Mitigating but Not Rethinking: George W. Norris, Tommy Douglas, and the Great Plains

The careers of George W. Norris of Nebraska and Tommy Douglas of Saskatchewan, two extraordinary Prairie progressives, cover nearly a century of political activism and tell us something about both what was possible and what was never even considered in the Great Plains. That their seemingly different heritages, one a dyed-in-the-wool Republican from Ohio and one a Scots Labourite, should result in similar solutions to the problems of European-style agriculture on the Great Plains illustrates the significance of geography, independent of ideology, in determining the lifestyles that will work for a region.

Richard Lowitt, Norris’s biographer, describes Norris as a nineteenth-century liberal, but one who became a Progressive and then a New Dealer, developing his ideas to fit the exigencies of the twentieth century but maintaining his basic beliefs in the fundamental goodness of human beings, the value of honesty and hard work, and the role of government in helping people who are in trouble through no fault of their own. Although Norris carefully researched all the legislation he proposed and supported during his
long career in the United States House (1902–12) and Senate (1912–42), he charted his economic and political course on experience rather than on readings in history or theory. Like many highly successful individuals, he had a few big ideas and he stuck to them, winning most of his greatest battles. He believed that government should be efficient, economical, and accountable to the voters. His institutional reforms included curbing the power of the Speaker and the caucus in the US House and in instituting a unicameral legislature in Nebraska. Norris started his career as a Republican but eventually became an Independent and one of the most intelligent backers of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal. Deeply moved by an international peace conference he attended in Belgium in 1905, he consistently supported a world body for arbitrating disputes, the disarmament of aggressor nations, and the restriction of munitions and armaments on the part of democratic nations. Norris, though originally not sympathetic to organized labour, came to see farmers and labourers as a necessary coalition. He believed that “big business” tended to exploit them both and that the role of government was to protect the people from monopolies by ensuring fair competition, bargaining rights for workers, and mortgage relief for farmers beset by bad weather or low markets. He also believed that electric power was a basic but transformative necessity that could serve people best if it were generated and distributed publicly, supporting both municipal and federal power.¹

Tommy Douglas has so far attracted more adulation, more vituperation, but less painstaking scholarly analysis than Norris. There is no work on Douglas that compares to Lowitt’s magisterial three-volume study of Norris. Nonetheless, the outlines of Douglas’s career and beliefs are also clear. His intellectual tradition was that of British Labour of the Scots variety, deeply affected by the twentieth-century Social Gospel of Salem Bland and J.S. Woodsworth. Like Norris, his program was based on experience rather than theory—he quickly dropped the repugnant eugenics theory that had formed his master’s thesis, and it never influenced any part of his public policy.² While Norris had had his pragmatic training as a lawyer and judge in southwestern Nebraska during the 1890s, Douglas’s lessons in the world came from his own recurring bouts of osteomyelitis, his witnessing of the police riots against strikers in Winnipeg in 1919 and in Estevan in 1931, and his experience as a pastor and graduate student among the
unemployed and desperate in the early 1930s. Unlike Norris, Douglas was satisfied with the parliamentary systems he worked in as both a Member of Parliament (1935–44, 1962–79) and as Premier of Saskatchewan (1944–62). He successfully advanced his beliefs, whether he was in the opposition or the majority. Like Norris, Douglas favoured arbitration for settling international disputes, though he was more willing than Norris to use force if he thought it necessary. During the 1930s, he was strongly opposed to Canada’s selling any materials that might be used as munitions against Canadians or their allies. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the party that, as CCF or later the New Democratic Party (NDP), would be Douglas’s throughout his career, was founded as a farm and labour party: Douglas always saw farmers and urban workers as a natural alliance against what the Regina Manifesto, the founding document of the party, had denounced as “capitalism.” Both Norris and Douglas came to see an alliance between farmers and urban workers as necessary if farmers were to overcome their increasing minority status as farm populations dwindled.

In The Making of a Socialist, the closest thing to an autobiography that Tommy Douglas left, he said that the notorious promise to “eradicate capitalism” contained in the Regina Manifesto really did eradicate the capitalism of the 1930s that had been a disaster for the people of Saskatchewan, leading to farm foreclosure, farm abandonment, and massive unemployment. The old capitalism had been banks calling loans and causing general social collapse—and the CCF had indeed done away with that. Condemning giant monopolies that had an unhealthy power to ruin the entire society was not the same as condemning private ownership. The “Pocket Platform” of the CCF in 1944, when it actually came to power in Saskatchewan with Douglas at the helm, called for home security and debt reduction; increased old age pensions, mother’s allowances, and disability care; medical, dental, and hospital services; equal education; free speech and religion; collective bargaining; and the encouragement of economic co-operatives. The party wanted a mixed economy, including public, private, and co-operative sectors, with a strong role for private ownership in innovation and competition.3

Planning was crucial to the kind of economy that Douglas and the CCF envisioned in 1944. Because of Saskatchewan’s relatively small
population base, its remoteness from larger population centres, and its lack of large sources of capital, the ccf had to manoeuvre reasonably carefully in order to avoid scaring away potential investors who would have to fund most innovations. Social ownership would have to be small and experimental, and taxes could not rise above the norms in the rest of Canada. Douglas argued that “those Industries that were vital to the life of the community, and were monopolistic in character, ought to be publicly owned.” This included power generation and automobile insurance. Crown corporations based on natural resources could process primary products, create employment, raise production and provincial revenue, and return profits to the people. Even anomalies, such as the government’s acquisition of a box factory, made sense when private ownership could not or would not provide investment or abide by labour laws.

According to Richards and Pratt, planning kept the ccf from foundering like the “Nonpartisan League in North Dakota,” but slowed down innovation, created friction with workers who wanted to share in management decisions for their plants, and discounted the need to take and reward risk, perhaps because, by definition, planning is intended to diminish risk. Nonetheless, Richards and Pratt found that the ccf Crown corporations were, as a whole, economically successful, but after 1948, the ccf’s ability for economic intervention was dampened by anti-communist hysteria against any state enterprise, overstated opposition by the business community, and striking, if misleading, comparisons to Alberta’s oil wealth after the first Leduc discoveries in 1947. Both Douglas himself and the more removed Richards and Pratt judged the ccf redefinition of capitalism in Saskatchewan as basically successful in diversifying the provincial economy, maintaining investment levels while capturing revenue streams for the province, and developing both a government bureaucracy and a managerial labour force by attracting highly qualified individuals from outside the province and educating those within. By contrast, Richards and Pratt see Alberta, much more richly endowed with petroleum and hence with wealth during this time period, as having produced only a “striking failure” at “nurtur[ing] a powerful class of Alberta entrepreneurs united with populist farmers in hostility to a takeover by external corporate and political interests.” Albertans, they suggest, merely counted the oil money as it
rolled in instead of attempting to enhance provincial and local control of the industry.

In their study of Saskatchewan’s economy after Grant Devine pronounced that the province was “open for business” in 1982, James Pitsula and Ken Rasmussen conclude that the free market economy, operating as it should, milked resources, capital, and people from economic hinterlands such as Saskatchewan. Devine and his Conservatives, working from an ideology derived from Reaganomics in the United States and Thatcher’s policies in Britain, operated contrary to CCF policies, and they failed. “Driven by necessity but trapped by ideology [Devine’s Conservatives] ended up entering into highly questionable deals that contradicted their own precepts about how the economy should work.” Far from rescuing the province from some kind of “nanny state” regulations, Devine’s failure illustrated that Douglas’s prescription for Saskatchewan of a modified capitalism that used government planning had been correct. “The new right believes in the free market, but the free market judges Saskatchewan harshly.”

Norris, working in the federal arena, could not back such sweeping reforms for one state. His focus was narrower, but equally determined. He backed public electricity generation and distribution above all and, in times of war or crisis, other public ownership as seemed necessary for society to function. Both Norris and Douglas were successful in bringing rural electric power to their polities, but Norris’s sustained campaign for public power ownership really had no analogue in Saskatchewan, as public power had been a norm in Canada since the 1910s. Douglas’s role was more one of organizing parts into a coherent province-wide system. His most personal and deeply felt cause was universal hospital and medical insurance, which took twenty years to secure in Saskatchewan and helped bring about Douglas’s 1962 defeat in Regina in the federal election and the 1964 defeat of the CCF-NDP government in Saskatchewan. Ironically, medicare has become Tommy Douglas’s most enduring legacy and one of the enduring—though enduringly embattled—touchstones of Canadian society. There is no analogue for Norris or for the United States. Even contemporary “Obama-care” is far less inclusive and was developed nationally rather than in a particular region.

While Norris moved directly from local to federal office, Douglas began and ended his elected career as an MP but spent the most productive
part of his political life as premier of Saskatchewan. Norris served only as a Nebraskan, while Douglas was elected MP from British Columbia after his federal defeat in 1962. The actual overlap in the careers of the two men was relatively short, from Douglas’s election to Parliament in 1935 to Norris’s defeat in the Senatorial election in 1942—or at most, from Douglas’s first campaign in 1933 to Norris’s death in 1944. Year-by-year comparisons, then, are not always relevant. Both Norris and Douglas worked in the context of other people: for Norris, the Progressives and the New Dealers, as well as his own circle of friends and supporters in Nebraska, and for Douglas, the ccf and later the New Democratic Party. They were not isolated prophets howling in the wilderness, but they were such significant leaders and shapers that one can attribute ideas to them without being misleading. Each has usually been discussed in the context of other Canadians or other Americans. For instance, Douglas is often compared to (and contrasted with) William Aberhart and the Saskatchewan ccf to the Alberta Social Credit. Norris is most often discussed as a Progressive and compared to Robert LaFollette, or as a New Dealer who was not a Democrat. Comparing Norris to Douglas, however, allows us to compare and contrast US and Canadian procedures and solutions, and to look at the ways in which the particular environmental and historical conditions of the Great Plains enabled the rise to power, the long and influential careers, and the distinctive arguments and successes (as well as those things misconceived or overlooked) of these two remarkable men.

The people whose anguish Norris shared in the 1890s and who commanded compassion from him and Douglas in the 1930s were those who had taken the promise of the Homestead Act seriously, whether they had homesteaded their land or purchased it. For them, leaving the land was neither emotionally nor economically sensible. They had followed all the rules to turn “free land” into farm homes, and they had failed because of forces they could not control—the climate; the international economic downturn; the pressure of outside financial, manufacturing, and transportation corporations; the workings of grain marketing boards; and the tax, tariff, and relief structures of municipal, provincial, state, and federal governments. Now they, like the farmers of southeastern Alberta in the 1920s, were being judged deficient. Norris and Douglas would do their best
to change the conditions under which their constituents laboured, from
government policies, to regional economics, to the very relationship of sky,
land, and water. Although both men and their allies would be attacked as
socialists and enemies to the market system, they, like the farmers whom
they wanted so deeply to help, were concerned with making a conventional
humid-culture market system work on the Great Plains. As the ccf and
ndp would discover, public ownership was not nearly as much of a depart-
ture from market economics as theory would have it, and planning did not
change the parameters of a sparsely populated hinterland. Neither Norris
nor Douglas undertook reforms that looked to previous means and ideolo-
gies of using the land (such as riverine agriculture based on usehold rights,
seasonal family-based migration to utilize different ecosystems, or a pasto-
ralism based on the buffalo) that related directly to the particular ecosys-
tem of the Plains or that moved outside the basic patterns of the market.
The policies Norris and Douglas chose to develop, however, suggest both
what their particular relationship with the Great Plains was and how eco-
nomic development on the Plains might have happened during the twenti-
theth century, and still might happen.

As a district judge in Nebraska from 1896 to 1902, Norris was fre-
quently called upon to foreclose farm mortgages and to order sheriff’s sales
of the properties. Again we see the central trope of losing the farm, and
Norris was in the thick of it. The southwestern corner of Nebraska (like
south-central Saskatchewan, where Tommy Douglas would find himself
in the 1930s) is a semi-arid region that receives an average of less than
twenty inches (500 mm) of precipitation in a year, coming in alternating
cycles of wet years and dry years as it does on most of the Great Plains. It
is mostly cropped land rather than pastures and cattle country. Farmers
who had come to Red Willow and the surrounding counties in the 1880s
had arrived during a period of good rains and good crop prices. The decade
of the 1890s was drier and featured the spectacular 1893 economic crash
following the overbuilding of the railroads. Southwestern Nebraska, like
south-central Saskatchewan and most of the territory in between, was
oversettled—people moved in as if the land were suitable for humid-cul-
ture agriculture. The area was also overcapitalized. The rich soils coming
under production were an irresistible magnet for eastern and European
investors. Money, in the good times, fairly chased farmers. It was not the sale of wheat that produced the Prairie booms but the lending of money on the expectation of the production of even more wheat. And farmers, during the 1880s (and later the 1900s, and particularly the great boom of World War I), were more than willing to borrow money to buy more land; to buy the machinery, such as reapers and thresher, that was necessary for increasingly large-scale agriculture; and to build improvements such as fences, drains, and irrigation works. The drought and contraction of the 1890s meant that farmers in Norris’s district were producing less wheat per acre and receiving less money per bushel of wheat than they had a few years before. Making things worse was an agricultural economy that had been basically deflationary since the Civil War, meaning that each year the farmer needed more bushels of wheat to pay off the same amount of debt. No wonder the Populist Party rose out of this mess and called for railroad and elevator regulation and the free coinage of silver to inflate the dollars of the debtor farmers.

Judge Norris was an ardent Republican, not a Populist, but he was as concerned about foreclosure as anyone. Because his background as a lawyer was in working for lenders, he could see better than most people that selling out a hardworking farmer was a lose-lose proposition. The farmer and his family lost their home, and all the lender gained was a hard-scrabble ruined farm that no one wanted to buy and that had no one to work it, unless the former owner were willing to stay on as a disillusioned and angry tenant. Nebraska had no mortgage foreclosure moratorium law, so Norris simply stayed foreclosure and sale if he thought a farmer would be able to make it when the good times returned. Only if he thought an individual were too shiftless or too heavily in debt to work his way out did Norris allow a sheriff’s sale. At first, creditors were furious, but they soon came to see that Norris’s solution was the most likely to repay their investments. For Norris, this was a pragmatic and humane solution to “the agony of these cycles of crop failure, heavy indebtedness upon the land, and ruinous farm commodity prices,” and perhaps more important in the long run, it preserved both capital and democracy. For Norris, “national welfare and progress are stimulated by any system of capitalism which provides for the widest distribution of the natural resources of soil and its use by the largest
number of legal owners.” Like the early modern bureaucrats who imposed square surveys on European commons and the men Worster believed had shaped the Dust Bowl, Norris did not consider other forms of land use than those of fee simple agriculture.

Tommy Douglas would not be in a position to deal with farm mortgages for another half-century or so, but his response was not dissimilar. Capital was safer if good farmers kept their land. Like Norris, Douglas believed deeply that one of the most essential roles of government (especially, for Douglas, in a Christian society) was to protect those who could not help themselves. The ccf fought the election of 1944 on the promise of farm security, and one of the first measures that the ccf government introduced was the Farm Security Act, designed to provide absolute protection to the farmer’s home quarter section and to prevent foreclosure in years of poor yields. Although the war had brought a large measure of prosperity back to Saskatchewan, many farmers were still in debt. The Farm Security Act, like similar measures passed in Alberta, was eventually declared ultra vires, but the period during which the issue was tied up in court gave at least some farmers the breathing room that they needed. Neither Norris nor Douglas intended to interfere with capital’s right to a return on its investment, though the Farm Security Act did propose that investors be required to forgo interest in years when a farmer could not make enough crop to repay the loan. Sharing the risk is part of the investment process, however, and the higher the rate of return, the higher the shared risk is assumed to be. The object in both Nebraska and Saskatchewan—as well as the other polities that introduced or considered foreclosure moratoriums—was to make capital more flexible and capable of creating both a healthy rural economy and a satisfactory rate of return in the long run. Farmers forced to repay debts to distant eastern investors before buying local goods and services depressed the local economy and were less likely to succeed in the long run. Creditors who waited would get their investment back over the length of the climatic and economic, if not annual, cycles. Both Norris and Douglas approached farm foreclosure from an experiential rather than an ideological point of view. Republicans in the 1890s did not advocate for foreclosure moratoriums. Actual conditions on the Great Plains were the stimulus for the responses of both Norris and Douglas. A truly ideological
response (and one that undervalued the ingenuity of actual farmers on the land) came much later, from Grant Devine, and, as Pitsula and Rasmussen demonstrate, it did not lead to more development but rather to more bankruptcies.¹²

Mortgage moratoriums, whether ad hoc or statutory, and the relief programs of the New Deal were not, however, sufficient to create or maintain healthy rural economies, and both Norris and Douglas continued to fight for changes to the way capitalism worked in the farm economy. Douglas was particularly interested in economic diversification, especially, as Richards and Pratt point out, into resource development and secondary manufacturing. Another piece of ccf legislation that was eventually declared ultra vires taxed mineral properties that were not developed. This legislation was intellectually akin to Henry George’s ideas in Progress and Poverty.¹³ Since economic value was created by society as a whole, landlords who held valuable properties out of production so that they could later reap speculative gains for themselves prospered at the expense of the rest of the society. Since the Canadian government had returned control of natural resources to the Prairie Provinces in 1930, the Saskatchewan ccf tried to spur development by taxing undeveloped mineral rights. Since much Prairie economic development has been premature in the sense that markets were not ready to support it—railroad building is the prime example—taxing undeveloped minerals was an ingenious attempt by the government, and hence the taxpayers of the province, to get the economic benefit of premature development even as owners waited for more economically viable production opportunities. Again, the courts ruled out this option, but it would have been an innovative way of frontloading the revenues that would eventually come to the province by way of royalties, back-ins, and other measures that Saskatchewan employed to share the revenue stream.

Norris’s measures to mitigate the difficulties of raising humid crops in a dry environment were less innovative but actually attained the force of law. He was a great champion of dry farming, especially of the “Campbell method,” and he pushed for federal support for agricultural experimentation with crops capable of withstanding Great Plains meteorological conditions. Both plant breeding and innovations in tillage succeeded in mitigating crop loss. Norris’s greatest legacy to mitigation, however, was
in the multi-purpose watershed projects that he championed throughout his federal career. Nebraska farmers were hindered by spring floods that inundated newly planted fields, swept away farm animals, damaged buildings, and, in the Republican River floods of 1935, resulted in the loss of more than one hundred human lives. Later in the summers, the lack of rain resulted in parched crops and diminished yields or even no harvest at all. Life on the farm in all seasons was lonely and labour-intensive. Dams could solve all of that, Norris believed, providing flood control in the spring, irrigation in the summer, and electric power and recreation all year long.14

Although Norris’s response to the Newlands Reclamation Act of 1902 was to propose a reservoir along the border between Red Willow and Hitchcock Counties in the middle of his congressional district, his real introduction to dam building and public power came with the Hetch Hetchy project in California. As Norris saw it, the major purpose of the project was to create hydro power on public land and to make it available to the city of San Francisco, assuring cheap power for consumers and for the street railway. The dam would also provide flood prevention downstream and secure irrigation water for the farmers who were already using the stream. Although the dam would flood a wild and beautiful valley in Yosemite National Park, Norris thought a lake would improve the view, and the roads necessary for the project would make the area more accessible to tourists. Not surprisingly, private power companies as well as conservationists opposed the project, and while conservationists had to see the valley flooded, the private power companies eventually took over the distribution and sale of the hydro power. Although central California was far away from the Great Plains and the main purpose of the dam was electrical generation for a city rather than irrigation, it was Hetch Hetchy that introduced Norris to the “miracle” of dams and lakes.15

Norris’s most famous multi-purpose river system development is also far away from the Great Plains. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), as Walter Stewart has pointed out in both his 1987 study of Crown corporations and his 2003 biography of Tommy Douglas, is bigger than any of Canada’s Crown corporations—thus somewhat complicating the assumption that publicly owned corporations are Canadian rather than American. After World War I, Norris saw an opportunity for the federal government to
use the federally owned fertilizer plant at Muscle Shoals as the nucleus of a project to develop the entire Tennessee River watershed for flood control, navigation, irrigation, and hydroelectric generation. This time supported by conservationists (and not, in the beginning, by the Nebraska legislature), Norris deflected a private offer from Henry Ford, hung on through vetoes of public power by Herbert Hoover, and fought off the private power interests of the southeast. When the New Deal finally favoured public projects, Norris still had to hold on through Supreme Court challenges to the constitutionality of TVA before he saw its building and success. What marked TVA, the Rural Electrification Administration that Norris also sponsored, and the collection of dams and lakes (crowned by Kingsley Dam and Lake McConaughy, known as the “Little TVA”) in Nebraska was their comprehensiveness. Norris made sure that each project even had a subsidiary that assisted farmers to purchase electric appliances so that demand would be ready when supply came on line and power would never go unused.16

If Norris’s expertise in guiding dam building, irrigation, and power generation schemes did not begin with the Great Plains, it certainly lent itself to conditions on the Great Plains in the 1930s. John Wesley Powell had warned Americans since 1878 that water would control the economic development of the West, and that federal development of dams and cooperative irrigation districts was the most intelligent means to that development.17 Although Powell’s ideas were unpopular with western boomers, they were in many ways accurate harbingers of Norris’s plans. The biggest problem with federally developed irrigation projects had always been that in most cases, irrigators alone could not pay for the cost of development. Hydro power could help subsidize construction, but not if private companies were able, as they were at Hetch Hetchy, to monopolize the sale and distribution of power. Navigation (not relevant to Nebraska, except on the Missouri) and flood control were federal concerns and could therefore command federal dollars that did not have to be paid back by the users of the water or electricity.

In putting together Nebraska’s Little TVA, Norris had to fight New Deal administrators to make sure the state was awarded Public Works Administration funding in accordance with the disproportionate economic losses suffered by the Great Plains states during the Dirty Thirties rather
than with average per capita US payments, and that farmers who had managed to avoid the dole were eligible to work on the projects. He had to cajole local backers of individual projects to work together instead of fighting among themselves for the primacy of their own local construction. And he particularly had to overcome the influence of his old adversaries, the “Power Trust,” particularly the Nebraska Power Company, headquartered in Omaha. Their vituperation against anyone associated with Roosevelt or the National Recovery Act of the New Deal was just as scathing and more lethal than any of the opposition to the socialism of the ccf. Because the president of the Power Company was also the president of the University of Omaha board of regents, he was able to censure a professor for praising the TVA and to fire university president W.E. Sealock, a Norris and Roosevelt supporter. Three days after his firing, Sealock committed suicide. Norris persevered, however, and when World War II began to restore prosperity to Nebraska, farmers had the water and energy to increase production, while Nebraska’s central location and plentiful, cheap electricity allowed it to land war-time production industries, though not as many as Norris desired. Once public power was harnessed into war production, it became patriotic rather than sinister and socialist. Ironically, though, Norris’s scrupulous concern for public welfare may have cost both Nebraska and the TVA region postwar economic development. Both the TVA and the Nebraska projects directly hired local workers to construct dams, transmission lines, and other parts of the projects. In the Far West, however, the Bureau of Reclamation hired private contractors from San Francisco, Salt Lake City, and Portland, who were able to develop the corporate strength to grow even larger government industries during the war and to demand for both themselves and the region sustainable manufacturing and prosperity, unlike Omaha’s, after the war. One of them was Bechtel.

Saskatchewan’s dams and hydro power lagged considerably behind Nebraska’s. A Liberal government introduced public power to Saskatchewan in 1929, and the Conservative/Progressive government elected the following year endorsed it, but it was not until 1945 that the new CCF government began buying up all the private power companies in the province to gain economies of scale and to get rid of duplication. After that was completed, the CCF could move toward generation. Neither Nebraska
nor Saskatchewan had to expropriate private utilities: they simply ceased to be economical after public power came in. In 1949, Saskatchewan Power (spc) became a Crown corporation and began a rural electrification program for the southern part of the province, paid for by the farmers and spc. Although the 1930s had moved Saskatchewan, like Nebraska, to look at damming major streams, particularly the South Saskatchewan River and its tributaries, the federal government dragged its feet on funding and authorizing such dam-building projects until 1958, when Prime Minister John Diefenbaker agreed to what would become the Gardiner Dam, holding back the waters of Lake Diefenbaker, which lapped against the shores of Douglas Park. Not until the late 1960s did the South Saskatchewan plants begin generating power, and, as is the case in Nebraska, coal-fired plants provide much of Saskatchewan’s power today. In both Nebraska and Saskatchewan, rural electrification was popular and uncontroversial. Isolated farm houses were not an attractive target for private power companies. The big difference was in the move to consolidate private power companies into a state- or province-wide public grid. In Nebraska, it was a hard-fought battle. In Saskatchewan, it was simply the model that other provinces already followed and the only surprise was that the ccf was able to hang on and get the job done in the vast and sparsely populated rural parts of the province. \textit{TVA} and Nebraska Public Power are anomalies in the United States. Saskatchewan Power was formed by the ccf, but its public status was the norm—even highly market-driven Calgary hung onto its city power system, though not without controversy, during the recent rage for utility deregulation.

Neither Norris nor Douglas saw any problems with building dams. Norris, as we have seen, thought even very picturesque parks were better with lakes and access roads. Rivers that simply ran were, he believed, a waste of water. Yet dams on prairie rivers silt in rapidly and require dredging to retain their capacity to prevent floods and store water for irrigation and generation. The lack of flooding on the post-dam Platte means that the sandy islands characteristic of a braided prairie river are not scoured out, damaging the roosting habitat of sandhill and whooping cranes and the nesting and spawning habitats of various other species, some, like the whoopers, threatened or endangered. Just as the dams on the Columbia
severely injured the native Pacific coast salmon, dams on prairie rivers have caused unforeseen ecological damage. Although Douglas opposed some provisions of the treaty governing Columbia River development, it was US control of the water, not habitat loss, that bothered him. Yet renewable resources, such as water, may not be entirely renewable after all.

Dams and lakes have an adverse environmental effect that was not foreseen by their builders. Many of the dams on the Great Plains have also had an adverse effect on Indigenous people (as we shall see in chapter 13), who despite their articulate protests have in many cases received shorter shrift than the whooping cranes and snail darters. As F. Laurie Barron points out in his study of Tommy Douglas and the Native peoples of Saskatchewan, governments, particularly governments that explicitly set out to help the underdog, must be judged at least partly by their ability to perceive and to respond meaningfully to the most disadvantaged members of society, and on the Great Plains, that primarily means Indigenous people. In Saskatchewan, the relationship between Native peoples and hydroelectric projects is not as contentious as it was in the case of the Great Whale projects in Quebec or the Oldman River Dam in Alberta. Power generation is mostly absent from the northern parts of Saskatchewan, the province with the highest proportion of Native and Métis people, although power generation and transmission was one part of the general disruption of Aboriginal societies in the vicinity of uranium-producing and pulpwood sites in the north. In Nebraska, dam building would mean substantial losses to Native people. While the Platte, Loup, and Republican river valleys had for the most part been “cleansed” of Native people long before the 1930s, Republican River dams did cause the flooding of one highly important Pawnee holy spring that was venerated by most peoples of the region. TVA dams also flooded Cherokee graves and other holy sites, long after the majority of the people had been removed from the area. The controversy over the snail darter and the Tombigbee River, long after Norris’s time, obscured the Cherokee objections to the flooding of their ancient capital of Echota and other historical sites. The developments that caused the most damage both to living American Indian communities and to graves and holy sites, however, were those on the mainstem of the Missouri River. Although constructed long after the death of Senator Norris, these dams, like the project
that flooded Echota, had been among his most cherished future projects. As Michael Lawson notes, Missouri mainstem dams were consistently sited where they would not inconvenience many Amer-European settlers, but where they would inundate large percentages of the homes of Lakota and Dakota people settled on Missouri River reservations and in several cases, including the Santee in Nebraska and the Hidatsa in North Dakota, would flood whole communities. Although tribal leaders consistently testified that the dams would do considerable economic and social damage, their legitimate concerns were systematically denied at every level. While Douglas was uncomfortably, if incompletely, aware of the failure of ccr policies to render substantial aid to Aboriginal communities, Norris, for all his tolerance and his disgust at racial hatreds, simply did not register Indian people. In the uplifting farewell chapter with which Norris ended his memoirs, thoughtfully suggesting his best hopes for a peace that would endure at the end of World War II, he wrote, “Never in its entire history has America coveted the lands and the wealth of other peoples,” quite oblivious to all of America being the land and wealth of other peoples. Building dams for irrigation and hydro power was a logical, even courageous, response to the conditions of drought and poverty, one especially relevant to the Great Plains. At the same time, it was a statement that both the land itself and the societies that had evolved there were deficient for proper human uses—so deficient as to be invisible. And it is hard to think of looking for guidance to something, or someone, that does not register on one’s consciousness.

Dam building and the flood control, irrigation, and hydro generation that went with it were the main means of mitigating the climate that Norris and, to a lesser extent, Douglas implemented. Both, however, saw ways to change the structure of government itself so that it would better serve the particular needs of the Great Plains. Norris’s lifelong goal of providing efficient and transparent government led to the formation of the only one-house legislature in the United States, Nebraska’s non-partisan Unicameral. As was the case with public power, Norris expended a great deal of time and energy securing what Saskatchewan and most provinces already had, a one-house legislature, though of course Saskatchewan’s is not non-partisan. The Unicameral was Norris’s idea, although state governance was not part of his duties as a US senator. He organized the
coalition that brought it into effect. While there was considerable public support for the idea, it would never have been raised except for Norris. A sparsely populated, relatively poor polity benefits even more than a large and diverse one from a small, simple legislature. Fewer senators cost less. Non-partisanship allows for fluid alliances that change from issue to issue. While both Saskatchewan and Nebraska have more diverse economies than they had in the 1930s and both have developed urban centres with their own particular demands and concerns, neither has the diversity and polarity that might require two houses to protect. The major benefit of a unicameral system, to Norris, was the relative transparency that results when bills do not disappear into the mangle of conference committees and emerge with transformations for which no one is clearly responsible, something that could benefit any deliberative body. Norris brought the one-house idea to Nebraska because it was his home state, but voters may have been ready to accept it because it made particular sense for Nebraska and the Great Plains.

It is tempting but not actually useful to say that Norris’s institutional innovations made government smaller while Douglas’s made it bigger. Certainly Norris’s support for the various New Deal agencies in Nebraska increased the presence of the federal government more than ever happened in Saskatchewan. The ccr government in Saskatchewan from 1944 to 1964 provincialized services that neither the federal government nor the private sector could provide. Co-operative marketing and purchasing boards were essential to farmers during hard times, though, like the New Deal agencies in Nebraska, they might come to be seen as impediments during the plush times. Provincial hospital and motor vehicle insurance were popular throughout Saskatchewan, but they were particularly helpful for farmers and their families. Because the farmer was self-employed, he had no employer to help out with medical insurance. And because farmers frequently owned valuable on-road vehicles such as pickups and other, larger trucks, in addition to private cars, they benefited more than the average urban driver from low-cost premiums.

One of the more striking parallels between Norris and Douglas during the years that they were both members of the federal legislature was in their reactions to the arms buildup before World War II. Norris, who had
opposed US entry into World War I, had allies among the isolationists and the pacifists in American society, but he was neither an isolationist nor a pacifist. Douglas shared his attitude toward peace and armaments with his ccr caucus, but he particularly spoke out about munitions and war materials, especially after his 1936 visit to Germany. Norris opposed US entry into World War I because he thought Britain was as guilty of imperialism and the disregard of neutrality as Germany was, and because he believed arms manufacturers were stirring up a war hysteria to sell their goods. America could make the world safer for democracy, he believed, by staying out of the war. Before World War I, he had consistently pushed for smaller naval appropriations and more support for international arbitration mechanisms. Disputes were solved by the means at hand, he believed, and it was safer to make sure that one was supplied with agreed-upon international dispute resolution mechanisms than to be surrounded by warships. During the 1930s, both men consistently argued against selling materials that could be used as weapons to countries that might turn out to be enemies. In his maiden speech to parliament, Douglas pointed out that the federal government could scarcely talk of peace while selling Mussolini nickel and oil. In the spring of 1939, he made the same point (echoing William Jennings Bryan, another Nebraska statesman), calling on Canada not to crucify “a generation of young men . . . upon a cross of nickel.” Norris, in the same year, similarly found it “heartbreaking” that the United States was selling scrap iron to Japan, airplane parts to Germany, and war materials to Italy. He proposed to keep materials out of the hands of aggressor nations by selling only on a “cash and carry” basis, which would have allowed England to buy—but not Germany and Japan. 26

Although at first blush this opposition to selling war materials to potentially hostile powers seems like a combination of pacifist-tinged ideology with plain good sense, it also has a relationship to region. Sincere as both Douglas and Norris were in their opposition to munitions, it is doubtful if representatives with their outlook could have been consistently re-elected to the Senate or the Parliament from regions dependent upon war materials extraction or manufacture—and in this, a kind of “deficiency” may even be viewed as positive. Even after the outbreak of war, the Plains benefited far less from wartime manufacturing than did those regions already engaged
in heavy manufacturing, such as the Ohio and St. Lawrence valleys, or the American West Coast and Southwest, where the companies who had built themselves up as federal contractors in the 1930s were most successful in landing war construction contracts. Montreal participated heavily in munitions manufacture during World War II, as it had in the Great War. Douglas, like all the federal members of the ccf caucus except for J.S. Woodsworth himself, supported Canada’s declaration of war in 1939, and when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Norris joined in supporting the US declaration of war. Once committed, both men pressed their respective governments to provide adequate support for the troops. Norris pointed to Nebraska’s central location and cheap, plentiful electricity to urge the siting of weapons and aircraft plants in his home state, and he was fairly successful. The Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, was fabricated in Omaha, Nebraska. Norris’s defeat in 1942 came about for a number of reasons, but the effect of his pre-war pacifism or his wartime beliefs on the economy of Nebraska was not one of them. Saskatchewan received less in the way of manufacture, despite Douglas’s greater degree of support for war. As a member of a minority party, he was not in a position to bring large wartime contracts to his province. Except for the training of Commonwealth pilots, the Prairies received little direct economic development during the war, but Douglas’s long opposition to the sale of war materials was no hindrance to his successful campaign for a ccf government in 1944. During the Cold War, however, Douglas and his ccf government endorsed and promoted uranium production, even though it was being used for weaponry. It was not sold to the Russians or other obvious potential enemies.

Both Norris and Douglas, then, mitigated the poor fit of humid-area cropping techniques with a semi-arid environment by supporting foreclosure moratoriums and direct relief for farmers, by championing irrigation and public power, by changing the structure of government to be more responsive to the people, and by articulating humanitarian and common-sense arguments against the excessive development of other regions, to the detriment of the Plains, through the sale of potential war materials. In what ways could they or did they try to change the humid-lands agriculture and economic system to fit the particular environment of the Great Plains or to mimic the past history of human land use there?
One could look at proposed variations to fee simple ownership and private property that seemed to have disproportionately affected American-European settlement on the Great Plains. Farm tenancy on the Great Plains has conventionally allowed new farmers to work themselves into the land and older farmers to work themselves out, rather than leading to permanent tenancy of the sharecropper version existing in the American South. Leasing is a somewhat different proposition that has primarily been applied to grazing and has allowed some approximation of the purposeful migrations of both the wild buffalo herds and the people who hunted them. Norris worked with fellow Nebraskan Moses Kinkaid to introduce a 640-acre homestead in 1908 to allow small ranches, especially in northwestern Nebraska’s rugged Pine Ridge and Sandhills areas, but he later came to favour state ownership with leasesholds for cattlemen. Even a whole section was too small for a ranch, and the Kinkaid Act continued to result in violations of the law. Norris was sentimentally attached to the Homestead Act, and in 1935, he sponsored a bill to create the Homestead National Monument near Beatrice, Nebraska—the site, as noted earlier, of the “first” homestead claim in the United States. Norris does not seem to have been particularly involved in the withdrawal of all public lands from homesteading in 1934 and the substitution of the Taylor Grazing Act, which enabled ranchers to lease federal land. By this time, Nebraska was no longer a public land state. Almost everything was in private or state hands and thus was not affected by the Taylor Grazing Act. Norris certainly recognized that private ownership of land did not always serve the farmer, or particularly the rancher, but his interventions were fairly limited and small scale.

Canada had experimented with leases for cattle ranchers, particularly in Alberta, before the mass influx of homesteaders to the Prairies. Public pressure had forced the opening of much of the grasslands to settlement and also expected ranchers to overgraze in order to be seen as more productive. During the waning days of R.B. Bennett’s prime ministership, in the middle of the Depression, the Conservatives passed several acts intended to mitigate the effects of the hard times, including one setting up the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA). Although Douglas praised Bennett for this and other attempts to mitigate farm distress, as a member of an opposition party, he obviously could not participate in the
Conservative plans. During the 1930s, the CCF in Saskatchewan experimented with the idea of public ownership of agricultural land in two ways. The first, quickly repudiated, was to secure farm tenure through usufruct rights rather than through fee simple. The province would hold title to the land itself, but the farmer could use, bequeath, or even sell the usehold rights. Agnes Macphail, from the Ontario Farmers’ Union, blocked the inclusion of such an idea from the Regina Manifesto, arguing that farmers would never support anything but absolute ownership rights to the family farm, and the proposal was attacked from the right as a precursor to the collectivization of farms.²⁹

After that, the proposal was dropped altogether, but it is unfortunate that it did not receive more careful thought, because it had potential as a model for an environmentally sound land-use policy and it reflected both past and present Native land-use patterns. Forced collectivization of farming in the Soviet Union turned out to be a disaster, but it was not the only alternative to a fee simple title. According to Douglas, usehold title would be a voluntary option by which the province would pay off the mortgage but maintain the farmer on the land, and it was intended as an alternative to letting farmers slip into tenancy or lose the land altogether to foreclosure. The proposal’s whole purpose was to guarantee owner-occupiers access to the land, the opposite of collectivization—though government programs do not always turn out exactly as planned. Usehold was the norm for the riverine horticulture practiced by plains peoples before the nineteenth century. Gardens belonged to individual women or coalitions of sisters or other female relations, who maintained specific plots as long as those met their needs. Swapping up or down as the situation changed seems to have been fairly easy. The Five Southeast Tribes who were moved to Oklahoma had proved that such useholds could work in commercial agriculture, as big holders and subsistence holders neighboured with each other, allowing wild game habitats to be interspersed with small fields and larger areas of monoculture until the system was destroyed by forced allotment.³⁰

Could Saskatchewan have developed a successful usehold system? It is doubtful, given the excessive deference to private property that had developed on the Plains. Owning one’s own land was a visceral response to the insecurities of European land tenure for peasant farmers as well as to the
reputed (and real) overcrowding of European and North American cities. Useholds that could be sold and thus had a cash value would not have provided the flexibility of the riverine farmer women or the Creek pastoralists to change fields according to circumstances. Of course, many twentieth-century Saskatchewan farmers owned their land only in conjunction with their friendly neighbourhood banker or moneylender, so ownership may have been more in name than in fact for the very farmers whom Douglas was trying to help. But the legal system was not based on usehold, and therefore security was indeterminate—not a very reassuring way to control your home and means of livelihood. Usehold had another economic pitfall that also bedevilled the communally owned land on First Nations reserves. The reason farmers were facing foreclosure in the first place was because they had borrowed money against their lands. A mortgage was the cheapest and usually the only way a farmer could raise the cash for farm machinery, buildings, fences, and other improvements, or for buying more land to make the farm more viable. Once land title was held by the province or, as with the reserves, by the federal government, it could not be mortgaged, a circumstance that has often retarded economic development in reserve communities. Theoretically, this problem could be addressed, as it has been in some parts of Asia, with revolving development funds administered cooperatively, but this was not part of the ccf scheme, nor has anything like it yet been undertaken on the Great Plains. Usehold, which might have provided an innovative response to living with the normal climate fluctuations of the Great Plains, never got a hearing because it was discussed only in sentimental odes to the family farm or in terms of capitalism versus communism, neither of which system is particularly relevant.

By the early 1980s, the cry of collectivization rose again, this time in response to the Land Bank established by Allan Blakeney’s NDP government to buy land from retiring farmers and allow young farmers to rent it in order to build up equity and to purchase the farm. When Devine’s Conservatives abolished the Land Bank, farm foreclosures rose and tenancy increased—another indication that fee simple land policies in a pure market economy were not sufficient to support Saskatchewan farmers. In 2006, as Prairie farmers debated whether their spreads could ever be profitable in the age of globalization, the farm community was split between
those who advocated a government-subsidized living wage for farmers and those who wanted more market control for farmers. Ironically, selling land to First Nations bands and leasing it back is allowing some Saskatchewan farmers to retain the use of their land.  

More successful than the abortive usehold proposal were the community pastures that are still part of Saskatchewan ranching, put in place by the Conservatives in Ottawa under the PFRA and implemented, also from Ottawa, by the Liberals. Again, there was an Aboriginal prototype, but this time closer to home and probably familiar at least in theory to some in the Saskatchewan government. The river lots of the Métis settlements had included community pastures behind crop and hayfields. Anglo settlements as well had employed community pastures and a herdsboy in the early days of settlement before individual farmers had the time or money to fence their fields. By including relatively large areas of land extending across various microclimates, community pastures can allow ranchers to utilize range more rationally than if each spread had to feed all its own cattle, especially in areas where there were separate summer and winter pastures. Because Saskatchewan does not have the variations in altitude of the mountain west nor, in the south, the oil and gas deposits of Alberta or American portions of the mountain west, community pastures present a useful alternative to leased, multi-use pastureland that may encompass grazing, recreation, and gas and oil exploration and extraction.

Both Norris and Douglas introduced structural changes to their own polities that have remained in place and that distinguish Nebraska and Saskatchewan from surrounding states and provinces. Even though the CCF was less inventive in terms of the structure of government than United Farmers of Alberta and early Social Credit governments in Alberta, it did initiate many innovations that have stayed in effect. The Unicameral legislature has not proved as impervious to lobbyists as Norris had hoped, and it sometimes works on partisan lines, but it is efficient, effective, and economical (though recently imposed term limits seem to make it less so). Most Nebraskans are quite proud of it and even its detractors oppose its non-partisanship more than its unicameral nature. Douglas’s changes involved the structure not of the legislative assembly but rather of the bureaucracy and its relationship to both individuals and industry.
Saskatchewan is still a sparsely populated province heavily dependent upon agriculture and to a lesser extent upon mineral extraction. According to Richards and Pratt, the ccf principles of social control and planning were at least as useful for the province as private ownership, but the ccf itself lost the nerve required to take the risks that would make social ownership as successful as it might have been, while the privatization attempts of Ross Thatcher and Grant Devine watered down some of the ccf heritage. Despite its mistakes—detouring local entrepreneurship into small secondary industries that really had no chance of long-term survival, or allowing northern fish, fur, and timber Crown co-operatives to undercut small private entrepreneurs such as sawmills—Douglas's first ccf government, especially in its first two years, did more to rationalize a sparsely populated, staple-producing province within a market economy than any other Plains government before or since. Provincial education, hospitalization, and medicare itself are deeply entrenched, and even enemies of the NDP admit that no government in its right mind would consider tampering with them. Once the discipline of twenty-five years of privation and war had worn off, and once large farmers had become part of the business elite instead of floursack-wearing populists, however, people from Saskatchewan responded the way most North Americans, particularly westerners, responded to the slow patient slog of reinvestment, social equity, and the gospel of comfort rather than riches. They repudiated it. Like the casinos Saskatchewan would eventually erect, jackpots in the economy and the appeal of being a “have” province capable of flashing its overflowing billfold in front of Quebec and the Maritimes and even Manitoba was definitely appealing.

Neither Norris nor Douglas nor their supporters, however, has ever really dealt with the implications of a grassland ecology and the kinds of economic and social structures that might be most complementary with it. Much of Saskatchewan's resource economy is north of the Great Plains. Norris was never attuned to either the dispossession or the strengths of the land knowledge of the Indigenous peoples of Nebraska or the United States in general; Douglas and the ccf-NDP tried valiantly but mostly unsuccessfully to deal with dispossession issues, but his lack of recognition and use of Indigenous strengths tended to doom, or at least to blunt, reforms.
The legacy of Norris and Douglas is one of honesty, peace, goodwill, and successful mitigation of the grassland ecosystem to fit Amer-European norms of land use and participation in the market system. Their emphasis on altruistic co-operative handling of the environment worked for whitestream society on the Plains as long as it was not overwhelmed by prosperity itself. Their legacy also displays the great loss to both Natives and newcomers that resulted from their inability to “walk in Indian moccasins.”

Farming is always a gamble with the weather, the land, and the markets, and in North America, gambling is always supposed to pay off with a jackpot. Both Norris and Douglas believed that what most people wanted was freedom from want, a decent level of comfort, and security for themselves and their families. Perhaps that was not enough.

One can scarcely fault Norris and Douglas for not working completely outside the paradigm of market-based humid-lands society, yet it seems somehow a waste that, since they were challenging the status quo anyway, these leaders did not have access to a frame of reference that would have allowed them to plan reforms that started out with the great fact of the land and the thousands of years of history of its use by humans. But the Great Plains is always in transition. Unlike redwood forests that last for centuries, grasslands change from month to month and from metre to metre. Mad cow, drought, and the melting of the glaciers that feed the rivers of the Plains are all forcing change right now. The experiences of Norris and Douglas illustrate the limits of mitigation and could challenge us, the Plains dwellers of the twenty-first century, to look to what they missed—the ecology of the grasslands, the adaptations of native flora and fauna, and particularly the land wisdom still miraculously resident, despite over a century of suppression, in the Indigenous communities of the Great Plains. To rewire Plains whitestream societies in this way would require planning and government intervention in ways Norris and Douglas could not have dreamed. Unfortunately, however, the theory of planning is more useful in hindsight, to explain what has already happened. As we shall see in the next chapter, planning only works well when it proceeds fairly gradually and honours the land knowledge of the people—as it did in Tommy Douglas’s Saskatchewan.