

The Regina Manifesto and the Origins of Canada's Parliamentary Socialists

Canada's Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, forerunner of today's New Democratic Party, may have been less militant than some of its contemporary rivals. But its founding document is a powerful call to arms — and present-day socialists could learn from its boldness.



The CCF was founded in 1932 in Calgary, Alberta. (Wikimedia Commons)
The Great Depression of the 1930s laid bare the inherent injustice and inhumanity of capitalism. Breadlines and dustbowls — increasingly ubiquitous symbols of intense misery — defied explanations for social suffering that placed the blame on individuals and undermined the case against government interference in the economy. The collapse of the world economy, as historian James Naylor recently [explained](#), “lent credence and a heightened confidence to capitalism’s strongest critics.”

In 1932, a group of women and men representing workers, farmers, academics, and religious leaders met at the Royal Canadian Legion #1 in Calgary, Alberta — now Canada’s conservative epicenter — to discuss their common experiences of exploitation. Surrounded by symbols of Canadian (really British) patriotism — the Red Ensign and a portrait of the king — they debated strategies to create a nation that would make possible “[a much richer individual](#)

[life for every citizen.](#)”

For those who did not believe in revolution, the solution was obvious: the formation of an electoral party to challenge the Liberals and Conservatives — “[the instruments of capitalist interests](#)” — for political power. A socialist government, they [argued](#), was the only way to “put an end to this capitalist domination of our political life.” The following year — the worst of the Depression in Canada — they founded the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF).

A Socialist Vision for Canada

The CCF was a socialist party, but not a labor party. Unlike the British Labour Party, unions did not enjoy a dominant voice in party governance; they were simply one voice among many. Because Canada was not sufficiently industrialized for a party to rely on an organized-labor vote, the early architects of the CCF understood that electoral viability would require a cross-class constituency. This set the CCF at odds with Canada’s militant industrial unionists.

The CCF represented the democratic-socialist, anti-communist faction of a divided Canadian socialist movement. Because they were not hamstrung by the Soviet model of “democratic centralism,” like their communist counterparts, the members of the CCF democratically decided on policies and platforms at annual conventions. The party engaged in extra-parliamentary organization and adopted decentralized and democratic governing structures to manage differences between its diverse constituencies, which included workers, farmers, women, and socialist organizations from across the country.

The CCF’s first statement of principles — the [Regina Manifesto](#) — was unabashedly socialist: “The present order,” it says:

is marked by glaring inequalities of wealth and opportunity, by chaotic waste and instability; and in an age of plenty it condemns the great mass of the people to poverty and insecurity. Power has become more and more concentrated into the hands of a small irresponsible minority of financiers and industrialists and to their predatory interests the majority are habitually sacrificed. When private profit is the main stimulus to economic effort, our society oscillates between periods of feverish prosperity in which the main benefits go to speculators and profiteers, and of catastrophic depression, in which the common man’s normal state of insecurity and hardship is accentuated.

The only way to remove “these evils,” the manifesto continues, is in “a planned and socialized economy in which our natural resources and principal means of production and distribution are owned, controlled and operated by the people.”

The manifesto called on Canadians to engage in a cross-class effort to replace the capitalist system with “a social order from which the domination and exploitation of one class by another will be eliminated, in which economic planning will supersede unregulated private enterprise and competition, and in which genuine democratic self-government, based upon economic equality will be possible.”

Eradicating Capitalism

In an age where discussion of capital controls is considered beyond the pale, the confidence with which the manifesto asserted its ideas is striking. Recognizing that the ability to implement planning for the public interest would come to nothing if capital remained in private hands, the authors of the document declared the need to socialize finance:

Control of finance is the first step in the control of the whole economy. The chartered banks must be socialized and removed from the control of private profit-seeking interests; and the national banking system thus established must have at its head a Central Bank to control the flow of credit and the general price level, and to regulate foreign exchange operations. A National Investment Board must also be set up, working in co-operation with the socialized banking system to mobilize and direct the unused surpluses of production for socially desired purposes as determined by the Planning Commission.

“No CCF Government,” the manifesto concludes, “will rest content until it has eradicated capitalism and put into operation the full programme of socialized planning which will lead to the establishment in Canada of the Cooperative Commonwealth.”

In the years that followed, capitalism was not eliminated. But it *was* reformed. The Second World War demonstrated the power of a planned economy by quickly and efficiently mobilizing industrial production and the workforce. In the context of the war economy, the CCF’s growing popularity — evidenced by a second-place finish in the 1943 Ontario provincial election, and the formation of a government in Saskatchewan in 1944 — convinced politicians from across the spectrum to implement the welfare state and a broad social safety net.

Postwar Canada, as a result, was relatively prosperous and increasingly equitable. It was not perfect, and many groups — especially Indigenous peoples and racialized minorities — continued to suffer. Nevertheless, in the light cast by postwar prosperity, capitalism appeared malleable and salvageable, and the radical ideas of the CCF fell out of favor.

Back to the Future

In response, the party shed its overtly socialist positions and, in 1963, merged with the newly formed Canadian Labour Congress to form the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP). The NDP, in its frequent accommodation of *laissez-faire* liberalism, has often failed to uphold the backbone and adherence to principle to be found in the CCF legacy. The decline of a socialist electoral Left freed capitalism from its postwar restraints, and neoliberalism and austerity flourished.

The twenty-first century, following the postwar welfare-state interregnum, has been [characterized](#) by what the Regina Manifesto called “glaring inequalities of wealth and opportunity,” “chaotic waste and instability,” “poverty and insecurity,” the concentration of power “into the hands of a small irresponsible minority,” along with environmental destruction, accelerated by the climate crisis.

The founders of the CCF were correct. Capitalism is inherently incompatible with equality and justice, and a cross-sectoral federation representing working people must take political power to democratically [implement](#) a socialist vision. Only then will we be able to fashion a society interested in meeting “human needs and not the making of profits,” end the exploitation of the natural environment, and ensure all can live fulfilling and prosperous lives.

The Regina Manifesto remains an inspiring blueprint for a socialist future. The NDP, now more than ever, would do well to take a page from the original CCF playbook.