan History*, Vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 1950), 54, H. Blair Neatby estimates that the Commission administered \$35 million worth of relief. Using the Bank of Canada's inflation calculator, \$100 in 1933 would cost \$1,502 in 2005.

² HBF, Saskatchewan Relief Commission report by C.B. Daniel to Henry Black, 15 June 1934. Up to the date of the report, 304,410 individuals received relief in 1931-32 while 120,875 and 214,742 received relief in 1932-33 and 1933-34 respectively.



Henry Black, circa 1930

Collection of the author

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the correspondence relied upon comes from the Henry Black fonds, a private collection belonging to Don Black hereafter referred to as HBF. In his 15 June 1934 report to Henry Black (HBF), C.B. Daniel, general manager, Saskatchewan Relief Commission, calculates

relief effort in the most non-partisan and effective way he could. He was able to recruit a strong staff to take care of daily administration at the Relief Commission. Black concentrated on the interface between the federal and provincial politicians and the SRC and spent a considerable amount of time chasing Prime Minister R.B. Bennett and Federal Agriculture Minister Robert Weir for money.³ Black managed difficult negotiations between the Commission and special interests of groups such as the Saskatchewan Retail Merchants Association, the national railroads and the Province's flour millers and fuel dealers.

Black expected to be rewarded politically by the Conservatives for his service as Chairman of the SRC and his significant provincial and national contributions to the Conservative party. When he was not given a promised Senate appointment, the

3 In a speech to the Canadian Conference on Social Work held in Hamilton on May 29, 1934, Black stated: "I am convinced that the cost of (the SRC's) administration being 3.18 per cent, will be very difficult to ever again closely approximate. Due to the economic depression and the drought throughout the province, collections agents, salesmen and executives who had earned \$200.00, \$300.00 and up to \$500.00 per month were walking the streets. As a result, competent and efficient men and women accepted very low paying positions. This is in some measure responsible for the favourable administration cost."

minimum he felt he deserved for the years of service he had rendered, Black temporarily stopped supporting the Conservative Party.

Henry Black: Boom-time Developer and Conservative Die-Hard

Like many other emigrants to Western Canada, Henry Black originally came from Ontario. He was born on the family farm near Kemptville (just south of Ottawa) in 1875, one of a family of eight children. His parents had emigrated from Ireland and life on the farm was governed by the strict values of the Presbyterian church including abstinence from intoxicants, hard work and strict observance of the Sabbath. After completing high school and a course at a business college in Kemptville, Black managed a general store at a railway construction camp in Russell County, Ontario.⁴ Lured by stories of the rail and construction boom in Western Canada, he traveled to the mining town of Kaslo, British Columbia, where he operated a lumber, coal and shipping business from 1899 until 1903. The local newspaper provides a glimpse into the local politics of the day in the rough-and-tumble mining town. Under the front page headline of "Disqualify the Mayor", it is revealed

4 "Henry Black on King's Honors List" *Regina Leader Post*, 2 Jan. 1935, p. 2.



The Black family homestead, located just south of Kemptville, Ontario

Collection of the author

that Henry Black (a Conservative) was suing to have the then current Mayor Archer (a Liberal) removed from office and fined \$2500 because the City's Water Commissioner had purchased a \$2.00 pole from a hardware store that the Mayor had an interest in.⁵ At the April 19, 1903 Council meeting the paper reported that Mayor Archer resigned. An election was held within the week and Mayor Archer was put back into office by acclamation.

Henry Black sold his business in Kaslo and moved to Regina early in the summer of 1903. He became a building contractor and real estate speculator, getting in on the ground floor of the city's construction boom. Drawing on his business experience in Kaslo, Black shopped competitively throughout the interior of British Columbia for lumber, utilizing sawmills in Armstrong, Cranbrook, Nelson, and Moyie. During the summer of 1904 he spent more than \$6000⁶ at a wide range of Territorial firms. Purchases included lumber from the Canadian Elevator Company, Smith and Fergusson Hardware and Regina Lumber and Supply Company, bricks, lime and plasterer's hair from W.F. Eddy, paint from Couch Brothers, and nails, tarpaper and screws from the Western Hardware Co.⁷ A promotional pamphlet published by the Regina Board of Trade in 1911 boasted that Regina's property had an assessed value of \$1.2 million in 1903 but had grown almost twenty-fold, to \$20 million by 1911.⁸

Henry Black would quickly become one of Regina's most prominent builders and property owners. His business records of the time document the realities of being a contractor in a period of rapid growth. A labour shortage in 1910 forced him to place ads for non-union bricklayers in papers across the dominion.⁹ He was the contractor for the officer quarters and

stables at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police headquarters. He built Regina department stores, schools, farmer's markets and apartment blocks. He joined many who were speculating in property and very soon, he owned property throughout Regina as well as large tracts of farm land beyond the city. His straightforward and honest business style earned him the trust of many in the community and he entered politics, solidly aligning himself with the Conservative Party, as he had done in Kaslo.¹⁰

In 1904, almost immediately after his arrival in the city, Henry Black was elected President of the Conservative Association of Regina.¹¹ He served as Regina alderman in 1915 - 17, 1923 and 1924 and Mayor in 1918 and 1919. At the time, provincial and federal party politics directly influenced local politics. When he decided to stand for re-election as mayor in 1918, it was as a prominent Conservative against J.F. Bole, the "local Liberal Member for Regina."¹² The *Leader*, the local Liberal newspaper, attempted to give Bole support by attacking Black with a "two column front page editorial with a heavy type headline" entitled "Black's Black Record."¹³ The lead editorial in the December 5, 1918 *Regina Morning Leader* was headlined "A Black Record" and went on to lambaste Henry's first year in the Mayor's chair. Despite the concerted Liberal attack, Black won the contest handily and was re-elected the following year as Mayor of Regina.

As Mayor, Black faced two potential crises. The first was the influenza epidemic during which he had to ban all public gatherings in the city including church services. The second was the labour unrest that followed soldiers home from the Great War. The Conservative paper of the day credits him with

5 "Disqualify the Mayor" *Kaslo Kootenaiian*, 26 March 1903, p. 1.

6 The Bank of Canada Inflation Calculator estimates value as early as 1914, \$6000 in 1904 would be worth in excess of \$100,000 today. http://www.bankofcanada.ca/en/rates/inflation_calc.html

7 Invoices, H. Black, May to July, 1904

8 Saskatchewan Council For Archives and Archivists web resources: http://scaa.usask.ca/gallery/regina/central/downtown_business/downtown_CORA_botstatistics.html

9 HBF, letter to London Free Press, Petrolia Advertiser, Lethbridge Herald et al., 30 July 1910 "Dear sir, kindly insert the following notice in your newspaper for six insertions – Bricklayers wanted. 60cts per hour, non-union, McGregor and Black, Contractors, Regina, Sask."

10 For example: "I would like to state that if an occasion should arise where I would have another opportunity to do business with Mr. Black that I would not have the slightest hesitation in engaging in any enterprise with him, without having any recourse to any legal agreement, as I consider his word once given would not in any way be strengthened by any legal document which might be drawn to confirm his verbal undertaking." HBF, reference letter, H.C. Cowdry, manager of Greenshields, Regina, 18 May 1931.

11 HBF, letter, Oliver Dean to Hon. Robert Weir, 6 Aug. 1932.

12 At that time, elections were held each December. Only men who owned property could vote. In the December 1914 election, there were 28 hopefuls vying for the 10 aldermanic seats. Henry Black received 1386 votes – 9th place

13 HBF, letter, Black to R.B. Bennett, 11 Sept. 1933.

Henry Black's Regina Home

Collection of the author



convincing labour leaders in Regina not to participate in a general strike along the lines of the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.¹⁴

Black's entrepreneurial ventures continued throughout most of his life. In July of 1917 he and a group of Regina businessmen opened the Prairie Biscuit and Confectionery Company. The revolutionary idea behind the concept was simple. Instead of growing wheat and shipping it to Winnipeg where it would be processed into biscuits and cookies that were shipped back to Regina merchants for re-sale, the biscuit company would manufacture the product in Regina and sell direct to Regina consumers. A biscuit expert was hired from Glasgow, a large factory was built on the corner of Rose Street and 6th Avenue in Regina's booming warehouse district and a spur line from the CPR was laid.¹⁵ However, a wartime sugar shortage extinguished the fledgling enterprise and by the end

of 1918, the biscuit making equipment was sold to a baker in Edmonton.

Black was not a frugal man. He built a large (almost 5600 sq. ft.) home at 2310 College Avenue and lived there for 30 years before moving into a gracious Storey & Van Egmond-designed home on the corner of Lorne Street and College Avenue where he lived until his death. In the 1920s he built a family cottage at Saskatchewan Beach. Most winters he traveled to Santa Monica, California or Vancouver for a few weeks escape from the cold. Black's real estate skills remained, and income from his apartment buildings, farmland, houses and commercial properties provided a relatively steady income stream during the periods of boom and bust that Regina endured. He gave generously to a number of charities and supported worthwhile community causes such as the construction of the Salvation Army building and the rebuilding of the YMCA. His hobbies were few. He never bothered with popular wealthy men's clubs of the day and, for the few hours he was not devoting to business or politics, he preferred to spend them in his spacious house being with his family or in his garden raising his flowers.¹⁶

14 Regina *Daily Post*, 19 May 1919, p.3.

15 "The Prairie Biscuit Company was incorporated in February of 1916 with an authorized capital of \$100,000 and with the object of manufacturing biscuits and confectionery to supply the increasing demand in western Canada....The factory is now employing 20 people and as business increases, there will be additions made to the staff." *Regina Morning Leader*, 14 July 1917, p. 8.

16 John Hawkes, *The Story of Saskatchewan and Its People* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1924).

While Henry Black enjoyed success as a businessman and a civic politician, he would often be frustrated at a provincial level. By the time of the 1921 election, his party had hit rock bottom. That year the Conservatives only nominated four candidates – including Henry Black. Despite the fact that he faced certain defeat, Black ran against William Martin, the Premier of the province since 1917. With no effective machine backing him, Black had to bear all of his own electoral expenses as well as putting up the deposit for his Conservative running mate in what was then a two-member constituency.¹⁷ As predicted, Black was badly beaten, and the Conservative vote was reduced to slightly less than four per cent of the total ballots cast.¹⁸

17 HBF, letter, Black to R.B. Bennett, 11 Dec. 1934.

18 Martin received 7,300 votes, “allegedly the highest” in any provincial election to that date. Ted Regehr, “William M. Martin,” in Gordon L. Barnhart, ed., *Saskatchewan Premiers of the Twentieth Century* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2004), 61. Appendix A in Howard Leeson, ed., *Saskatchewan Politics: Into the Twenty-First Century* (Regina: Canadian Plains

No fair-weather friend, Henry Black kept the Conservative faith after the election, continuing to organize, contribute and fundraise. He would eventually see his party’s fortunes gradually improve over the decade. By the mid-1920s, the federal Conservatives had become a major threat to the Liberals, actually taking office for three months in the summer of 1926. In Saskatchewan, the Conservatives were still building on their respectable showing in the 1925 election when they managed to poll 18 per cent of the vote despite running candidates in only a quarter of the ridings. By the time of the next provincial election, Black was Regina’s single major financial contributor to the Conservative Party. In addition to direct financial support, he had also bought the presses for the Conservative paper of the day, the *Regina Daily Star*.¹⁹ On June 6, 1929, the Conservatives won 24 seats. Although this was 4 seats short of the Liberals, the provincial Conservative leader, J.T.M.

Research Center, 2001), p. 407.

19 HBF, letter, Oliver Dean to Hon. Robert Weir, 6 Aug. 1932.



The Broder Building, the original home of the Saskatchewan Relief Commission

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Anderson had forged an electoral partnership with Independent and Progressive party candidates who together had captured 11 seats, enough for a majority coalition government.²⁰

After securing the province, Saskatchewan Conservatives began to sense that the federal Liberals under Mackenzie King could be defeated by a new Conservative team under the leadership of R.B. Bennett of Calgary. When the Conservative nominations for the 1930 federal election were held, Henry Black's name was put forward. The day before the convention, however, a prominent Conservative lawyer by the name of Frank Turnbull approached Black and asked him to step aside in his favour. A deal was struck between the two men. If Black put up \$1,000 towards Turnbull's campaign fund, and if the Conservatives were elected nationally, then Black would be appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Saskatchewan or, at a minimum, to the Senate in Ottawa.²¹

Within weeks of Bennett's successful election, (which included a victory by Frank Turnbull) the new Conservative Prime Minister was being dunned by letters recommending Black for appointment as Lieutenant-Governor of Saskatchewan.²² Those writing including Murdoch MacPherson, the Attorney-General of Saskatchewan and one of J.T.M. Anderson's most important cabinet ministers. As MacPherson explained it, Black was not only a long-time Conservative supporter, he was also

"independently wealthy and in a position to uphold all the dignities of the office." Moreover, Black's elegant wife, Jennie Lenore, had "all the qualifications that a Chatelaine of Government House should have."²³

It was not to be. On March 31, 1931, another provincial Conservative, Hugh Edwin Munroe, was made Lieutenant-Governor of Saskatchewan.²⁴ Nor did Henry Black receive a Senate appointment. Why could he not secure one or the other of these appointments despite his long years in the political trenches, the commitments made and the glowing recommendations from life-long Conservatives as well as others? We may never know. It appears that Black himself was not sure although he came to believe that Frank Turnbull and Conservative lawyers, seeking their own federal judicial appointments, betrayed him at the time.²⁵

By the summer of 1931, everyone was beginning to recognize that the depression that had begun in 1929 was not going away. Moreover, the drought that had begun in 1929, covering a huge swath of southern Saskatchewan, refused to relinquish its hold on the land and 76 municipalities in the province were facing their third successive crop failure.²⁶ The situation was disastrous for Saskatchewan wheat farms and for the small businesses that populated hundreds of towns and villages in the heart of the great wheat belt. The depression with its low grain prices was bad enough but the drought was forcing the province, and with it the Conservative coalition government, to its knees.²⁷

20 Patrick Kyba, "J.T.M. Anderson," *Saskatchewan Premiers of the Twentieth Century*. Appendix A in *Saskatchewan Politics*, p. 408.

21 This "arrangement" was explained by Henry Black himself: HBF, letter, Henry Black to R.B. Bennett, 11 Dec. 1934.

22 National Archives of Canada, R.B. Bennett fonds, MG26K (hereafter referred to as NAC, Bennett fonds), vol. 438, reel M1098: A.M. Carmichael (Independent Progressive M.P. for Kindersley) to R.B. Bennett, 22 Sept. 1930; and W.J. Hetherington (Secretary, the Conservative Association of Regina) to R.B. Bennett attaching minute recommending Henry Black for appointment and forwarded to Robert Weir, federal minister of agriculture, and F.W. Turnbull, member of Parliament for Regina, 20 Oct. 1930. At the time, the Conservative Association of Regina honorary presidents were R.B. Bennett and J.T.M. Anderson and its honorary vice-presidents were Conservative members of the legislature, M.A. MacPherson and James Grassick, and its offices were located in Henry Black's building at 1757 Hamilton Street. Entry for Archibald Morrison Carmichael in *Saskatchewan Politicians: Lives Past and Present* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2004), p. 42.

23 NAC, Bennett fonds, vol. 438, reel M1098, M.A. MacPherson (Attorney-General of Saskatchewan) to R.B. Bennett, 28 Jan. 1931.

24 *Saskatchewan Executive and Legislative Directory, 1905-1970* (Regina and Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Archives Board, 1971), p. 7: Hugh Edwin Munroe (1878-1947), the Lieutenant-Governor of Saskatchewan from March 31, 1931, until September 9, 1946, may have been the older brother of Frederick Munroe (1881-1955), a Conservative from Moosomin constituency who served as Minister of Public Health in the Anderson government from 1929 until 1934: *Saskatchewan Politicians*, 176-177. Bennett appointed Joseph Marcotte of Ponteix to the Senate in 1931. Marcotte was a Conservative lawyer who had represented Canada in the 1904 International Billiards Tournament in New York City.

25 HBF, letter, Henry Black to R.B. Bennett, 11 Dec. 1934.

26 HBF, letter, M.A. MacPherson to Henry Black, 1 Sept. 1931.

27 Gregory P. Marchildon, "The Great Divide," in Gregory P. Marchildon, ed., *The Heavy Hand of History: Interpreting Saskatchewan's Past* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center,

Henry Black and the Saskatchewan Relief Commission

J.T.M. Anderson and his cabinet knew full well the enormity of the problem they faced. First, with the collapse of the farming economy, and with it the property tax base that supported the municipalities, the provincial government was increasingly being required to step in to provide relief to starving farm families in the dozens of drought-stricken municipalities that were no longer able to distribute relief. At the same time, almost every dollar being expended on relief was questioned by those individuals not (yet) on relief. This had been the case from the beginning, whether the municipalities or the provincial government were distributing relief. Decisions concerning the recipients, as well as the type and amount of relief, were seen through the lens of past grievances and partisan political differences to the point that even when justice was done it was rarely seen to be done. Indeed, the assumption was the opposite given the prevalence of government patronage in the past.

The Anderson government desperately needed an arm's-length agency that would be perceived to be absolutely impartial and non-partisan in the distribution of what was the largest relief initiative in the country. Thus the idea of an "independent" relief commission was born. Anderson had campaigned hard on the platform of a non-partisan public service and had promised to break the "Gardiner machine" – shorthand for the patronage methods of Anderson's predecessor, Liberal Premier Jimmy Gardiner.²⁸ The creation of the Saskatchewan Relief Commission with five volunteer commissioners drawn from different political persuasions and a staff selected by the Commission without interference from Cabinet or the Conservative Party would prove the Conservative government's bona fides. Of course, it was important for Anderson and his cabinet to have a reliable and loyal Conservative as Chair of the Commission given

2005), pp. 51-66.

28 On Gardiner's methods, see Escott M. Reid, "The Saskatchewan Liberal Machine before 1929," in Norman Ward and Duff Spafford, eds., *Politics in Saskatchewan* (Don Mills, ON: Longman, 1968), and Norman Ward and David E. Smith, *Jimmy Gardiner: Relentless Politician* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp. 93-104. On the election campaign of 1929, see Patrick Kyba, "J.T.M. Anderson", in Gordon L. Barnhart, ed., *Saskatchewan Premiers of the Twentieth Century* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2004), pp. 109-38.

the differing political stripes of the other Commission members.

There is no record of what went through Henry Black's mind when he was first approached to become chair of the Saskatchewan Relief Commission. Far from a cushy appointment, this unpaid position would turn out to be one of the most challenging jobs in the country during the Great Depression, one that he not only had to do for free but one that would take valuable time away from his own business interests. Black's financial records of the time show that during the depression, income from his business dropped dramatically. He carried a number of tenants – preferring to see the suites and storefronts occupied and maintained, albeit for 'free' rather than falling into disuse and disrepair, and even reported a loss on his 1933 tax return.

Black met with Anderson in early August of 1931 and agreed to take on the job on a voluntary basis.²⁹ Both assumed that it would last no more than eight months, the time the Commission needed to supervise the distribution of relief to drought-stricken farmers over the winter, but agreed that if the Commission had to go longer that Black would be provided with at least a modest honorarium for his time and trouble.³⁰

They then reviewed names of other potential members of the Commission, spending most of their time selecting the high-profile Liberal member of the Commission. Black suggested Victor Sifton, the son of Sir Clifford Sifton as well as the current owner of the Liberal newspapers in the province. The *Leader*, Victor Sifton's Regina paper, had already written an editorial to the effect that any proposed commission for the distribution of relief should be composed of members of all political parties. At the time, Black was almost certain that Sifton would say no but argued that the fact of such a request would force a more careful editorial line on the Commission in the future. Premier Anderson agreed.³¹

Victor Sifton was asked and, predictably, refused on the ground that his acceptance would prevent his newspapers from "commending or criticizing

29 *Regina Leader-Post*, 13 Aug. 1931.

30 This is at least Henry Black's own version of the meeting as set out in his letter to R.B. Bennett, 11 Dec. 1934, HBF.

31 HBF, letter, Black to R.B. Bennett, 11 Sept. 1933.

work which is of the greatest public importance.”³² The Anderson government then went to a second, then a third, Liberal, but they too refused, likely anticipating the political implications of accepting the Conservative government’s invitation.³³ Finally, they found a Liberal in W.G. Yule, the supervisor of the Royal Bank of Canada’s operations in Saskatchewan. Yule’s Liberal credentials were criticized by Cameron McIntosh, a Liberal MP from North Battleford who argued that Yule more represented the interests of the national banks than the provincial Liberals. McIntosh also charged that “every relief agent” was “appointed by an out and out Conservative.”³⁴

The other members of the Commission were A.E. Whitmore, a Conservative supporter and Regina businessman, W.A. Munns, Manager of the Executors and Administrators Trust Company of Moose Jaw and Pearl Johnson. Contrary to McIntosh’s allegations, Johnson was not a Conservative. In fact, she was a highly identified supporter of what would soon become known as the Canadian Co-operative Federation or CCF.³⁵

Ultimately, the charges of partisanship would not stick. In his article published well after the Great Depression, Canadian historian H. Blair Neatby concluded that, over its three-year life, the Saskatchewan Relief Commission had an “enviable record” of achievement without “the slightest indication of political influence, profiteering or partiality.”³⁶ This positive judgment on the Commission has never since been revised.³⁷ At the time, however, it seemed to Black that his efforts in establishing a non-partisan and effective relief organization were constantly being thwarted, at least

initially, by Liberal attacks on the Commission as well as a lack of communication, and at times a lack of agreement, between the Conservative government in Ottawa and the Conservative government in Regina, on funding.

Although the Saskatchewan Relief Commission was, in theory, only accountable to the government of Saskatchewan, in reality it found itself also accountable to the government of Canada because of the way in which relief was financed. From the beginning, the federal government footed a significant portion of the relief bill even if the administration of that relief was the responsibility of the province. The federal and provincial governments divided up the drought-stricken region of the province into three groups. In the first year of the Commission’s operations, Group A targeted 95 municipalities that had suffered three successive crop failures and for which the federal government agreed to bear the total cost of direct relief and the province the total cost of indirect relief which included seed and other supplies intended to keep farms in operation. Group B included the 77 municipalities that had suffered two successive crop failures while group C were the 68 municipalities with one crop failure. For groups B and C, the federal and provincial governments split the cost of direct relief.³⁸

In an ideal world, Henry Black and the Commission should have received a provincial appropriation large enough to meet the relief needs of the province and the two governments would have sorted out the actual transfer of money. In practice, the provincial government had great difficulties forecasting the relief requirements given the inherent unpredictability of climate in general and drought in particular. Moreover, with its own revenues rapidly diminishing, the province needed the federal relief grants before it could transfer money to the Commission. The catch was that the federal government required receipt of itemized accounts from the Saskatchewan Relief Commission before it could forward funds to the province.³⁹

32 HBF, telegram, Colonel Victor Sifton to M.A. MacPherson, 11 Aug. 1931.

33 HBF, letter, Black to R.B. Bennett, 11 Sept. 1933.

34 “Hold Relief Commission Political” *Regina Leader Post*, February 19, 1932, p. 1

35 NAC, Bennett fonds, vol. 793, reel M1449, letter, anonymous to R.B. Bennett, 26 Sept. 1933.

36 Neatby, “The Saskatchewan Relief Commission”, p. 56.

37 Peter A. Russell, “The Co-operative Government in Saskatchewan, 1929-1934: Response to the Depression” (M.A. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1970). In his biographical essay on J.T.M. Anderson, Patrick Kyba states that the Saskatchewan Relief Commission was the one major achievement of the Anderson government during the Great Depression: “J.T.M. Anderson” in *Saskatchewan Premiers*, p. 129.

38 Neatby, “The Saskatchewan Relief Commission”, p. 42. HBF, letter, R.B. Bennett (as Minister of Finance) to Black, 26 Jan. 1932.

39 HBF, letter, Black to R. Weir, 5 Dec. 1931.

As a consequence of this chaotic arrangement, there was a significant lag between the time that the Commission incurred obligations and time it received money to meet its obligations. Since relief recipients were “paid” in food and clothing rather than cash, the Commission tried to manage its cash flow problem by delaying payments to the hundreds of town and village stores that actually provided foodstuffs and other necessities. Needless to say, this created dozens of disputes between the Commission and the many merchants supplying relief. Thus, Henry Black’s job included damage control so that the disputes would not destroy the Commission’s reputation, hurt the two levels of government or drive the local merchants out of business. Over and over again, Black wrote to federal and provincial ministers about the damage this unreasonable arrangement was causing the relief effort, even threatening to resign if the problem was not fixed.⁴⁰ Indeed, the dominant theme of much of the correspondence between Black and the federal and provincial governments during this time is the hardship created by their chronic inability or unwillingness to deliver oft-promised funds.⁴¹

Unfortunately for Black, the funding problem would never get fixed over the course of the Commission’s life. Worse, Black had to contend directly with R.B. Bennett who initially acted as his own government’s Minister of Finance.⁴² Bennett would periodically wreak havoc by demanding detailed information on the Commission’s expenditures from Black. Bennett even issued orders for the “immediate curtailment of expenditures in Saskatchewan” as he watched with

alarm as the province absorbed federal relief money like an ink blotter.⁴³ Black soon concluded that the Bennett government was delaying payment in order to pressure the Commission into kicking thousands of people off the relief roles and became so upset at the Prime Minister’s actions that he again threatened to resign. However, nothing Black did or said changed the behaviour of Bennett or his government.⁴⁴

By the winter of 1931-32, the Saskatchewan Relief Commission had become a political football in the House of Commons. Henry Black was constantly being peppered by requests from Conservatives in the Bennett government for information so that they could answer the opposition’s pointed questions and allegations.⁴⁵ Saskatchewan Liberal members of Parliament led the charge against the Commission trying to embarrass the Conservatives.⁴⁶ No one was more on the spot and intent on getting answers from Black than the Conservative point man on the issue, Robert Weir. The federal minister of agriculture, Weir was a “prosperous farmer and stock-breeder” from the Melfort area. One of eight Conservatives from Saskatchewan elected in the 1930 election, Weir was the Anderson government’s own recommendation to Bennett for the highly-desired Agriculture portfolio. Despite his lack of experience, Weir soon established himself as one of Bennett’s best ministers.⁴⁷ Indeed, Weir would be instrumental in launching the Bennett government’s drought land reclamation through the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act.⁴⁸

Although Weir was growing weary of defending the Saskatchewan Relief Commission against opposition attacks in the House of Commons, he faced an even larger problem among his cabinet colleagues, none of whom were from Saskatchewan and almost all of whom believed that relief had become too easy to obtain in Saskatchewan compared to their provinces. Trying to strengthen his position, Weir begged Black to cut the number of relief recipients so that he could argue that the Commission was taking a tougher attitude. In the meantime, federal money

40 HBF: letter, Black to R. Weir, 5 Dec. 1931, and response, 9 Dec. 1931; letter, Black to M.A. MacPherson, 7 Jan. 1932.

41 HBF: letter, Black to M.A. MacPherson, June 24, 1932: “I now feel that meeting payments and stalling is the biggest job of the Commission, and if it continues as it is at present for very long it will go a long way to undo the work we have done in carrying so many through the winter. It is also costing the country considerable by keeping the staff writing letters stalling. It also retards the progress of closing the Commission. As you are no doubt aware there are close to one million dollars worth of cheques issued and withheld awaiting funds to meet them.”

42 On Bennett’s prime ministerial style, see Larry A. Glassford, *Reaction and Reform: The Politics of the Conservative Party under R.B. Bennett, 1927-1938* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 100-10. Bennett was Minister of Finance from 7 Aug. 1930 until 2 Feb. 1932: Robert B. Bryce, *Maturing in Hard Times: Canada’s Department of Finance through the Great Depression* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1986), p. 235.

43 HBF, telegram, R.B. Bennett to P.H. Gordon, 14 May 1932.

44 HBF, letter, Black to R. Weir, 18 May 1932.

45 HBF, letter, W.D. Cowan, M.P., to Black, 20 Feb. 1932.

46 HBF, letter, W.D. Cowan, M.P., to Black, 7 Mar. 1932.

47 Glassford, *Reaction and Reform*, pp. 104-5.

48 Entry for Robert Weir (1882-1939) in *Saskatchewan Politicians*, pp. 239-40.

would be difficult to get for Saskatchewan because of the “strenuous claims” for relief money from other cabinet members, especially those from Ontario and Quebec. In Weir’s own words, he was finding it increasingly difficult “to keep continuously before the minds of Cabinet, the difference in the Saskatchewan situation.”⁴⁹

The provincial Liberals, under opposition leader Jimmy Gardiner, also attacked the Saskatchewan Relief Commission in the Legislature in Regina. Black became so annoyed at the repeated requests for information from members of the legislature that he finally sent a letter to M.A. MacPherson warning him that if the Commission continued to provide “prompt answers” to the “constant flow of question”, this political work would end up “impairing” the “distribution of relief.”⁵⁰ Although sympathetic, MacPherson could not control what the Liberals did in the legislative assembly. He wrote Black that, “More objection to it by the government would induce further requests by these gentlemen.” At the same time, he wanted Black’s fellow Commissioner, W.G. Yule, to talk to his Liberal friends to try and get them to back off a little.⁵¹

By the beginning of March 1932, the ammunition provided by Black and the Commission to Conservative members in both Parliament and the provincial Legislature had punctured the Liberal assault. One Conservative backbencher in Ottawa pointed out that “even the Leader of the Opposition”, Mackenzie King, “had to admit that the work of the Commission... was virtually above criticism.”⁵² Few were more grateful than Weir. In late February 1932, he wrote M.A. MacPherson, the Commission point man in the Anderson cabinet, stating that the Commission had in fact “protected” both Conservative governments and, “looking at it now, rather than from the beginning, I do not like to think of what might have happened in the way of public resentment, had we not had that protection.”⁵³ A Saskatchewan Conservative backbencher wrote Black to assure him that the Liberals were becoming increasingly timid in their criticisms until finally they were “scared out

of their wits” to ask questions about the Commission for fear of the Conservative response. He went on to advise Black and his fellow Saskatchewan Conservatives to just continue “giving the people of Saskatchewan good Government, and keeping it clean as you have done, and the merit of your administration will be the only answer that is necessary.”⁵⁴ Weir followed up with a letter to Black praising his efforts:

It must indeed be a source of great satisfaction to you people that, after having undertaken such a colossal task with so little preparation and having built up the machine... whose work is its best commendation, many who have tried to find fault with it are unable to do so. The work of your Commission is really the healthiest note in the House.⁵⁵

By the late spring of 1932, conditions throughout the wheat belt looked like they were improving. Assuming that the Commission would be wound up by the provincial government, Henry Black felt that the time had come for his Senate appointment. Once again, his political friends and associates advanced Black’s name to the Bennett government.⁵⁶ By the end of summer, however, the government realized that large amounts of relief would again have to be distributed. Although yields were up, grain prices dipped even further, and drought again savaged a sizeable area of southern Saskatchewan.⁵⁷ The provincial government realized that tens of thousands of people would again be forced on to the relief rolls for the winter and Premier Anderson asked that Black and the Commission continue with their work for another year. In addition, Anderson asked the Commission to take on the responsibility for distributing relief to single and homeless unemployed men that had congregated in and around the urban areas of the province.⁵⁸ As Anderson explained to Black, “your Commission is praised throughout the whole of Canada because of its efficiency and business-like management of relief matters” and the

54 HBF, letter, W.D. Cowan, M.P., to Black, 7 Mar. 1932.

55 HBF, letter, R. Weir to Black, 4 Apr. 1932.

56 HBF, letters: Oliver Dean to R. Weir, 6 Aug. 1932; M.A. MacPherson to Black, 19 Aug. 1932.

57 E.W. Stapleford, *Report on Rural Relief due to Drought Conditions and Crop Failures in Western Canada, 1930-1937* (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1939), p. 32.

58 HBF: M.A. MacPherson to Black, 10 Nov. 1932; Black to J.T.M. Anderson, 19 Nov. 1932.

49 HBF, letter, R. Weir to Black, 9 Dec. 1932.

50 HBF, letter, Black to M.A. MacPherson, 22 Feb. 1932.

51 HBF, letter, M.A. MacPherson to Black, 24 Feb. 1932.

52 HBF, letter, W.A. Beynon, M.P., to Black, 3 Mar. 1932.

53 HBF, letter, Weir to MacPherson, 26 Feb. 1932.

provincial government was understandably reluctant about stepping into the relief business directly.⁵⁹

Despite his deepening concern about his lack of attention to his own business interests and his private losses as a consequence, Henry Black continued his work at the Commission on a voluntary basis. He was given some assurances, however, that the job would end for certain by March 31, 1933, at which time he would finally get his proper reward.⁶⁰ But that season, the drought along with a grasshopper infestation swept the wheat belt. Seeing that the Commission would have to continue, Black wrote both Anderson and MacPherson asking to be relieved as Chair. By this time, the government itself was teetering and both pleaded with Black to stick it out as they needed at least one clear success with which to face the coming election. Reluctantly, Black agreed, his loyalty to the Conservative Party once again coming to the fore.⁶¹

On May 29, 1934, just three months before the Saskatchewan Relief Commission was wound down, Black addressed the Canadian Conference on Social Work held in Hamilton. He mentioned that he had been asked if Saskatchewan residents appreciated the relief goods sent to them from the eastern provinces. He replied that there was a tremendous amount of gratitude and reminded the audience that "... Saskatchewan residents in the greatest numbers originally came from Ontario and the Eastern Provinces, and you will agree with me that those who went west were more adventurous than those who were satisfied to stay in the east, where opportunities were not so promising. I claim to be a westerner and am prepared to admit, those who were farmers in the east and pulled up stakes and went west where land was free to the homesteader, were not in every instance, Ontario's most successful and economical farmers."

The Conservative Denouement

On June 19, 1934, the Anderson government was defeated by the Liberals and five years of continuous drought and depression. Although the Conservatives garnered nearly 27 per cent of the vote, not one member was able to keep a seat. The election attacks still fresh in his ear, Henry Black wondered

whether he and his fellow Conservatives had been wise in investing so heavily in a non-partisan relief commission. At the same time, he let Prime Minister Bennett know that he had been approached by the Gardiner Liberals to continue as Chair of the Commission, and agreed to do so only if Bennett wanted him to do so.⁶² By August, however, the Gardiner government had decided to terminate the Commission and put relief back into the hands of government departments, where it would reside until the end of the Depression.⁶³ Gardiner wrote Black expressing "the appreciation of the government and the people of the Province to you and other members of the Commission for the unselfish manner in which you have given of your time and ability to the handling of the very difficult piece of work" and asked Black to gather up his Commission members for a private "exit" meeting with the Premier the next day.⁶⁴

After three years of toiling on the Commission, Henry Black was finally able to return to his business interests on a full-time basis while waiting for appointment to the Senate by Prime Minister Bennett. He waited through the fall until finally, in early December, the long-anticipated letter from the Prime Minister's Office came. But instead of the promised Senate nomination, Bennett recommended that Black receive a Commander of the British Empire (CBE).⁶⁵ It would all be too much for Black who felt that insult had now been added to great injury.

Black exploded and wrote a letter back to the Prime Minister. In it, he accused Robert Weir, Frank Turnbull and other Conservatives of blocking and interfering with his appointment in the past. He reminded Bennett of his over thirty years of contributions to the Conservative Party, including financial contributions that ran "well up into five figures" and his anger at being ignored while the Conservatives held office provincially and federally from 1930 until 1934. He argued that, at a minimum, he had been promised appointment to the Senate and rejected Bennett's offer of a CBE as simply insufficient "for all the services"

62 HBF, letter, Black to R.B. Bennett, 29 June 1934.

63 "At the time, these were the departments of Municipal Affairs and Agriculture.

64 HBF, letter, J.G. Gardiner to Black, 16 Aug. 1934.

65 1933 Senate appointments were Byron Homer from Blaine Lake and Walter Asetline of Rosetown.

59 HBF, letter, J.T.M. Anderson to Black, 21 Dec. 1932.

60 HBF, letter, Black to R. Weir, 4 Jan. 1932.

61 HBF, letter, Black to R.B. Bennett, 11 Dec. 1934.

he had “rendered the Conservative Party during the past thirty-two years.”⁶⁶

While the letter appeared to both surprise and upset Bennett, he did not arrange a Senate appointment for Black. Although Black eventually accepted the CBE, he temporarily ended his support of the Conservative Party from that time forward. He did, however, maintain sporadic contact with R.B. Bennett until 1944.⁶⁷ In early 1935, for example, he suggested to Bennett that “...we call a convention of the C.C.F. and Conservatives...and nominate a Candidate of whichever party has had the strongest support” to avoid three-way contests. Again, in 1937 he tried to convince Bennett of the merits of a new all-party anti-Liberal coalition that would replace the Conservative Party, going so far as to say: “I have refused for the past four years to take part in any Conservative activities or organizations, or to contribute to the cause, as I feel it is a waste of time and money in this province. But if an organization along the lines as suggested [by Black] were approved, I would be pleased to lead every effort in its success.”⁶⁸ A partisan Conservative who harboured nothing but hostility for the new socialist party, Bennett could hardly have been enamoured of these suggestions from Black.

However, the taste for politics had not quite left Henry Black and he swallowed his bitterness to run under the Conservative banner one last disastrous time. Relying somewhat on the supportive editorial policy of the *Regina Star*, Black gave the impression of being an extremely reluctant candidate for Mayor in the 1937 Regina civic election.⁶⁹ All through October, it had looked like Mayor A.C. Ellison was going to be re-elected by acclamation and he, in turn, would be highly influenced by a left-leaning council that included C.C. Williams and Clarence Fines of the C.C.F. A week after the Saskatchewan Conservative party held its annual convention, with

J.G. Diefenbaker as leader and R.B. Bennett attending as federal leader, Black announced his candidacy as mayor. But 40 minutes after the polling stations closed on November 23, Black was forced to concede defeat. He received only 2,722 votes compared to A.C. Ellison’s 11,202 votes, the largest margin of defeat ever recorded in a Regina civic election until that date, and a clear signal that the Conservative’s were spent as a legal force in the province until their resurrection four decades later.

Five years after his humiliating defeat, Black wrote to Bennett with a request that he be appointed to join Bennett on the Board of Directors of the Royal Bank of Canada. Bennett was, by this point, a rather tragic, defeated and lonely figure living in self-imposed exile in an immense mansion in Surrey, England. His reply to Black’s request was evasive and non-committal: “To be frank, this is one of those matters one can speak about but which preferably not write about unless one is asked for an opinion by the President. Were I not a Director, I could easily write, but being a Director I am afraid it would be misunderstood were I to write about it. I could speak of it casually and I am afraid that is all I can say.”⁷⁰ Black was not appointed to the bank’s board.

After his civic defeat, Black had turned away from public life to concentrate solely on his family and his business. In 1943 he built the York Apartments, adjacent to the General Hospital and across the street from the Crescent Annex, which he also owned. In 1944 he built the St. Andrews Apartments on Dewdney Avenue, adjacent to the Franklin, another one of his blocks. He bought speculative lots in Lakeview on which he built houses. In 1946 he bought property on the corner of 13th Avenue and Scarth Street. Ten years later he and his sons formed a partnership with the Hills and the Kramers to construct the Financial Building on the site.⁷¹

After the death of his wife Jennie Lenore in 1950, he remained active in the affairs of his business, at times intervening to remind tenants that their children should be quiet in the hallways, at times asking them not to sunbathe on the balconies or have noisy parties. He

66 HBF, letter, Black to R.B. Bennett, 11 Dec. 1934.

67 HBF, letter, Black to R.B. Bennett, 11 Dec. 1934: this letter presents Black’s view of a litany of sins and treacherous self-aggrandizing plots hatched by various Conservatives, and Conservative lawyers, in Regina since The First World War. Black’s attitude towards Bennett is more forgiving: “I must confess that you were the only one whom I was satisfied was loyally behind me through the three years that I was Chairman of the Commission.”

68 HBF, letter, Black to R.B. Bennett, 25 March 1935.

69 *Regina Daily Star*, 13 Oct. 1937, p. 3.

70 HBF, letter, R.B. Bennett to Black, 12 Jan. 1943.

71 See W.A. Riddell, *Regina from Pile O’ Bones to Queen City of the Plains*, (Burlington, Ontario, Windsor Publications, 1981), page 204, story of McCallum Hill Ltd.



Jennie Lenore Black

Collection of the author

also wrote paternalistic notes to his tenants in a style and tone similar to this letter to a family renting one of his apartments in Regina's Crescent Annex:

Dear Friends:... The complaints mostly are about the noise of children running up and down the stairs, and then jumping two and three steps at a time. There are a number of children who do not belong to the apartment and along with the occupant's children make a lot of noise. The door of your suite is always left open and this encourages outsiders, I'd also bring to your attention our Rule No. 12 which states that children must not play in the halls. With children you should insist they be quiet. Trusting you will endeavour to make living conditions better for your adjoining tenants, Very truly yours,
Henry Black⁷²

Henry Black died on July 29, 1960. He died a proud capitalist, a teetotaling Presbyterian and, despite his great disappointments during the 1930s, a devout member of the Conservative Party.⁷³ He was often characterized as ruggedly honest in business and public life. For him, public service was an obligation, particularly for those who, like himself, had become wealthy through business.⁷⁴ His beliefs had carried over in his directing of the largest relief scheme in Canada in which recipients did not receive charity. Instead, they accepted a loan from government that included their signature on a promissory note for repayment. Black had always paid his bills and he expected nothing less from relief recipients in the long run. Moreover, as a businessman who had always paid his bills on time, he was dismayed to find himself in the position of having to shield the Saskatchewan and Canadian governments from bill collectors when they did not provide the Commission with the funds required to pay the suppliers of relief goods.

When the Relief Commission was first established, Provincial Secretary M.A. MacPherson provided Black with guidance on the work responsibilities of the Relief Commission. After going through the Government's wishes for fuel distribution, clothing distribution and the relationship with the retail merchant's association, MacPherson urged Black to observe two cardinal principles – "alleviation of distress and no wastage of public money."⁷⁵ Even if the Commission could only alleviate some of the distress caused by drought and depression, Black did everything humanly possible to ensure that no public money was wasted.

As for the lack of reward for his immense sacrifice, Black may have been one of the most extreme examples of the unfairness of the patronage system but he was hardly alone. As historian Larry Glassford has

73 His will stipulated that none of his properties could "be used or rented for the sale or manufacture or intoxicants." The Presbyterian Church had become part of the United Church of Canada by this time, and Black had also directed a \$10,000 donation in his will to the United Church in Regina.

74 A December 9, 1917 *Regina Morning Leader* ad for Black's Mayoralty put it more plainly: "Your vote for H. Black, retiring alderman, is respectfully solicited for MAYOR 1918. Mr. Black is now completing his third year as alderman and is fully in touch with all municipal matters. Being a heavy taxpayer, Mr. Black is vitally interested in an economic administration of local affairs."

75 HBF, letter, M.A. MacPherson to Black, 1 Sept. 1931.

72 H. Black, letter to Williams, May 9, 1956,

pointed out, R.B. Bennett's Conservative government was extremely ineffective in dispensing patronage to its supporters. This was, in part, a consequence of the Great Depression itself as Bennett became so preoccupied with the problems of governing in a fiscal crisis that he often delayed, or forgot about, Senate and Lieutenant-Governor appointments.⁷⁶ Henry Black was one of the forgotten.

Postscript: A Friend from the Past Reaches Out

Although employees of the Relief Commission, under General Manager, C.B. Daniel, handled the day-to-day administration, Black intervened personally on occasion and received letters like the following:

Pierceland, Sask
June 17, 1932

Dear Henry:

I have been tempted to write you for some time and finally the temptation has got the better of me. However, after an acquaintanceship of some 25 years I have no hesitation in writing you, knowing full well that if you do not fully agree with what I have to say, you will not be highly indignant nor again prostrate with joy at receiving the information. Your position as Chairman of the Saskatchewan Relief Commission, I am sure, is not a very pleasant one during this trying time of food depression and far be it from your humble servant to add to your worries.

How I got up here in Township 61-26-3 is a chapter all by itself. It might sound something like the Children of Israel trekking out of Egypt but Moses is not at hand and the Red Sea refuses to part its waves. In short, I am what is generally known as a 'homesteader' in these parts as "... a two-headed billy-goat who had signed on the dotted line, promising to love, cherish and greatly improve 160 acres of fairly heavy timber, mosquitoes and sand-flies (with the aid of none save Divine Providence) but one who unfortunately forgot to leave his stomach and the attendant occasional desire for food in the so-called dried-out areas of Southern Saskatchewan.

If you were to put yourself in my position you would readily understand what is worrying me – with nine of us all told, on land 55 miles from railway – no cow, no garden stuff until possibly this coming fall – nothing except four uncompleted buildings – just a strong desire to continue to live. This week the Relief Officer left me an order from your commission covering two months' period amounting in all to \$11.35 or \$5.66 a month. This figures out as considerably less than one cent per meal for each of us. When one has absolutely no other subsistence except this order (as is the exact truth in my case) it is practically impossible to live for that length of time, especially when groceries are purchased at prices not at all similar to city groceries. "Strange as it may seem" I have lost exactly 54 lbs. in weight up here

due largely to under-nourishment and hard work on the dear old homestead and believe me, if this continues, I will be able to make Mr. Mahatma Gandhi look like the fat man in a circus.

I can only conclude that the Commission is not aware of the exact state of affairs among a lot of the newer settlers in this area. Surely you have been misinformed and I am not speaking for myself alone, but for quite a number of others who are exactly in the same boat. I sincerely hope that you will make it your business to have some reliable party come up here and investigate and this should be done at once, as I know in my own home we will not have more than we can scrape along with (using every economy) for more than two weeks.

If many of us had cattle, hogs and a garden from last year, it would be a slightly different tale. Fish abound in the lakes north of here but, as a matter of fact, it has been almost impossible to get fish all winter. There are lots of good beef cattle on some of the adjacent ranches but beefsteak is almost an unknown quantity. We only had meat about three times all winter. For the last two weeks we subsisted chiefly on bread and water. I was clearing 10 acres of land at the time and had to quit, as I played out on this rigorous diet.

I think I have told you enough so that if you see fit to take any action you will have something to go on. If I ever get down to Regina again, I intend going straight from the Union depot over the street to Jim Cooksley's butcher shop to see if T-bone steaks are still in existence.

With kindest personal regards to yourself and family, I am
Yours sincerely,
W.C. Bettschen

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76 Glassford, *Reaction and Reform*, pp. 132-3.