

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association
Revue de la Société historique du Canada



The Mixed Social Economy of Unemployment Relief in Regina during the 1930s

James M. Pitsula

Volume 15, Number 1, 2004

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/012070ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/012070ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Pitsula, J. M. (2004). The Mixed Social Economy of Unemployment Relief in Regina during the 1930s. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 15(1), 97–122.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/012070ar>

The Mixed Social Economy of Unemployment Relief in Regina during the 1930s

JAMES M. PITSULA

According to the standard interpretation of the 1930s Depression in Canada, the failure of private charity and municipal relief administration led to the development in the 1940s and post-war period of unemployment insurance and social assistance programs as key components of the welfare state. Recognizing that local authorities did not have the capacity to handle unemployment relief, the federal and provincial governments, after much hesitation, finally assumed responsibility for it. The exemplary narrative is James Struthers' *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State 1914-1941*, the very title of which telegraphs the connection between the failure of the 1930s relief regime and the welfare system that was designed to replace it. Struthers characterizes the local relief structure in 1930 as a "ramshackle collection of private charities and hastily organized relief committees."¹ In Toronto, five family charities worked in ill-coordinated fashion with the city's two public relief agencies. Montreal channeled all its social aid through four private religious charities. Saint John placed destitute families in the Municipal Home, where the aged, infirm, and feeble-minded were also housed. Halifax did much the same.²

As for Western Canada, John Taylor observes that "the voluntary sector was less mature and weaker than in longer established areas of the country." "Even with government assistance," he continues, "the voluntary sector proved even by 1930 to be helpless in the face of unemployment, and local government agencies rapidly emerged, supported by *ad hoc*, temporary and emergency funding from the senior levels."³ This placed the matter of poor relief squarely in the political arena. By 1934, left wing and labor organizations had taken

1 James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State 1914-1941* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 48. This is also the interpretation offered in Dennis Guest, *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1980) and Allan Moscovitch and Jim Albert, eds. *The Benevolent State: The Growth of Welfare in Canada* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1987).

2 *Ibid.*, 48-9.

3 John H. Taylor, "Sources of Political Conflict in the Thirties: Welfare Policy and a Geography of Need," in Allan Moscovitch and Jim Albert, eds. *The Benevolent State: The Growth of Welfare in Canada* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1987), 150.

control or were threatening to take control of municipal governments in Edmonton, Winnipeg, Regina and Vancouver. They also showed strength in Hamilton, London and Toronto, but “east of the Ottawa River, the old verities tended to prevail.”⁴ The end game for Taylor was the building of the welfare state, a transformation of the social service system that removed poor relief from local administration, where it created serious difficulties for the political establishment because of the concentration of working class voters in downtown wards, to senior levels of government, where radical constituents were more widely dispersed and therefore easier to contain.⁵

This paper explores unemployment relief in Regina during the 1930s. It argues that the voluntary sector by 1930 was not “helpless in the face of unemployment.” On the contrary, it was energized and dynamic. Secondly, the voluntary sector and the government sector were not separate and distinct entities. Rather, each penetrated and overlapped the other to constitute a mixed social economy of poor relief. The analysis focuses on three entities: City Council, the Civic Relief Board, and the Regina Welfare Bureau. The first fell within the government sector, the second was a hybrid, and the third belonged primarily, though not exclusively, to the voluntary sector. Examination of the composition, structure, and functions of the three bodies and how they interacted with one another reveals the inadequacy of a conceptual framework based on a simple government sector/voluntary sector dichotomy. The boundaries between these entities were blurred and highly contested. By 1936, they had shifted as a result of the power of the working class exercised through civic elections and protest demonstrations. The Civic Relief Board was abolished and the Regina Welfare Bureau redefined its mission. Although the role of government became more prominent, it did not altogether displace the voluntary sector. Instead, the boundaries were redrawn.

The conceptual framework of this paper draws inspiration from two sources: the recent renewal of interest in the role of the voluntary sector and the developing theoretical work on the mixed social economy. The voluntary sector (also known as the non-profit, non-governmental, community-based, charitable or third sector, and [especially in Quebec] as the social economy)⁶ attracted increased attention in the 1980s. Governments faced major deficit problems and began to roll back the welfare state. Brian Mulroney told a Progressive Conservative convention in 1983 that “One of the major priorities of my government will be a complete revision of social programs in order to save as much money as possible. One way of meeting that objective is to

4 *Ibid.*, 149.

5 *Ibid.*, 152.

6 Michael Hall and Keith G. Banting, “The Nonprofit Sector in Canada: An Introduction,” in Keith G. Banting, ed., *The Nonprofit Sector in Canada: Roles and Relationships* (Montreal & Kingston: Social of Policy Studies, Queen’s University, 2000), 4-5.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

encourage the voluntary sector to participate more in the implementation of social programs. Volunteer work is the most efficient method of work in Canada.”⁷ The federal Liberal Party followed the same trend. It made a commitment in 1997 to “increase the capacity of the voluntary sector to contribute to Canadian life.”⁸ This led to the signing of “An Accord between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector” in 2001, which described the latter as “one of the three pillars that constitute Canadian society,” the others being government and the for-profit sector. The Accord affirmed that “our quality of life, our economic strength and the vitality of our democratic institutions depend on the vibrancy of these interdependent sectors and the support they provide to one another.”⁹

The heightened interest in the voluntary sector coincided with a reconsideration of the history of the welfare state. British social policy historian Jane Lewis suggests that “rather than seeing the story of the modern welfare state as a simple movement from individualism to collectivism and ever-increasing amounts of (benevolent) state intervention, it is more accurate to see Britain as always having had a mixed economy of welfare, in which the state, the voluntary sector, the family and the market have played different parts at different points in time.”¹⁰ Mariana Valverde contends that the mixed social economy is a Canadian tradition and calls for a “re-writing of the history of the symbiotic relation between public and private resources in the management of poverty, crime and ‘vice.’”¹¹ “There is not one public/private split but many,” she argues, “depending on whether we are discussing financing, service delivery, or inspection and regulation. Each of these public/private distinctions is subject to major shifts in the relative weight of each pole.”¹² Lynne Marks’ study of poor relief in late nineteenth-century small town Ontario finds that government action and private charity were interconnected, the precise nature of the links varying from place to place. The municipal council in some communities delegated responsibility for poor relief to private charitable associations run by women, while in others the council disbursed most of the funds directly and called on private benefactors for extra help in special

7 Jacquelyn Thayer Scott, “Voluntary Sector in Crisis: Canada’s Changing Public Philosophy of the State and Its Impact on Voluntary Charitable Organizations,” PhD diss., University of Colorado, 1992, 189.

8 *Ibid.*, 25.

9 Canada, Voluntary Sector Task Force, “An Accord Between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector,” 2001, 2.

10 Jane Lewis, *The Voluntary Sector, the State and Social Work in Britain: The Charity Organization Society/Family Welfare Association Since 1869* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 1995), 3.

11 Mariana Valverde, “The Mixed Social Economy as a Canadian Tradition,” *Studies in Political Economy*, 47, Summer 1995, 36.

12 *Ibid.*, 54.

cases.¹³ Paula Maurutto's examination of Catholic charities in Toronto from 1850 to 1950 shows that church and state had a mutually supportive relationship and that it was difficult to disentangle one from the other.¹⁴

This paper applies the mixed social economy approach to relief administration in Regina in the 1930s. It does not so much refute, as refine, the standard interpretation in which the shortcomings of the voluntary sector and local government administration are viewed as setting the stage for the rise of the welfare state. It re-examines the relationship between the government and voluntary sectors and in so doing mitigates the triumphalism inherent in conventional welfare state narratives. The voluntary sector was active and innovative in 1930s Regina, as it continued to be in the years that followed.¹⁵

The 1930s Depression hit Regina with devastating force. By June 1931, 23 percent of adult male wage earners were out of work, a number that declined only slightly to 19.7 percent in June 1936. Initially, the city, with financial assistance from the provincial and federal governments, sponsored public works relief projects, but, as the money dried up (Regina held over \$1,000,000 in unsold debentures in 1931), all available resources had to be channeled to direct relief. In October 1932 nearly 20 percent of the 53,000 residents of the city were on the dole. The accumulated cost of direct relief from 1929 to 1935 amounted to \$4,754,216, of which the federal, provincial, and city governments each paid one third. In addition, the city had to pay all the costs of administration. The burden was heavy, so much so that after 1931 the city had to borrow one half or more of the money needed to pay for direct relief. Although the mill rate was increased at the beginning of the Depression from 41 to 48, there was a limit to what taxpayers could bear. Tax arrears in 1933 were close to a million dollars.¹⁶

Prior to the 1930s a committee of Regina City Council supervised the administration of the minimal municipal poor relief that was dispensed in the city, but with the advent of the Depression the system broke down. Alderman A.C. Froom, chairman of the Relief Committee, declared in September 1931 that the Committee's work had become so burdensome that council members "are almost visitors in [their] own homes."¹⁷ He said that fifty percent of his

13 Lynne Marks, "Indigent Committees and Ladies Benevolent Societies: Intersections of Public and Private Poor Relief in Late Nineteenth Century Small Town Ontario," *Studies in Political Economy*, 47, Summer 1995. See also Margaret Little, "The Blurring of Boundaries: Private and Public Welfare for Single Mothers in Ontario," *Studies in Political Economy*, 47, Summer 1995.

14 Paula Maurutto, *Governing Charities: Church and State in Toronto's Catholic Archdiocese 1850-1950* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

15 See, for example, James M. Pitsula, *Helping Families Through Life: A History of Family Service Regina* (Regina: Family Service Regina, 2001).

16 J. William Brennan, *Regina: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1989), 135-7.

17 *Regina Leader-Post*, 25 September 1931.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

time had been taken up with relief administration. To ease the pressure, City Council on 25 September 1931 named a Civic Relief Board to oversee municipal relief. The volunteer board was composed of nine members together with the mayor who served ex-officio:

D.J. Thom, chairman (lawyer)
Edgar H. Morrison (manager, Huron and Erie Mortgage Corporation)
Francis B. Reilly (architect)
Mrs. P.I. Thacker (Local Council of Women)
John W. Ehmann (manager, Western Printers Association)
Rev. Willam Surman (Cameron Memorial Baptist Church)
Ralph Heseltine (secretary, Regina Trades and Labor Council)
William T. Hunt (manager, Northern Electric Company)
William J. Allison (real estate director)¹⁸

According to City Council, the composition of the Civic Relief Board was supposed to be representative of the citizens of Regina, but it was hardly that. Among its members were one woman and eight men, the latter comprising four businessmen, three professionals, and one individual associated with organized labor. All the names were Anglo-Celtic, except for one (Ehmann) that was German.

The dominant figure on the Board was Douglas J. Thom, who served as chairman for two years. He practised law in one of the city's largest firms, and, together with his wife and four children, lived in modest comfort in one of the better areas of town. As his son, Stuart Douglas Thom, recounted, "... it was just a normal middle class home of a lawyer who was not making a fortune but wasn't broke, and the family were growing up and his wife had a certain position in the community, commensurate with his status and we weren't the poorest and we weren't the richest."¹⁹ Both D.J. Thom's father and father-in-law (whose name was Chown) were Methodist ministers in Ontario. Accordingly, the Thom family occupied a pew at Metropolitan Methodist Church, said grace at every meal, and held regular morning prayers, in which the two maids of the household participated. Thom was active in civic affairs, serving on the board of Regina College (forerunner of the University of Regina), and the Collegiate School Board, as well as many other organizations. Beginning in 1931 he accepted the chairmanship of the Civic Relief Board. After putting in a full day at his law office, he strolled down the street a few blocks to the Relief Department to take up what was in effect a second job.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26 September 1931.

¹⁹ The Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, Interview with Stuart Thom, 6 November 1981.

The Civic Relief Board had a pro-business tilt. It arose in part from an initiative of the Regina Board of Trade, which on 17 June 1931 submitted the following resolution to City Council:

That the Regina Board of Trade is of the opinion that the relief and unemployment situation is such that it requires more time and effort devoted to it than it is possible for a committee of the City Council to give.

That therefore, Council of Regina Board of Trade requests the City Council to appoint nine Relief Commissioners at \$1.00 per year as officials under the City Act to supervise the administration of relief, including also investigation of complaints and formation of schemes, subject always to the final authority of the City Council.²⁰

The city thereby delegated responsibility for the administration of public funds to nine non-elected, private citizens. The nature of the relationship between the Council and Board was summarized in a Council Committee report of 25 September 1931: "The [Board] should be given the widest possible powers to deal with relief, bearing in mind, however, that the Council must retain such control as will enable it to keep in touch and have under its jurisdiction at all time, the expenditure of money for relief purposes."²¹ However, as soon became evident, it was difficult for the Council to maintain "final authority," as the Board of Trade resolution phrased it, when effective administrative control was handed over to an appointed board.

Before entering into an analysis of the power relationship between the Civic Relief Board and City Council, it is important to note that the Board's legitimacy did not go unchallenged. The Joint Ratepayers' Executive passed a resolution on 26 August 1931 calling for the establishment of an advisory relief committee and strongly urging "the appointment of one member of each Ratepayers' Association in the City, together with one representative of the Regina Board of Trade, to such body."²² Similar missives arrived from the North West Ratepayers' Association and the South East Ratepayers' Association.²³ When a vacancy opened up of the Relief Board in January 1932 due to the resignation of one of the members, the Independent Labor Party (founded in 1929 to represent the viewpoint of organized labour) put forward

20 City of Regina Archives [CORA], 5, C.H. Puckering, Secretary, Regina Board of Trade, to His Worship Mayor Balfour and Members of the City Council, 17 June 1931.

21 COR-5, 3898d (31b), Council Committee to the Mayor and members of the City Council, 25 September 1931.

22 COR-5, 3898d (31b), W.H. Turner, Secretary-Treasurer, Joint Ratepayers' Executive to City Clerk, 27 August 1931.

23 COR-5, 3898d (31b), F.H. Kirby, Secretary, North West Ratepayers to City Clerk, 16 October 1931; COR-5, 4002a (31), J. Fesser, Secretary, South-East Ratepayers' Association, to Your Worship Mayor McAra, 23 January 1932.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

the view that the position should be filled “by some person in close touch with the unemployed workers of this city, so that their viewpoint may be kept before the commission in its deliberations.” The ILP nominated William Brown, who was said to have “served on two committees of the unemployed and has devoted much time to the study of relief and unemployment measures.”²⁴ Hearing that their nomination had been rejected, the Laborites resolved on 12 February 1932:

While there are nine members of the Relief Commission there is among them no representative of labor or of the working class interests, as such.

This meeting is of the opinion that the condition of a affairs amounts to class discrimination and is a grave injustice to the working class, who at any rate are entitled to have their viewpoint placed before the Commission.

We, therefore, ask that the Council appoint at least two representatives of the workers (one of whom should be an unemployed man) to the Civic Relief Commission.²⁵

The City Council tersely replied that they had considered the suggestion, but “could not see their way to accede to your request.”²⁶

Other groups, too, sought representation on the Civic Relief Board. The Regina local of the Retail Merchants’ Association asked in April 1932 that the City consider “appointing a merchant, either a retailer or a wholesaler.”²⁷ Merchants had a direct interest in the operations of the Board since relief recipients were given food vouchers, which they could fill at any grocery store. City Council considered a proposal to establish a civic food depot to buy groceries wholesale and distribute them from a central location. The plan was rejected, much to the satisfaction of storeowners. Here was an instance where the priorities of the market economy thwarted a potentially more efficient method of relief administration, enabling retailers to hold on to their share of the profits.²⁸ However, no representative of the Retail Merchants’ Association was appointed to the Relief Board, the City Council upholding the principle that it had been “set up without reference to the representation of organizations thereon.”²⁹

24 COR-5, 4002a (31), E.L. Delmage, Secretary, Independent Labor Party of Saskatchewan, to His Worship the Mayor and Aldermen, City of Regina, 11 January 1932.

25 COR-5, 4002a (31), E.L. Delmage, Secretary, Independent Labor Party of Saskatchewan, Regina Branch No. 1, to His Worship the Mayor and the Aldermen, City of Regina, 12 February 1932.

26 COR-5, 4002a (31), City Clerk to E.L. Delmage, 17 February 1932.

27 COR-5, 4002a (31), Harold Wright, Secretary, Retail Merchants’ Association, Regina Local, to His Worship the Mayor and Members of the City Council, 6 April 1932.

28 COR-5, 4002a (31), I.H. Stephens to James McAra, 8 April 1932.

29 COR-5, 4002b (31), City Clerk to Mrs. W.K. Cruickshank, 5 October 1932.

When Mrs. Thacker resigned, the Local Council of Women asked that another member of their group be appointed to fill the vacancy.³⁰ They were told Board members were supposed to have in mind the best interests of the city as a whole, not the claims of a particular constituency. This was, at best, a convenient fiction that obscured the skewed gender, class, and ethnic make-up of the Board.

B. Lewitsky, Secretary of the Regina Unemployed Workers Councils, sent a letter to City Council on 3 December 1932 stating that “the 13,000 people most interested in relief [i.e. those on relief] have at present no representation on the Relief Board and we would ask you to appoint our representative and obviate the present discrimination.”³¹ One month later, M.O. Schoenfeldt, secretary of the Regina Non-Partisan Unemployed Association, nominated a representative to the Board. Schoenfeldt hastened to say that his group was “in no way connected with the organization known as the [Communist-influenced] Unemployed Workers’ Councils or United Front. The present situation calls more than ever for cooperation of all classes of citizens for the good of the whole.”³² City Council did not see fit to appoint a representative of either organization, noting that “the Civic Relief Board acts for the City Council, who represent our citizens as a whole, which, of course, includes those who unfortunately are unemployed, as well as their families.”³³

The issue of representation flared up again in December 1933 when City Council appointed Philip John Boechler, a member of the Regina Union of Unemployed, to the Relief Board. Boechler, thirty-two years of age, had registered for relief in October 1932, giving his occupation as “lawyer.” According to the report of the relief officer, he had made every effort to secure employment and “keep away from the Relief Office.”³⁴ He tried to earn a living by taking in boarders and had rented a large, furnished house for this purpose. When the venture failed, the relief officer advised him to move into rented rooms, and at the time of his appointment to the Board, he, his wife and three children were residing in “two furnished rooms at \$12.00 per month, using a coal oil stove for cooking purposes.” His relief entitlement quota was \$35.15 a month. Those already on the Board took strong exception to Boechler’s appointment. They said that previously he had appeared before them with a delegation from the Regina Union of Unemployed asking for a

30 COR-5, 4002b, (31), Elizabeth Cruickshank, Corresponding Secretary, Local Council of Women, to Mayor and Aldermen, 1 October 1932.

31 COR-5, 4002d (31b), B. Lewitsky, Secretary, Regina Unemployed Workers Council, to Mayor and Aldermen, 3 December 1932.

32 COR-5, 4106a (31), M.O. Schoenfeldt, Secretary, Regina Non-Partisan Unemployed Association, to Mayor and Council, 4 January 1933.

33 COR-5 4106a (31), City Clerk to B. Lewitsky, 27 January 1933.

34 COR-5, 4106e (31), History re: Philip John Boeckler, by Relief Officer William Redhead.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

30 percent increase in the food quota. His placement on the Board, they argued, would constitute implicit Council endorsement of the increase. Moreover, the Board took the position that its membership should be restricted to taxpayers because only taxpayers should be entrusted “to give oversight to the spending of the great sums of money involved.”³⁵ To give added force to their objections, the entire Board threatened to resign if Boechler’s nomination went forward. The Council bowed to the pressure and rescinded the appointment.³⁶ This in turn led the Regina Trades and Labor Council to charge that the Relief Board, having been appointed by City Council, was now dictating to the Council who could and who could not serve on the Board. The TLC in January 1934 “respectfully ask[ed] the City Council to take over the administration of direct relief in this City as early as possible.”³⁷

The TLC resolution spoke to a key issue, namely, the power relations obtaining between the City Council and the Civic Relief Board. An important aspect of the relationship was the information flow between the two bodies. According to the by-law establishing the Board, it was supposed to make a monthly report to Council. D.J. Thom, the Board chairman, reported in December 1931:

A great deal of time has been spent by the full membership and committees [of the Civic Relief Board] reviewing a multitude of details of policy, formulating many new policies and dealing with individual cases. We assume the Council does not wish to go into details on these points. We wish to again state that any information asked for will be gladly furnished.³⁸

By keeping detailed information out of the monthly reports, the Board was able to maximize its control over relief administration. Because the Council did not know specifically what was going on, it was not in a good position to criticize the Board’s actions. The offer to “gladly furnish” whatever information the Council requested was not entirely helpful, since without precise knowledge aldermen did not always know what questions to ask. Also, to further obfuscate matters, the Board chairman sometimes pleaded that the press of work made it impossible for him to comply with the requirement to submit a monthly report.³⁹

The Board set up a revolving case committee consisting of three of its members who served for a week at a time, one member of the previous week’s

35 COR-5, 4106e (31), Will Surman, Francis B. Reilly, J. Nicol, Philip Busch, W.J. Lawless, Mrs. Helen Horne to Mayor and City Council, 7 December 1933.

36 COR-5, 4106e (31), City Clerk to Secretary, Civic Relief Board, 20 December 1933.

37 COR-5, 4210a (31), Ralph Heseltine, Secretary-Treasurer, Regina Trades and Labor Council to Mayor and City Council, 10 January 1934.

38 COR-5, 3898d (31b), Report of Civic Relief Board signed by D.J. Thom, 17 December 1931.

39 COR-5, 4002d (31b), D.J. Thom to Mayor and Council, 24 October 1932.

committee being carried forward on the committee of the subsequent week. The case committee met every day at five o'clock for about one-and-a-half hours to discuss with the relief officer how cases should be dealt with.⁴⁰ Unpaid, non-elected Board members decided who would receive relief funded by the taxpayer. Public relief was dispensed as though it were private charity.

Relief applicant J.L. N__ wrote to City Council in November 1931 complaining about how the way he had been treated. Board chairman D.J. Thom informed Council:

I have every confidence that the City Council having very wisely, as I think, divested itself of the exacting details of relief administration, will not readily allow those duties to be passed back to it. I would expect that in a case of the present sort the Council would refer the writer of the letter back to the Relief Board for a statement of their action in the case and the reasons for it. The Board would always be willing on reference of this sort by the Council to put its reasons in writing. If the complainant then wished to go before the Council, it is always his privilege.⁴¹

The Board thereby established the principle that disgruntled relief applicants could not go directly to City Council to modify or reverse Board decisions. The appeal had to go first to the Relief Board, who had the opportunity to provide a written statement to Council justifying the action taken. If the complainant then went to City Council for redress, the aldermen were placed in a difficult spot if they tried to over-rule the Board. The latter was composed of volunteers, who could quit at any time. This would throw the whole business of relief administration back to the Council, who had created the Board to rid themselves of that very burden.

In October 1932 when Council tried to intercede on behalf of relief applicant H.G. S__, Thom delivered a stiff rebuke:

If the Council is to make itself a court of appeal in individual cases, the whole value of the Relief Board will be undermined. Council would be hopelessly cluttered up with a multitude of detail which it was intended to get away from, and the authority of the Board in handling its many difficult problems will be badly shaken.⁴²

What Thom characterized as the "detail" of relief administration translated into effective Board control over who received relief and who did not. The Board also made it a rule that individuals who wanted to appeal a decision had to make the appeal themselves without the assistance of an advocate to speak on

40 COR-5, 3898d (31b), Report of Civic Relief Board signed by D.J. Thom, 6 October 1931.

41 COR-5, 3898e (31b) D.J. Thom to City Clerk, 17 November 1931.

42 COR-5, 4002d (31b), D.J. Thom to City Clerk, 26 October 1932.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

their behalf.⁴³ The Regina Union of Unemployed objected to this practice. As the Union pointed out, even a prisoner being tried in a criminal court was allowed to have someone present his defence, and many of the unemployed had difficulty expressing themselves or were intimidated by the idea of speaking before relief officials.⁴⁴ The Relief Board took a firm stand on this point, asserting that delegations had taken up too much of the Board's time on what the members considered to be trivial matters. It relented only in those cases where the applicant could not speak English, in which case an interpreter was allowed.⁴⁵

The procedures in place for individual appeals applied also to organizations that sought changes in the way relief was administered. In January 1932 the National Unemployed Workers Association tried to send a delegation to City Council with complaints "concerning conditions at the Exhibition Grounds [where single men were housed] and also as to Relief being granted to married men."⁴⁶ The mayor informed them that "representations on the question of Relief must first be taken up with the Civic Relief Board, which now has charge of administration." The Board in such instances served as a convenient buffer, shielding politicians from irate constituents. City Council was also quite particular about the language used by groups presenting petitions. In October 1932 it took umbrage at the Unemployed Workers' Council's use of the word "demands." The City Clerk was directed to return the letter sent by the secretary of the organization "with the suggestion that if a resolution in more respectful language is submitted it will receive consideration."⁴⁷ The Civic Relief Board, for its part, required all delegations appearing before it to submit their suggestions in writing. A verbal presentation was not sufficient.⁴⁸

D.J. Thom further elucidated his perception of the relationship between the Civic Relief Board and City Council in a memo to the mayor dated 7 February 1933. It had been suggested in the newspapers that the bylaw establishing the Board be amended to oblige that body to "submit to the Council any proposed major change in policy before putting it into practice." Thom asked:

In the first place, what are major and what are minor changes? I know of no method to define these words which would not lead to waste of time, effort and patience both in Council and in this Board. Such a distinction would

43 *Ibid.*

44 COR-5, 4210e (31), John Chambers, Vice-President, Regina Union of Unemployed to City Council, 22 November 1934.

45 COR-5, 4210e (31), W. Redhead to City Clerk, 4 December 1934; W. Redhead to City Clerk, 18 December 1934.

46 COR-5, 4002a (31), City Clerk to H. Court, Esq., Secretary, N.U.W.A., 19 January 1932.

47 COR-5, 4002d (31b), City Clerk to H. Court, Secretary, Unemployed Workers' Councils, 28 October 1932.

48 COR-5, 4002d (31b), D.J. Thom to City Clerk, 26 October 1932.

merely give every dissatisfied relief applicant a peg on which to hang an argument to take to Council or the newspapers to get a whack at this Board.

Secondly, why go looking for trouble unless something has been shown to be wrong. The relations with Council were satisfactory last year. We know we are – and we must assume Council thought we are – a reasonable group of people or they would not have appointed us and turned over to us the highly important work they have given us. Why then go to meet difficulties when the easiest way to avoid them is not to raise them? We recognize the paramount authority of Council – “The man who pays the piper calls the tune.”⁴⁹

With these arguments, Thom defeated a proposal that would have shifted a degree of control from the Board to the Council. In theory Council was paramount, but in practice the Board was able to exercise considerable independent power because it kept information to itself and assiduously guarded its policy-making authority.

One of the Relief Board’s first decisions was “to take from each recipient of relief an acknowledgement of indebtedness which is to be drawn in such a way as to enable the City to have a charge on the property and assets of the applicant and thereby protect the taxpayers of the City in every way possible.”⁵⁰ The Board demanded that each relief applicant who owned a home deposit a Duplicate Title for the property with the relief office. This was in addition to the promissory note all relievers had to sign, whether they were homeowners or not, promising to pay back to the city the full amount of the relief they had received. The ILP objected to the policy, prompting City Council to pass a resolution asking the Relief Board for a report on the matter.⁵¹ Protests against the taking of titles poured in from diverse groups including Regina Lodge No. 757, Loyal Order of Moose, Regina Victoria Lodge No. 59, Daughters of England Benevolent Society, the North West Ratepayers Association, and the West End Electors’ Association.⁵² Faced with widespread criticism, the Civic Relief Board retreated, notifying Council on 17 May 1932 that:

we [the Civic Relief Board] will be prepared, if Council wishes, to cease taking Titles and hand back those we have, on the distinct understanding that such action be not taken as acknowledgement of any change in the policy

49 COR-5, 4106a (31), D.J. Thom to Mayor McAra, 7 February 1933.

50 COR-5, 3898d (31b), Report of Civic Relief Board signed by D.J. Thom, 6 October 1931.

51 COR-5, 4002a (31), City Clerk to D.J. Thom, 15 January 1932.

52 COR-5, 4002a (31), G.A. Beckett, Regina Lodge No. 757, Loyal Order of Moose, to His Worship the Mayor, 26 January 1932; COR-5, 4002a (31), M. Winchester, Secretary, Regina Victoria Lodge No. 59, Daughters of England Benevolent Society, to the Mayor and Aldermen of City of Regina, 8 February 1932; COR-5, 4002a (31), Arthur H. Pedley, Secretary-Treasurer, North West Ratepayers Association to City Clerk, 16 February 1932; COR-5, 4002a (31), A.M. Cameron, Secretary-Treasurer, West End Electors’ Association, to City Council, 6 April 1932.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

recommended and adopted by this Board and approved by Council, in accepting the form of promise to repay now in use, to the effect that advances for relief made shall be collected when the proper time comes and when collection can be made without unreasonable hardship in individual cases; this policy to be subject to relinquishment by Dominion and Provincial Governments, or either, of its share, if it so directs.⁵³

This was not quite the end of the discussion. An elaborate exchange followed in which the City Council tried to avoid directly telling the Board what to do, while the Board insisted that if the Council wanted a change of policy it should say so. Council passed a resolution stating that “the Civic Relief Board be informed that if it feels disposed to cease taking Titles and return those they have on hand this Council will have no objection.”⁵⁴ The Board replied that “in absence of specific directions from the City Council pursuant to our resolution of May 16, we are not changing our policy in the matter of taking titles.”⁵⁵ Finally on 7 July 1932 City Council came down with a clear directive. While acknowledging that “we believe that the Civic Relief Board acted in all good faith and in what it regarded as the best interests of the all concerned in instituting this practice,” Council resolved that “the Civic Relief Board be requested to discontinue the taking of Titles to properties from applicants for Relief and that the Titles now being held by the Board be returned to the parties by whom they were deposited. It is to be distinctly understood that this is to be taken in no way as implying any want of confidence in the Board.”⁵⁶ Only after receiving this clear expression of the Council’s wishes did the Civic Relief Board halt its practice of taking titles and give back those it held.⁵⁷

The episode throws light on relations between the Council and the Board. The aldermen were most reluctant to impose their will, even on an issue where public opinion was clearly against the Board. When Council finally acted, it did so half-apologetically, almost as though it were afraid of what the Board might do. Despite the fact that the Board was a creature of Council, having been appointed by it, the Board had the upper hand because its services were voluntary. The Board was fully conscious of its power. It did not take the subtle hint to discontinue the taking of titles without having been explicitly ordered to do so. In this way it protected itself from Council’s attempt to control the Board through indirect methods. The Board insisted that the Council lay bare its exercise of power, thereby deterring it from doing so.

53 COR-5, 4002b (31), W. Redhead to Mayor and Aldermen, 17 May 1932.

54 COR-5, 4002b (31), City Clerk to W. Redhead, 23 May 1932.

55 COR-5, 4002b (31), Miss E. Gough to City Clerk, 21 June 1932.

56 COR-5, 4002c (31b), City Clerk to Secretary, Civic Relief Board, 7 July 1932.

57 COR-5, 4002c (31b), W. Redhead to City Clerk, 2 August 1932.

While the Board fought this battle over the taking of titles, it also took the opportunity to lower the food quota. Prior to January 1932 the quota had been \$18.00 per month for a family of four with 15 percent more for each additional person and a corresponding deduction for fewer persons. This was reduced to \$16.00 per month for a family of four with 15 percent for additional or fewer persons.⁵⁸ While some aldermen were willing to go along with the recommendation, others opposed it on the grounds that, in their opinion, the reduced allowance was insufficient “to maintain the unemployed and their families, except at a very low level of health and subsistence.”⁵⁹ After a lengthy discussion, Council resolved to refer the matter back to the Board for further consideration. The latter refused to budge, arguing that the cost of living was going down, and that those on relief had be encouraged to purchase lower-priced goods (“simple fare”) with their food vouchers. D.J. Thom made clear where the Board stood:

The Board would enjoy being generous as well as anybody else. Unless, however, we have misconstrued our duties with respect to the taxpayers on the one hand and the relief applicants on the other, we do not see any reason to alter the decision we have arrived at, and we would respectfully submit to the Council that if they wish any change they should specifically state what different principles we should adopt from those on which we have been acting as herein-before indicated.⁶⁰

Faced with this challenge, the Council backed down, informing the Board that its memo had been received and filed.⁶¹

The boundary between the government and voluntary sectors became highly contentious with respect to the distribution of clothing relief. The *Regina Leader-Post* sponsored charity clothing drives in 1929 and 1930, but in 1931 it surrendered this increasingly onerous task to the newly formed Regina Welfare Bureau. Despite its official-sounding name, the Welfare Bureau was a voluntary sector organization. Ninety-eight representatives from service clubs and benevolent societies came together on 29 September 1931 to organize a “social service exchange,” that is, a central index of the names of persons receiving help from private charities. The idea was to prevent overlapping and the inefficient use of resources. Those were who receiving excessive amounts of assistance would be discovered and the surplus aid diverted to more worthy recipients. The Welfare Bureau also planned to hire “an experienced and

58 COR-5, 4002a (31), D.J. Thom to Mayor and City Council, 26 January 1932.

59 COR-5, 4002a (31), City Clerk to D.J. Thom, 2 March 1932.

60 COR-5, 4002a (31), Memorandum from the Civic Relief Board to the City Council, respecting the amount of the food allowance in response to request for reconsideration of amount of food allowance, 8 March 1932.

61 COR-5, 4002a (31), City Clerk to Miss E. Gough, 16 March 1932.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

trained case worker” as executive-director in order to advance the agency’s two main goals:

1. Where possible, to restore to independence and a normal life, disadvantaged families, and to take part in the community’s program for social betterment, seeking – in council with other agencies – to lessen those abuses in society which are the causal factors in undermining the well-being of individual families.
2. To serve as a cooperating center for all agencies interested in the various phases of community and relief work, to maintain a central exchange to coordinate the efforts of all agencies affiliated with the Bureau.⁶²

The Bureau attempted to bring something new to private philanthropy in Regina: bureaucratization (coordination of private relief in a coherent system) and professionalism (the application of professional social work expertise to solving the problem of poverty).

The first board of directors included eight men and three women plus a representative of the Civic Relief Board:

J. G. Nickerson (Royal Bank manager)
Mrs. J.V. O’Brien (Catholic Women’s League)
H. Schumacher (realtor, German Canadian Club)
Rev. McElroy Thompson (United Church minister)
Mrs. H.R. Horne (Local Council of Women)
Arthur McDonald (retired businessman, Sons of England)
T.W. Cogland (Adanac Brewing Company manager, Canadian Legion)
Rev. W.J. Stewart (Inspector, Provincial Bureau of Child Protection)
C.G. Dunning (Bank of Montreal, assistant superintendent)
W.S. Kirkpatrick (Puritan Oil Company manager)
Mrs. James Feir (affiliation unknown)
Civic Relief Board representative⁶³

Not only did the Civic Relief Board have an ex-officio member on the Regina Welfare Bureau executive, but also D.J. Thom, chairman of the Relief Board, was a close associate of J.G. Nickerson, his counterpart at the Bureau. Both were members of the Civic Service Division of the Board of Trade, and Nickerson, manager of the Royal Bank, hired Thom’s firm to do the bank’s legal work. The two men also cooperated in 1935 to launch the Regina Community Chest, forerunner of the United Way, which coordinated charitable

62 Saskatchewan Archives Board [SAB], Regina Family Service Bureau Papers, Provisional Board Minutes, 9 November 1931.

63 SAB, Regina Family Service Bureau Papers, Minutes of a meeting of the members of the Regina Welfare Bureau, 10 December 1931.

fundraising in the same way that the Welfare Bureau tried to coordinate the process of distributing aid to those in need.

Writing to Nickerson in 1939, Thom laid bare the “real story” behind the formation of the Community Chest and the Welfare Bureau:

If our experience in Regina means anything, I would say that a welfare bureau and a trained worker are not necessary for a Community Chest. But now let's get a little personal between ourselves. It was the men who were interested enough to put over the Welfare Bureau who were also interested enough to put over the Community Chest. That was the real link between them in Regina. Seeing it is myself writing to you, I don't mind mentioning that the two men I have in mind are J.G. Nickerson and D.J. Thom. Perhaps we had it in the back of our heads also that the Welfare Bureau in its very essence cannot make a spectacular appeal to the public and that we need a Community Chest to keep it financed. I really don't think that was much of a conscious influence, however.⁶⁴

The Community Chest, Welfare Bureau, and Civic Relief Board, though separate organizations, were all part of a major voluntary sector initiative to deal with the consequences of the 1930s Depression. The Depression did not bring about the breakdown, but rather, the re-energizing and redirection of private charity. It became more extensive, more organized and more professional.

The Welfare Bureau opened an office on the second floor of the old Alexandra School building on Hamilton Street adjacent to rooms occupied by the Civic Relief Board, an arrangement that underlined the intimate connection between the two organizations.⁶⁵ In addition to establishing the social service exchange and pioneering family casework, the Bureau operated a Clothing Depot. This was somewhat anomalous given that clothing was a legitimate relief expense, along with food, fuel, and shelter, under the agreement by which the federal, provincial and municipal levels of government each paid one third of the cost of direct relief. The Civic Relief Board chose not to distribute clothing, even though it could have claimed reimbursement of two-thirds of the expenditure from the senior levels of government. The municipal relief function was divided between the Civic Relief Board, a mixed government/voluntary sector authority that supplied food, fuel and shelter, and the Regina Welfare Bureau, a voluntary organization that supplied clothing. The Welfare Bureau received a grant from City Council to supplement the funds it raised through private donations, further blurring the boundary between the two sectors.

The Regina Unemployed Workers' Councils complained in October 1932 that the clothing provided to those in need was insufficient and demanded that

64 SAB, Regina United Way Papers, D.J. Thom to J.G. Nickerson, 16 May 1939.

65 SAB, Regina Family Service Bureau Papers, board of directors minutes, 10 December 1931.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

“the City Council immediately supply adequate clothing for all unemployed workers and their families and that a shoe repairing shop be immediately established.” The workers’ organization added: “unless these demands are immediately met... we shall call a strike of all relief workers and withdraw our children from the schools.”⁶⁶ Thom replied on behalf of the Civic Relief Board: “We believe that notwithstanding hard times, there are still great resources of generous philanthropy in this City and that the provision of clothing will not only furnish an excellent outlet for that private goodwill but will take a great burden from the City and government finances.”⁶⁷ In other words, private philanthropy was both a good in itself and an alleviation of the charge on the taxpayer.

Thom’s pronouncement did not take into account the unmet needs of the unemployed and their families. Peter H. P__ wrote Mayor (and Colonel) James McAra on 12 December 1932:

Please forgive me for taking a liberty to write to you this letter, also for enclosing the watch fob made by myself, but I believe that you will understand my position and will forgive me for my action. I am a married man with two small children out of work and on relief for the last month. Thanks God I get just enough to eat, but children are without shoes and clothing also my wife needs shoes and overshoes and not saying anything of myself. I made application to the clothing relief dept, but it is two weeks pass and no word from them yet, so look like I won’t get any clothing from them.

I try my best to get some work even few days so I could make few dollars for clothing, but there is no way of getting any work. Now I am trying to help myself and to make few cents for clothing this bead work, which work I learn in Hospital during the war, but even this is hard to sell.

I am enclosing one watch fob to you Sir and hoping that you like it and buy it from me for your own price, or if you do not care for it yourself please try and sell it for me. Any little thing will be big help to me.

Please understand that I am ashamed of myself for taking this action but God only knows that I am telling you the truth and that I haven’t got a cent in my name now. I did not apply for relief until my last dollar went, as I did not believe in charity as long as I am able to work, but as I can not get any work, so I was forced to apply for relief.⁶⁸

The Mayor returned the watch fob, saying that he was “continuously besieged with requests from all sorts of persons and it is absolutely impossible and

66 COR-5, 4002d (31b), H. Court, Secretary, Regina Unemployed Workers’ Councils, to Mayor and Aldermen, 23 October 1932.

67 COR-5, 4002d (31b), D.J. Thom to Mayor and Council, 24 October 1932.

68 COR-5, 4002d (31b), Peter H. P__ to Mayor, 12 December 1932.

utterly beyond [my] means to assist them.” However, he did take up the request for clothing with the director of the Welfare Bureau, who advised that P__ would be given special consideration and that his family “will receive the clothing required within a very short time.”⁶⁹ Even though the Bureau was a voluntary sector organization, the mayor was able to intercede to help an applicant jump the cue.

D.A. McNiven, Chairman of the Campaign Committee of the Regina Welfare Bureau, reported in February 1933 that the Bureau had supplied clothing to 1906 families, comprising a total of over 9,500 persons. Included in this number were over 2,000 children of school age. The shoemaker employed at the Community Clothing Depot had repaired over 1000 pairs of shoes, and women volunteers had sewn 2,100 new garments, using materials that had been purchased with cash donations made to the Bureau.⁷⁰ A canvass for the collection of funds was organized for February 15-17, 1933 in which more than 150 businessmen participated.

McNiven offered potential canvassers preemptive responses to two “criticisms heard on the street.” The first was that the Bureau unnecessarily duplicated the work of the Civic Relief Board. McNiven replied that the Bureau made “full use of the services of the City Relief Department for investigations.”⁷¹ This means that that the Board appointed by the City Council to administer municipal relief shared confidential information about relief applicants with a private organization, another illustration of the permeability of the government/voluntary sector boundary in matters of social assistance. The second criticism was that “relief is a City or Government responsibility and should be paid for by taxes levied on the whole community!” McNiven’s placement of an exclamation point after this statement registers his astonishment that such an idea should be seriously entertained. His answer was somewhat convoluted:

There are a large number who are in receipt of salaries and a steady income from other sources, whose tax bill to the city is comparatively small. For example, take one business block, heavily mortgaged, unsaleable now, owner’s equity very small, annual taxes \$6000 – increase in mill rate owing to relief – 20%. This man’s tax bill has been increased annually on account of relief. Such properties cannot stand a further increase in taxation. On the other hand, a salaried man living in a house – taxes \$150 – increase on account of relief 20% or \$30. Opportunity for individual contribution is the only method of leveling this discrepancy.⁷²

69 COR-5, 4002d (31b), City Clerk to Peter H P__, 17 December 1932

70 COR-5, 4106a (31), D.A. McNiven, Chairman, Campaign Committee, Regina Welfare Bureau to “Dear Sir,” 10 February 1933.

71 *Ibid.*

72 *Ibid.*

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

Instead of revising the tax system to make it more equitable, McNiven recommended using private charity to compensate for the tax regime's deficiencies. He assumed that taxation for poor relief was not conceptually distinct from voluntary giving for the same purpose.

Complaints about the clothing situation persisted. Mayor McAra in March 1933 rebuked N. K__, President of the Slavonian Liberal Association, who had interceded on behalf of the family of Mr. S__. McAra stated that the latter had received "more than their share," and, further, both Mr. K__ himself and the Secretary of the Slavonian Liberal Association had also received clothing. "This surely calls for gratitude rather than complaint," said the Mayor. "This clothing and the other articles are being provided and distributed through the generosity of our citizens who, themselves, are carrying very heavy burdens in order to give relief to those in distress."⁷³ Keeping the Clothing Depot in the voluntary sector helped keep relief recipients on the defensive. If they complained, they were accused of being ungrateful. In a similar dispute, relief recipient H.A. L__ had the temerity to say that the City Medical Health Officer was "not fit to be a horse doctor." The Mayor insisted that the statement be retracted before L__'s case could be taken up. L__ wrote back, "Complying with your request you will note I have withdrawn the statement referred to above and offer my apologies for the statement, which was written in an angry moment."⁷⁴

The Regina Union of Unemployed in August 1933 took up the clothing issue in a concerted way. They interviewed the Hon. J. Merkley, the minister in the provincial government who oversaw relief matters, and obtained from him a statement that the federal and provincial governments were willing to pay two-thirds of the cost of clothing relief. The Union of Unemployed further protested that relievers were forced to accept cast-off, rather than new, clothing. Because the depression had been so prolonged, second-hand clothing had become difficult to obtain, and the supply was "out of all proportion with the demand." The petition concluded: "Although every right thinking person can only commend the churches and charitable organizations for their effort to supply the necessary clothing, their efforts did not, and could not meet the requirements."⁷⁵

A meeting of public officials was held in early September 1933 to discuss the clothing situation. In attendance were representatives of City Council, Provincial Government, Civic Relief Board, Regina Welfare Bureau, Collegiate Board, Public School Board, and Separate School Board. They decided to

73 COR-5, 4106a (31), Mayor to N. K__, Esq., President Slavonian Liberal Association, 22 March 1933.

74 COR-5, 4106a (31), City Clerk to H.A. L__, 20 March 1933.

75 COR-5, 4106d (31), Secretary, Regina Union of Unemployed, to Mrs. Flory, Secretary, Civic Relief Board, 26 August 1933.

allow the Welfare Bureau to have charge of the distribution of clothing for another year. Bureau representative W.H. McEwen reported that the organization had already raised \$10,000 by subscription through their campaign for funds, and the City Council promised to grant additional funds as the Bureau required.⁷⁶ Mayor James McAra proclaimed the week of October 1 to 7, 1933 "Sharing Week," "for the purpose of enabling all citizens to participate in the campaign of the Regina Community Clothing Bureau for the collection of clothing for distribution among the needy."⁷⁷ Over eighty volunteers canvassed the downtown business district and by their efforts were able to raise \$3,247.⁷⁸

The protests from the unemployed did not abate. The Mayor passed along complaints to Miss Evelyn Caswell, the executive-director of the Welfare Bureau. Caswell provided the Mayor with an account of how the cases to which he called attention had been handled. Mrs. S__ was first denied and then granted an allotment of clothing:

At the time that our Visitor called on the family they appeared to be in fairly comfortable circumstances and she did not feel that she could conscientiously recommend that clothing be given them.

Yesterday, however, Mrs. S__ came to our office and stated that she was in great distress due to lack of clothing. As the weather is so much colder it was decided that we would send another visitor to the home and would abide by her report.

One of our visitors called on her this morning and she has given us a list of clothing requirements for the family which will be attended to immediately. We may add in confidence that this family is a somewhat unsatisfactory one with which to deal and that Mrs. S__ cannot always be depended upon to tell the truth.⁷⁹

Mr. B__ was not as fortunate. Of him Miss Caswell wrote:

We are in receipt of a letter from Mayor McAra regarding this case. Would you please advise His Worship that I do not feel that I can recommend that anything further be given to Mr. B__ at the present time. The Visitor who called on the family recommended what she thought was necessary and I cannot in this particular case go against her judgment. Further this is a childless couple and I feel that there are a great many others in the city of Regina in greater need than Mr. B__.⁸⁰

76 COR-5, 4106d (31), Meeting re: relief clothing; City Clerk to J.F. Galloway, Secretary, Saskatchewan Economic Reform Association, 6 September 1933.

77 COR-5, 4106d (31), Mayor's Proclamation, 23 September 1933.

78 *Leader-Post*, 2 December 1933.

79 COR-5, 4106e (31) Evelyn Caswell to City Clerk, 3 November 1933.

80 COR-5, 4106e (31) Evelyn Caswell to City Clerk, 6 November 1933.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

George W. B___, an army pensioner, was jailed for refusing to send his sons to school in second-hand clothing. The executive of the Regina Union of Unemployed borrowed the necessary \$15 to pay his fine and costs, thereby obtaining his release. Mrs. B___ explained her thinking on the matter:

The clothing the Truant Officer brought me yesterday I am sending back. I have looked them over properly and I don't consider other people's rags good enough for my children to wear. I kept the new pants though and after I get them properly cleaned I will consider them fit to wear after being wrapped up with the old clothes. I am very particular about what my children wear. I like mending and cleaning my own children's clothes, but other people's rags – No – that is final. What did the Welfare Bureau do with the \$3,100 that was giving for clothing? I suppose it goes to the West End [the wealthier section of Regina] and the West End send their old rags to the East End or whoever will wear them, but Mrs. B___ does not accept the old rags. No thanks I won't accept them.⁸¹

It is clear that by the fall of 1933 some relievers, spurred on by the Union of Unemployed, were becoming vocal and aggressive in their resistance to relief policies.

On 16 October 1933 a small delegation carrying large parcels of clothing invaded Mayor McAra's office. They displayed overcoats, suits, underwear and boots, all badly in need of repair. Outside City Hall a large crowd of relief recipients gathered. The mayor took the complaints to W.H. McEwen, a lawyer who served as the voluntary chairman of the Clothing Depot. McEwen admitted that in the rush to fill orders some inferior articles had been distributed, but he added: "We think that those receiving clothing should do a little of the repair work themselves. With clothing we issue repairing material such as threads, darnings, and so forth."⁸² The Welfare Bureau set up an exchange system whereby recipients of clothing that did not fit or was otherwise unsuitable could obtain substitutes. Exchanges were made on Tuesday and Friday mornings between nine o'clock and noon.⁸³ To counteract the protests of the unemployed, some of the lady visitors who volunteered their time as investigators gave their side of the story. One reported having been told by a female relief applicant "to call again as she was entertaining her bridge club." Another family who applied for assistance had "every appearance of comfort in the home and when the mother asked for a sweater for her little boy, the child, aged four-and-a-half years, said, 'Mummy, I have two sweaters.'"⁸⁴

81 COR-5, 4210a (31), Statement of Mrs. B___, 20 December 1933.

82 *Leader-Post*, 16 October 1933.

83 *Leader-Post*, 17 October 1933.

84 *Leader-Post*, 24 November 1933.

The City Council on 16 January 1934 constituted itself a committee to inquire into the question of the distribution of clothing through the Welfare Bureau. It held four meetings, three of which were open to the public and attended by representatives of the Union of Unemployed. Some thirty-two persons presented their views. The committee reported in favor of maintaining the existing system with minor changes of a procedural nature. It recommended that Bureau officials post notices in the Clothing Depot "indicating clearly to recipients all regulations as to exchanges, fittings and so forth, with a view to avoiding misunderstandings which may have arisen heretofore." Secondly, the committee recommended "that the lists which go out with parcels be made out in triplicate and the recipient be furnished with a copy."⁸⁵ This presumably was to resolve disputes about what had or had not been included in the parcel.

Despite this attempt to ease the controversy, the Welfare Bureau was reluctant to continue responsibility for clothing relief. President J.G. Nickerson commented in October 1934: "We were seriously criticized in some sections last year and whether that will discourage those who voluntarily associated themselves with us I cannot say."⁸⁶ When City Council met to decide on a policy for the coming winter, several hundred unemployed occupied the entire seating capacity of the council chamber and outside a large crowd jammed the corridors. The aldermen referred the matter to a committee whose meetings were to be closed to the public, and then moved on to other business. The delegation of unemployed left the premises, but, as the aldermen continued the meeting, they could hear the boos and shouts of the disgruntled relievers.⁸⁷

The Council committee on clothing relief met a few days later. For the first time in the history of the city, claimed the *Leader-Post*, two uniformed members of the police force stood on guard outside the council chamber. Representatives of two organizations of the unemployed gave their views to the committee: the Regina Union of Unemployed led by P.J. Boechler and a second group whose spokesman was T.J. McManus, a Communist candidate in the 1934 civic election.⁸⁸ City Council on 5 October 1934 adopted the "open voucher" method, which meant that relievers would receive vouchers for clothing that were valid at various retail stores. Under this scheme the Civic Relief Board would issue the vouchers (as it did the food vouchers) upon the recommendation of the Welfare Bureau volunteer investigators.⁸⁹ The Bureau balked. It did not want to have this kind of relationship with the quasi-government sector Relief Board. Nickerson stated: "Our organization is voluntary and the effectiveness of our work would be decidedly lessened should we become

85 COR-5, 4210a (31), E.B. McInnis to Mayor and Aldermen, 15 February 1934.

86 *Leader-Post*, 2 October 1934.

87 *Leader-Post*, 3 October 1934.

88 *Leader-Post*, 5 October 1934.

89 *Leader-Post*, 6 October 1934.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA
DURING THE 1930S

part of an official system, therefore the directors feel that they would not be performing a service of the City by undertaking the work of investigation suggested by Council."⁹⁰ Here was an instance of a voluntary sector organization insisting on maintaining the boundary between itself and the government sector. It did not want to be visibly assimilated into the government system.

City Council contemplated establishing a civic clothing store to purchase garments wholesale for distribution to the unemployed.⁹¹ Clothing retailers immediately galvanized to oppose the plan. The General Manager of Robert Simpson Western Limited wrote:

These people in unfortunate circumstances are citizens who have pride in themselves, their homes and their city, and should not be compelled to congregate at any specific point to secure the essential needs provided by the community. The local clothing bureau, if provided for this purpose, would have a degrading effect upon the minds of these people whom we should endeavor to have maintain a standard equal to their more fortunate neighbors. The merchants of Regina are in a position to serve the City in an effort to distribute relief clothing efficiently and with the greatest economy through the medium of the regular channel of trade and it would not seem logical for the City to enter into competition with its taxpayers.⁹²

City Council received letters along the same lines from the R.H. Williams Department Store, the Army and Navy Department Store, and the Retail Merchants Association.⁹³ As with the grocery store owners' opposition to a civic food depot, the for-profit sector organized to defeat the proposal for a government-owned clothing distribution centre. The argument was framed in terms of what was in the interest of relief recipients, but of course this was not the sole consideration.

Faced with positions taken respectively by the retail merchants and the Welfare Bureau, City Council reverted to a modification of the existing system. The Bureau continued to control clothing relief, which was given in kind rather than in the form of vouchers. Both used and new clothing were to be distributed, the City Council stipulating that all new clothing had to be purchased from Regina merchants. The City reimbursed the Bureau for its overhead and

90 COR-5, 4210e (31), Statement by J.G. Nickerson, President, Regina Welfare Bureau, 10 October 1934.

91 COR-5, 4210e (31), C. Rink and R.J. Westgate to Special Committee of the Whole Council re: Civic Clothing Store and Open Voucher System, 11 October 1934.

92 COR-5, 4210e (31), General Manager, Robert Simpson Western Limited to City Council, 18 October 1934.

93 COR-5, 4210e (31), President, R.H. Williams and Sons Ltd. to Mayor and City Council, 18 October 1934; A.W. Chadwick, General Manager, Army and Navy Department, to City Council, 18 October 1934; Retail Merchants Association, Regina local, to Mayor and City Council, 18 October 1934.

administrative expenses on the condition that appropriate financial statements were submitted to the City Comptroller's Department. Complaints of recipients who felt they had not been treated fairly were referred in the first instance to the Welfare Bureau for settlement. If the complainant was still not satisfied, the matter went to a board of appeal composed of one representative from each of City Council, the Civic Relief Board, and the Welfare Bureau.⁹⁴ The decision of this board was final.

Although the relief system status quo was maintained through the 1934-35 season, the following year saw major changes. The newly elected mayor A.C. (Alban Cedric) Ellison declared in his 6 January 1936 inaugural address that "for the first time in the history not only of Regina but of Saskatchewan a City Council with a Labor Mayor and a majority of Labor Aldermen has taken office." He went on to say that there had been a lamentable tendency in recent years for governing bodies

to avoid and delegate the powers entrusted to them by the people, a tendency to escape their responsibilities by appointing Boards and Commissions and delegating undue authority to the permanent officials. This is a negation of democracy, and I look to see a reversal of policy in this regard and to see the full responsibility for all departments of civic business placed back where it belongs on the shoulders of the elected representatives.⁹⁵

Accordingly, City Council on 6 January 1936 abolished the Civic Relief Board and appointed in its place a Relief Committee of three members of Council to take charge of relief administration.⁹⁶ One of the first actions of the Relief Committee was to make clothing part of the relief allowance, taking this function away from the Welfare Bureau.⁹⁷ However, the Bureau still received a civic grant to carry on its work of charity coordination and family casework. City finances were bolstered in 1936 when a change was made to the relief cost-sharing formula. The federal and provincial government each agreed to pay 40 percent of the cost of relief payments, reducing the municipal share from one third to 20 percent. The city still had to cover all the administrative expenses.⁹⁸

94 COR-5, 4210e (31), C. Rink and R.J. Westgate to Mayor and City Council, 25 October 1934.

95 CORA, City Council Minutes, 6 January 1936, Appendix A: Mayor's Inaugural Address. For an account from a labor perspective of Regina civic politics in this period see SAB, R-E1446, C.M. Fines, "The Impossible Dream: An Account of People and Events Leading to the First CCF Government, Saskatchewan, 1944," 1982.

96 CORA, City Council Minutes, 6 January 1936.

97 CORA, City Council Minutes, 3 March 1936, Special Committee Report Re: Increased Food Quota and Cash Relief.

98 Brennan, 143.

THE MIXED SOCIAL ECONOMY OF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN REGINA DURING THE 1930S

Labor candidates did well in civic elections until the end of the 1930s, and there was no reversion to the relief system that had been in place from 1931 to 1936. The system, while it lasted, had exemplified a complex intersection of government and voluntary sector elements. City Council delegated responsibility for relief administration to the Civic Relief Board, a committee of citizens who volunteered their time and expertise to supervise the spending of taxpayers' dollars. While the City Council retained "final authority" over the Board, the control was more theoretical than practical. The Board's power derived from its regulation of the flow of information to the Council, its insistence that relief applicants' appeals had to be made in the first instance to the Board and not the Council, and its strategic use of the threat of mass resignation. The latter weapon was especially effective since Board members, as volunteers, had nothing to lose financially from quitting their posts, and aldermen were reluctant to assume the onerous duties and public criticism associated with relief administration. Moreover, since the municipal government had to bear the full cost of operating the relief system, it grasped the opportunity to save money through the use of a volunteer supervisory Board.

The Civic Relief Board was responsible for relief food, shelter, and fuel, but not clothing, which was the purview of the Regina Welfare Bureau, a voluntary sector organization that came into existence at the same time as the Relief Board in the fall of 1931. The Bureau solicited charitable donations of cast-off clothing and recruited volunteer visitors, mostly women, to investigate the clothing needs of relief applicants and make recommendations as to what aid should be given. Since the Bureau could not raise enough money on its own to cover its overhead or buy new clothing when the second-hand supply ran out, it received a grant from City Council. In addition, it shared client information with the relief investigators who worked for the city relief department. The boundaries between government and voluntary sector were blurred, if they existed at all.

Both the Civic Relief Board and the Welfare Bureau drew upon the philanthropic instincts of the citizens of Regina who donated time and money to helping the less fortunate. The onset of the Depression did not see the defeat of private charity, but rather its reinvigoration. The Bureau, in addition to operating the Clothing Depot, introduced a social service exchange to coordinate private giving and hired a professional social worker with skills in family casework. The voluntary sector was in this respect more dynamic and innovative than was the government sector. Socially minded business and professional men, such as J.G. Nickerson, manager of the Regina branch of the Royal Bank, and lawyer D.J. Thom, took the lead in these endeavours. Other businessmen adopted a more overtly self-interested approach. Both the retail grocers and department store owners successfully blocked proposals to establish a civic food depot and clothing center that might have facilitated the more efficient and economical distribution of relief supplies.

In a larger sense, private-sector participation in the relief system served to place relief recipients on the defensive. D.J. Thom, chairman of the Civic Relief Board, explicitly denied that “the City of Regina and the Governments are charged with the duty of providing upkeep for everybody, and anybody who gets some work for himself is kindly relieving them to some extent of their duty.” He feared that people were beginning to think that the government owed them something: “Fortunately, although there is a certain amount of that attitude of mind about, it is not really general. If it were, it would take the satisfaction out of the work the Relief Board hope they are doing for the good of all concerned.”⁹⁹ The blending of government and voluntary relief discouraged relief recipients from acquiring a sense of entitlement. It would be churlish of them to criticize those who bestowed gifts upon them.

Organizations representing labour and the unemployed challenged Thom’s assumptions. They doubted that the Relief Board was working “for the good of all concerned,” and they questioned why clothing, which the federal and provincial governments recognized as a legitimate relief expense, was being doled out as private charity. Ultimately, the working class and the unemployed changed the system. Their power was expressed in demonstrations at City Hall and the election of a labor slate, including the mayor, in the civic election for 1936. The result was a redrawing of sectoral boundaries in the relief system. Municipal relief, including clothing, was now fully under the control of City Council, while the Welfare Bureau specialized in coordinating the work of non-government social agencies and taking the lead in the introduction of professional social work methods. Although the Bureau still occupied offices adjacent to the Relief Department, the former asked the City in September 1938 to make “a private passage way for relief recipients to go through to enter the line of issue clerks and cashier without entering the office of the Bureau.”¹⁰⁰ The City acceded to the request, helping to clarify the distinction between relief recipients and Bureau clients.

However, the Welfare Bureau continued to receive funding from the municipal government, underlining the fact that the government and voluntary sectors were still intertwined. It is an oversimplification to say that the voluntary sector “failed” during the Depression; rather, it transformed itself and continued to make a contribution to social welfare. At the same time, the boundaries between the government and the voluntary sector were redrawn. What Jane Lewis says of Britain applies also to Canada. The history of poor relief is best understood as a mixed social economy in which the state, the voluntary sector, the family and the market play different roles at different times. The story of Regina in the 1930s bears this out.

99 COR-5, 4106a (31), D.J. Thom to City Solicitor, 9 February 1933.

100 CORA, City Council Minutes, Relief Committee Report, 15 September 1938.