

---

# By One Vote

## The Defeat of the Manitoba Government

Beverley Bosiak

*There are, of course, other examples of governments in Canada falling because of a vote of non-confidence. Indeed, in Manitoba in 1922 the Liberal minority government of T.C. Norris was defeated on a motion of non-confidence respecting the abolition of the Public Utilities Commission. While not a matter traditionally considered to be one of non-confidence, the matter was deemed to be a key enough issue that the then Premier requested Lieutenant-Governor Sir James Aikins to dissolve the Legislature. The response of the Lieutenant-Governor was that the Legislature had been summoned to attend to the business of the province and when it had done so (which took about two weeks) he would dissolve it. Last year another government fell under even stranger circumstances.*

On March 8, 1988 Manitoba's Thirty-Third Legislature came to a sudden and unexpected end when the government fell on a matter of confidence. What made this unusual, if not completely unprecedented, was that the government was defeated by one of its own members.

A strange hush – followed by what can only be described as pandemonium – engulfed the House as the NDP Member for St. Vital (James Walding) rose with the opposition to register his vote during the division. A former Speaker, Mr. Walding, voted with the opposition on an amendment to the motion "That this House support in general the budgetary policy of the government".<sup>1</sup> At the time the standings in the House were NDP 28, Conservatives 26, 1 Liberal and 1 vacancy.

First elected in 1971, Mr. Walding served as critic of several major departments while in opposition. When the NDP formed the government in 1982 he was elected Speaker of the Assembly. By several accounts, he distanced himself from the government of the day in 1984 by refusing to turn off the division bells during the acrimonious debate on the French language issue.<sup>2</sup> In 1986 he was challenged for the NDP nomination in St. Vital by a former executive assistant to the Premier. Mr. Walding won the nomination by a single vote and held onto his seat in the subsequent provincial election. He was, however, passed over for a cabinet appointment after the election and having indicated he had

no wish to serve another term as Speaker, sat as a government back-bencher.

Mr. Walding expressed his unhappiness with the NDP government's program as mover of the Throne Speech motion. He cautioned that "People are not sure of who's in charge of the store or, more frighteningly, is anyone in charge of the store". "We've been doing well in this province, but are we doing well on borrowed money? The day of reckoning will come, whether it's next year or the year after." "...I believe that there is a problem that has been reflected not only in what people have said but in the public opinion polls which were produced about a week ago. ...Autopac (the public insurance corporation) was merely a reflection of the focus, the symbol if you like, of a number of underlying facts that people know. Neither one on its own would probably be enough to make them turn the government out of office, but when you get all of them together they form a cumulative objection that people have." Following his speech, he was asked in the House on the record if one could assume that he would be voting against the Throne Speech thus triggering an election, to which he replied, "That facetious question is really not worthy of reply."<sup>3</sup> And as late as the day before the vote on the budget he had told members of the media he would support the government on the budget vote.<sup>4</sup>

When asked by the media why he voted against his own party on March 8, 1988, Mr. Walding replied, "It is time for the people of Manitoba to decide whether this government still has a mandate. The people of Manitoba can decide. I don't want that decision to be all on me. It's too much of a strain. I can't do it any longer."<sup>5</sup> Later, Mr. Walding was quoted as saying that the reason for his vote was that the NDP

---

*Beverley Bosiak is Deputy Clerk in the Manitoba Legislative Assembly.*

---

was moving away from its CCF roots and principles, citing the development of policies for particular linguistic, ethnic and cultural groups as departing from the CCF's "humanity first" motto.<sup>6</sup>

The Pawley government was becoming unpopular with many Manitobans due to large increases in rates for the provincially-operated automobile insurance plan, as well as revelations that operations by the Manitoba Telephone System in Saudi Arabia had led to a twenty-seven million dollar loss of taxpayers' money which added to the province's growing deficit and increasing taxation.

The opposition amendment expressing the House's lack of confidence in the government had carried. The Speaker then put the question on the main motion (as amended) which carried. Perhaps the second vote was redundant, but it certainly sealed the fate of the Pawley government. This Legislature was finished. Or was it? The Premier had not admitted defeat so the Opposition House Leader moved to adjourn the sitting. Within the hour rumours abounded in the corridors of the limestone Legislative Building. One rumour had the opposition wooing the dissident government Member and the Liberal Member in an attempt to form a coalition; a second rumour had the government wooing the Liberal Member in an effort to form a "new" administration.

Preparations were made by the Clerk's Office for a sitting on March 9, anticipating the Premier's announcement to the House that he had called upon the Lieutenant-Governor to dissolve the Legislature and issue the writs of election. There was, too, the slim possibility that the Lieutenant-Governor would not immediately terminate this Legislature. In addition to the 1922 situation in Manitoba and the King-Byng affair, a Canadian precedent exists from the 1929 situation in Saskatchewan where a minority government lost two routine votes, including one on the election of a Speaker. In that situation, the Saskatchewan Premier met with the Lieutenant-Governor and subsequently announced to the House his intention to resign. With the co-operation of the opposition, that administration and the legislative session continued for a few days in order to pass necessary matters. The Saskatchewan House then prorogued and the government resigned to make way for the formation of a new administration.

Professor Howard McConnell of the College of Law at the University of Saskatchewan suggested to Manitoba's procedural officers that Premier Pawley had two options: resign and make way for a new government or ask the Lieutenant-Governor to dissolve the House and call a provincial election. It is the exclusive prerogative of the Lieutenant-Governor to call upon a person to form a government and in so doing the Lieutenant-Governor would sound out Members of the Assembly to satisfy himself which person would be capable of enjoying the confidence of the House. Once satisfied that a particular person could form a

government capable of sustaining the confidence of the House, he would call on that person to become the First Minister. The first item of business in the next gathering of the House would be a vote of confidence in the new administration. If the Lieutenant-Governor, as a result of his sounding out of Members, was not satisfied that any person could sustain the confidence of the House, the Lieutenant-Governor could use his reserve power to dissolve the House and call an election, whether or not the Premier was prepared to recommend it.

These and other options were no doubt discussed by Manitoba politicians into the wee hours of March 8 and 9. In the end, Premier Pawley called upon the Administrator of the Province to dissolve the House and an election was called, precluding the need for the House to sit again to hear the Premier announce his intentions. The news conference was held at 12:30 p.m. – one hour before the usual sitting start. The Orders-in-Council were signed by Alfred Monnin, Chief Justice of the Manitoba Court of Appeal and Administrator of the Province (in the absence of the Lieutenant-Governor). His Honour, George Johnson, had been out of the country and unable to return in time to receive the Premier.

Howard Pawley also on March 9 announced his resignation as leader of the NDP. His successor was Gary Doer who was elected as party leader on March 31 but not sworn in as Premier. When the provincial election was held on April 26 the people of Manitoba elected a minority Legislature consisting of twenty-five Conservatives, twenty Liberals and twelve NDP Members. Former Premier Howard Pawley was subsequently unsuccessful in his bid for a seat in the 1988 federal election. James Walding has maintained a low public profile.■

---

## Notes

1. The text of the opposition amendment was as follows:  
...in presenting its Budget, the Government has:
  - 1) Ignored the long-term effects of uncontrolled spending by once more increasing its expenditures at twice the rate of inflation; and
  - 2) Dipped into the pockets of ordinary Manitobans for an enormous tax haul of \$185 million more in personal income taxes; and
  - 3) Absorbed the largest increase in revenue in the province's history while applying less than 15% of it to deficit reduction; and
  - 4) Because of its continued policies of foreign borrowing and deficit spending, has brought about an increase in interest costs of almost 20% in this year's budget; and
  - 5) Thereby lost the confidence of this House and the people of Manitoba.
2. For an insight into the "bell-ringing affair" see "A fateful prorogation: The death of constitutional proposals in Manitoba" by Gordon H.A. Mackintosh, *The Parliamentarian*, April 1985, pp. 60-66.
3. *Hansard*, February 12, 1988, pp. 20-23.
4. *Globe and Mail*, March 9, 1988.
5. *Globe and Mail*, March 9, 1988.
6. *Winnipeg Sun*, March 13, 1988.