

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## William "Bible Bill" Aberhart

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the William Aberhart biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Former school principal turned Baptist preacher, William Aberhart took Alberta politics by storm in the 1935 election. During the Depression, his promise of a \$25 dividend to every citizen struck a winning note for his recently created Social Credit Party. His schemes didn't pan out, but his party ruled Alberta until 1971.

### Aims

With writing, debates, and role-playing activities, students will be challenged to synthesize their understandings of William Aberhart and the early years of the Social Credit Party.

### Background

In the early 1930's, with the Depression running rampant, a Scottish fascist-turned-social scientist who went by the name of Major C.H. Douglas, had a plan for creating a new political order. He called it Social Credit and he looked around the world for a place to implement his theories. But the first government to actually practice his theories was led

by a man Douglas believed was insane and completely out of control – a man who simply hadn't understood the concept. The man was "Bible Bill" Aberhart and his Social Credit Party controlled the province of Alberta from 1935 until 1971 – not bad for a man who misread the book.

William Aberhart was educated at Queen's University and was a high school principal in Brantford when he decided to move west. By 1915 he was principal of the Calgary High School. As an ordained Baptist minister, he spent his Sundays preaching fire and Brimstone in the local Baptist Church and people would come for miles around to hear his sermons.

With his Radio Sunday School he found an even bigger audience. Farm and city folk gathered to listen to "Bible Bill," who was unlike anything they had ever heard. The official Baptist Church wasn't too happy about everything Bill Aberhart proclaimed as gospel, so Bill decided to found his own sect, The Bible Institute Baptist Church.

This was around the time that he read C.H. Douglas's book which hinted that there was a Jewish conspiracy to control the world's wealth and that for society to function properly it had to get financial control by putting the wealth into as many hands as possible. Serious economists were already laughing at Douglas's theories but Aberhart wasn't laughing. There wasn't much to laugh at in Alberta, which was perhaps the hardest hit with the Depression.

When "Bible Bill" took to the airwaves now it was to preach the doctrine of Major Douglas, to find a way out of the Depression, and to establish the Social Credit Party of Alberta. Aberhart promised every citizen of Alberta a monthly \$25 dividend and Albertans rushed to the polls to vote for him. In 1935 he took 56 of 63 seats. The Federal Government stood shaking

its head in disbelief.

Even the great Major Douglas couldn't believe it. He described Aberhart as a lunatic who had misread his work. Aberhart didn't mind. He simply concluded that it was Douglas who had made the mistake.

In the meantime he made a covenant with the people of Alberta and had thousands of contracts published. Albertans who signed them were promised monthly dividends in exchange for "co-operating most heartily with the government of Alberta" and "working whenever possible." No dividends were paid out.

Aberhart moved to bring in financial legislation, which Ottawa simply overruled. He fussed and fumed, but they overruled him again. Aberhart told the businessmen and storeowners of Alberta that he was going to issue his own provincial script, which they could use instead of money. Panic set in and appeals were launched to Mackenzie King in Ottawa who quietly moved to oust Aberhart.

Aberhart failed miserably, yet Albertans stuck with him and when he died in 1943, Ernest Manning, father of Preston, replaced him. Albertans continued to re-elect the Social Credit until 1971. Aberhart's popular place in history was as a master manipulator who managed to hoodwink the people of Alberta with cockamamie concepts and looney-tune economics. But there was much more than that, as we will discover in this story of one of the most unique Canadians to ever reach high political office.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

**Procedures:**

1. Put the students into groups and have them do a "Plus, Minus, Interesting (PMI)" about William's political life and then report ideas to the class.

2. Have the students write an individual paragraph on what they think people would think of "Bible Bill" if he were a politician today. Include in your discussion the idea of receiving a dividend of \$25 a month.

3. Allow students to engage in role-playing. First, divide the students into groups of four. Assign two students to be Aberhart and Ernest Manning and the other two to be reporters. The reporters ask Aberhart and Manning questions about their political philosophies and actions. The best question and response from each group is to be shared with the whole class.

4. Based on the statement "William Aberhart was a good man but a poor politician," organize the students to debate this issue as a class. Allow time for preparation of arguments. As well as watching the video they should do some additional research.

5. Have the students in groups map out, with a pictorial representation on a large piece of paper, Aberhart's journey from childhood to his death. Make sure to include significant dates, people, and events in his life.

6. From the perspective of either William's wife, his parents, his children, or the public, assign the students to write a brief biography of Aberhart's life. Read them to each other in a group setting.

7. Establish small groups of 3 or 4 students to design a bulletin board illustrating the life and times of William Aberhart. Ask them to decide on the important information to be included. The students should show planning and rationale for their design.

## **Resources**

[William Aberhart Worksheet](#)

[William Aberhart - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Social Credit - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Aberhart, William. *Aberhart, Outpourings and Replies*. Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 1991.

Elliot, David Raymond. *Bible Bill: A Biography of William Aberhart*. Edmonton: Reidmore Books, 1987.

Mardon, Ernest G. and Austin A. *Alberta in Revolt: The Social Credit William "Bible Bill" Aberhart Years, 1935-1943*. Edmonton: Fisher House Publishers, 1996.

Thomas, Lewis H. *William Aberhart and Social Credit in Alberta*. Toronto: Copp Clark Publishers, 1977.