

CHAPTER SIX

Corruption in Prince Albert: The Failure of the Reform Movement

The dissent displayed by the Halfbreeds and Europeans was qualitatively different from that of the Indians and the Metis in the Northwest. And for good reason. The Halfbreed and European settlers were to be allowed into the new wheat economy according to the plans specified in the National Policy. They, along with the expected thousands of new European immigrants, were to be systematically exploited by the eastern manufacturers and merchants. The Indians and Metis, on the other hand, were not to be allowed into the new wheat economy. Instead, they were to be abandoned as a people and sidelined as a surplus population. Whereas the Metis struggled to resolve questions of a land base and the right to survive as a people, the other settlers of the Northwest simply sought reform legislation that would give them a better deal within the new wheat economy.

There were, however, serious political splits along class lines within these European and Halfbreed groups. Although the class divisions were not uniformly reflected in the voting patterns, it was clear that the Conservative Party was controlled by the Prince Albert speculators and businessmen, while the Liberal Reform Movement that developed locally between 1880 and 1885 was the creation of a small group of European intellectuals, and was supported by a substantial number of poor farmers.¹ Of these two classes, the Conservative clique of speculators and businessmen held virtually all the institutionalized power, controlling both the economic and political destiny of the District of Lorne. The District of Lorne was the electoral district that sent Lawrence Clarke, the first elected member in the North West Territories, to serve on the North West Council in 1881. This was the district that contained the town of Prince Albert as well as the Metis communities of St. Laurent, Batoche, Duck Lake and St. Louis. In fact, politics and economics were intricately interrelated, since the source of both economic and political power was the federal government. The speculators of the Conservative clique received access to information regarding the government's development plans that enabled them to earn fortunes as investors. In return, the clique ensured

that the federal government's policies for the exploitation of the region would be carried out efficiently at the local level. Thus, over the years, the Prince Albert Conservative clique became an elite group which owed its continued existence and growth to the federal government's patronage system.

As the fur trade decreased in the region and the HBC's importance waned, Lawrence Clarke, using his political position within the Conservative party, became heavily involved in land speculation. As an insider, he was able to use his knowledge of the government's development plans to his own advantage. As well as being an investor in his own right, Clarke, with another prominent Conservative party member, Colonel Sproat, became a land agent for most of the large property owners of the Prince Albert region.² This group, referred to by local people simply as "the clique," dominated both the business world and the political scene in the Prince Albert region from 1883 until long after the "rebellion" was over.

The Conservative clique had an almost foolproof political machine at its disposal in Prince Albert. It was well funded and consisted of the wealthiest and best-educated members of the community. These people were so successful politically that they often won elections with a three-to-one majority over their only opposition, the Liberal Reform group. As a result, the District of Lorne regularly sent members of the Conservative clique to Regina as elected members of the North West Council.

Lawrence Clarke served on the North West Council from 1881 to 1883. He was succeeded by D. H. MacDowall, who held office from 1883 to 1885. Even after the rebellion, the clique continued to dominate local politics when O. E. Hughes succeeded MacDowall in 1885.³ All of these men belonged to the same political machine and represented the interests of the same clique.

In view of the scandals that frequently surfaced, it is remarkable that the clique managed to retain such a tight grip on the voters of the district. Members of the clique were often the recipients of government contracts, so much so that the practice appeared as open patronage. On at least one occasion this blatant political patronage almost led to open rebellion in the town of Prince Albert. The trouble began in 1883, when the federal government issued a contract for an eighty-three-mile telegraph line to be constructed from Clarke's Crossing to Prince Albert. The eventual location of the telegraph terminal was important because the terminal would not only mark the centre of the future business district of the town but also determine in large measure the future value of properties within the town limits. As a result, businessmen vied with each other to have the telegraph line terminate on their own property.

The district superintendent of telegraphs in the Northwest, a man named Hartley Gisborne, was attempting to ensure that the line would end on the property of Lawrence Clarke and his associates, who not only controlled the

local political machine, but also owned most of the property in the wealthy subdivision of Goshen. Since Lawrence Clarke and D. H. MacDowall had purchased most of the stock for the telegraph poles, Gisborne argued that they should have control over the location of the terminal.

The plot to place the telegraph terminal on the Clarke-MacDowall property was foiled by their political adversary, Dr. Andrew Porter of Prince Albert. Dr. Porter, the first physician to practise medicine in the North West Territories, was a highly respected man, despite his radical politics. When he brought the plot to the attention of the Prince Albert citizens, they became enraged: it was yet another case of political patronage. On a brisk November afternoon in 1883, an angry crowd gathered in the streets, loudly demanding the resignation of Hartley Gisborne for his part in the telegraph scandal. However, Gisborne was nowhere to be found, having taken up residence in the luxurious home of Lawrence Clarke.

The Clarke mansion became Gisborne's refuge when the crowd took to the streets. Gisborne did not make a public appearance until long after tempers had cooled and people had returned home. Before dispersing, however, the crowd cut down and hauled away the telegraph poles that had been installed according to Gisborne's orders on the Clarke-MacDowall property. Gisborne then charged six of the townspeople with "unlawfully and maliciously removing and carrying away . . . the property of the Dominion Government."⁴ Summonses were issued to the six accused men. This so infuriated the community that a crowd again gathered on the streets and burned Gisborne, Clarke and MacDowall in effigy. The crowd then marched *en masse* to Clarke's residence with the intention of seizing Gisborne and sending him out of town after tarring and feathering him. They were deterred from this action only when Lawrence Clarke met them at the door of his mansion with a loaded shotgun.⁵

Lieutenant Governor Dewdney kept Sir John A. Macdonald informed about the trouble in Prince Albert. On November 13, 1883, Dewdney sent a telegram indicating that the local police "were of little use" and requested permission to bring in Magistrate Richardson (the man who later sentenced Riel to death). Dewdney reported that 150 cases were awaiting trial as a result of the disorder. When Richardson arrived on the scene he reported that law and order were crumbling. He wrote: "I have come to the conclusion that we are very much at the mercy of the people."⁶ Richardson informed Dewdney that he had encountered a crowd of three hundred men whom he suspected "had revolvers secreted about them" and who "meant to resist the law."⁷

The civil disobedience displayed by the townspeople over the telegraph affair caused the government to rush troops to Prince Albert: a large contingent of police, under Inspector W. D. Antrobus, arrived on November 18, 1883, to restore law and order. When Inspector Antrobus refused to tell

the people precisely why the troops had been sent to Prince Albert, the angry people concluded that his silence on the matter was an attempt to cover up the government's relationship with the Conservative clique. However, the people's charges of tyranny and partiality did nothing to remove the troops from Prince Albert.

James Campbell, justice of the peace for the North West Territories, was concerned that, because of the frequent scandals, the people of Prince Albert no longer saw the federal government as legitimate. In fact, the discontent was so widespread that Campbell could never be sure whose side any particular member of the local population would take; he was therefore reluctant to swear in local special constables.⁸ However, tempers eventually cooled and life returned to normal. Despite the ill feelings created by this scandal, Clarke and MacDowall managed to stay in control of the political situation, and MacDowall went on to win the election of 1883 in a landslide victory over his opponent, Dr. Porter.⁹

The uneducated (some were even illiterate) people of Prince Albert and its region were no match for the sophisticated and crafty members of the local Conservative political machine. The Conservatives, however, did not depend totally on the townspeople for support at the polls. They also had the support of virtually the entire Metis population in the district.

Father André had a record of obsequious behaviour among the well-educated, economically powerful members of the Conservative party in Prince Albert. To be sure, André felt that it was in the best interests of both the Metis and the Catholic Church to support the powerful Conservative clique, hoping that these gentlemen, in return for Metis political support, would represent the Metis fairly and justly in their demands to the federal authorities in Ottawa.

Political candidates for the District of Lorne depended upon Father André for Metis support. The Metis represented a large block of votes. Without their support, there was little chance for success. The Metis voted as a block, and they voted according to the instructions of one man: Father André. Until Riel's return in 1884, Father André and Lawrence Clarke were the political "king makers" of the region. Politicians seeking the large, critical block of Metis votes came "cap-in-hand" to the short, robust priest. André, for his part, could virtually guarantee the outcome for any aspiring candidate.¹⁰

André had given his support unequivocally to Lawrence Clarke when he was elected to the North West Council in 1881. Since there was no effective reform party in the District of Lorne at that time, Clarke had run against another Conservative, Captain Moore. André ensured Clarke's victory by throwing his support behind him because of Clarke's generosity to the "Catholic cause." Lawrence Clarke had never been stingy to the Church; his frequent donations are a matter of record. Father André publicly labelled

Captain Moore as a Mason and a Protestant extremist and, as a result, Clarke enjoyed a landslide victory over Moore. While in office, Clarke had further ingratiated himself with Father André by ensuring that certain of the schools in the District of Lorne would teach only in the French language.

Clarke and his successors in the Conservative party were particularly adept at playing the two important ethnic groups of the district off against each other. They consistently used the Metis vote to prevent reform candidates from obtaining a seat on the North West Council. André's status as the moral guardian of the Metis enabled him to use his influence to prevent his followers from electing reform candidates, even though they had genuinely espoused the struggle for Metis rights, and incorporated Metis demands into their political program.¹¹ Consequently, the Metis consistently supported the party that, as it turned out, proved to be their worst enemy.

In 1883, elections were again held to choose a new member for the North West Council. This time, the Conservative candidate, D. H. MacDowall, was faced with a strong opponent and a fairly well-organized reform group, known as the Popular Movement.

The Popular Movement arose as a result of the discontent generated by the local depression, brought about by the shift of the railway to the southern part of the prairies in 1882. This shift occurred because the CPR executive had plans of its own for making a fortune on speculation in urban development along the new route.¹² Contributing to the regional instability was the federal government's failure to completely resolve the land-title question, so that many farmers could not obtain loans from the banks. The land-title question was further exacerbated by the fact that immigrants were rapidly moving into the area.

Although Dr. Porter and his cohort, young William Henry Jackson of Prince Albert, presented a genuine political platform for reform in the election of 1883, they did not get the majority of votes from either the mixed bloods or the poor European farmers. Clarke and MacDowall, despite their involvement in the telegraph scandal, managed to retain some popularity among these poverty-stricken groups. By 1883, squatters were moving in and actually driving some of the Metis off the lands they had occupied. Yet, under the direction of Father André, the Metis supported the Clarke-MacDowall alliance in this critical election. It was the Metis vote, in fact, that ensured MacDowall's defeat of the popular movement. Father André explained:

The elections this year took place in March. Two candidates stood, Mr. MacDowall, representing the Bourgeoisie and Doctor Porter for the lower classes and the Free masons But thanks to catholic support, the candidate of the Bourgeoisie has been elected and to recompense his Metis voters he gave \$100 for the erection of the church of Saint Antoine.¹³