

Opinion: Remembering Canada's first great political dynasty: the Bennetts of Kelowna

BY DAVID MITCHELL, SPECIAL TO THE SUN DECEMBER 8, 2015



Bill Bennett with his father, W.A.C. Bennett, in 1976.

Much of the country is today transfixed by the novelty of a father-son political dynasty: the Trudeaus of Montreal. However, a generation ago the Bennetts of Kelowna became the first winning dynasty in Canadian politics.

A new generation of British Columbians will have little if any direct experience of Bill Bennett, who passed away last week at the age of 83, but he and his father, W.A.C. Bennett, were dominating political personalities in Canada's Pacific province from 1952-1986. For all but three of those years (1972-75), they served as premiers of British Columbia, governing with a determination and focus that was polarizing but unwavering. Their public policy legacies continue to shape the province.

If you had started kindergarten in B.C. when W.A.C. Bennett first became premier, you could have graduated from university and launched your career, only knowing a single premier. A populist firebrand who espoused conservative fiscal policies (20 consecutive balanced budgets!), he led his Social Credit Party to seven consecutive election victories.

More than his record-setting longevity, however, W.A.C. Bennett's boldness and consistency of vision had a significant impact on opening up the province to the development of its natural resources. He achieved this by building the necessary infrastructure of highways, bridges, ferries and power dams.

When his government was finally defeated by the NDP in 1972, it was difficult to imagine British Columbia under different management. It was also widely assumed that the Social Credit Party, so strongly associated with his outsized personality, was finished. Therefore, it was a surprise to almost everyone that the former premier's son, Bill Bennett, decided to enter politics and seek the party leadership.

This he achieved, not only succeeding his father, but also successfully uniting the other non-socialist parties, including Liberals and Conservatives, under his banner. After winning the 1975 election, he didn't look back for more than a decade.

At first, Bill Bennett was derided as "daddy's boy" or "mini-WAC." However, it didn't take long for him to demonstrate that he was, in fact, his own man. He worked hard to modernize the Social Credit Party and professionalize the provincial government in Victoria, which seemed out-of-date compared with public administration in the rest of the country. He ushered in a more contemporary, technocratic style of governance, causing his aging, restless father some concern.

When Bill Bennett returned from his initial First Ministers' meeting in Ottawa, presided over by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, his father had a poignant question for him. Referencing the positive press his son had received in Central Canada, W.A.C. said: "They seem to like you in Ottawa. And in Toronto they're writing glowing editorials about you. But what do they think of you in Spuzzum, B.C.?"

Bill Bennett seemed to take the message to heart. He and his father hailed from the interior of the province. Most B.C. premiers were from Vancouver, the Lower Mainland or Victoria and were part of the professional elite of the province. Not the Bennetts. Their roots were in small business and in the Okanagan Valley. And they would both correct anyone referring to the interior as the "hinterland" of B.C. by pointing out it was actually the "heartland."

Bill Bennett would win three consecutive and hard-fought provincial contests. He stared down massive protests over his public sector restraint program following the 1983 election. He also oversaw the world's first large-scale privatization of government assets (B.C. Resources Investment Corporation), started construction of the Alex Fraser Bridge linking Coquitlam and Surrey, commenced the building of Vancouver's first Sky Train, and presided over the opening of Expo 86.

Perhaps his proudest achievement, however, was opening the first phase of the Coquihalla Highway, providing a more direct and shorter route from Vancouver to the heartland he called home.

When he announced his retirement as premier in the summer of 1986, indicating he would stay on as

the MLA for Okanagan South, the riding both he and his father had represented, one wag in the Victoria press gallery playfully asked, "Okanagan South? Where's that?"

The departing premier simply smiled and responded: "Just follow the pavement."

Like his father, Bill Bennett played to win. Unlike his father — and many political leaders — he left public life undefeated.

David Mitchell is a former B.C. MLA and the author of the biography, *W.A.C.: Bennett and the Rise of British Columbia* and *Succession: the Political Reshaping of British Columbia*.

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[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



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