

“Political Leadership and Democracy in Manitoba:  
The Roblin Era and Beyond.”

Draft Paper for the Templeton Lecture on Democracy,

April 4, 2011, St John’s College

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## **I. Introduction**

Let me begin with a gigantic understatement. It is truly a great honour to have been asked to deliver the Templeton Lecture on Democracy, especially when the lecture is being given as part of a day long event examining the policy legacy of the Honourable Duff Roblin.

It was my great good fortune to know both Carson Templeton who inspired and endowed the lecture series and Duff Roblin who provided the lead funding and allowed his name to be attached to the position of the Roblin Professor of Government, a position which I held for a decade.

As an original member of the organizing committee for the Templeton Lecture it was wonderful to encounter the public-spirited initiative, imagination, curiosity and generosity of Carson Templeton. There was always a twinkle in his eyes when we talked about the state of democracy in Canada and elsewhere. Knowing his aspirations for the lecture series and the stature of past lecturers, I have tried my best to prepare some remarks that he would find interesting and that are worthy of this occasion.

Turning to Duff Roblin, my first awareness of him as a leader occurred when I left a new high school in East Kildonan in 1961 and headed off to a growing University of Manitoba. For me this represented far more than a bus ride across the city. As the first ever member of my family to attend university, the experience provided me with the knowledge, skills and aspirations to have a rich and fulfilling life. Like thousands of other young Manitobans from that period, my life has been a product of the social investments and opportunities created by the Roblin governments of the late 1950s and most of the 1960s.

This indirect, historical connection came to mind in 2000 when I was very fortunate to be appointed as the first Duff Roblin Professor of Government. This appointment was the highlight

of my academic career. Even before this honour was bestowed on me, I regarded Duff Roblin as the greatest Premier this province has ever had. In the many recent celebrations of his life there has, in my opinion, been insufficient recognition that he was also a thoughtful, enlightened and influential statesman on the national, political stage. I always felt that having his name on my business card and being introduced here and across the country as the Roblin Professor of Government gave me credibility beyond what I had earned. In addition to the symbolism of the title, there were also the very generous material benefits of reduced teaching, the opportunity to collaborate with exceedingly bright young Roblin Graduate Fellowship holders and the financial resources to conduct research and to stage events. Holding the professorship made the past decade the most productive and satisfying of my 40 plus years (nearly 50 if you count student days) at the University of Manitoba. I owe a great deal of whatever I have achieved to Duff Roblin, his governments and his friends who supported the establishment of the professorship. On this public occasion, I am pleased to say thank you, which hardly seems adequate.

Before discussing Roblin's political leadership in the context of Manitoba democracy, let me suggest that Duff and Carson Templeton had important values and beliefs in common. Both were individuals of outstanding character and integrity. They were wonderful "citizens" in the broadest meaning of that term. They believed in and lived by such virtues as responsibility, duty, loyalty, integrity, respect for others and commitment to the collective good of society. Both were deeply interested in the ongoing dialogue over the ideas and public purposes which should guide change and progress within a pluralistic, democratic society.

Duff and Carson believed deeply in the importance of education, seeing it as much more than simply preparation for jobs. They also recognized that education was not confined to the classroom; rather it took place throughout society on many different levels. For them education

and democracy were fundamentally and inextricably linked. Creating knowledgeable and engaged citizens, they believed, should be one of the aims of education. For them, education in the broadest sense was essential to achieve the recognition, understanding and accommodation of different, at times divergent, values and interests in more complicated, pluralistic societies.

Of these two exemplary citizens, Duff Roblin was, of course, the more prominent public figure. As we all know, he was designated the greatest Manitoban of the 20th century in a 2008 selection process conducted by the CBC and the Winnipeg Free Press, an honour richly deserved.

Tonight, I want to talk about how Duff Roblin's personal philosophy and his leadership approach transformed democratic life in Manitoba.

Rather than keep you in suspense – this is not a mystery thriller – let me outline my main points at the outset and you can then decide whether I have marshalled persuasive arguments and evidence to support those points.

I begin from the premise that it is hard to imagine a strong, healthy democracy without effective and ethical political leaders. I will argue that political leadership is a complex, interactive process that takes place in a particular context. Actions by political leaders reflect and are constrained by the context in which they operate and yet simultaneously their actions modify that context.

When Duff Roblin emerged as a political leader in Manitoba, democracy was in the doldrums and the provincial government was not addressing the emerging challenges of an industrial, increasingly urban and more diverse society. In collaboration with his colleagues in the Progressive Conservative Party of Manitoba, Roblin provided the ideas, energy and actions

needed to revitalize democracy in the province and to transform the role of government in setting directions and achieving positive change within society.

In talking about Roblin as a transformational political leader, I want to contrast his deep understanding of and support for traditional forms of representative and responsible government with the newer ideas of participatory democracy and citizen engagement which gained strength in the Manitoba political culture during the late 1960s and beyond. In the participatory mode of politics and governing, citizens are meant in some measure to provide their own leadership rather than have elected and appointed public office holders simply act in their name.

I will argue that Roblin would find such a polarized choice between representative versus more participatory forms of democracy as too simplified and unhelpful. With the practical wisdom for which he was famous, he would probably argue that a 21st century democracy must be prepared to examine a range of mechanisms to enable the public to have a greater voice in the political and the policy-making processes, to strengthen democratic accountability and to improve public trust and confidence in government as an institution. However, as an institutional conservative, he would warn against the unforeseen, disruptive and potentially damaging consequences of widespread use of mechanisms of direct democracy to resolve public issues.

Having attributed a position to Roblin I then want to endorse it, thereby appropriating his reputation to my argument that as we seek to improve democracy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century we should focus more on refining the existing channels of representation than on implementing widespread direct or on-line democracy. This leads to my conclusion is that the most likely, and the most desirable, future scenario for Manitoba democracy is a blend of traditional representative processes with the selective use of direct democracy devices. Even with the potential for digital

democracy, there will be crucial need for political leaders who have the character, integrity, knowledge and skills to lead effectively in more complex, turbulent environments.

Having given away my conclusions and drained the presentation of any suspense, hopefully I can still hold your attention as I develop my arguments.

## **II. The Key Concepts**

After four decades of criticizing students for failing to define terms, I feel compelled to begin with a brief discussion of the key concepts of democracy and leadership. Both topics are broad and controversial. Whole forests have been sacrificed in the form of books, reports and articles on these topics.

At the risk of great oversimplification, I take democracy to be based on four broad value premises:

- Respect for the rule of law;
- Support for individual and group autonomy;
- The acceptance of competing values and interests;
- The reasoned consideration of alternatives and the need to accommodate, to the greatest extent possible, divergent perspectives.

There are many different constitutional and institutional designs that might contribute to the fulfillment of these four value premises. Again in broad, simplified terms, three sets of structural features are required for a healthy democracy:

- Meaningful channels of representation, particularly free and fair elections;
- Mechanisms to promote transparency and accountability;
- Opportunities for citizen participation and influence.

In addition to such essential structural features, political leaders must understand and respect the values and norms of behaviour required to have a truly democratic society. As R. MacGregor Dawson wrote many years ago in *The Government of Canada* (the textbook on which my

generation was raised), democracy requires a “genuine spirit of tolerance and fair play.” I will have more to say on this requirement later.

Many distinguished scholars would argue these features represent too limited a definition of democracy. They believe that democracy has, or should have, more sweeping, idealistic connotations of active citizenship which goes far beyond voting in periodic elections and writing the occasional letter to an elected representative. They believe that more continuous engagement by citizens would make government decision-making more representative and responsive, would contribute to more effective policy outcomes and would increase public trust and confidence in government. Greater participation would also offer the potential for learning and personal development for those citizens who commit time and effort to such activity.

All of this is probably true but, as I will argue later, we need to be realistic about the willingness of the public to participate more regularly and the potential danger that the best financed, best organized and the loudest voices will dominate more direct modes of democracy.

Turning to leadership, this concept is almost as elusive and contentious as democracy. In the early 1990s when I began to look at leadership in the public sector, one of the first books that I read was Joseph Rost, *Leadership for the 21st Century*. In what was an exhaustive review of the leadership literature between 1900 and 1990, Rost found no fewer than 221 definitions of leadership in close to one thousand books, chapters and journal articles. Leadership, especially what qualifies as good leadership, seems to be very much in the eye of the beholder.

There are many different schools of leadership scholarship and practice. Again at the risk of oversimplification, I divide them into two broad camps.

The first is the “Great Person” school. It focuses mainly on the personal qualities, behaviours and situational responses of individuals who are given the title of leader. Most of this

literature is derived from the experience of the private sector and features celebratory stories of heroic and charismatic C.E.O.s who single-handedly overcome insurmountable obstacles to turn failing enterprises around. As we have seen in the business press coverage of the economic recovery from the 2008 meltdown, the stories of corporate superheroes often leave out or minimize the part played by government bailouts and other forms of support.

A second approach sees leadership as an interactive group process in which individuals motivate and influence others to work towards a shared purpose. Under this approach the distinction between leaders and followers becomes blurred, there is a recognized two-way flow of influence, and leaders are found throughout organizations, not just in the big offices occupied by people with the formal titles. Fortunately more realistic ideas about shared and quiet forms of leadership have gained popularity in recent decades.

Following the lead of James MacGregor Burns, a distinguished leadership scholar, the distinction is often made between transformational versus transactional leadership.(Burns, 1979) Put simply, transformational leaders enlist followers by achieving their identification with and support for a higher level cause. In contrast, transactional leadership operates on a less elevated level and involves mainly an exchange of benefits, both material and symbolic, in return for support and actions.

If presented with this dichotomy, most of us would probably opt for transformational leadership based on values and integrity over a more calculated, negotiated transactional style of leadership. For me, however, “the best” type of leadership is contingent on the context and the task at hand. This suggests that a dichotomy between two styles of leadership neither is too simplistic and does not mirror the complications of leading in the real world.



This is particularly true in political life where transformational leadership is relatively rare and even transformational leaders must often rely on more transactional techniques to move their agenda forward. This is the case because of the distinctive context and constraints of leadership in the public sector compared to private firms. In the interest of time, I will simply list some of the features of politics and governing that create obstacles to bold leadership:

- the range of values and interests that need to be accommodated in decision-making are numerous and often conflicting;
- as a consequence, the goals of public policy tend to be multiple, vague and often shifting, reflecting the political requirement to mobilize consent and build support for government action;
- there is no widely accepted “bottom line” in government, and therefore what qualifies as success is very much open to debate;
- to ensure that such debates take place, there is a paid “Loyal Opposition” who can be counted on to constantly scrutinize and criticize government performance;
- increasingly, governments operate in a fishbowl which means that the messiness, uncertainties, conflicts and shifts in direction are on display to an extent that would drive most corporate CEOs crazy;
- the media are critical in shaping public perceptions of politics and government and they have become generally negative and sensational in coverage which has become non-stop and instantaneous.

Given these fundamental conditions and constraints in the world of government, inspirational, bold and decisive leadership is relatively rare, even in well functioning democracies.

Turning to an examination of Roblin’s leadership, I want to argue that personal character and contextual circumstances combined to shape his leadership style and approach to revitalizing democracy and changing the role of government. Roblin was not a flamboyant or theatrical leader. He followed a quiet, shared approach to leadership. He understood the social psychology and dynamics of leading a party and a government in a society with a political culture that was small “c” conservative in content and tone.

### **III. Leadership and Democracy During the Roblin Era**

It might be argued that given his family background Roblin was born to be in politics. He wrote in his memoir that entering political life was “no whim” and continued the thought by writing “I was determined from the beginning, even if subconsciously, to be premier of Manitoba” (Roblin, p.23).

Roblin grew up in a family which emphasized personal responsibility and service to the community. A dominating presence in that life was his paternal grandfather, Rodmond P. Roblin, who had served as Premier from 1900 to 1915. In his memoir, Roblin recounts fondly childhood memories of Saturday morning visits with R.P. (as the former premier was known) when histories and biographies would be read to him. At his own home, over Sunday dinners there were rousing political debates – Tories versus Grits – between R.P. and Duff’s maternal grandfather Andrew Murdock, who lived with the family. With this family background, it is tempting to raise the perennial debate over whether leaders are born or made, but I will dodge the issue by simply saying it is both.

In the case of Roblin, he prepared himself to be leader by becoming an avid student of the principles and practices of cabinet-parliamentary government. He read the works of such icons of British political thought as Edmund Burke, Benjamin Disraeli and Lord Shaftesbury, as well as John A. Macdonald in the Canadian context. Based on his knowledge of the requirements for meaningful party competition and rigorous legislative debate, Roblin entered electoral politics in 1949 determined to challenge the non-partisan, coalition government approach to running the province that had prevailed since the early 1920s.

Several arguments had been made in favour of coalition government. For example, it was argued that a small, “have less” province like Manitoba could not afford to be divided in its efforts to gain financial and other forms of support from the national government, It was also

argued that intense and rigid partisanship would weaken the role of the Legislature as a check on the political executive and lead to patronage and other forms of corruption. Finally there were the unity requirements of a great depression and World War II which made partisan disagreement seem inappropriate.

The 30 plus years of coalition government in this province stands as the longest stretch of coalition government in Canadian history, a fact which has largely gone unmentioned in the current federal election campaign in which the phrase “coalition government” has become a dirty word.

The coalition period in Manitoba involved limited, straightforward, fiscally prudent, and honest government. Less positively, the absence of party competition took its toll on the health of Manitoba democracy. As documented by Murray S. Donnelly, elections were lackluster events, turnouts were low, many rural MLAs were embalmed in office through acclamations, there was no significant opposition in the Legislature and party organizations outside the legislature atrophied. (Donnelly, 1957, p.30).

During the coalition period governing was all about balancing the books and administering existing programs, activities which were meant to be kept free of politics. As Bill Neville wrote in a fine essay in the recent book on Manitoba premiers: “Essentially Roblin argued for the necessity of putting politics back into politics” (Neville, p.239)

From his election to the Legislature in 1949 as an Independent Conservative opposed to the coalition, through to his becoming Premier from 1958 to 1967 and on to his time as Senator (1978-1992) including two years as Government Leader in the Senate (1984-1986), Roblin defended in words and deeds the principles and practices of cabinet-parliamentary democracy. He understood far better than most politicians that our system of government represents a

distinctive approach to distributing authority and holding politicians to account for their exercise of power.

Put simply, cabinet-parliamentary systems concentrate power in the hands of the prime minister and the cabinet and then seek to prevent abuses of authority by requiring ministers to boast and confess before the legislature, the media and the public at large. The principles of collective and individual ministerial responsibility provide the constitutional foundation for this arrangement.

Collective responsibility translates into the requirement that governments retain the confidence of a majority in the legislature, that outwardly the cabinet demonstrates solidarity behind its legislation and spending, and that the proceedings of cabinet remain strictly confidential.

Individual ministerial responsibility means that cabinet ministers are legally in charge of their departments, set the policy directions of those departments, answer before the legislature for departmental activity and pay a political price (loss of reputation always and in the worst case the loss of a job) when something goes seriously wrong within their portfolios of departmental and non-departmental bodies.

Most Canadians do not know how fundamentally different the cabinet-parliamentary approach to the distribution and control of political power is from that which operates in the U.S. political system which is based on an elaborate system of divided powers and checks and balances among the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. Inherent in the design of our system is the original belief in a strong, initiating executive that could use public power for collective purposes. Inherent in the U.S. system is a preference for dispersed power reflecting an underlying fear of government trespassing on individual liberty.

The greatest danger in our system is an excessive concentration of power in the hands of a small group of partisan figures called the Premier and cabinet, especially when there is a majority government and strict party discipline applies. In contrast, the greatest danger of the U.S. system is gridlock and institutionalized buck passing which arises because, acting alone, no one institution – the Congress, the President or the Courts – is able to bring about any major policy changes.

Roblin was very much aware of these fundamental differences between the two political systems. He also recognized that many Canadians were ill informed about our political system and had misguided ideas about how power should be exercised based on the fact they were constantly bombarded by news about American politics. I recall Duff asking me once whether any study proved that either system generally produced better policy outcomes and greater voter satisfaction. When I replied that I knew of no such study, his response was: “Well, there is something you might want to work on.”

Roblin recognized that competitive and disciplined political parties are essential in Canadian democracy. The arrangements of cabinet-parliamentary government elevate parties over individuals, which is far less the case in the U.S.A. where more politicians advance their careers by becoming “free-lance” policy entrepreneurs. In our system of government, parties and partisanship provide the ideas and the energy which drive the political and policy processes. For example, parties will help to shape and give meaning to the votes of Manitobans on October 4, 2011, the first fixed-date election in Manitoba’s history.

Parties also act as giant personnel agencies for the recruitment and election of members to the legislature. The party with the largest number of MLAs – usually a slim majority in the

case of the Manitoba Legislature – provides leadership and direction to government, ideally based upon a mandate to do certain things obtained from voters during the election.

Other parties perform the function of providing a visible and responsible opposition to the party in office, something which is considered valuable as a check on the possible abuse of executive power, as an outlet for minority opinions and as a means of ensuring peaceful alternation in office. The cabinet-parliamentary model does not presume much, if any, policy initiation from the opposition. Moreover, governments are not expected to regularly compromise or modify their legislative and financial plans based on opposition criticism because to do so would diffuse their responsibility and accountability to voters who have granted them an election mandate to govern along certain lines.

Finally, for both political and psychological reasons, individual MLAs see themselves as part of a cohesive group, which means that voluntary party solidarity more than enforced party discipline produces almost 100 percent voting along party lines in the Legislature. In short, parliamentary government is mainly a team sport, not an individual competition.

At present there is a strong anti-party mood among Canadians. Over 90% of them tell pollsters that they are not in favour of MPs or MLAs being required to vote along party lines. It is alleged that party discipline makes elected representatives into trained seals, increases prime ministerial power and undermines the role of the Legislature as a check on the political executive. There is some validity in these complaints but they involve exaggeration and ignore the benefits of competitive, disciplined political parties.

As already mentioned, party solidarity and discipline help to ensure that governments are able to carry out their election promises. In order to advance their careers, ambitious politicians must attach themselves to a party and a program that is tolerably representative of society and

this requirement limits the opportunities for purely self-interested maneuverings. There is always the requirement for leaders to bring party followers along. For example it was pressure by Paul Martin and his followers that caused Jean Chrétien to retire earlier than he planned. In British Columbia the Liberal caucus forced Premier Campbell to leave. It is an exaggeration, therefore, to argue that party leaders in office, with all the perks that entails, cannot be seriously challenged and forced to leave by their own members.

Let me say a brief word about the development of capable political leaders. A few years back, Roblin kindly read the draft of an article of mine in which I argued for a national school of government for new and aspiring politicians. The article began with the following quotation from the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson: “Politics is the only occupation for which no preparation is thought to be necessary.” Roblin and I agreed that preparation was in fact necessary. He was less sure about whether my idea of graduate education for politicians was desirable or feasible. Most of the knowledge and skills of the good politicians, he believed, came from learning on the job so to speak. His initial years in opposition were described in his memoir as an “introductory course in Political Science 101” (Roblin, p.78).

What Roblin developed during his time in public office was good political judgment or to use an old-fashioned term “prudence”. At its simplest, prudence involves the discernment to make sounder practical judgments based on experience and reflection. In terms of the requirements of public life decisions made by leaders who possess practical wisdom are often “better” than those that might be reached by people with more education and more access to relevant knowledge. Please don’t misunderstand me, Roblin believed deeply in the importance of evidence-based policy making. However, he saw it as the job of political leaders to combine, and at times reconcile, expert knowledge with public values and public opinion.

The importance Roblin attached to ideas in public life can be seen in his actions after the Progressive Conservatives had left the coalition government. In the 1953 election, the Progressive Conservatives had run only 38 candidates for the 57 seat Legislature and elected only 12 MLAs. The party campaigned almost entirely on an anti-government platform and the disappointing result was, in Roblin's words, "what his party deserved." The next year when Roblin became party leader, he began what he saw as the essential process of developing policies across all fields of government activity. He was the catalyst, but this was very much a shared leadership process. "It is enough," he wrote, "to be permitted to conduct the orchestra without trying to play all the instruments" (Roblin, p.78).

In addition to policy development, Roblin embarked on the systematic recruitment of talented individuals from all corners of the province. These individuals would form the Progressive Conservative team which won a minority government in 1958. Majority governments followed in 1959, 1963 and 1966. It was a far more representative group of candidates than the Conservative Party had ever before presented to the electorate.

As the political head of government, Premier Roblin ran a small, efficient cabinet, which grew from nine members in 1958 to fourteen by 1967 when he resigned to run unsuccessfully for the leadership of the national Progressive Conservative Party. For most of his time in office, Roblin served as both Premier and Provincial Treasurer (The equivalent of Finance Minister today). As Treasurer, he chaired the Treasury Board committee of cabinet. In Roblin's day, this committee went well beyond the usual function of reviewing spending plans and became involved with the formulation of policies related to resource development, urban growth, health care insurance and educational reform (Dunn, p.110).



It is interesting to note that critics accused Roblin of being a dictatorial premier long before the accusation of one-person rule became as fashionable as it is today. As is the case with all premiers, Roblin was definitely more than first among equals. He had a vision of the future needs of the province and he was prepared to use his prerogatives as leader of the party and Premier to move his ideas forward. However, he respected the principles of collective cabinet decision-making and used the cabinet as a forum to reconcile disagreements. In a 1983 interview he described the dynamics of cabinet decision-making as follows: “My technique was to ensure that each minister had a chance to state his opinion. After that I would declare what the consensus was” (Dunn, p.119).

Likewise, Derek Bedson, who was recruited from Prime Minister Diefenbaker’s office in Ottawa to serve as Clerk of the Executive Council, observed that Roblin granted individual ministers considerable autonomy but contacted them weekly to keep informed about what was happening across government (Wilson, p.112).

Based on his recruitment efforts Roblin had assembled a talented group of ministers who were leading figures in their home communities and could not simply be taken for granted or ignored by the premier. Recalling the names of Roblin ministers such as George Johnson, Sterling Lyon, George Hutton and Sidney Spivak and others, one is struck by the stature and capabilities of his cabinets which were half the size of contemporary cabinets. Dr George Johnson, M.L.A. for Gimli, was probably the closest in philosophy to Roblin, and the premier relied on Johnson as Education minister from 1961 to 1966 to steer through the ambitious program to modernize Manitoba’s school system, about which I will say more in a moment..

Roblin believed in the tradition of an impartial, relatively permanent civil service. In a system of cabinet-parliamentary government based on the principles of ministerial responsibility,

the role of the civil service is “to be on tap not on top.” In other words, the job of civil servants is to provide neutral, sound policy advice and to carry out the directions of the premier, cabinet and individual ministers in a professional, efficient manner. Roblin realized that the civil service had not been asked to be highly innovative during the coalition period. To ensure the implementation of his ambitious agenda, he recruited a small number of key people from other provinces, mainly Ontario, to serve in strategic locations. There was, however, no widespread turnover in the senior and middle ranks of the civil service.

To implement Roblin’s wide ranging agenda; the civil service had to grow and to become more professional. In 1958 when Roblin took office, total provincial spending stood at only \$100 million (in today’s dollars that would be approximately \$800 million in a provincial budget of \$13 billion in 2010-2011) and the civil service employed only 4,417 people (compared to 15,000 today). During Roblin’s decade in office, spending increased fourfold and the civil service doubled in size to over 8,000 employees (Thomas, p.231).

From the outset, Roblin recognized the bias towards growth inherent in a system in which ministers and their deputy ministers were expected to be advocates on behalf of their departments and the sectors of society that depend on their programs. The job of the cabinet minister, Roblin said, was “to tell the civil service what the public won’t stand for” (Colombo’s New Canadian Quotations). For this reason he remained chair of the Treasury Board committee until his last two years as Premier.

Before leaving to run unsuccessfully for the national leadership of his party in 1967, Roblin appointed the Operation Productivity Committee, an outside group to examine the expansion and efficiency of government operations. By then there was a growing public backlash to rising taxes, especially to the introduction of the retail sales tax. Manitoba was the last of nine

provinces to levy a sales tax (Alberta still does not have one). Roblin recognized that Manitobans believe they are entitled, almost by birthright, not only to buy most things wholesale, they also expect wholesale government which is both affordable and effective.

The highest investment priority for Roblin was education, which he saw not just as preparing people for jobs and making Manitoba competitive but also as the foundation for strong citizenship in a democratic society. Roblin was attracted to the notions of progressive education as one way to create more equal opportunities for children from all social backgrounds. In 1958 the education system was highly fragmented, consisting of more than 1,500 school districts and another 42 private schools, all of which had limited finances and were facing a shortage of qualified teachers (Cousins, p.13). Roblin saw the crucial need for consolidation and modernization of the system. However, he also recognized the acute political sensitivity of taking control over education away from local communities, especially in relation to elementary education. Accordingly, he proceeded cautiously with school consolidation.

The modernization process began in the winter of 1958 with an intensive campaign to sell the benefits of larger, integrated school districts. No fewer than 600 local meetings were held across the province. This was followed in 1959 with plebiscites held in 36 of 46 proposed school divisions. In 32 of those divisions consolidation was approved, but actual consolidations proceeded at a glacial pace. Eventually, to speed up that process, the Roblin government announced in November, 1966 that referenda would be held in 33 school districts to bring elementary and secondary schools under a single board. An enriched grant was offered to encourage local ratepayers to vote in favour of consolidation, but despite this inducement (critics called it a bribe) only fourteen of the 33 districts approved the single-district concept.

On the school consolidation issue, the eminent historian, W. L. Morton accused the Roblin government of “leading from the rear”. (Morton, p. 486). Morton favoured provincial legislation to force the integration of elementary and secondary schools. Of course such bold action would require less courage for a tenured academic to recommend than for a premier to implement, when he was trying to retain a majority in a legislature where 37 of the 57 seats were in rural Manitoba.

Roblin wrote in his memoir that the cross-province consultations and the use of plebiscites were exercises in direct democracy, an approach that he argued should be used sparingly and “should not be elevated into a fixed principle of our parliamentary system” (Roblin, p.115). Perhaps Roblin’s general opposition to direct democracy was one of the lessons learned from his childhood Saturday morning visits with RP. Back in 1912, when the direct democracy bandwagon was rolling across Western Canada, Premier Rodmond P. Roblin delivered a famous speech denouncing initiatives and referenda as “a denial of responsible government and a form of degenerate republicanism” (Morton, p.144). In 1916 the Liberals, who had replaced the first Roblin government, passed the Initiative and Referendum Act, but based on second thoughts they referred their own legislation to the courts and it was eventually ruled unconstitutional by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council because it altered certain fundamental features of the parliamentary system.

Let me go back to the “genuine spirit of tolerance and fair play” which ought to be central to a democratic culture. Roblin believed in this notion. He conducted political activity with civility. He had political opponents, not political enemies. He knew he could not force his ideas on the public; he had to change fundamental public beliefs and values, which was a long

term, uncertain and politically risky process. He knew the importance of respecting minority rights.

The issue of Francophone language rights and schooling illustrates this last point. Roblin recognized the need to provide support to the Francophone minority whose language was gradually losing its place within Manitoba society. Over a number of years, he sought to find a pragmatic and prudent path to providing support in ways that would not be highly divisive. In 1965, his government established a system of shared services between public and private schools as a low profile way to provide some public funding to Manitoba's Roman Catholic schools. In 1967, Bill 59 was passed in the Legislature to allow for French as a language of instruction in social studies and "such other subjects" as the minister of education might stipulate by regulation (Russell, pp.216-217). Roblin believed that these compromise arrangements had defused the incendiary potential of language issues. However, the later crisis of 1981-1984 over English-only laws revealed that this was not the case. A difference in the 1980s was that some political leaders were prepared to exploit the emotionally charged issue without calculating the costs to society of arousing deep divisions and conflicts.

Before turning to the evolution of Manitoba democracy since the Roblin period, let me summarize how I have characterized his leadership. Roblin recognized that political leaders and political parties are integral to representative government. To be successful, leaders must embrace goals and use skills that are congruent with the historical context. The preeminent skill of leaders is the discernment of the needs and the political possibilities within a society in a given time period. Roblin recognized that in a traditionally conservative society like Manitoba he had to be prudent in order to be bold. He combined both transformational and transactional politics. Roblin was not a dramatic or theatrical leader, but he communicated with great clarity

and conciseness, even on complicated topics. He appealed to the better nature of Manitobans and sought to education them to rethink long-standing assumptions about democracy and to overcome their limited expectations about the potential of government to produce positive change within society.

### **Contemporary Manitoba Democracy**

Most, if not all, observers agree that the Roblin period ushered in the modern era of Manitoba democracy. However, much has changed in the political context between the 1960s and today. The agenda of governments over the past three or four decades have become less ambitious, but politics and governing have become more complicated and challenging. I would point to the following trends as evidence of this claim:

- The public has become suspicious of the motives, intentions, and trustworthiness of politicians and pessimistic about the capabilities of governments to solve major economic and social problems;
- All political parties have gravitated to the political centre by crafting policies meant to appeal to voters who are less ideological and more fickle in terms of party loyalty;
- A more complicated and aggressive 24/7 media environment has emerged and today more political fights are won in the media arena than in the legislature;
- Most of us have become spectators to the political process, gaining our perceptions of leaders and their parties from the media, especially television;
- A process of professionalization of politics has taken place with more reliance on political advisers, polling, focus groups and sophisticated communications strategies;
- There has been greater centralization of the governing process around the premier and his office, reflecting a preoccupation with managing the political agenda and countering opposition and media attacks;
- With the expanded scope of government there are more numerous pressure groups pushing their points of view in the corridors of power;
- The size, complexity and diversity of the civil service has increased, especially in the form of more semi-independent arms-length bodies;
- The role of the courts in the policy process has expanded;

In process terms, the combined impact of these trends has been to create a more complicated and demanding political environment than the one Roblin faced back in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the public was more deferential towards political leaders and the range of demands from outside groups were fewer than today. In substantive terms, however, contemporary political leaders offer voters more limited visions than Roblin did in his day. Today in order to gain credibility and to mobilize support, leaders need to manage public expectations and to work with stakeholders to develop politically feasible and affordable policies and programs.

To illustrate the importance of context let me offer a brief contrast between the leadership of Roblin and Gary Doer. Both men spent a decade in opposition before they won government. Like Roblin, Doer used his opposition years to transform his party to become more centrist, but still progressive. Beginning in 1999, the NDP's success in winning three majority governments was based in part on "under promising and over delivering"; an approach that fit with the public perception that government lacked the capability and the money to solve overnight complex, seemingly intractable economic and social problems.

It was also the case that there was less to be done than when Roblin first took office back in 1958. As a result of the initiatives of the Roblin governments and governments that followed, there were fewer brand new policy spaces to be filled by NDP governments in the first decade of this century.

In summary, I think that the context in which Doer became premier demanded a more limited, transactional approach that relied more on so-called "retail politics" to "sell" new initiatives to skeptical voters. In saying this, I am not suggesting that Doer and his governments lacked ideas and a sense of direction.

There has always been a fair amount of stability in Manitoba society and politics. We have not had parliamentary crises involving the misuse of prorogation and dissolution by governments to escape accountability, as has happened in Ottawa.

Since 1969 Manitoba has evolved into a “two-party- plus” pattern of party competition. This has meant that minority governments have been rare. There have been only two in the modern era – Roblin in 1959 and Filmon in 1988. Majorities have usually been small, however. In such situations, the requirement to keep in touch with backbench opinion means there is more emphasis in both parties on caucus democracy than exists within governing parties at the national level. When majorities are slim, backbenchers can not only bark, they can bite. This was illustrated by Jim Walding’s vote to defeat the 1988 budget of the Pawley government, which is the only time in Canadian history that a majority government fell because one of its members voted against it.

There have been intense issues and the occasional political scandals leading to public anger, but in general Manitobans seem to be reasonably satisfied with how the political process operates in the province. This does not mean that the province is immune from the worrying trends of declining trust in government and withdrawal from the traditional political process. Here and elsewhere in Canada there is said to exist a so-called democratic deficit. I want to make three brief points about this concern.

First, the phrase “democratic deficit” is used by different commentators in different ways. Most often it refers to declining turnouts in elections. In Manitoba, the 54% turnout in the 2003 provincial election was the lowest in the modern period and turnout only rose to 58% in the 2007 election. In terms of the mandate theory that I described earlier it would be better if governments gained office with a higher percentage of Manitobans voting.



Second, the democratic deficit phrase is sometimes used to describe the low levels of public trust and confidence in political institutions, like leaders, parties and legislatures. This is too complex a topic to be explored here. Let me just say that there are both long-term forces and short-term developments that account for the poor reputation of today's politicians. In part they have themselves to blame based on their own deeds and misdeeds. Institutional arrangements and processes are also part of the explanation, but such features only account for a small part of the problem. This means that we should not look for a quick institutional fix to the so-called democratic deficit.

Third, perhaps the most worrying concern under the heading of a democratic deficit, is the relative lack of interest and participation by young people in the traditional processes of parties and elections. Young people have always voted in fewer numbers than middle aged and older voters. The worry is that current low levels of political engagement may carry over into later life when most people reach their peak in terms of their willingness to vote and perhaps go beyond that minimal act of citizenship to become involved with other explicitly political activities. I should add that younger people today are not completely disinterested and apathetic; rather their participation is based on causes more than traditional avenues of political engagement.

Fourthly and finally, we need to maintain a sense of proportion about the depth of the problem. Critics go too far when they suggest there is a "crisis" of democracy, especially in Manitoba. Levels of public trust and confidence are certainly lower today than in the past, but they have been shown to fluctuate significantly in response to short-term events. Also, some measure of skepticism is healthy in a democracy. The institutional foundations of our system are not crumbling. Three quarters of Canadians still tell pollsters that our political system is superior

to any other in the world, although they say this without much actual knowledge of how the system is meant to work.

In the late 1990s when Roblin was completing his memoirs he was acutely aware of the malaise within the political system. . His next to last chapter was entitled “Give Politics Back Its Good Name” As an institutional conservative his prescription to deal with the malaise was a limited one: reduce the number of votes treated as confidence matters, send topics of future government bills to committees for “pre-study” and allow members more freedom to exercise their independent judgments on more matters. Notably, he insisted that elected representatives should see themselves as trustees, not as delegates elected simply to carry out the wishes of their constituents

Over the past four decades, both NDP and Progressive Conservative governments have, in fact, introduced numerous reforms, intended, at least in part, to strengthen democracy and to increase public trust in government institutions. The list of reforms would have to include the following:

- The passage of a Human Rights Act and the creation of a commission to oversee its operation;
- The appointment of an ombudsman to assist citizens with complaints about government actions and inactions;
- The adoption of freedom of information legislation;
- The adoption of general privacy legislation, as well as laws to protect personal health information;
- Limits on campaign spending, tax credits for political contributions, disclosure of campaign contributions and eventually a ban on corporate and trade union contributions to parties and candidates;
- Fixed election dates which remove the premier’s prerogative to control the timing of elections;
- Conflict of interest rules for MLAs and ministers;
- A lobbyist registration act;
- The granting of political rights for civil servants below the level of deputy minister;
- A guide to values and ethics for the civil service;
- Programs to support diversity and gender equality at all levels of the civil service;

- New frameworks for the governance and accountability of crown corporations, including the requirement that the major crowns hold annual public meetings with their “customers”;
- Published reports on broad social indicators of the impacts of government activity and more narrowly focused reports on departmental and program performance;
- A broader mandate for the Auditor General to investigate the efficiency and effectiveness of spending and a legislated minimum number of meeting of the Public Accounts Committee of the Legislature;
- The passage of a balanced budget law, which cuts the salaries of cabinet ministers if government runs a deficit and requires a referendum before any increases in income or sales tax can take place;
- Legislated requirements that a referendum be held before the privatization of Manitoba Hydro or Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation can take place;
- The occasional use of all-party committees of the Legislature to consult the public on sensitive topics like the Meech Lake Accord and smoking regulations;
- Widespread use of other consultation mechanisms using panels of outside experts or civil servants.
- The use of information technology to improve the quality service delivery to strengthen democracy one transaction at a time.

Critics would say this list is impressive in length, but not in substance.

For those people who value public participation in its own right as a source of improved representation and greater legitimacy for decision-making, tinkering with constitutional and institutional arrangements does not go far enough. They would favour more direct participation mechanisms such as citizen initiatives, referenda, recall petitions, citizen assemblies, open primary contests to select candidates and even on-line voting on issues.

In the present circumstances, I think there are several reasons to be skeptical about the desirability and feasibility of such proposals.

First, there is not compelling evidence to suggest that a large segment of the public want to get involved. Experience with participatory mechanisms of various kinds suggest that people are prepared to take the time and effort to become involved only on a very selective basis, most often when government decisions affect them directly and adversely. People tell pollsters they want a say in decisions, but most do not want direct, actual involvement in decision-making,

which they are prepared to leave to elected officials. Lack of time is cited most often as the main obstacle to greater involvement, but this probably reflects the low priority politics has in the lives of ordinary citizens.

Interest and knowledge of politics is worryingly low. Civic illiteracy (a polite word for public ignorance) about the most basic features of the cabinet-parliamentary system is high, with just over half of Canadians saying they know nothing at all about the constitutional and institutional arrangements of the country. In fairness to citizens, our constitution is a complex blend of written laws and unwritten constitutional conventions which defy easy understanding. The elusiveness of our constitutional rules means that a determined prime minister or premier can potentially violate the spirit of the constitution in order to evade accountability and then be politically successful in misrepresenting his actions to an indifferent and ill informed public.

In summary, the barriers to greater public engagement are broadly a mixture of cynicism towards politics, a lack of attention and knowledge of public affairs and a lack of time when other activities are considered more important. Participation has always been skewed in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and age, with better educated, more affluent people from mainstream ethnic groups, men and older individuals tending to be more involved in traditional forms of political participation.

In thinking about ways to improve the democratic process, we should avoid a polarized choice between the current representative system and the glittering prospects of direct democracy seemingly made possible by the miracles of modern technology. Given the complex, even contradictory, nature of their views on participation, most members of the public would probably prefer reforms to existing institutions that are integrated with new procedures for more direct participation.

Let me use the example of the Manitoba Legislature to illustrate the potential for a hybrid approach combining direct and indirect avenues of representation in the policy process. In one respect the legislative process in Manitoba is more accessible and open to citizen input than other jurisdictions. For decades, unless otherwise ordered, all bills have been referred automatically after second reading to the Law Amendments committee of the legislature where individuals and groups can appear to offer comments and possibly changes. The number of citizens who appear on their own behalf is small; it is mainly the affected groups who show up to testify. Nevertheless, the hearing process obliges them to make their case in public as opposed to behind closed doors, which is valuable in terms of transparency..

.The committee hearing process has its limits. The fact that bills have passed second reading, which constitutes approval in principle, means that any fundamental changes proposed by interveners may be ruled out of order. Also, a government's reputation will suffer if it is In any case most governments do not like to be seen as backing down on their legislative proposals. Notice of meetings on bills is short so ordinary citizens have trouble being aware of and showing up to testify on legislation. There is also the opposite problem when issues of high intensity arise and there are orchestrated campaigns intended to clog up the committee hearings with long lineups of witnesses. We saw this on the Meech Lake Accord hearings.

A more participatory approach, and one that would reduce the potential for obstruction, would involve much greater use of all-party legislative committees reaching out to the public on contentious topics before the government takes a position. Technology could facilitate such consultations that could take place outside the regular sessions of the Legislature which are compressed into a short fall and somewhat longer spring period. At some point, we might even consider the system of e-petitions adopted by the Scottish, Welsh and UK Parliaments. The

system gives the public the chance to raise issues and, after filtering, select issues are considered by subject matter committees. Often this process leads to program changes and occasionally to legislation.

At present, the Legislature does a poor job as a “school of politics”, which is how Roblin envisaged it. Too much of its time is taken up with a kind of pantomime adversarialism in which parties exaggerate their differences, the opposition launches attacks, the government reacts defensively and no real learning takes place. For the individual backbench MLA, the legislative process provides too few opportunities to acquire new knowledge and even fewer opportunities to use it in a meaningful way.

As mentioned earlier, cabinet-parliamentary system which focuses responsibility and accountability with the premier and cabinet, so backbenchers will never have that many chances to change legislation and spending. However, they could play a more important role by using committees to examine the impacts of existing policies and programs, including how effectively they are being delivered by departments and the various non-departmental bodies.

For this scrutiny approach to work several things would have to happen: ministers would have to welcome enhanced scrutiny as a way to improve performance, opposition leaders and MLAs would have to be less preoccupied with scoring political points and MLAs from all parties would have to commit the time and effort for few immediate political rewards. This is a tall order given the prevailing political and parliamentary culture which is too caught up in the dynamic of blaming and defending. All that I could add by way of persuasion is that the public seems to be fed up with mindless partisanship, and seeing parties work together to improve performance would help in some measure to restore the good name of politics.

In conclusion, my main theme has been that we need, and should nurture, good political leadership if we want a vibrant and healthy democracy. Criticizing politicians as a class of citizens – regardless of their individual merits and weaknesses – is counter productive and dangerous. It may deter good people from putting themselves forward as candidates and party leaders. It is hard to imagine where Manitoba might be today if Duff Roblin had not entered the political arena. His inspired leadership revitalized democracy and transformed the role of government. He was prudent and practical. He recognized that compromise was an essential requirement of politics and not a betrayal of principles. Some measure of skepticism about politicians is healthy in a democracy, but rampant cynicism is not. Let's end our celebration of the Legacy of Duff Roblin, with three cheers for democracy and two and a half cheers for politicians. Thank you for listening... I hope that I have done justice to this wonderful occasion.

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Thanks and appreciation are extended to Professor Christopher Dunn, Mr. Joe Martin, Mr. David Mc McCormick and Professor Bill Neville for conversations and advice during the preparation of this paper.