

‘It’s not that the Tories are closer to God, they’re furthest from the Devil’: Politics and Mennonites in Winnipeg, 1945-1999

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What were the political attitudes of Mennonites in Winnipeg in the latter half of the twentieth century? Had they become increasingly involved in partisan politics? Is there a discernible pattern in Mennonite electoral behaviour during that era? There were still some groups of Mennonites who refused to deal in the affairs of politics and government because they believed it was not in accordance with the teachings of the Bible. Conversely, some Mennonites chose to become very involved politically. Many successfully stood for public office and held positions in government. Others became politically active in different ways. Some joined unions and took leading roles. Mennonite businessmen sat on the side of management in labour relations negotiations. Church members served with the Mennonite Central Committee, pursuing peace initiatives. The community in general expressed its concern for political issues in the pages of the Mennonite press. Through the use of interviews, poll analysis and community newspapers this paper will discuss the entrance of Mennonites into

Manitoba's political conversation during the second half of the twentieth century.

During the time under survey, approximately one third of Mennonites in Winnipeg belonged to Conference of Mennonites of Canada (also known as General Conference or GC) churches. Another third belonged to Mennonite Brethren (MB) churches and most of the rest belonged to the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC) and Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC).¹ These distinctions first began appearing in nineteenth century Russia and continued forming in the first half of the twentieth century in Canada. The Mennonite Brethren and Evangelical Mennonites left the greater Mennonite church over conflicts involving 'worldliness', or the extent to which the church had become too permissive.² Their members sought the enforcement of codes of conduct which would prohibit activities like drinking, dancing, smoking, belonging to fraternal organizations, pursuing higher education, reading novels, attending country fairs, and participating in politics.³ These differences have resulted in some discernible divergences in political attitudes.

Until the mid 1960s, politics were treated with apprehension by many Mennonites. The threat of compulsory military service during the Cold War gave them cause for concern. During the civil defence debates of 1954 the pages of *The Canadian Mennonite* were filled with articles urging political mobilization to combat the threat of compulsory service.⁴ Having faced such conflicts before, the Church provided leadership: "Mennonite Churches are willing to speak up before governments, not only to safeguard privileges as in time of war, but also to speak of social responsibility in other areas at other times."⁵ That 1954 editorial went on to admonish the general Mennonite naivete in regard to politics: "many did not know what was happening in the province. Others did not know there was a possibility of doing something about it."⁶ In the same year the editors of *The Canadian Mennonite* applauded those who had taken part in the elections: "most of our Mennonites are taking active part, and I think wisely, at all levels if by no other way than by voting."⁷

The question of whether to participate in politics persisted in the pages of the Mennonite press from the 1950s through the 1980s. Both the *Canadian Mennonite* and the *Mennonite Mirror* cautiously but consistently advocated political action, even though they received letters which challenged that position. As one 1957 editorial explained: "it is not easy to brush off the thought that 'politics' has not only received an evil connotation, but may also have something inherently evil."⁸ Among the *Kanadier* Mennonites in particular, but in other groups as well, there was a desire to maintain the separation between religion and politics, as well as between church and state. This attitude

is best exemplified in the 1963 declaration of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference on politics. It proposed that the basic function of the state was coercion, thereby making the state a violent, Satanic organization.⁹ Others argued that "the old answer 'we believe in separation of church and state' is easier said than realized....On the whole we are tired of the clichés 'we can't take part' or 'that is not for us'. This defensive attitude is a great part of our trouble."¹⁰ One respondent concurred that it was only reasonable for "the Christian layman to accept the challenge of politics."¹¹ Many of these discussions focused on questions of religious responsibility and both sides used religious language to express their views. For example, one editorial urged "we must pray for Parliament, encourage Parliament, write to Parliament, and constructively advise and criticize Parliament. Their problems are our problems, their sins our sins, their triumphs our triumphs. For the twenty-third Parliament we implore a sincere desire to serve God first, their fellow men second and themselves last. That surely is the will of God and the way to peace."¹²

Mennonites have in the past been described as *die Stillen im Lande*, which translates roughly as 'the quiet of the land'. Angela Kroger, in a 1968 article, argued that this name was given to Mennonites in Europe because "in their efforts to keep themselves pure, the Mennonites regarded politics with disapproval."¹³ A.M. Willms, the Chief of the Records Centre at the Public Archives of Canada, argued strongly against this practice. In his words Mennonites had been "backwards in politics."¹⁴ He cited examples of Mennonite ministers who preached against the evils of holding public office and who were then seen driving voters to the polls. He also wondered why politicians were treated as less than Christian while businessmen were held up as pillars of the community. A general suspicion of government, Willms conceded, was understandable. A linguistic and religious minority would likely feel excluded from public debates. The perceived failure of government to honour its promises to early settlers and the clash between Mennonite pacifism and state nationalism also contributed to this suspicion. By the 1960s, though, this apprehension was beginning to wane as Mennonites gradually embraced political action.

Jerome Black has described voting as the least demanding political activity.¹⁵ Judging from the interviews I conducted, it appears that many Mennonites were in the habit of voting by the 1930s. Vic Schroeder, a former cabinet minister in New Democratic Party (NDP) provincial governments, argued that the rural vote among Mennonites was strongly Liberal until John Diefenbaker became federal Conservative leader in the late 1950s. He attributed this to the fact that most Mennonites who arrived from Russia in the 1920s were admitted by Liberal governments.¹⁶ Peter Peters, a retired executive director of

Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba, confirmed that feeling: "the Liberals were the ones that brought the Mennonites into Canada so Mackenzie King was an important person, as I recall, as a child."¹⁷ Both were careful to point out, however, that voting patterns were very different after the 1950s, especially in the city of Winnipeg.

Schroeder remembered arriving in Winnipeg and being exposed to a multitude of new ideas. He became an NDPer in 1966, which he admitted was surprising, referring to his southern rural roots: "the CCF [Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, forerunner of the NDP] really didn't register on the scale in our part of the country."¹⁸ Harry Schellenberg, NDP member of the Manitoba Legislature, agreed: "it was really coming to Winnipeg that opened our eyes."¹⁹

Many Mennonites had difficulty choosing how to vote. Jacob Klassen wrote in 1963: "I would like to get an answer from the Bible: for what political party would Jesus vote if he was on earth today?"²⁰ Some turned to church leaders for guidance. A.M. Willms spoke out vigorously against this tendency, charging "we have retained the medieval conviction that the church and the churchmen must be the authorities in all matters."²¹ The General Conference churches provided guidelines for political action which questioned the practice of endorsing candidates. They also urged that a candidate's Christianity should not be sufficient grounds for political support, but that voters should pay extra attention to the tenet of biblical non-resistance when assessing a candidate's merit.²²

Some Mennonites believed they had found political parties which reflected their Christian views. One letter to *The Canadian Mennonite* proclaimed that Social Credit Party conventions "are on a higher moral plane than those of other parties."²³ Another correspondent believed that the NDP were a party closer to God.²⁴ Gerhard Ens argued against such talk, proposing that no Canadian party is truly Christian: "one of the basic principles of Christianity, that of separation from the world and of suffering, love and non-resistance is immediately violated by any political party that aspires to rule."²⁵ Ens was not opposed to political involvement. On the contrary, he supported it. He feared, however, that Mennonites could be swayed by the pious slogans of vote-seekers.

What did sway Mennonite voters? Anti-communism was one phenomenon. Those Mennonites who escaped from Russia after the revolution were ardently opposed to communism and suspicious of anything that resembled it. K.W. Taylor and Nelson Wiseman describe a "whispering campaign" in the late 1940s and early 1950s "to the effect that the CCF was in alliance with the Communists and that there was no difference between the policy of the CCF and the Communist Party."²⁶ George Epp, a canvasser in the Mennonite area of North

Kildonan, detected a similar view among many Mennonites.²⁷ Harry Schellenberg, Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for the North Kildonan riding of Rossmere, described how even at the time of the interview "in the back of the mind the NDP is close to communism, or it's a cousin of communism. That's a favourite phrase in North Kildonan, oh yes, the cousin of the communist. But I think those are the older people."²⁸

Suspicion of the CCF or NDP may have been heightened by the left's support for unions. Ted Regehr argues that few Mennonites understood how Canadian unions actually operated but their Russian experiences "had instilled a horror of all proletarian class action."²⁹ Mennonites also feared the militancy of labour unions, which clashed with their pacifist ideals. Regehr sees this as one aspect of a general fear of proletarianization among Mennonites in the post-war period. He cites the community's emphasis on education as the reason for one of the greatest changes in Mennonite society, what Leo Driedger calls the Mennonite urban professional revolution.

Beginning in the 1950s and accelerating with each passing decade, Mennonites moved to the metropolis and entered the professions. By 1989, Leo Driedger estimates that 75% of Mennonites on the prairies lived in cities, compared to 35% in 1972. The growth of Mennonite high schools and colleges was partly responsible for luring young people to the city. Advanced education provided them with skills and qualifications necessary to enter the stable work world of the middle classes. The Mennonite farmer, a traditional figure, became outnumbered 4 to 1 by the urban professional. A full 28% of Mennonites worked in the professions, the highest of any occupational category, according to Driedger's 1989 survey.³⁰ They were the second wealthiest group, behind business people, and the most educated among Mennonites. They had a higher rate of voting, 75% compared to 66% for Mennonites as a whole, and were twice as likely to vote for parties of the left or centre (the NDP or Liberals).³¹

For a closer examination of urban Mennonite voting practices I have examined electoral returns in the provincial riding of Rossmere. The riding has undergone many changes in the post-war years. It began as part of Kildonan-Transcona, a very large geographical area which was subdivided as its population increased in the 1950s. It became the Kildonan riding in 1957 and eventually Rossmere in 1969. It is perhaps the nearest thing to a Mennonite ethnic enclave in the city of Winnipeg. Although the latest census figures show that the Mennonite proportion is declining, and now is estimated to constitute fewer than one-third of the total, the example is still worth pursuing.³²

The voters lists suggest that the greatest concentration of Mennonite names belonged to the polls located at Princess Margaret

school. On the 1958 list for the riding of Kildonan, polls 2 and 3 were made of 50% Mennonite names. The 1973 list for polls 28 and 29 were both made up of 43% Mennonite names.³³

The 1958 provincial election seems to confirm some of the trends identified earlier. Voter turnout at polls 2 and 3, the Mennonite polls identified above, was approximately 50% (51% and 49% respectively), 10 points lower than the turnout for the riding as a whole and 11 points lower than for the entire province.³⁴ Support for the Liberals was unusually high. Poll 3 was one of the two polls they won in the riding. The percentage of Liberal votes in polls 2 and 3 was significantly higher than for the riding in general, though similar to that for the rest of the province: 33% and 40% compared to 25% in the riding and 34% in the province. Support for the CCF was much higher in other parts of the riding, perhaps proof that some Mennonites felt suspicious of the left. A.J. Reid, the CCF candidate who won the riding, received only 28% of the vote in polls 2 and 3, compared to 38% for all of Kildonan. This figure was still higher, however, than the 20% of the provincial vote garnered by the CCF. Support for the Conservatives, in the mid 30%, was similar to that across the riding and slightly lower than for the rest of Manitoba.³⁵

In 1962, the entrance of a Mennonite Social Credit candidate in the Kildonan race produced some interesting results. Perhaps the community followed the counsel of the aforementioned letter in *The Canadian Mennonite* which described Social Credit as being 'on a higher moral plane'. A more likely explanation is that a Mennonite candidate received a great deal of his support in the predominantly Mennonite polls. Mr. De Fehr, the Social Credit candidate, received four times more support in polls 2 and 3 than he did in the rest of the riding (18% and 23% compared to 5% for the entire riding).³⁶ The NDP received 15% less than in the rest of the riding, which they lost by four votes to the Conservatives. The Conservative vote was higher than average in poll 2 and lower in poll 3. As in 1958, the Liberals polled slightly better (2 to 4 percent) in Mennonite districts, although their support likely suffered because of the strength of Social Credit in these two polls.

Buoyed by their success in the previous election, Social Credit again nominated a Mennonite in Kildonan in 1966. Mr. Redekopp, one of 17 Social Credit Candidates contesting Manitoba's 57 seats, received 1331 votes. His total was second only to Mr. Froese among Social Credit candidates in the province. Froese, also a Mennonite, received more than 1600 votes in the heavily Mennonite rural constituency of Rhineland. Redekopp's result provides further evidence of either Mennonite support for Mennonite candidates or a group identification with Social Credit principles. Even a combination of both indicates some collective voting tendencies among Mennonites in Kildonan.

Redekopp, in stark contrast to his 11% of popular vote, received 32% of poll 2 and 42% of poll 3. In those two polls he received almost one-fifth of all his votes. The NDP continued to do poorly in these districts, receiving 15% less support than they did in the rest of the riding. The Conservatives suffered due to Social Credit's success, dropping to 25% and 15% in these polls as compared to 30% for the riding. The Liberals stayed at the same level, around 23%, having also seen a dip from previous levels attributable to the emergence of Social Credit. Ironically, the NDP, the least popular party in Mennonite polls, were the direct beneficiaries of the vote-split caused by Redekopp's candidacy. They were able to pass the Conservatives and win the riding.³⁷

The electoral boundaries were redrawn in 1969, cleaving the riding of Rossmere from Kildonan, which remained a separate constituency. The new riding contained all of the Mennonite polls we have been examining, but since no voters list could be obtained for this year my assumptions are perhaps less reliable. In any case, five polls were located at Princess Margaret school, just as polls 2 and 3 had been stationed in the old riding.

The 1969 election seems to represent a break with the past. Rossmere was won in convincing fashion by Ed Schreyer, the popular premier-elect of the first NDP government in Manitoba. Although Schreyer is not a Mennonite he speaks German and is of German descent. Remarkably, when one considers the usually low levels of support for the NDP in these areas, Schreyer received 54% of all votes cast at Princess Margaret School. This figure is for the 1100 ballots cast at the district's five polls, and each poll presents similar results. There was an anomaly: one poll was won by the Conservatives, who received 35% of the five polls. The biggest surprise was the complete collapse of the Liberal party who mustered just 8% in an area where they had traditionally been well supported.³⁸

In 1977, opposed by a Mennonite, Dr. Henry Krahn of the Conservatives, Ed Schreyer won Rossmere for the third time. In the Mennonite polls Krahn received mixed support. Although he won three of the five with approximately 50% of the vote, based on the past success of Mennonite candidates for marginal parties Krahn could have been expected to lead the NDP by more than a few votes. Schreyer captured the other half of the electorate as the Liberal collapse continued. The Liberals garnered a mere 2% of the vote, much lower than the 12% they received provincially. On the one hand, the results of the Schreyer era may be misleading because of his stature as Premier and party leader, factors that usually lend themselves to high visibility and easy re-election. On the other hand, these results may represent a turning point in terms of Mennonite attitudes to the political left.

Schreyer was succeeded as the NDP candidate for Rossmere in 1981 by Vic Schroeder. Schroeder, a Mennonite, was opposed by fellow

Mennonite Harold Neufeld, a Conservative candidate, in 1986. With the Liberals still struggling in provincial politics, how would the vote be split? Given a choice of two Mennonites, would Mennonite voters choose the right rather than the governing left? In the Princess Margaret polls Schroeder received 47% to Neufeld's 42%, and won the riding. Two years later, though, Neufeld returned the favour, defeating the cabinet minister of an unpopular government and outpolling Schroeder 41% to 32% at Princess Margaret. In the 1990s the riding has been held solely by Mennonites. Neufeld easily won re-election over the non-Mennonite NDP candidate in 1990. The NDP held the riding briefly after Harry Schellenberg's by-election victory, only to lose the seat again in 1995 to Conservative Vic Toews. Toews was then defeated by Schellenberg in 1999.

K.W. Taylor and Nelson Wiseman argue that voting for candidates of one's own ethnicity was prevalent in Winnipeg's north end in the post-war period.³⁹ This seems to correlate with the evidence from Kildonan in the 1950s. They argue, however, that ethnic voting usually resulted in support for the left, which was not the case in Kildonan, possibly due to Mennonite fears about the 'the cousins of the communists'. In 1969, there is a sudden surge in support for the left in Rossmere. We can also see that there is perhaps less evidence of ethnic group voting after this year. Whereas the Mennonite candidates of Social Credit had been well supported by the Mennonite polls in earlier elections, that trend was not as strong for Dr. Henry Krahn in 1977.

Ted Regehr identifies the Canadian centennial celebrations in 1967 as a moment of self-conscious reflection for Mennonites. Citing the content of the declarations and publications which surrounded the public events of that year, Regehr argues that "Mennonites, who had been strangers and sojourners in alien lands so often in their history, had become citizens of Canada in an emotional and religious as well as in a legal sense."⁴⁰ Although it may be an oversimplification to point to such a distinct moment in time, there appears to be some evidence that Mennonites had become more comfortable in Canadian public life by the late 1960s.

One of the first examples of a growing political assertiveness involved the government's plans to transform their community's medical centre, the Concordia hospital. Born out of the tradition of Russian benevolent societies, Concordia had provided a form of affordable community health insurance long before medicare was introduced.⁴¹ There was little protest in 1957 when changes to the provincial hospital plan undercut Concordia's privileged position in the community by enforcing uniformity in billing across the province. In 1971, however, as part of an expansion of hospital services, Health Minister Sid Green insisted that there be more non-Mennonite members on the hospital's board. The all-Mennonite board was

adamantly opposed to this dilution of the faith-based character of the institution. The Board's inflexibility prompted criticism in the Mennonite Mirror, a paper with an urban professional readership run by University of Manitoba professor Roy Vogt.⁴² The board accused the government of trying to take advantage of the Mennonites because of their preference for negotiation over protest: "it [the provincial government] may be less willing to get into conflicts with other groups in our society."⁴³ They were referring to the preferential treatment they felt had been accorded to the French Catholics in the re-organization of St. Boniface hospital.

The right to private education is another area where Mennonites asserted themselves in the public forum. In May of 1968, 115 Mennonite students, mainly from Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, took part in a demonstration on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislature. They demanded full public funding for private schools, an end to tuition fees, and the organization of a separate private schools system. At the very least, they proposed, the province should not force parents to contribute to public school funding if they chose to send their children to private schools. Many Mennonites were not impressed by this activism. Interestingly, they attacked the students on matters of principle rather than practice, showing surprisingly little disapproval for the public agitation. One letter to the editor proposed that a private school system was senseless and that these 'demands' gave Mennonite students "a black eye."⁴⁴ Another was similarly moved: "the state has shown that it is able to supply the educational needs of the population."⁴⁵ This reader was also embarrassed by the students' demands and their blasphemous singing of 'We Shall Overcome' for "such selfish causes."⁴⁶

Roy Vogt, in an editorial two years later, came out in favour of many of the students' demands: "our province will undoubtedly become a poorer place in which to live if we penalize (through taxation) those people who wish to maintain a somewhat separate religious and cultural tradition, just as it would be unfortunate if people with no interest in private schooling were forced to make contributions to it."⁴⁷ Although there was not much community consensus on the matter, perhaps that diversity of opinion was indicative of a growing political interest. The level of debate was certainly a far cry from the conciliatory tone of the *Canadian Mennonite* in 1957; "we are grateful to our country and its educational policies. We came to this country because we wanted more self-determination and freedom in education. The country on the whole has not failed us, even though we sometimes have failed our country."⁴⁸

Mennonite views on trade unionism were publicly aired in the controversial court proceedings concerning Henry Funk in 1974. Funk, an employee of McGavin's Bakeries, refused to join the plant's union.

As a result, he was fired from his job in accordance with the collective agreement. Funk took the matter to court, where he argued that his religious beliefs prevented him from joining the union. He described himself as a conscientious objector opposed to the swearing of membership oaths and the 'violent tactics' of unions.⁴⁹ The court was unsympathetic, concluding that "the state of his conscience is not founded on his religious beliefs."⁵⁰ When the Conservatives returned to government, however, Mennonite MLA Albert Driedger sponsored an amendment to the Labour Relations Act. With the support of fellow Mennonite and Conservative MLA Harry Enns, the amendment guaranteed that conscientious objectors could not be forced to pay union dues.⁵¹

The *Mennonite Mirror* received many letters supporting Funk's cause and their editorials were generally supportive of his arguments. They were surprised by the court's dismissal of his claims, a decision which they believed to be "contrary to what would appear clear evidence."⁵² Some years later, however, Vogt gave cautious support to the principle of unionism and criticized the vociferous opposition of his subscribers to strikes at Manitoba hospitals. Apparently taking issue with the community's leadership he wrote, "we have led them [Mennonites] to think that the right Christian course is to refrain from all conflict and to avoid participation in unions. But unions are here to stay: they have a legitimate role to play."⁵³ For the next two months the pages of his publication were filled with letters attacking his position.

The basis for such criticism lies partly in religion and partly in the interests of capital. Mennonite business leaders have, like other business people, historically been opposed to unions. Ted Regehr argues that some Mennonite employers were able to build their financial strength on the basis of paying employees "very meager wages."⁵⁴ They expected that "in times of difficulty they and their staff alike would make sacrifices, but most were not nearly as keen about sharing benefits when times were good."⁵⁵ The *Canadian Mennonite* reported that in 1968 the MCC peace and social concerns committee arranged for a meeting between the Christian Labour Association (CLA) and a group of Mennonite business leaders and churchmen. The CLA's message, which "rapped the evils of the trade union movement and the Marxist influence on trade union philosophy," was well received.⁵⁶ To be fair, not all Mennonites were opposed to unions. One of Manitoba's largest unions, the white collar Manitoba Teachers Society, was led by Mennonite George Enns in the 1970s. As Leo Driedger has argued, urban professionals were responsible for much of the new liberalism emerging in the Mennonite community from the late 1960s which helped break down some of these traditional ideological barriers.

Peace initiatives and social policy concerns are areas in which Mennonites are renowned for their activism. They are led in this area by the Mennonite Central Committee Canada, an umbrella organization formed in 1963 that brings the various Mennonite congregations together to work for common causes.⁵⁷ A message from the North Vietnamese government to MCC demonstrates the type of voluntarism they encouraged; "Hanoi appreciates Canadian Mennonite efforts to provide medical supplies and children's clothing to war sufferers in North Vietnam, but they would prefer to see the Mennonites raise a louder voice of protest against US policies in Southeast Asia."⁵⁸ Although not political in the formal sense, executive director Peter Peters argues that the MCC is, nevertheless, a very political organization.⁵⁹ In 1971 an MCC delegation urged External Affairs minister Mitchell Sharp to impress upon Premier Kosygin of the Soviet Union the importance of reuniting families in the Soviet Union and Canada. They also sent a delegation to meet with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1970. Trudeau and MCC leaders discussed matters of special concern to Mennonites, including their historical exemption from compulsory military service. Regehr argues that this was a definitive moment because Trudeau, although he engaged and impressed the delegation, was unable to guarantee that he would be able to deliver everything they sought: "the 1970 encounter demonstrated that Mennonites had entered the political process, only to discover that politics is the art of the possible, not of the ideal."⁶⁰

Language was a crucial factor in the growth of Mennonite political involvement. In the first sense, the increasing predominance of English and the decline of German as the language of religion and education within the community was very influential. One woman, the daughter of a Mennonite leader, wrote of her father's insistence on the use of German which "had nothing to do with a celebration of German; on the contrary it symbolized the separation of church and state. The wall of language created a space for religious freedom."⁶¹ The transition was perhaps inevitable. Although some resisted when congregations began to use English in the 1950s, by the 1970s most churches had switched to the dominant language.⁶²

Language, in the second sense, was important in shaping community debate. Mennonite leaders, journalists and politicians all seem to use the language of religion when discussing matters of politics. This, of course, touches on complicated issues of Mennonite identity. The language of religion was fundamental to Mennonites because it was religion that united them and religion was crucial to the Mennonite world view in the early 1970s. As a result, when speaking within their community, they used the language of the Bible and asked Christian questions. One person asked 'how would Jesus vote?' Another

asserted that Social Credit was 'the most Christian party', and a third that 'the NDP was closer to God'. An article entitled "Let's face it, we should get into politics" describes the need to participate politically as "our Christian duty."⁶³ Not as a moral or civic duty, but as a Christian duty.

One of the reasons for these religious invocations is that there continues to be some uncertainty or tension surrounding the relationship of church and state. When I tried to discuss the matter with Mennonite pastors, the three that I approached in Winnipeg were unwilling to discuss the matter with me. Peter Peters, when asked if the church had relaxed its view of politics replied "I don't think it has. There's still some suspicion of government."⁶⁴ In 1980, Roy Vogt declared that over the preceding three decades "we joined the world."⁶⁵ He also described the church's accompanying political dilemma: "there are those who think that for the church to become involved in affairs of state...is in itself a violation of the Christian principle to be 'in the world but not of it', while others, the consciousness-raisers, strongly advocate involvement as an expression of Christian faith."⁶⁶

By the 1980s, however, most urban Mennonites saw little danger in political participation. The families of Russian Mennonites, those who arrived in the 1920s, were perhaps most prominent in this regard.⁶⁷ Their leadership could be partly explained by generational patterns. As Chui, Jones and Lambert have identified, the children of immigrant parents are often very politically active. In fact, their study of the Toronto area indicates that political participation peaks in the second generation.⁶⁸ The 1980 federal elections indicated just how politically active Mennonites had become. Sixteen Mennonite candidates were nominated to represent parties from across the Canadian political spectrum: five Progressive Conservatives, four Liberals, three independents, two NDP, one Marxist-Leninist and one Libertarian. This seemed to prove, for the editors of the *Mennonite Mirror* at least, that "the traditional Mennonite distrust of involvement in politics is a thing of the past."⁶⁹ In another sense, however, Canadian Mennonites were "just catching up" to their European Mennonite ancestors. Mennonites had been politically involved before: "perhaps in sheer self-defence, the Mennonites of Holland and Germany began running for political office as early as the second half of the eighteenth century."⁷⁰

Defining or characterising the political attitudes of an entire community is an impossible task. It is more productive to ask about Mennonite attitudes to politics rather than about political attitudes, though the two are inseparable. The *Mennonite Mirror* argued in 1980 that "very few [Mennonites] are political radicals or even moderate

socialists, as indicated by the fact that only two among the federal Mennonite candidates [in 1980] represented the NDP.”⁷¹ This is an unfair assumption. Looking at the riding of Rossmere in the provincial elections of the 1980s, the NDP won the riding twice and even in their great collapse of 1988 lost by only five hundred votes. In the polls at Princess Margaret school, which may or may not still be heavily Mennonite (voters lists for the past 25 years are protected under Manitoba’s anti-stalking legislation), the NDP never dropped below thirty percent. Vic Schroeder argues that Rossmere’s Mennonites are politically “no more homogeneous than any other group now.”⁷²

It is especially easy to categorize rural Mennonites of the Steinbach and Winkler area as uniformly conservative. In Schroeder’s words, “in Rhineland you can run a yellow dog and as long as you put PC on him he’ll get elected.”⁷³ But, Schroeder cautions, this is not necessarily a product of being Mennonite: “I’m not so sure that the Mennonites, when you generalize, would be much different from the Anglo-Saxon farmers in Southern Manitoba.”⁷⁴ Not many agree with Schroeder’s view, however. Even in an urban context, most people, Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike, believe the community is generally right-wing. Roy Vogt argues that these conservative attitudes are partly the result of traditional religious views of politics:

The state was seen as divinely ordained and to be accepted without question (Romans 13:1) except in spiritual matters. This traditional view provides a ready sanction for the modern Mennonite who, as a member of the safe and stable middle-class, does not believe in rocking the boat or changing the comfortable status quo. This conformist attitude is further strengthened by the highly conservative brand of religious fundamentalism many Mennonites have adopted here.

Peter Peters, similarly, when asked if the Mennonite vote, when broken down among parties, was similar to the non-Mennonite vote, responded “it’s not quite. I’m embarrassed to say that.”⁷⁵

If there is a right-wing tendency among Mennonites, where does it come from? Peters admits that given the group’s historical involvement with credit unions, mutual aid societies, co-ops and community peace initiatives one might think they would tend more toward radical liberalism than conservatism. Part of the explanation lies in the experience of Russian Mennonites. Harry Enns, a long-time Progressive Conservative member of the legislature in Manitoba, keeps a photo of a murdered Russian relative in his office as a reminder of the evils of socialism.⁷⁶ Not all Mennonites lived through the Russian revolution, however. Some in the community make generalizations

about political attitudes based on the era in which one's family arrived in Canada; those who arrived in the 1870s are thought to be the most conservative and those most recently arrived the most liberal, with the exception of the colony Mennonites from Mexico who rarely participate in politics.⁷⁷

Most of the Mennonites interviewed believe that, on the whole, members of Mennonite Brethren churches are more right wing than those in the General Conference. Evangelicals are seen as the most right wing. Harry Schellenberg, although he was wary of resorting to stereotypes, proposed that his Brethren opponent Vic Toews got a high percentage of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) vote: "MB's will vote for MB's, GC's [General Conference] won't vote like that."⁷⁸ Schellenberg also stated that "Mennonites take their vote, where they put their X, very seriously. They are very political."⁷⁹ Peters concurred that a lot of Mennonites make careful political choices, often relying on their assessment of an individual's integrity and ability, rather than on loyalty to certain parties.⁸⁰ Finally, Peters said "I think they like to have good, commonsense, responsible government which fits in with the way they understand the Bible."⁸¹

This paper has traced the development of Mennonite attitudes to partisan politics from the Second World War to the present. Over these years Mennonites have come to rely less on the Church for political leadership and have become more willing to assert themselves in the public realm. The traditional practice of supporting the Liberal party has, at the provincial level, steadily declined. Group voting, it appears, has also dwindled since the late 1960s, a factor closely tied to the growth of the Mennonite urban professional class. Urban professionals have led a movement that has contributed to a general liberalization of political views. The vast majority of Winnipeg's Mennonites are now politically active, supporting causes and parties across the political spectrum. Despite these enormous changes in Mennonite society, as they became "a people transformed" in Regehr's words, their political views remain linked to their collective history. The Russian experience has clearly been significant in creating a tendency towards parties of the political right. In the words of former Conservative Justice Minister and current Alliance Party MP Vic Toews, for a large number of Mennonites "it's not that the Conservatives are closer to God, it's that they're furthest from the devil."⁸²

Notes

¹ Leo Driedger, *Mennonites in Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1990) ix.

² T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 17.

- ³ Ibid., 18.
- ⁴ *The Canadian Mennonite*, May 14, 1954.
- ⁵ *The Canadian Mennonite*, November 5, 1954.
- ⁶ *The Canadian Mennonite*, November 5, 1954.
- ⁷ *The Canadian Mennonite*, January 22, 1954 .
- ⁸ "Participation in Politics," *The Canadian Mennonite*, March 15, 1957.
- ⁹ "Evangelical Mennonite Conference Speaks on Politics," *The Canadian Mennonite*, July 12, 1963.
- ¹⁰ "Participation in Politics," *The Canadian Mennonite*, March 15, 1957.
- ¹¹ B. Alf Warkentin, letter, *The Canadian Mennonite*, August 30, 1957.
- ¹² "Parliament in Session," *The Canadian Mennonite*, October 18, 1957.
- ¹³ Angela Kroger, "Let's Face It: We Should Get Into Politics," *The Canadian Mennonite*, March 26, 1968.
- ¹⁴ A.M. Willms, "We Have Failed to Carry Out Our Duty to Government," *The Canadian Mennonite*, January 4, 1963.
- ¹⁵ Jerome H. Black , "Ethnic Minorities and Mass Politics in Canada: Some Observations in the Toronto Setting," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* (Spring 1991) 135.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Vic Schroeder, August 14, 1998.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Peter Peters, August 24, 1998.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Schroeder.
- ¹⁹ Interview with Harry Schellenberg, August 25, 1998.
- ²⁰ Jacob Klassen, letter, *The Canadian Mennonite*, March 1, 1963.
- ²¹ Willms, *The Canadian Mennonite*, March 29, 1963.
- ²² *The Canadian Mennonite*, June 18, 1968.
- ²³ *The Canadian Mennonite*, March 29, 1963.
- ²⁴ F. Bergmann, letter, *The Canadian Mennonite*, March 15, 1963.
- ²⁵ Gerhard Ens, letter, *The Canadian Mennonite*, March 1, 1963.
- ²⁶ K.W. Taylor and N. Wiseman, "Class and Ethnic Voting in Winnipeg during the Cold War" *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 16 (1979) 63.
- ²⁷ Interview with George Epp, August 22, 1998.
- ²⁸ Interview with Harry Schellenberg.
- ²⁹ Regehr, 246.
- ³⁰ Leo Driedger, "From Martyrs to Muppies: The Mennonite Urban Professional Revolution," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* (1993, 67) 317.
- ³¹ Ibid., 319.
- ³² Interview with Harry Schellenberg.
- ³³ These were the only two years for which voters lists were available. As a result there has been some guesswork involved in determining which polls to examine. It should also be allowed that whatever conclusions can be drawn are based on imperfect evidence. For instance, it is not certain that someone with a Mennonite name is necessarily part of the Mennonite community. Nor does Mennonite identity necessarily influence voting behaviour. This study provides a useful sketch but is not intended to be scientifically accurate.
- ³⁴ "Detailed Voting in Urban Ridings" *Winnipeg Free Press* June 18, 1958 and J.R. Reeves *Statement of Votes of Thirty-First General Election 1977: Report of the Chief Electoral Officer*, 147.
- ³⁵ See above.
- ³⁶ "Electoral Results," *Winnipeg Free Press*, December 15, 1962.
- ³⁷ "Electoral Results," *Winnipeg Free Press*, June 24, 1966.
- ³⁸ "Electoral Results," *Winnipeg Free Press*, June 26, 1969.
- ³⁹ Taylor and Wiseman, "Class and Ethnic Voting in Winnipeg During the Cold War," 75.
- ⁴⁰ Regehr, 411.
- ⁴¹ *Mennonite Mirror*, September 1971.

- 42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 *Mennonite Mirror*, May 21, 1968.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 *Mennonite Mirror*, October 1971.
48 *The Canadian Mennonite*, October 4, 1957.
49 *Mennonite Mirror*, November, 1974.
50 Ibid.
51 *Mennonite Mirror*, June 1980.
52 *Mennonite Mirror*, November 1974.
53 *Mennonite Mirror*, June 1980.
54 Regehr, 158.
55 Regehr, 158.
56 *The Canadian Mennonite*, March 19, 1968.
57 Interview with Peter Peters.
58 *The Canadian Mennonite*, July 2, 1968.
59 Interview with Peter Peters.
60 Regehr, 385.
61 Cited in Regehr, 312.
62 Regehr, 315.
63 Kroger, "Let's face it, we should get into politics," *The Canadian Mennonite*, March 26, 1968.
64 Interview with Peter Peters.
65 *Mennonite Mirror*, January 1980.
66 *Mennonite Mirror*, January 1980.
67 Regehr, 413.
68 Tina Chui, James Curtis, Ronald Lambert "Immigrant Background and Political Participation: Examining Generational Patterns," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 16 (1991).
69 *Mennonite Mirror*, March 1980.
70 *Mennonite Mirror*, April 1980.
71 *Mennonite Mirror*, April 1980.
72 Interview with Vic Schroeder.
73 Interview with Vic Schroeder.
74 Interview with Vic Schroeder.
75 Interview with Peter Peters.
76 Interview with Harry Enns, December 28, 1998.
77 Interviews with Schellenberg, Peters and Schroeder.
78 Interview with Harry Schellenberg.
79 Interview with Harry Schellenberg.
80 Interview with Peter Peters.
81 Interview with Peter Peters.
82 "Political duo with religious background offer unique view," *Winnipeg Sun*, March 15, 1999.