

Review Essay

Saskatchewan Myth and Reality and Left to Right

Dale Eisler.

False Expectations: Politics and the Pursuit of the Saskatchewan Myth.

Regina, Saskatchewan: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 2006.

Dale Eisler.

From Left to Right: Saskatchewan's Political and Economic Transformation.

Regina, Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2022.

Reviewed by Eleanor D. Glor

Dale Eisler was one of two journalists who covered Saskatchewan provincial politics for the *Regina Leader Post* newspaper when I lived in Regina during the 1970s and 1980s. Eisler was considered politically in the centre or maybe right-wing and a consistent critic of the (then) left-wing New Democratic Party (NDP) government of Premier Alan E. Blakeney. The other journalist was John Twigg, who was considered more sympathetic to the government. The *Regina Leader-Post* is now part of the right-wing Postmedia Network.

Eisler grew up in south-eastern Saskatchewan, worked for 26 years as a Saskatchewan and Alberta journalist, and spent 16 years as a senior public servant in the federal government of Canada. He was Assistant Deputy Minister for the Energy Security, Prosperity, Sustainability Task Force at Natural Resources Canada; Assistant Deputy Minister of Communications at Finance Canada; Consul General for Canada in Denver, Colorado; and Assistant Secretary to Cabinet (Consultations and Communications) in the Privy Council Office (the Prime Minister's department). He clearly has excellent communication skills did him well. He is now a Senior Policy Fellow, Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Regina.

Journalists, like most other people, are not always consistent with their politics in their writings but most tend in a direction, as newspapers also do. Eisler's two books on Saskatchewan politics reviewed here reveal something more about him. He is supportive of the right-wing Liberal governments (1905-29, 1934-44, 1964-71), critical of the left-wing CCF and NDP governments (1944-64, 1971-82). He especially liked the Liberal Ross Thatcher government (1964-71), about which he wrote another book, *Rumours of Glory: Saskatchewan and the Thatcher Years* (Eisler, 1987). While he has some criticisms of the incompetent, corrupt and ideological Grant Devine Progressive Conservative government (1982-91), he is not as critical as some commentators. He is rather neutral about the centre-left Roy Romanow government (1991-2007) and right-wing Saskatchewan Party governments (2007 to present).

In my opinion, Eisler's perspective on Saskatchewan history is (not surprisingly), informed by his (unnamed) politics. He argues against the innovativeness of the CCF

governments, for example but he wrote a book about the Ross Thatcher Saskatchewan government, which was not innovative, from 1964-71.

John Twigg ended up as a journalist in Victoria, B.C., the *Victoria Times Colonist*, with Eisler working for Conservative then Liberal bureaucracies in Ottawa, the Canadian capital, and for the Canadian diplomatic service elsewhere. Given Eisler has his own politics, he has addressed some very interesting Saskatchewan topics in the two newer books, reviewed here,

False Expectations: Politics and the Pursuit of the Saskatchewan Myth truly is about the Saskatchewan myth. Eisler proposes that a myth—that Saskatchewan can be more than it is and the dream of a much greater destiny—has always shaped politics in Saskatchewan from its creation as a province in 1905. While myth can play a positive role in politics, as a way for politicians and populations to formulate the idea of and bring into being a better place, it has risks. Saskatchewan's myth was initiated at the time of the protectionist National Policy, in existence when the federal government sought to lure as many settlers as possible to the province during the first three decades of its existence, 1905-1930. The myth was shattered (Eisler uses many superlatives, especially in the next book reviewed, that make his writing interesting) during the Great Depression and Dirty Thirties ("Dirty" named for the dust clouds of prime black soil that blew around and away during the drought that hit southern Saskatchewan very hard). Many southern Saskatchewan farming families lost their farms and moved away (my grandfather Johnston's family, which farmed near Rosetown, was one of them).

The myth of Saskatchewan as the promised land was renewed by the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) party with its core inspiration, the social gospel. According to Wikipedia, the social gospel is a social movement within Protestantism that aims to apply Christian ethics to social problems, especially issues of social justice such as economic inequality, poverty, alcoholism, crime, racial tensions, slums, unclean environment, child labor, lack of unionization, poor schools, and the dangers of war. Eisler suggests the myth was reinvigorated in the meaning of Medicare to Saskatchewan, where it saw its first implementation in North America, and in recent decades through competing visions for economic development. The competing approaches to economic development have been social democratic, mainly through state corporations, and neoliberalism, through public subsidies to private sector corporations. In 2006, Eisler suggested Saskatchewan still had a more substantial collective sense than other Canadian provinces. He also suggested that the Tommy Douglas government was not as innovative as we believe, because in some areas of the province doctors already had been put on salaries by their municipalities. I think of these as demonstration or pilot programs, which most innovations should have.

I disagree with his argument. I believe innovative governments, that introduce well development, successful innovations, if there is time and the capacity to consistently support initiatives and especially if they would be expensive to implement, should do experiments and demonstration projects, learn from them, modify them as necessary, and only then introduce them as universal programs. The problem, of course, is the unpredictability of duration for innovative governments. Saskatchewan also previously had some hospital doctors on salary before it introduced taxpayer-funded universal hospital care. The Saskatchewan Blakeney government (1971-82) implemented a number of demonstration projects. The Canadian federal

government has not taken this approach as much as Saskatchewan but it has sometimes adopted as national programs ones that have been introduced first in a province or even two, sometimes with some federal money, treating them as demonstration projects. It did this, for instance, with national hospital and then medical insurance, that had been introduced in Saskatchewan first and also with the late 1990s child subsidy, which had been introduced in Saskatchewan first.

In *False Expectations* but not in *From Left to Right*, Eisler identifies the disadvantaged status of Saskatchewan's indigenous population as Saskatchewan's most serious problem. Indigenous people compose 15 percent of the population, and its population is growing faster than the rest of the population.

Although the Thatcher government introduced a department to work on issues involving Indigenous and disabled people, the Blakeney government took a different approach, funding Indigenous programs and educational institutions, to be run autonomously by Indigenous people. As requested by Indigenous leaders and elders, and supported by Eisler, the innovations emphasized education. During the constitutional negotiations of 1980-81, the Blakeney government made aboriginal self-government its primary "ask" and defended it vigorously. Educated Indigenous people would be more employable, better at self-government and more effective at providing services to Indigenous people (Indigenous people did not tend to use mainstream services).

The second book reviewed, *From Left to Right*, published this year, considers, year-by-year, the transformation of Saskatchewan from a people with a strong collective spirit into a people with a strong individualistic sense. Although he does not mention it, this change has paralleled the demise of the family farm and the growth to dominance of the American-owned oil and gas industry in Saskatchewan. A similar culture developed in next-door Alberta when oil and gas became the dominant industry there. Whether the oil and gas industry with its head offices in right-wing parts of the USA tend to introduce a new culture where they mine would be an interesting topic for another book.

While *From Left to Right* acknowledges the Christian, social gospel origins of the left-wing CCF, the book suggests the social democratic ethic in Saskatchewan is a spent force. Someone else at the University of Regina, who worked for two NDP governments, has said the same thing to me. Eisler suggests Saskatchewan now has adopted a right-wing, individualistic ethic. It is reasonable to conclude its population is therefore well represented by the right-wing Saskatchewan Party, formed to separate and distinguish the Saskatchewan conservative party from its discredited predecessor, the Grant Devine Progressive Conservative party. Left and right are distinguished in Saskatchewan predominately by the economic tools they use: left-wing governments use crown corporations more; right-wing governments heavily subsidize large corporations through low taxes and no-strings-attached monetary grants and land grants.

From Left to Right begins with a still-remembered and -resented comment made by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau during the 1969 federal election. He is remembered as saying (though it is not certain he actually did say) "why should I sell your wheat?" At that time Saskatchewan's economy was primarily based on wheat and the federal government was responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board, that marketed Canadian wheat through single desk

selling (a monopoly on selling). This meant all Canadian wheat farmers received the same pooled rice for their wheat. The CWB was a collective response to the problem of each farmer being an individual economic unit that had no power in the market. Farmers were not entirely satisfied with the approach, especially large southern Saskatchewan farmers who lived near the USA border and thought they could get better prices marketing their wheat themselves (trucking it across the border). The smaller family farmers in central and northern prairie areas were happier with the CWB. At this time the federal government wanted to get rid of the 1897 Crow Freight Rate, a subsidy to rail transportation of prairie grain to export points (the Great Lakes, James Bay, Pacific Ocean). Neither of these supports exists any longer.

During the 1960s, the Thatcher Liberal government had secured investment in Saskatchewan potash, the largest deposits in the world, but by foregoing increases in taxes (including royalties). The Blakeney NDP government that took office in 1971 tried various means to secure more revenue for the province from development of its rich resources. Its efforts were challenged in the courts by both the companies and the federal government, that also wanted a larger share of resource taxes. When these approaches were unsuccessful or were delayed in the courts, the province purchased 40 per cent of the potash industry at current share prices. The American companies that owned much of the Saskatchewan industry resisted ferociously by refusing to provide legislated information or pay the taxes, and also politically. The Progressive Conservative government that replaced the NDP in 1982 eliminated most of the Blakeney government economic efforts and drove the government into deep deficit and debt. It hired two Margaret Thatcher's advisors who recommended selling off the crown corporations, as had been done in the United Kingdom. The government sold the resource crown corporations at fire sale prices.

In 1991, the Romanow NDP government inherited an enormous deficit and debt, a government that was bankrupt and a choice: declare bankruptcy and lose the capacity to borrow money or deal with the deficit and pay back the debt. In keeping with Saskatchewan NDP philosophy, it chose the latter approach. It led to abolishing valued programs (e.g. rural hospitals, the universal drug plan, the family income plan) and handcuffed the government's capacity to introduce new programs. Recreation of the resource crown corporations was out of the question as Saskatchewan could only bow money at high interest rates. The Saskatchewan Party assumed power in 2007 and completed the payments on the debt. The Saskatchewan Party continues in power today, 15 years later (there are no legal limits on how long a party can be in power in the Parliamentary system).

Starting in the late 1980s, free trade agreements with the USA, signed by a Progressive Conservative federal government, have made the traditional supports to Canadian farmers difficult or illegal. Family farming, originally based on homesteads of 160 acres of free land that spread throughout the prairies, even the marginal drier areas of the south-western Palliser Triangle and the poorer quality land, forested areas before the Canadian Shield, declined. With mechanization of farming after World War II, and lower prices for wheat, farmers needed more and more land to pay for the newly-developed, enormously expensive farm equipment. The federal government that had originally encouraged farmers to settle marginal land now encouraged farmers to sell or abandon it. Today, the family farm has virtually disappeared, with especially during the 1980s. Corporate farms (agribusiness) have taken their place, many of them

owned by Americans. This has depopulated the farms and towns of rural Saskatchewan. The province's population has rarely grown and has sometimes declined. The province's economy continues to rely on primary products, although production has expanded further. Eisler predicts the NDP is a spent force.

The Saskatchewan myth has been adopted by all Saskatchewan parties, especially during election campaigns, according to Eisler. He feels people need to hope for a better province. Although even more ideological, this is also the benefit of Trumpism—it gives people hope.

References:

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