The Rise of the City Relief Machines

In respect to each group in need of care—the family, the single man, the unemployed woman—smoothly running machinery appears to exist to . . . meet that need at a reasonable minimum compatible with health and decency.

“Family Welfare in Greater Winnipeg, 1934”

It is spoken of as an efficient piece of machinery. The men think that efficiency is not everything. The electric chair is also an efficient piece of machinery.

Unemployed man from Edmonton, on the relief system, 1936

The onset of what would come to be called the Great Depression compelled municipal authorities in cities like Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg to confront a series of unemployment-related challenges the likes of which they had not encountered before. Increasing numbers
of families sought relief from city offices and private charities, making heavier-than-normal demands on local soup kitchens and bread lines, and stretching the resources of city relief departments. And the small armies of single men migrating into western cities seeking—but not finding—work after the harvest season’s close only exacerbated the situation. With winter bearing down in the late autumn of 1929, municipal officials in cities across the Prairies grew increasingly anxious. It was too early to tell whether the emerging unemployment problem was the result of an extraordinarily bad seasonal downturn or evidence of a more chronic and structural cyclical business recession. The New York stock market crash in October certainly hinted at the latter, but the abrupt drop in key economic indices like the Dow Jones Industrial Average on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange seemed worlds away from three smallish cities on the Canadian prairies. Closer to home, and much more problematic in the immediate term, was a combination of what Gerald Friesen calls a “disappointingly small” wheat crop and a sharp decline in wheat prices on the world market. The former was related to a drought that began during the important summer growing months, and the latter to production outstripping demand and to a series of European domestic price supports, embargoes, and quotas on foreign cereal grains.

Whatever the causes of the growing numbers of unemployed, Edmonton’s city council felt that the emerging crisis was serious enough to warrant a meeting with the provincial government, something the council had not requested since the early 1920s. The Edmonton Bulletin agreed that a conference on unemployment was necessary, especially given that autumn’s poor harvest. “It has been apparent ever since the crop situation developed,” the Bulletin’s editors averred in early December, “that the coming winter would find more than the usual number of men unable to get along in the slack season without some measure of help.” The mood in Saskatoon was similar. In late December, officials from that city travelled to Regina, the provincial capital, to discuss an unemployment relief strategy with provincial officials and representatives of Prince Albert and Regina. Even in Winnipeg, which was older and more economically diverse and stable, unemployment numbers were causing
much worry. The city struggled with an influx of what local officials later
coldly called the “natural ‘backwash’ of idle farm labourers, and casual
workers from Northern construction, lumbering, and mining camps.”

This was certainly not the first time Prairie cities had faced reces-
sions in their short histories; they had confronted similar situations just
before the Great War and again through the early 1920s. Neither was
mass unemployment an unknown phenomenon prior to the 1930s. Unem-
ployment and its associated problems had been chronic features
of Canada’s urban and industrial experience for decades. And west-
ern cities had had in place at least since the start of the century relief
apparatuses to deal with poverty and unemployment. But the unemploy-
ment crisis looming over the winter of 1929–30 was of a different order.
Prairie cities had never before faced an economic catastrophe so severe
or a social dislocation so jarring. In subsequent years, especially during
the dark winter months, the crisis would only worsen. “In the history
of the Province,” Manitoba officials remarked in mid-February 1932, “the
problem had never been as great as it was during the winter of 1930–31.
And it should be made clear here that the winter immediately passed
was worse still.” Brian McKillop points out that Winnipeg “was hit with
a particular vengeance. . . . By the fall of 1930 wheat was being sold on
the Liverpool market at the lowest price since the seventeenth century.”
Nor was wheat the only commodity critical to Winnipeg’s wealth in real
trouble by the early 1930s. “Tractor purchases in the prairie provinces,”
McKillop notes, “declined from 14,557 in 1929 to 762 in 1933. The gross
value of manufactured products in Winnipeg fell between 1929 and
1932 from $109.3 million to $56 million. Eatons’s mail order slumped
from $22,027,000 of business in 1930 to $17,139,000 by 1932.”

Relief officials in Winnipeg were quick to recognize this distinc-
tion, and especially its implications for the administration and delivery
of relief. The Greater Winnipeg Welfare Association recalled of that city’s
first encounter with the Depression, “It may be said at once that it very
soon became evident that the existing Welfare Agencies, including the Churches, were not equipped to care for the new situation.” The city’s churches and private agencies, the association continued, “functioned under normal conditions and more or less met the needs of those normal conditions,” aiding Winnipeg’s poor through seasonal downswings in the economy as well as deeper cyclical recessions. But the Depression was different. “We feel this distinction cannot be too clearly or forcibly drawn,” the association said. The vast amounts of public money for relief purposes demanded by the Depression simply “could not be entrusted to either the churches or the private relief agencies for administration.”

In their stead, policy-makers in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg developed what officials in Winnipeg called “relief machinery”: ad hoc relief administrations designed exclusively to meet Depression-related unemployment problems. Their main functions were to coordinate unemployment relief financing arrangements with the provincial and federal governments; propose, organize, and carry out urban work relief programs; and deliver direct relief to unemployed victims of the Depression. They concentrated their efforts only on those urban residents affected by unemployment, leaving poor relief cases with causes unrelated to the Depression to other welfare bodies and private charitable organizations. Of course, lines separating the unemployment-related poor and the remaining poor were often blurred, but the policy-makers in charge of the city relief machines nevertheless struggled to maintain the distinction for at least two reasons. First, most city relief machine activities were funded jointly by the federal, provincial, and municipal governments. Keeping unemployment relief monies separate from other municipal spending made accounting easier and allowed cities to charge any unemployment-related relief spending to agreements with the more senior levels of government. Second, distinguishing between unemployment-related and other relief expenditures reflected municipal thinking about the difference between those who were poor because they could not find work and those who were poor because they could not work at all (for example, widows, orphans, the elderly, and the disabled).

The city relief machines would remain at the front lines of unemployment relief provision and administration until mid-decade, when
the federal and provincial governments would take a more active and direct role in the provision and delivery of relief. During their period of ascendance, roughly between 1930 and 1933, the city relief machines formed the most important and immediate connection between the state and the unemployed, enjoying relative policy autonomy from senior levels of governments yet encountering serious and complicated policy challenges from local business and community interests, as well as from the unemployed themselves.

THE EMERGENCE OF AN URBAN WEST

Edmonton graduated from town to city status on 8 October 1904. One month later, the new city of more than eight thousand people was ready to celebrate. The weight of the region’s past was not lost on the party’s planners: fastened to the walls of the Thistle curling rink, the city’s largest structure and the site of the day’s celebrations, were thousands of dollars’ worth of furs—muskox, beaver, buffalo—recalling the great fur trade that had attracted Europeans far into the interior more than a century before. The furs were set off by yards of colourful and imperial red, blue, and white bunting, giving the room a festive, official feel. The main stage at one end had been set up to resemble a trapper’s cabin, and off to one side stood what a Calgary Daily Herald reporter called an “Indian tepee,” representing the Cree people who had once dominated the area. But the distinguished guests arriving for the banquet and the speeches—mostly business, religious, and political leaders—would not have missed the organizers’ nod to the future: brought into the rink especially for the occasion was mayor and motorcar enthusiast William Short’s automobile, one of the first in the city. It was an auspicious start for the small town with big city dreams.

Less than a year later, Prime Minister Laurier’s administration created the new province of Alberta and—much to the dissatisfaction of Calgary, the rival city to the south—named Edmonton its capital city. Still, Edmonton in September 1905 looked much like it had as a town only two years before. Its sidewalks remained little more than wooden
planks that, in the words of one local historian, “rose and fell as they followed the surface of the ground.” The constant horse traffic on the unpaved streets kicked up terrific dust on dry days and created terrible muck on wet ones. The winters were cold. Those strolling through the city’s downtown would have seen mostly wooden buildings with false fronts—livery and blacksmith shops, stores and saloons and pool halls, several hotels, and banks. There were a few brick buildings, like the McKay Avenue School and the new Windsor Hotel, but by and large, the city’s rough-hewn look easily betrayed its frontier town roots.

Great changes were afoot, however, as a steady stream, and soon a flowing river of settlers passed through Edmonton’s Dominion Lands Office to claim their homesteads. Many new arrivals chose to remain in town. Some found work at one of the city’s several coal mines, lumberyards, or brick works, or—especially after 1902, when the Edmonton, Yukon, and Pacific railways met up with the Calgary-Edmonton Railway and linked to the Canadian Pacific—loading and unloading goods and agricultural produce at the city’s bustling rail yards. In subsequent years, with the introduction to Edmonton of the Canadian Northern Railway in 1905 and the Grand Trunk Pacific in 1909, the city would enjoy the traffic of three important railways. Some newcomers took up jobs on the many building sites scattered throughout the city. Others came intending to start small retail businesses; establish law, real estate, and contracting offices; or provide other professional services for the growing city.

The paths to Edmonton were many, and for some, like future mayor Charles May, they promised wealth and social mobility. Born in Wellington County, Ontario, in 1858, May travelled west to Manitoba at age twenty-two to farm in the northern part of the province. Some time later, he moved to Winnipeg, where he worked as a carpenter and builder. In 1902, perhaps drawn by the boom town’s reputation, he arrived in Edmonton, where he set up a successful building and contracting firm, winning tenders to construct numerous buildings that would become city landmarks, including Edmonton’s main post office, the first station for the Canadian National Railway, two bank buildings, and the residence of Frank Oliver, founder of the Edmonton Bulletin and federal minister of the Interior. New arrivals like May fit easily into an already
established elite that, like its counterparts in Saskatoon and Winnipeg, had been busy constructing an architecture of political, economic, and social dominance over the city through powerful local associations like the exclusive Edmonton Club, the Chamber of Commerce, and the city council. Edmonton’s urban elite joined what Gerald Friesen describes as “the several hundred entrepreneurs, financiers, merchants, and government and church leaders who ‘set the tone’ or established the rules in the new society. They took up where the preceding generation had left off, asserting the rule of law, the power of the church, the influence of the school lesson, and the inevitable correctness of British traditions.”

The influx of workers through these early years would leave an equally important mark on the city. Like Winnipeg before it, Edmonton developed an increasingly stark geographical division along class lines. Members of Edmonton’s well-to-do business and professional classes secured the west end of town to build their homes. On the east side were the city’s working-class neighbourhoods. Still further east, the small cottages turned into rooming houses and cheap hotels housing growing numbers of single young men recently arrived from Central Europe and Great Britain. On a visit from Winnipeg, J. S. Woodsworth reported on one east-end home: “In one house ten by twelve by nine . . . eight people [were] sleeping, where by laws of sanitation there should have been three.” In the basement of another house, Woodsworth found eighteen sleeping, “each man paying $3 a month for the privilege.” In 1906, the city had few unions, but in August of that year, organizers from the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress and the American Federation of Labor arrived and urged workers to organize. The organizers evidently met with some success: that September, Edmonton workers marched in the city’s first Labour Day parade. At the end of the decade, more than half of the city’s population was engaged in four discrete trades: building, manufacturing and mining, domestic and personal service, and transportation.

Edmonton’s boom town experience also added new ethnic dimensions to the city. Some 5 percent of the population in 1906 called themselves Germanic, while a further 5 percent might, in the words of one historian, be divided into “Slavic or other east European extraction

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. . . Scandinavians, Jews, East Asians, and Dutch.” Another 5 percent were French. Still, even by 1906, Edmonton remained solidly dominated by Anglo-Celtic peoples who traced their origins either to Ontario or directly to Great Britain, making up no less than 85 percent of the city’s population. By 1910, the situation had changed, as more immigrants had moved into the city. In that year, immigrants from Eastern Europe made up approximately 15 percent of the city’s population, and another 8 percent counted themselves of Germanic or Scandinavian origin. But Anglo-Saxons, at 70 percent, still made up the vast majority. In 1912, when the cities of Strathcona and Edmonton amalgamated, the collected population jumped to fifty thousand. It had been a busy start for an ambitious town. In less than a decade, Edmonton’s population had increased sixfold, three important railways had entered the city, housing and business-related construction had become a near constant, and the city had been named both the provincial capital and the site of the provincial university, much to the chagrin of Calgarians.

Changes no less dramatic were occurring over the same period five hundred kilometres to the east in Saskatoon. By the second decade of the twentieth century, Saskatoon had emerged as one of five dominant metropolises on the Canadian Prairies. In rapid and dynamic succession, the small and wholly unremarkable Prairie hamlet of the 1890s progressed to a commercial, cultural, and educational centre of growing economic and political importance by the end of the Great War. Founded largely on Methodist and temperance principles, Saskatoon began as a rather unlikely attempt to create a utopian oasis of sobriety where, in the words of the settlement’s founder, John Neilson Lake, “alcoholic beverages shall not be sold.” During the summer of 1882, a party of thirteen had left Toronto in search of a suitable townsite on a forty-two by eighteen mile rectangular tract of land set aside for the Temperance Colonization Society. After a long journey by rail, trail, and boat, the small group settled on a spot between the Métis settlement of Batoche to the north and a Sioux reserve to the south, and spread on either side of the South Saskatchewan River. But the harsh winter of 1882–83 and the severe isolation of the frontier hindered any real initial growth, despite the group’s best intentions. The small colony even abandoned its Methodist
and temperance principles, but this was largely because the members of the Temperance Colonization Society could not legally restrict access to the settlement to those sharing their beliefs.38

It was not until 1890—when the Qu’Appelle, Long Lake, and Saskatchewan Railway and Steamboat Company built a branch line through Saskatoon connecting central Saskatchewan with the main Canadian Pacific Railway line at Regina—that the fledgling community had a sound basis for future growth and development. The railway eased the isolation of the frontier and offered a strong and necessary sense of connection with the rest of the young Dominion. Thereafter, the railway transformed Saskatoon into a shipping point for the emerging cattle range industry and a terminus for agricultural goods from the Battleford district to the west.39 Saskatoon also functioned as a distribution centre for agricultural implements necessary for grain production in the surrounding area. In short, the coming of the railway, the development of an agricultural market, and, after 1907, the establishment of the provincial university ensured Saskatoon’s continued development and growth.40

Although much smaller than the four other Prairie urban centres at the turn of the century, Saskatoon’s population grew from 113 in 1901 to an astonishing 25,739 only twenty years later, making it the seventeenth-largest city in Canada. Saskatoon’s net assessment value, a negligible $2.5 million in 1906, stood at more than $56 million by 1913.41 The city’s revenue jumped from $226,000 in 1910 to more than $927,000 only twelve years later.42 As remarkable as those numbers are, however, they hardly capture the sense of excitement, optimism, and frontier spirit of Saskatoon’s first decades. The wild dreams and visions of grandeur even led some commentators to count Saskatoon among the “great families of Western cities.” Saskatoon was unabashedly placed in the company of Cincinnati, St. Louis, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Winnipeg.43 Nothing seemed out of reach; anything seemed possible.

Saskatoon’s boosters, that small core of local elite whose fortunes were tied to the city’s economic success, channelled that optimism into attracting large-scale immigration and investment. Manifested in a mad and fantastic real estate boom, the booster strategy contributed to a wave of unprecedented growth. A dealer from one of Saskatoon’s 267 real
estate firms described the boom as a time when “you could sell anything anywhere to anyone at any price.” Prosperity had finally descended on the Canadian Prairies, and western cities like Saskatoon and Edmonton benefited tremendously. By some accounts, land purchased for $300 a front foot in 1909 sold for more than $1,700 a front foot only three years later. Serious money could be made, often in the space of months, sometimes in mere days. And serious money drew serious investment, not to mention large-scale immigration. The local elites’ relentless pursuit of “big city” status and the corresponding economic benefits drove Saskatoon toward incorporation (in 1906), significant boundary extensions, massive infrastructure works, and, of course, deficit financing. The latter would return to haunt the city when the good times went sour just before World War I.
Despite the immense capital investment, the increased borrowing power that came with city status, and the waves of immigrants pouring into cities like Edmonton and Saskatoon during the boom years, the cities accrued cumbersome debts, which were mostly the result of massive, though necessary, infrastructure works. Saskatoon’s per capita general debenture debt reached $290 by 1917, the third highest in the country after Regina and Vancouver. Adding insult to the injurious climbing debt was Saskatoon’s steadily decreasing revenue flow after the boom ended in 1913. The collection of property taxes, one of the few means of revenue generation open to the city government, was increasingly replaced by the collection of properties in lieu of taxes from bankrupt property owners. In 1917, the city recorded a deficit, and it continued to do so intermittently for the next twenty years. In an
effort to counteract the debilitating loss of revenue, the city administration could do little but raise local property taxes.\textsuperscript{47} Similar troubles emerged in Edmonton. In March 1914, the city’s treasurer reported that $1 million of the previous year’s taxes had not been collected. Added to this was an additional $250,000 in taxes that had failed to materialize over the past few years.\textsuperscript{48} Yet the city’s population continued to grow astronomically—from fifty thousand in 1912 to more than seventy-two thousand two years later, with corresponding investments in essential infrastructure and services.\textsuperscript{49}

Through this early period, Winnipeg was, in the words of Gerald Friesen, “the first city of the prairies.” It was, of course, the region’s first urban centre, formed in 1870, but it was also first among all other Prairie urban centres in that it was the largest and most economically and politically important in the region. It would remain so until at least the mid-1900s, when the young upstarts, Edmonton and Calgary, surpassed Winnipeg in importance. But such an unhappy future would have been inconceivable to Winnipeggers of the late nineteenth century, when Winnipeg’s star was rising. The city’s population in 1891 was a commanding twenty-six thousand, more than six times that of Calgary, the nearest Prairie rival with a mere four thousand residents. The Canadian Pacific Railway passed through the city in 1881, remaking Winnipeg almost overnight into Canada’s “gateway city”; indeed, the city was well on its way to becoming the “Chicago of the North.” By the end of the century, the tracks of other railways and branch lines converged in Winnipeg from all directions, among them the Canadian Northern, the Grand Trunk Pacific, the Midland, and Colonization branches. The railways established rail yards and shops, offering employment to the thousands of new arrivals to the city, including Britain- and Ontario-born Anglo-Saxons, Poles, Galicians, Jews, Germans, and Scandinavians.\textsuperscript{50} By 1890, historian Jim Silver observes, “the city had become the headquarters of the Canadian grain trade, and had developed a sophisticated system of financial institutions.”\textsuperscript{51} By the turn of the century, Winnipeg had firmly established itself as an important economic, political, and even social centre. Most of the grain and cattle produced in the West passed through Winnipeg (and after 1899, all grain inspection in Winnipeg was made compulsory),
enhancing immeasurably the city’s general wealth and prestige. In 1902, more wheat passed through Winnipeg than through Chicago.52

Much more so than in either Edmonton or Saskatoon, Winnipeg’s urban geography developed early along class and ethnic lines. In the city’s north end lived Winnipeg’s poor, where, as Gerald Friesen notes, “poor Jewish, Icelandic, and British immigrants with few or no skills to sell on the labour market lived in . . . shabby dwellings and endured such slights from the better elements as the suggestion that they fostered a ‘Shanty Nuisance’ and that their area was ‘attaining an unenviable notoriety in police circles as the resort of criminals and half-breed prostitutes.’”53 To the west stood the “modest frame houses of the respectable, but not wealthy citizens.”54 For the most part, these were many of the same Winnipeggers who would have viewed the Diamond Jubilee in 1897 as an opportunity to confirm and celebrate their allegiance to “their traditional cultural sentiments, centred in the British nation, the monarchy, and the empire” in the face of the north end’s changing character.55

The Prairies’ second boom, roughly between the turn of the century and 1913, did not transform Winnipeg so much as continue the solid economic growth that had been evident since the 1880s. For the Winnipeg elite, the brief recession of the 1890s represented little more than a minor stumbling block. “The years of the great western boom,” writes W. L. Morton, “saw Winnipeg rise to metropolitan stature, and realize in large part the aspirations of its founders.” Building contracts in 1907 stood at $12 million.56 In 1910, Winnipeg’s Development and Industrial Bureau reported that the city had 236 factories employing more than fourteen thousand people and producing some $36 million worth of goods.57 Two years later, city officials proudly called Winnipeg “the chief distributing, industrial, and financial city of the Canadian West.”58 But not all Winnipeggers shared in the wealth produced by the city’s growth through these years. James Shaver Woodsworth’s All People’s Mission reported in 1909, for instance, that it had had “an unprecedented number of appeals for employment and clothing . . . which have not ceased yet, men still being unable to obtain work which yields enough to support their families.”59
When the boom finally ended in 1913, the dominance of at least five urban centres on the Prairies had been established. Winnipeg was a growing metropolis, while Edmonton and Calgary, in Alberta, and Saskatoon and Regina, in Saskatchewan, no longer viewed smaller Prairie centres as rivals, as they had at the turn of the century. The development of railways, the influx of newcomers and capital, and the growth of urban services such as sanitation and sewage systems, electricity, and other infrastructure in large measure illustrated their economic and political importance to the region. Increasingly too, beginning in the 1920s, Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg looked northward for economic diversification opportunities and new markets.60

THE IDEA OF UNEMPLOYMENT

The history of unemployment, it might be said, is the history of efforts to understand and define it. There have always been people who have been without work for a period of time, although, until quite recently, such people have not generally been deemed “unemployed.” Instead, as John Garraty explains, they were simply understood to be idle.61 Medieval serfs may have lived in extreme poverty and may have been without work during the winter, but they could not be considered unemployed in any modern sense. Their paternalistic relationship with the lord of the manor meant that they could not leave their work on the land of their own free will, nor could the lord dismiss them from the land they worked. Neither did artisans in medieval towns commonly experience anything approaching unemployment in the modern sense. They had, by the thirteenth century, organized themselves into guilds that at once protected them from want and regulated entry into their trades so as to ensure that all members had sufficient work.62 Even those on the margins of medieval society, who survived by whatever means they could, were described as beggars, outlaws, or vagabonds, not as unemployed. To the medieval mind, the “unemployed” simply could not exist, for according to the medieval world view, as Garraty points out, “work was available for all who would labor.”63
Later, especially during the seventeenth century, more and more people in Europe fell idle despite the enormous wealth generated by mostly European exploitation of colonial resources abroad. This increasing lack of work had several causes. First, the population was growing, putting heavy stress on food resources. Second, a series of devastating crop failures plagued the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, exacerbating the food crises and driving many to seek refuge in the cities and towns. Finally, those two centuries were marked by long, brutal, and costly wars, causing tremendous social dislocation and widespread poverty. Yet despite the growing poverty and the steadily increasing numbers of idle beggars, vagrants, and vagabonds roaming across continental Europe and Great Britain, the concept of unemployment as we understand it today had not yet formed. After all, in such an age of empire, the problem was believed to be not a lack of available work but rather a lack of willingness to work. If some people could not find work where they lived, they could do so in the colonies, aboard naval ships, or, increasingly through the late sixteenth and into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, inside the newly conceived houses of industry.

Rather than being understood in terms of unemployment, people without work were seen through the lens of poverty. Poverty, in turn, was seen as a consequence of the bad habits and practices of the poor, not of problems in the larger economic and national structures that caused people to lose their jobs and become poor as a result. Thus, following the introduction of the Elizabethan Poor Laws in 1601, the idea that the able-bodied poor should learn the virtues of thrift and self-sufficiency through sober hard work gained ground. The learning of such virtues, many believed, would single-handedly solve the problem of poverty.

Not until the end of the eighteenth century, however, did anything approximating a modern conception of unemployment emerge. Slowly, the idea that famine and wars and larger structural economic problems, rather than a lack of industry, lay behind people’s inability to find work began to take root. Still, the concept of unemployment was understood much more literally in the early nineteenth century than it was a century later by the policy-makers of the 1930s. Prior to the 1850s, notes American historian Alexander Keyssar, the unemployed
were still seen as “those who were simply ‘not employed,’ who were idle or not working.” 67 This literal definition cast a wide net that included anyone, even children, without work, regardless of the reason. In the decades following the 1850s, and especially during the years after the depression of 1873, a distinction between two types of unemployed persons began to emerge: the voluntarily unemployed, whose ranks included “the sick and incompetent, the thriftless, the lazy and vicious, the willing paupers and the professional beggars,” and the involuntarily unemployed, who were “idle from no fault of their own.” 68 Reflecting this shift, in 1878, the influential American statistician Carroll D. Wright limited the definition of the unemployed to those “out of work and seeking it.” For the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics and Labor, which Wright led, the unemployed were “those who had occupations but did not have jobs.” Wright’s instructions to local officials charged with determining unemployment rates in their districts were even more explicit, advising enumerators to count as unemployed only able-bodied adults “who really want employment.” 69 Thus, by 1900, Keyssar concludes, in both England and the United States (and undoubtedly Canada as well), “men and women who were jobless and in need of work were routinely described as unemployed.” 70

At the root of this new, narrower definition of unemployment were two interrelated shifts in the economic structure of the Western world. The first was the development of industrial urbanization, especially during the latter half of the nineteenth century, which gave rise to a much larger, more pronounced and concentrated working-class population than had hitherto existed. These were people largely dependent on wages for their survival, and the threat of losing their jobs entirely—particularly during times of illness, economic hardship, and recession—raised the spectre of unemployment more starkly than ever before. The second economic shift was the financial panic and ensuing depression of 1873, which in turn laid bare the reality of mass industrial unemployment and raised the equally devastating spectre of social dislocation and disorder. Efforts to minimize the damage caused by unemployment led to the development of policies to address the problem, and policy-makers began for the first time to distinguish between poverty caused by
industrial unemployment and other types of poverty, such as that among the infirm and the aged and among widows and orphans.

By the 1930s, then, urban relief policy-makers on the Prairies had a rich reservoir of thinking and acting on unemployment on which to draw. The distinctions between the voluntarily and the involuntarily unemployed and between poor people who were unable to work and those who could work but were unable to find jobs were already well established by the time the Great Depression began.

**UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF BEFORE 1929**

By the onset of the Depression, relief of the poor in Canada had long been considered a local responsibility, both by legislation found in most cities’ acts of incorporation and by convention dating back at least to Britain’s earliest Poor Laws. Canadian city governments, therefore, stood on the front lines of providing for the care and maintenance of those residents who, for a variety of reasons, found themselves without work or could not support themselves. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Canada, much of this early welfare provision took the form of what sociologist Mariana Valverde calls the “mixed social economy.” The idea of the mixed social economy stands in contrast to earlier historical characterizations of the welfare state’s development that described how privately organized and administered welfare practices prevalent in the nineteenth century “were slowly but surely left behind in the historical dust as ‘the welfare state’ rose in majestic splendour.” Valverde and others tell a more complicated story, one in which the public and the private were inextricably linked and where lines between state and non-state efforts to administer relief to the poor were blurred. Beginning in the mid-1870s, Valverde argues, Ontario funneled financial support to private welfare bodies, including churches, and extensively regulated privately managed welfare services. Thus, the history of welfare provision is a history of the relationships forged between the state and civil society rather than of the latter abruptly being succeeded by the former. It is also a history in which the rhetoric suggesting that
virtually all social services, from poor relief to orphanages, were privately funded and operated” did not match the reality. State financing and regulation—but not outright control—of private charities allowed governments to maintain the illusion of what Valverde calls a “self-sufficient civil society of hardy pioneers and charitable philanthropists” without having to establish costly “legislative machinery” (as a contemporary writer for the Toronto Globe put it) to administer relief to the province’s poor.74

On the Prairies, municipal welfare efforts, much like private charities in Ontario, received financial support from provincial governments, particularly in times of recession. Presumably, this arrangement was made to allow provincial authorities in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba to escape having to establish expensive and precedent-setting relief administrations of their own. Well before the onset of the Depression, therefore, Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg had in place welfare administrations designed to fulfill their responsibilities to the local needy while receiving contributions from the federal and provincial governments. The development of these cities’ welfare services followed two main paths, each highly gendered: the first dealt almost exclusively with women and their dependent children, while the second dealt entirely with male breadwinners.

The first path handled what Edmonton’s relief officer described as “ordinary indigents” covered under the various Town Acts, Mothers’ Allowances, Neglected Children’s Aid programs, and old age pensions.75 Among the earliest expressions of this sort of relief in Edmonton was the Women’s Hospital Aid Society, operating from the 1890s and staffed exclusively by volunteers.76 Edmonton’s chronically poor were looked after by other voluntary private aid societies, including the Salvation Army, the Beulah Mission Home, and the Bethphage Home. The city government generally provided these organizations with small grants. By 1912, Edmonton boasted its own Civic Relief Department providing food, accommodation, medical care, and burial services to the poor.77

In Winnipeg, the city for which the most complete “ordinary indigent” records are available, the city council employed a city relief officer, who provided “public assistance to citizens in their own homes” until
1908. The position was filled by a civil servant who had no formal training in professional social work techniques, and, according to an unemployment relief report produced in 1934, his work was carried out “in much the same more or less spasmodic and inadequate way as prevailed in most other large centres.” In 1908, in response to what was perceived as a disorganized and haphazardly applied system of relief, Winnipeg’s mayor, James Henry Ashdown, called for plans to develop a more rigorous and centrally organized relief system that would avoid overlapping of services and would “meet the needs of applicants more adequately.” The Associated Charities, organized shortly thereafter, was designed to meet these goals. Consisting of representatives from the city’s thirty-three charitable organizations, the mayor, the police magistrate, the relief and health officers, the school inspector, the commissioner of immigration, and the inspector of public institutions, the organization “assumed the responsibility of supplementing city relief from funds donated by interested citizens.” It investigated all applications for city relief, established a city wood yard as a work test, and requisitioned from the municipal government any food and fuel it needed to carry out its responsibilities. But much like Winnipeg’s first city relief officer, the Associated Charities was directed and run largely by civil servants with no training in professional social work.

Gradually, the City of Winnipeg assumed more control over relief administration. By 1917, what had been the Associated Charities, now renamed the Social Welfare Commission, was financed entirely by the city. City Bylaw 9642, which brought the new commission into being, placed in the hands of a board consisting of eight aldermen and six citizens the responsibility for investigation, case management, mothers’ allowances, and the establishment of residence requirements for patients in public hospitals. Those charged with operating the new commission were plainly a mix of public servants, politicians, and citizens with no formal training in social work practices. Nevertheless, by 1917, Winnipeg could boast that it had “developed the most extensive public social welfare division in the Dominion.” Operating alongside (though entirely independent of) the new public system were myriad privately run organizations, including the Home Welfare Association, the Personal Service
League, district community centres, Goodwill Industries, lodges, fraternal societies, veterans’ and military organizations, service clubs, and most of the city’s religious denominations. But there was no longer a centralized and organized private unit through which all charities passed. The result, according to Winnipeg welfare officials, explained “the diversity, and the largely unrelated activities of private relief and of ‘friendly visiting’ of various types.”

Sources for the history of welfare in Edmonton and Saskatoon are less complete, but both cities, by the second decade of the twentieth century, had developed relief departments organized and run by the city commissioners.

While the first welfare path dealt solely with relief that was unrelated to unemployment—that is, looking after poor people who could not (or were not expected to) work—the second path dealt with the poverty caused by unemployment related to recurring, cyclical recessions and to seasonal work. Both types of unemployment were typically addressed through special ad hoc unemployment relief programs that emerged in response to short-term emergency situations and were disbanded when city officials decided the emergency had passed. The relief work given to the urban unemployed was small scale (cutting wood, breaking stones, cutting ice at the river, and so on) and was funded through tripartite arrangements among the municipal, provincial, and federal governments. It offered minimal aid to unemployed city residents in need and endeavoured to maintain the work ethic by requiring some form of labour in exchange for aid. In addition, it sought to avoid welfare dependence by employing the principle of “less eligibility.” First articulated in Britain’s Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, this principle sought to ensure that the living conditions of someone on relief would be less desirable (less “eligible”) than those of someone working in even the lowest-paying private sector job, the assumption being that this would deter the able-bodied from applying for relief. Similar principles were later relied on by municipal relief officials in the autumn of 1929, and all of these early features of emergency unemployment relief persisted into the 1930s.

As the First World War drew to a close, the recession of 1913, which had been delayed by wartime production, reasserted itself and led to
the re-emergence of unemployment problems in Canadian cities. The steady immigration that had swelled the populations of Prairie cities through the first decade of the century translated into increased competition for fewer jobs after the war. At the same time, thousands of war veterans, whose travel fares to anywhere in the country were paid for by the Dominion government as part of a soldier resettlement program, descended on Canadian cities. Not only did the soldiers’ return exacerbate municipal unemployment problems and increase competition for already scarce jobs, but it also made social stability as tenuous as economic stability. “Telegrams poured into Ottawa from the nation’s largest cities,” notes James Struthers, “warning of dangerous levels of unrest among returned men.” The men, municipal authorities emphasized, needed somewhere to go. And that somewhere was preferably not their cities.

The Dominion government’s response was the creation in 1918 of the Employment Service of Canada (ESC), described by historian Udo Sautter as “a national network of labour exchanges jointly financed and administered by the federal and provincial governments.” With the war still going strong in Europe, the ESC’s first priority, in the spring of 1918, was to address agricultural workforce shortages by arranging for returned men to work on farms. As Sautter argues, the ESC worked for a “more efficient use of manpower and ultimately as a means to prevent potential, and to fight real, public unrest.” By November, the rapid demobilization of soldiers transformed the ESC’s mandate from placing men where there were labour shortages to lessening unemployment. The ESC, then, aimed not only to help employers find an adequate labour supply but also to assist “the job seeking individual [who] had to fend for himself in an anonymous market whose dominating forces he was ill-put to understand and with whose intricacies he was not able to cope.” Despite these Dominion-wide efforts at rationalizing the labour market for the benefit of both employers and workers (by 1919, according to Struthers, there were eighty-eight employment offices across the country), responsibility for unemployment relief remained in municipal hands. As the nation slid into recession, showing alarmingly high unemployment rates by the winter of 1920, the ESC lost much of its relevance. Through its
labour exchanges and employment offices, it could bring employers who needed workers and workers who needed jobs together, but it could not create new jobs. By February 1921, roughly a quarter of a million men were unemployed, representing 12 percent of the labour force.87

Through the recession of the early 1920s, city officials in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg recognized an emerging unemployment problem caused by generally depressed conditions. That recession offers a useful illustration of how relief officials responded to unemployment before the Depression. In Winnipeg, authorities established a special Emergency Unemployment Relief Office staffed by ten people: a superintendent, four clerks, and five investigators who issued meal tickets, arranged for work at the city’s wood yard, and provided sleeping accommodation at the city’s Immigration Hall.88 The staff members, mostly drawn from the ranks of the unemployed, were not experienced welfare workers. Still, according to Winnipeg’s emergency relief superintendent in 1922, they “showed exceptional tact and ability and an utter disregard for what constituted a working day,” working long hard hours processing as many as five hundred applicants per day. By the end of May 1922, when Winnipeg’s emergency relief scheme ended, it had helped 12,680 men, women, and children.89 As in Edmonton and Saskatoon, however, Winnipeg’s emergency relief schemes operated only between November and May of any year in which policy-makers perceived an unemployment problem. This meant that whatever limited unemployment relief the jobless might access during the winter months became unavailable between May and October, mainly because policy-makers assumed that those unable to find work in the winter could easily find it on surrounding farms during the summer and autumn months.

The urban emergency relief measures clearly emphasized the work ethic. Saskatoon, for instance, made arrangements with the federal and provincial governments to provide $4,500 worth of relief work over the winter of 1920–21.90 Unemployed men laboured at such jobs as street sweeping, snow shovelling, brush work, and infrastructure repairs supervised by the city’s engineering department. Winnipeg required unemployed men to work for their relief at the city’s wood yard, quarries, sewers, pipelines, and street commissioner’s department.91 During
the much more severe winter of 1921–22, Edmonton, with the help of the provincial and federal governments, made nearly $45,000 worth of work relief available to some 450 unemployed men. Edmonton’s unemployment relief body, the Public Welfare Board, comprised one municipal alderman, a provincial member of the legislative assembly, and two prominent citizens. Through its years of operation, dating at least as far back as before the Great War and lasting into the early 1920s, the board oversaw the movement of single men to lumber camps during the late autumn and winter, received delegations of unemployed groups bearing complaints, and coordinated public works relief with the city’s engineering department.

The insistence on exchanging work for relief was not new. As we have seen, its roots stretch back to the development of workhouses and houses of industry in Britain beginning in the seventeenth century. Work relief would, many believed, discourage people from seeking aid if they could get along without it. This was most evident in the principle of “less eligibility,” which would reverberate through subsequent decades, right down to the eve of the Depression. As the British Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 stated, the “first and most essential” characteristic of all relief provided to the able-bodied was to ensure that their “situation on the whole shall not be made really or apparently so eligible as the situation of the independent labourer of the lowest class.” Work relief would also, it was thought, ward off the moral degeneration that many believed resulted from poverty and shiftless behaviour. A corresponding belief was that relief actually contributed to pauperism. As British historian Lynn MacKay writes of poor relief in early nineteenth-century Britain, “Many in the upper classes believed that it undermined initiative and the willingness to work hard, that it bred dependency, and that these moral failings were largely the cause of the ever-escalating levels of poor relief.” These ideas remained largely unchanged more than one hundred years later. “The method of relief without work has had a damning effect upon men who have come under my personal and intimate knowledge,” Winnipeg’s emergency relief superintendent warned in May 1922. “There is distinctly evident a complete change in the attitude of those applying for relief. During the past three years, this
has developed from bashful inquiry, to confident expectation, and finally to belligerent demand with the avowed intention on the part of a too large minority to secure, by misrepresentation if necessary, every possible nickel’s worth of relief.  

THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND ITS PREDECESSORS

In the second half of the 1920s, with the return of moderate prosperity, seasonal emergency unemployment relief largely disappeared from Prairie cities. It was not until the early winter of 1929–30 that these urban centres once again faced emerging unemployment problems. The severity of the Great Depression set it apart from previous recessions. In Winnipeg alone, relief schemes from the early 1920s typically aided twelve thousand people over the course of an entire winter. In the early 1930s, that city aided more than three times that number over the course of just one month. Just as dramatic was the rise in relief cases from 1928 (a non-recession year) to 1929. In Saskatoon, for example, twice as many families sought relief in December 1929 as had during the same month one year before. Furthermore, the recorded number of families on relief often disguised a much larger unemployment problem simmering just below the surface. Saskatoon’s chief engineer, for example, warned the city commissioner on 24 December 1929 that many more families were facing hard times but had not yet applied for relief. With at least four months of winter ahead, the unemployment situation seemed unlikely to improve before spring, when private construction firms typically began their work season. A little more than one month later, Saskatoon’s local situation more than confirmed the engineer’s prediction: by the end of January 1930, the number of jobless married men on city relief in Saskatoon, a city of only forty-one thousand, had shot to more than nine hundred. If single men had been counted, the number would have been much higher.

Similar early warning signs appeared in Winnipeg and Edmonton. Through all of 1928, less than four hundred married men
out of a total Winnipeg population of 175,000 sought relief from the city. The following year, that number dropped to less than three hundred. By the end of February 1930, however, it had jumped to 1,306, twice the number of the previous two years combined—and that only two months into the year. This dire situation was compounded by the nearly two thousand single men unemployed and seeking relief from the city. Municipal relief expenditures told an equally worrisome tale. Edmonton’s relief costs increased steadily through the first few months of 1930, from $400 per day in early January, to $600 per day in February, and then to $800 in March. An exasperated Mayor Douglas, nearing the end of his rope, pointed out in late March that “it is practically impossible for the city to continue with the present relief scheme much longer. It is costing us about 900 dollars a day.” Translated into annual expenditures, this would account for nearly 15 percent of the city’s total annual budget.

Figures such as these set cities like Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg within a larger unemployment-related crisis emerging throughout the industrial world. Its effects were uneven, its causes complicated, but what is certain is that Canada was especially hard hit. Its close economic ties to the United States brought the Canadian economy down swiftly after the stock market crash in New York in October 1929. Thereafter, with the general deterioration of industrial economies worldwide, together with the debasing of export markets for its staple goods, Canada’s economy suffered further erosion. Finally, high tariff barriers such as the Smoot-Hawley tariff in the United States all but stopped Canadian exports to the United States. Within Canada, the Depression’s effects were likewise uneven. While its human costs are difficult to measure, historians have suggested that people working in unskilled and semi-skilled trades, as well as people relying on export staples for their livelihood, suffered most. By 1933, some 30 percent of the nation’s entire workforce was unemployed, but unemployment did not hit all regions with the same force. The Depression hit the Prairie provinces harder than it did other regions of the country. Between 1929 and 1933, per capita incomes in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba fell further than incomes in any other province (see table 1).
Part of the reason for this was the near total collapse of the agricultural economy in the southern plains belt. A combination of oversupply and low demand caused wheat prices to plunge from $1.24 per bushel in 1929 to just $0.34 per bushel in 1932. As if that were not enough, western farmers faced unprecedented crop destruction. In 1931, grasshoppers, sawflies, and gophers devoured their crops. What little wheat remained on the stalks was subject to the swirling dust storms that carried away topsoil and crops.\textsuperscript{107} The disaster besetting Prairie farmers deeply affected the cities that provided services to them. As William Cronon effectively illustrates with his description of Chicago’s experience in\textit{ Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West}, western cities were highly integrated with and dependent on surrounding agricultural production. For cities like Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg, therefore, the failure of the agricultural economy was devastating. Decreased traffic of goods that normally passed through all three cities and on which they depended caused unemployment in everything from retail trades, to construction, to packinghouse work, to the staples handling trades. Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Edmonton had emerged by the 1930s primarily as wholesaling, distributing, food processing, and service sector centres serving

\begin{table}
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\hline
 & 1929–30 & 1933 \\
\hline
British Columbia & $594 & $314 & 47 \\
Alberta & $548 & $212 & 61 \\
Saskatchewan & $478 & $135 & 72 \\
Manitoba & $466 & $240 & 49 \\
Ontario & $549 & $310 & 44 \\
Québec & $391 & $220 & 44 \\
Nova Scotia & $322 & $207 & 36 \\
New Brunswick & $292 & $180 & 39 \\
Prince Edward Island & $278 & $154 & 45 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Average per capita income by province, 1929–30 and 1933}
\label{table1}
\end{table}

regional markets that depended in large measure on wheat farming. Manufacturing in Edmonton and Saskatoon was geared mainly toward supplying light industrial goods for regional (mostly mixed-farming agricultural) needs.\textsuperscript{108}

Only Winnipeg had developed any significant export manufacturing, but even this was no match for the Depression and the city’s reliance on wheat, a fact that city authorities ruefully acknowledged. “Though her more statesmenlike leaders for years had impressed upon the West, the danger of building so great a social structure upon wheat alone,” Winnipeg officials claimed, “their counsels were submerged in the constant flow of ‘easy money’ in a prosperous world wheat market.” That easy money—charming, almost blinding in good times—disappeared fast in bad times, leaving unfulfilled promises and disaster in its wake. “The world collapse of wheat prices, and recurring crop failures in such a large area of the West have therefore ‘hit’ Winnipeg harder than any other of Canada’s larger cities,” city officials asserted.\textsuperscript{109} It was a problem that they believed peculiarly afflicted western cities: “Such rapid growth, dependent so largely on good grain crops, and a good world price, has meant recurrent periods of prosperity and recession.” And the city’s “very large Labor Market” made it “the focal point to which men and women drift in periods of unemployment.” Municipal authorities further pointed out that the “climatic conditions” of southern Manitoba made Winnipeg’s unemployment problems worse than those of large centres to the east because poor agricultural seasons drew farm labourers to the city seeking work.\textsuperscript{110}

It was more than just increased numbers of people seeking relief that differentiated previous recessions from the one confronting city authorities in the autumn and early winter of 1929–30. Applicants for Depression-related relief were also, at least in the minds of relief policymakers, of a different class and character from those in the past. These were not the sorts of relief cases municipal authorities and private charitable organizations had grown accustomed to through their cities’ booms and busts, and through war years and postwar years: these were not the widows, the unemployable, the aged, and the disabled—in short, the anomalous but seemingly inevitable poor in any industrial society.
Instead, they were mostly families and individuals who, in normal economic times, had typically managed to make ends meet one way or another on their own and who only sought aid from public relief programs or private charities when bad times got worse. A report on unemployment in Winnipeg produced in late 1932 called these the “thousands of citizens who never before had occasion to ask for such assistance but who, because of losing their gainful occupations found themselves in sore straits.” It was primarily to this class that the city relief machines turned their attention.

**THE CITY RELIEF MACHINES**

“Relief Services are, and are designed to be a piece of relief machinery,” wrote the authors of 1934 report on family welfare commissioned by the Winnipeg Unemployment Relief Committee. Officials in Winnipeg drew on the image of the machine not because Winnipeg’s relief administration actually ran like one but because city relief policymakers wanted people to believe that it did. Neither was the machine image meant to evoke notions of bossism or patronage, as it had in other historical contexts, such as Boston or Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Instead, it emphasized policymakers’ own ideals of efficiency and precision. Winnipeg relief officials took pains to emphasize that the city’s relief machine “did not function as part of the Civic Social Welfare Commission at all,” referring to the municipal body responsible for non-Depression-related welfare services. Each city created a special name for its unemployment relief delivery system to distinguish it from other welfare services offering aid to the urban poor. These relief systems employed their own staffs, answered directly to city council or to city council-appointed boards, and drew funding entirely from public sources.

In Winnipeg, relief officials called their machine the Civic Unemployment Relief Committee (CURC). Appointed by city council, the committee consisted of six aldermen, the mayor, the provincial deputy minister of Labour, and Manitoba’s superintendent of the
Employment Service of Canada. Sitting as an observer was a representative of the federal government. The CuRC was “entrusted with the entire administration of family unemployment relief in and for Winnipeg.” It maintained its own headquarters and offices, first at the city’s wood yard and later in St. Boniface near the Assiniboine River. By the spring of 1932, the CuRC was responsible for 8,100 families, as well as a number of single men and women, totalling roughly 37,000 people and costing $3.5 million each year. The numbers even surprised Winnipeg’s relief officials. “Who would suggest, a few years ago, that it would be necessary to keep 5,000 single men in Winnipeg by opening dining halls and giving them two meals per day?” a report on unemployment relief asked at the time. “Out of a total [provincial] population of 699,841, Winnipeg City has over 37,000 individuals supported by direct relief.”

The unemployment relief administrations in Edmonton and Saskatoon similarly coalesced into recognizable “machinery” by the early 1930s. The City of Edmonton developed the Special Relief Department as an adjunct to its more general Relief Department. The two departments operated out of separate offices and with separate staffs, though both answered to the city commissioners directly and exclusively. On a per capita basis, Edmonton’s Special Relief Department compared roughly with Winnipeg’s Civic Unemployment Relief Committee, dealing with, on average, approximately 2,200 families each month during the winter of 1932. The department employed thirty-nine full-time people at a cost of nearly $40,000 per year in wages. In Saskatoon, the city council alone made unemployment relief policy and addressed any problems directly through a special standing committee formed in early 1930. This lasted until early October 1932, after which the city council delegated all relief business to a new Civic Relief Board consisting of six members of the business community together with the city’s mayor. In 1934, however, the Civic Relief Board reverted back to city council control after the board proved extraordinarily unpopular among the unemployed. In November 1932, after the Civic Relief Board had begun its work, a typical week involved taking care of 1,270 families at an approximate cost of nearly $10,000. The costs included groceries, milk, meat, bread, water, fuel, wages for relief department workers, and wages paid
out to married men working on relief jobs. The average weekly cost per family was about $7.25.\textsuperscript{123}

In each North American city, a small group of local politicians and city managers held primary responsibility for sketching the broad contours of Depression-related city relief: the mayor, aldermen, city commissioner, city solicitors, relief officers, and city engineers. American historian Jonathan Teaford, writing in the context of general city administration in the United States, calls these the “technical experts vital to day-to-day operations.”\textsuperscript{124} When it came to operating the day-to-day business of administering and delivering relief in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg, the activities of these so-called experts, primarily men, were critical. The mayors and aldermen, together with the various board members drawn from the community, formulated local relief policy. The city commissioners acted as liaisons among the various city departments involved in local relief administration and advised the mayors and the city councils. The city solicitors made all legal arrangements for raising money, passing bylaws, and corresponding with ratepayers associations and municipal boards. The relief officers ran the relief departments according to instructions from relief policy-makers. The city engineers advised on potential public works and, together with contractors and occasional outside advisers, organized all work relief programs carried on in the cities.

The three cities’ relief machines operated in similar ways, distributing relief, organizing work relief schemes, and coordinating financing arrangements with the province and the federal government. In Winnipeg, applicants for relief applied at the CRUC offices and stated their requirements. Staff then made a record of the application, and investigators “endeavoured to satisfy themselves as to the bona fides of the applicant and his needs.” Where investigators recommended relief, officials in the committee offices gave the applicant coupons, each having a fixed value for the purchase of specific relief articles, depending on his needs as decided by relief officials. The coupons could then be exchanged for goods at “any one of several designated stores.” The merchant supplying the goods “then presented the coupon to the proper civic authority and it was redeemed in cash.”\textsuperscript{125} Work relief was likewise organized out
of the committee offices, where men were required to report for their instructions. They were inspected and, if deemed suitable for work, given a work card and told where and when to report on various work schemes in operation at the time of application.

Saskatoon’s relief machine shared many of these practices. Applicants there visited special relief offices, stated their needs, and signed a relief card. Investigators then inquired after their bona fides, measured these against the applicant’s statements, and, if everything checked out, recommended a course of relief allocation and work assignment. After October 1932, when relief administration in Saskatoon passed from the city council’s standing committee on unemployment to the Civic Relief Board, the board itself dealt with questions of relief policy and made decisions on individual applicant cases brought before it by investigators from the investigation branch. The Civic Relief Board met each weekday to hear all questions in camera, refusing in all but the rarest cases to host delegations of the unemployed directly and allowing no appeal process to its final decisions.126

Like relief practices in Winnipeg and Saskatoon, Edmonton’s Special Relief Department made no effort to seek out needy cases, instead expecting the unemployed to make application for relief of their own accord.127 When an applicant arrived at the department offices, an official commissioner took an affidavit, made out an identification card, and gave it to the applicant. The identification card thereafter acted “as a passport in the Department,” ensuring smooth delivery of services, according to the department’s director. Once the applicant had left the department offices, his affidavit went to an investigation branch for processing.128 There, an investigator was assigned to the case. The investigator would take the affidavit, make some inquiries into the applicant’s situation, and then report to the chief inspector and recommend whether or not the applicant’s case qualified for city relief. The final decision was left to the chief inspector, who determined “on behalf of the City, whether the case is worthy of relief or not.”129 If everything checked out, the department informed the applicant that the case was successful, and relief “in accordance with the [relief] schedule” was administered. Thereafter, investigators—each of whom was assigned one territory “so that they become
familiar with all the avenues of information in that district”—called on each relief case at his or her home at least once every three months. Work relief instructions, if work was available, were issued “as the men come for relief and as their turn falls due.” If the department refused the application, the applicant had recourse to an appeals process of sorts: the same officers who recommended refusal the first time were again assigned the case and asked to review their earlier decision. If the officers stood by their initial recommendation, the department’s director made the final decision, although dissatisfied applicants did have one final recourse: to appeal directly to the city commissioners or the city council itself.

**STRIKING A BALANCE AMONG IDEOLOGIES**

In general, relief officials based many of their policies on a blend of what they viewed as “hard economics” and the particular moral and social order they wanted their relief policies to promote. The ideological currents that influenced local policy-makers imposed certain constraints—both ideological and practical—on their work through the early 1930s. State theorists have, since the early 1960s, developed a number of theories of state dynamics in an effort to explain why governments and policy-makers act as they do under various circumstances. Among the earliest of these theories are those of the New Left historians Gabriel Kolko and James Weinstein, both of whom describe the development of what they refer to as a “corporate liberal” state dynamic that animated much of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century political policy-making. According to Kolko and Weinstein, economic elites dominated state (including local) policy making, accepting and even sometimes initiating state intervention in the economy, including welfare policies. They did this either because such intervention was in capital’s long-term interests or because it helped maintain the status quo in the face of challenges to their economic dominance. In the context of Prairie cities in the 1930s, the economic devastation of the Depression certainly qualified as a significant threat to the power of economic elites, and the response of city
governments to the Depression—namely, the creation of bureaucratic mechanisms to administer unemployment relief—looks like an effort to maintain the status quo. Yet, as later social scientists observed, the corporate liberal model depends on some questionable assumptions. First, it assumes that economic elites consistently act in unified, measured, and thoughtful ways. As we shall see in the following chapter, at least at the local level, this was not the case. Business owners, from those involved in the building trades to neighbourhood retailers, acted in anything but a unified manner. Second, the model overstates the degree to which economic elites are able to dictate policy decisions. City politics in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg did reflect a strong representation from the business community (in the form of Edmonton’s Civic Government Association or Winnipeg’s Citizens’ Committee, for example, both of which billed themselves as primarily pro-business). Yet city councils in those cities also included members who were pro-labour or who were independents, and these members must have exerted a countervailing influence. The fact remains, however, that city relief policies, as illustrated in the following chapters, did tend to favour the status quo, and that status quo tended to favour the capitalist system as a whole.

Another theory—referred to as hegemonic competition—contends that the capitalist state maintains, of necessity, a position autonomous from business elites, allowing it to mediate between society’s competing economic interests, both between and within classes. The state, according to this theory, is beholden neither to the various segments within the dominant capitalist class nor to the dominated non-capitalist classes. Instead, it occupies a moderating role and seeks to lessen capitalism’s inherent contradictions by mediating between (and among) major corporate interests and smaller competitive-sector corporations, on the one hand, and working-class interests, on the other. Yet, as with the corporate liberal theory of state, the hegemonic competition theory relies on the assumption that one entity—in this case, the state itself—retains a consciousness of its role in capitalist society and works to mute perceivable contradictions as that society relates to its constituent parts. Again, in the context of local government operations in Canadian Prairie cities,
this is doubtful. The city relief machines—and the policy-makers who created them—operated under an array of constraints, including federal and provincial strictures, larger inherited societal assumptions and biases, and economic realities. Taken together, these constraints—all outside of direct relations with the business community—make it unlikely that local governments had anything more on their agendas than getting their cities through the crisis intact; performing any explicit mediating role among economic classes was probably far from their minds. Still, the actual operation of the city relief machines, and especially the attempts of the policy-makers to measure business interests against the interests of the unemployed, appears to follow the theory (even if the theory does not necessarily follow the reality).

A third perspective on the role of the state, developed by Theda Skocpol and Fred Block, is state autonomy theory, which regards the state as an independent agent, capable of pursuing its own agenda regardless of the demands of specific social and economic interests. Assuming that the state is concerned with the long-term survival of capitalism, as is generally the case in industrialized Western nations, it will naturally tend to create policies to further this goal. For its part, the business community shares the state’s investment in the fundamental structures of capitalism; however, businesses (no matter what their size) are focused almost exclusively on the growth of short-term profit. According to this theory, then, during the Depression years, the autonomy of the US government enabled it to implement New Deal policies—policies that it believed to be in the best interests of capitalism’s survival in the longer term—despite considerable opposition from the business sector. How closely did the city relief machines cooperate in the effort to safeguard the capitalist order? Given the manner in which these machines operated, it appears that, on balance, policy-makers shared a bias toward the status quo. In most instances, their efforts to address unemployment and provide relief were grounded in the conceptual assumptions of their nineteenth-century forebears. These included a preference for work relief over a system of “doles,” so as to reinforce the work ethic, the use of the principle of less eligibility to discourage any but the “genuinely” poor from seeking relief, and the concomitant desire to avoid creating welfare dependence.
In this sense, the relief officials might properly be conceived of as “holding down the fort” during capitalism’s greatest crisis. Whether they were engaged in a thoughtful and sustained effort to protect capitalism behind the shield of their relief policies, though, is less clear.

Skocpol and other state autonomy theorists later modified their ideas, arguing for a more pluralistic approach to state development and taking account of different institutions and interests in the fashioning of public policy. For Skocpol, paramount to understanding federal welfare policy development is an examination of state structures, political culture, and organized politics, as well as of wider societal interests and their perceptions, suggestions, and complaints about the emerging welfare state. This appears to explain how relief officials developed relief policy at the local level: they believed that helping business through hard times was important, but, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, they also routinely took account of the interests and views of the community, the unemployed, professional bodies, and private citizens.

One final critical perspective that helps to explain how Prairie cities (and cities more generally) functioned is the theory of city boosterism. Donald Wetherell defines “boosterism” as “the promotion and encouragement at the local level of social cohesion and purpose around the goal of economic growth.” Scholars exploring the development of a local, regional, or even national ethos through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries argue that the booster mentality served several important purposes. By appealing to broad and often vague notions of the common interest, city elites attempted both to draw business and industry to their cities and to dampen ethnic, class, and gender tensions. Indeed, efforts to draw people and industry to their cities, and especially to create environments friendly to potential newcomers and industries, were among the top priorities of city councils. In their view, what was good for the city economically was good for the city more generally. In Prairie cities, real estate dealers, the local business elite and the media, and city councils together developed a powerful ideology that emphasized the common sense of shared interests. And this ideology, although most certainly not reflective of societal divisions, nevertheless informed relief policy-makers’ approaches to welfare
The Wages of Relief programs. In the final analysis, the city relief machines operated in accordance with many of the same ideological assumptions that had governed other welfare initiatives in the past, assumptions that were fed in part by city officials’ fears of a deteriorating work ethic and welfare dependence among recipients. Officials in Winnipeg, for instance, assessed the “social implications” of relief, pointing to a “dependency problem” among recipients and to a “blunting of personal initiative and to the mental attitude that they do not need to worry since they are bound to be cared for.”

The publicly funded and municipally controlled city relief machines by no means displaced or replaced private or public/private charities and welfare services. Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg, like other urban centres, sported all manner of charities offering aid to the urban poor, from the secular to the religious, and everything in between. Winnipeg had thirty-seven different private welfare bodies operating through this period; Edmonton had at least thirty-two, including the Salvation Army, the Canteen Club, the Canadian Legion, the Canadian Red Cross, the Edmonton Bulletin’s “Not Forgotten Fund,” the Edmonton Journal’s “Sunshine Fund,” the Elks, the Royal Society of St. George, the Order of the Royal Purple, and various churches. These private charities persisted into the 1930s, becoming increasingly integrated into sociologist Mariana Valverde’s “mixed social economy,” which was marked by a collaborative public/private effort at welfare financing, service delivery, inspection, and regulation. As early as 1913 in Winnipeg, for instance, all charities seeking public funds to support their activities were made to undergo “examination of their bona fides and characters” by a civic charities endorsement bureau run by the city council. The endorsement bureau further required every charity to show that it had “responsible and satisfactory local management,” that its administrative body met at least four times per year, and that it was “rendering services commensurate with the money expended.”

In short, the city relief machines were not simply a part of broader and ongoing local welfare systems. Instead, they addressed only those unemployment cases directly caused by the Depression, leaving more general, chronic welfare problems to existing relief organizations, private charitable bodies, and churches. Illustrating this distinction was
the fact that each city’s relief machinery operated out of offices separate from other, more general welfare departments such as aid programs for unwed mothers, abandoned children, the aged, and the infirm. City relief machines also employed their own staffs, answered directly to city council, and drew funding entirely from public sources. The relief machine’s main job was to provide unemployed single men and unemployed married men and their families with what city officials considered basic necessities—clothing, shelter, fuel, food, and, more rarely, cash—and only for so long as the Depression was causing the unemployment. Relief machines were also charged with organizing and carrying out work relief programs designed to provide unemployed men with work on public buildings and bridges, sidewalk and sewer works, and other odd jobs such as street sweeping and snow shovelling.\textsuperscript{139} Finally, the relief machines coordinated their responses to unemployment-related problems with provincial and federal relief efforts. This made economic sense because, beginning in the summer of 1930, municipal relief was funded through legislative arrangements with the provincial and federal governments, each typically funding one-third of direct relief costs and sharing various proportions of work relief costs. The city relief machines did not, of course, appear from nowhere fully formed and functioning. Instead, relief efforts meandered along in an ad hoc fashion, with city councils and city commissioners making policy decisions only as situations required. In subsequent chapters, I explore more fully the machines’ operations and argue that, despite Winnipeg officials’ insistence that their “general plan, set-up and operation . . . appeared to operate with precision and efficiency,” the reality was often far more complicated.\textsuperscript{140}