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The Royal North-West Mounted Police and Labour Unrest in Western Canada, 1919

DURING THE EARLY MORNING HOURS of 17 June 1919 eight leaders¹ of the Winnipeg General Strike were arrested by members of the RNWMP and charged that as officials of the One Big Union they had conspired together to replace constituted authority with a soviet form of government.² Although a royal commission which investigated the causes of the strike³ found no evidence of any seditious conspiracy, nor any connection between the strike and the OBU,⁴ seven of the eight accused were eventually convicted by the courts of trying to 'overthrow' the state.⁵

The verdict touched off a controversy which still continues. 'Strike or Revolution?' asked Masters in his pioneering study of the labour dispute. Most historians now accept his conclusion, with varying refinements, that it was not an incipient revolution but 'an effort to secure the principle of collective bargaining.'⁶ Nonetheless, it was widely believed at the time that the OBU represented a revolutionary challenge to established authority. Borden, in his memoirs, described the strike as an attempt to supersede the existing government with one based upon 'absurd conceptions of what had been accomplished in Russia.'⁷

1 R.B. Russell, W. Pritchard, J. Queen, A.A. Heaps, G. Armstrong, R.E. Bray, W. Ivens, and R.J. Jones

2 D.C. Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto 1950), 115

3 'Report of the Royal Commission ... upon the causes and effects of the General Strike ... H.A. Robson, KC, commissioner,' 1919, 3

4 *Ibid.*, 13

5 W.J. Tremear, ed., *Canadian Criminal Cases*, xxxiii (Toronto), 12

6 Masters, *Winnipeg General Strike*, 134

7 H. Borden, ed., *R.L. Borden: His Memoirs* (Toronto 1938), 972

What evidence did the prime minister have for such a view? Although a full study of the role of the federal security agencies has yet to appear, it is generally accepted that the government's action was influenced by information it obtained from a number of intelligence sources. Rodney has emphasized the reports of 'Moscow Money' being diverted to Canada for revolutionary purposes as reason for the position of the authorities.⁸ Others have turned to the intelligence reports of the Dominion Police, RNWMP, and the Department of Militia to explain its response, although McCormack has shown that there was very little co-ordination in their investigations and their findings were often contradictory.⁹

As the responsible federal police force in western Canada in 1919 the Royal North-West Mounted Police was perhaps the most important of these security agencies. McNaught and Bercuson have suggested that the intelligence reports of the RNWMP supported the official view that the strike was revolutionary in nature.¹⁰ This seems a reasonable conclusion considering that it was the members and secret agents of the Mounted Police who provided the backbone of the evidence that led to the conviction of the strike leaders.

It is a view that has been perpetuated by the writers of quasi-official histories of the force which, although too often preoccupied with justifying its ways to man, have been widely read in their time. Longstreth wrote colourfully of 'Red wisdom' journeying from 'sweat shop to sweat shop,' and the spread of 'Russian venom' by 'Muscovite emissaries.'¹¹ Fetherstonhaugh was more explicit, describing the strike as 'No ordinary fight for higher wages or improved working conditions ... but a campaign to impose upon the people a dictatorship by the One Big Union.'¹² More recently the Kellys, ignoring the historical scholarship of the last quarter century, have claimed that the strike leaders 'were plotting to overthrow the government, by force if necessary.'¹³

How true is this interpretation of the intelligence role of the RNWMP during those critical months that led up to the breaking of the strike? What steps did that force take to organize a secret service and how did it operate? Did the Mounties see bolsheviks and caches of arms behind every tree? Did they advise the government that the One Big Union and the Winnipeg strike were all a part of a plot to kick it off Parliament

8 W. Rodney, *Soldiers of the International* (Toronto 1968), 26

9 R. McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries* (Toronto 1977), 178

10 K. McNaught and D.J. Bercuson, *The Winnipeg Strike: 1919* (Toronto 1974), 91

11 T.M. Longstreth, *The Silent Force* (New York 1927), 290

12 R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Canadian Mounted Police* (New York 1938), 179

13 N. and W. Kelly, *The Royal Canadian Mounted Police: A Century of History* (Edmonton 1973), 151

Hill? For so convinced was Borden of the revolutionary nature of the labour unrest that following the strike he quickly took steps to use the legendary frontier force as the nucleus for a new nation-wide, centrally controlled, federal security organization – the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The Mounted Police was initiated into the world of secret agents and espionage in 1914 when it became a part of the intelligence network organized under the Dominion Police to protect national security. As the provincial police force in Alberta and Saskatchewan it spent the early years of the war investigating the rumoured plots of German spies and enforcing the various regulations under the War Measures Act which were aimed at restricting the activities of the large enemy alien population on the prairies.

As the war drew to a close the RNWMP began to direct its attention to radical labour organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World. These security investigations were gradually curtailed, however, following the termination of the contracts for provincial policing in 1917 and the government's decision to allow members of the force to volunteer for overseas military service.¹⁴ By the fall of 1918 over eighty police posts had been closed in Alberta and Saskatchewan, and the transfer of men to the Canadian army had reduced the Mounted Police to little more than a border patrol.

Just when it looked as if the Mounted Police was about to disappear into the pages of history an important intelligence-gathering role was suddenly thrust upon it. Behind the change was the federal government's dogged belief that a sinister conspiracy lay at the root of the growing number of strikes and industrial disputes that occurred in 1918. Reports from the Dominion Police and the Department of Militia on the labour situation were contradictory.¹⁵ As a result Borden asked an old political colleague, C.H. Cahan, later director of public safety, to investigate the revolutionary propaganda prevalent in the country.¹⁶ Cahan submitted the results of his enquiry to the minister of justice in September. It was not the Germans or the IWW, he reported, that were behind the unrest, but the Bolsheviks. If there was any doubt about these findings they must have been dispelled when Borden learned from British intelligence sources in December 1918 that the Soviet government intended to launch a propaganda campaign in North America.¹⁷

Among the measures taken to meet this perceived threat was a

14 Canada, *Sessional Papers*, Report of the Commissioner of the RNWMP for 1918, 7–8

15 R. McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries* (Toronto 1977), 441–2

16 Public Archives of Canada [PAC], Borden Papers, 56642, Borden to Cahan, 19 May 1918

17 Borden Papers, 60920, Borden to White, 2 Dec. 1918, telegram

reorganization of the federal security and intelligence system in western Canada. Hitherto the Dominion Police had had nation-wide responsibility for the enforcement of federal laws and the security provisions of the War Measures Act. On 12 December 1918 this responsibility was geographically cut in half.¹⁸ The RNWMP took over from the Dominion Police from the Lakehead to the Pacific, leaving the operations of the latter force confined to eastern Canada. In addition, the strength of the Mounted Police was increased to twelve hundred men.

One of the principal thrusts of this reorganization was the desire to ensure that there was an adequate mobile force in the west to meet any civil disturbance. N.W. Rowell, the minister in charge of the Mounted Police, was at pains to inform the provincial governments later in the new year that the force was available to assist them should any disorders occur.¹⁹ With many of the municipal police forces already unionized, the government had already taken steps to ensure that the Mounties themselves could not be affected by the unrest by passing an order-in-council which prevented them from joining or associating in any way with any union or association of employees.²⁰

Another result of this change was that it created two secret services where formerly there had been only one. The RNWMP reported to the president of the Privy Council, the Dominion Police to the minister of justice. No provision was made for any overall direction of their operations or analysis of their intelligence. Cahan, the director of public safety, was supposed to advise the government on security matters but he resigned early in 1919. Lacking centralized control, each departmental intelligence service more or less went its own way, each carrying out its own investigations, sometimes tripping over each others' toes in the process, and each drawing up its own assessment of conditions. They tried to keep each other informed of the results of their work by circulating the reports of their agents among the five or six key ministers and their senior advisers in Ottawa. It was not the best of security systems at a time when the country needed reliable intelligence and analysis of what was happening and was likely to happen. Added to this, the effective leader of the government, Sir Robert Borden, was in Europe from November 1918 to May 1919 attending the Peace Conference.

Since October 1917 the minister responsible for the RNWMP had been Newton Wesley Rowell. A onetime leader of the Liberal party in Ontario, he had broken with his party over the conscription issue and

18 PC Order 3087, 2 Dec. 1918

19 RCMP Headquarters, Ottawa, RCMP Records, G-2-6, Rowell to the attorneys-general of BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, 16 May 1919

20 PC Order 2213, 7 Oct. 1918

joined Borden's Union Government. Rowell quickly set about organizing an effective secret service and laying down guidelines for its operation. Following the transfer of responsibility to the Mounted Police in December 1918 he had taken steps to secure the return of the Mounted Police cavalry squadrons serving overseas.²¹ Early in the new year he informed his deputy minister, A.A. Maclean, the comptroller or administrative head of the force, of the priorities he wished given to secret service duties: 'It is most important that this branch of the service should receive most careful consideration and that an efficient service should be maintained so that the government would be kept thoroughly advised of what is going on in the principal centres where i.w.w. or other revolutionary agitators might be at work.'²²

Rowell did not share the opinion of the hardliners among officials in Ottawa on the extent of the Bolshevik conspiracy and the measures needed to confront it.²³ He was conciliatory in his attitude towards labour and opposed to a repressive policy.²⁴ This was apparent in his assessment of the labour unrest, and the operational guidelines he brought to the attention of A.A. Maclean. Most of the leaders of organized labour, he informed Maclean, were opposed to Bolshevik propaganda. The ordinary workers who appear to express approval of revolutionary doctrine do so, he continued, without clearly understanding its real nature or what is actually happening in Russia. In Rowell's view, their ignorance had to be met with education. Finally, he identified a 'small minority,' largely of 'foreign birth,' who had imbibed the doctrines of class war and believed in revolution to achieve their ends. 'Take care,' he warned the comptroller, that where prosecutions are begun they are only taken up against this final group.²⁵

As soon as he was informed of the minister's policy, Commissioner Perry of the RNWMP took steps to draft operational directives for the guidance of his divisional commanders. In the first of these he outlined the main threat to security and the legal action which was to be taken against those behind it. The objects of security investigations, he informed his field officers, were to be those individuals and organizations that espouse the pernicious doctrines of Bolshevism. He identified the main centres of radical activity as Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Vancouver. All those suspected of revolutionary activities, he ordered, were to be watched and a careful record kept of all their public utterances. In addition, the divisions were to keep themselves informed on all radical

21 Borden Papers, 49413, White to Borden, 16 Dec. 1918, telegram

22 RCMP Records, G-2-6, Rowell to Maclean, 4 Jan. 1919

23 McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, 445

24 M. Prang, *N.W. Rowell: Ontario Nationalist* (Toronto 1975), 267

25 RCMP Records, G-2-6, Rowell to Maclean, 20 Jan. 1919

publications in their area. Legal proceedings, he instructed, were to be taken up where possible under the various wartime regulations and the sections of the Criminal Code dealing with sedition. Perry also requested that each commanding officer forward a summary of the secret service activities in his district to Headquarters every month.²⁶

In his second memorandum the commissioner drew the attention of his immediate subordinates to the need to create an efficient detective service of carefully selected men who could operate without drawing suspicion on themselves. Their primary task was to penetrate all labour organizations in their district, identifying which groups and which leaders favoured revolutionary action. Finally, Perry demonstrated that he had well and truly grasped the fundamental objectives of any intelligence service. 'It must be borne in mind,' he stated, 'that the only information which is of any value in connection with Bolshevism is the valuable and first hand information of what is going to happen before it occurs in sufficient time to permit arrangements being made to offset any intended disturbance.'²⁷

The new duties required a considerable amount of reorganization. Men had to be transferred to Manitoba and British Columbia, and accommodation found there for new divisional headquarters and detachments. Funds had to be found to support the new operations. During the war Perry had employed individuals from time to time to assist him with the administration of secret service investigations. With the expansion of responsibilities some of this work was now taken over by a new department at Headquarters in Regina known as the Criminal Investigation Branch.²⁸ Its first head was Assistant Commissioner W.H. Routledge. CIB became responsible for all correspondence and instructions regarding criminal and security matters between Headquarters and the field divisions. The change resulted in a significant delegation of the commissioner's authority, although during 1919 Perry continued to exercise close personal control over all secret service duties.

One of the commissioner's immediate problems was lack of personnel. In December 1918 he had only eight secret agents and a half dozen detectives in his entire command.²⁹ Most of the agents employed during the war to investigate enemy aliens had been discharged. Several of his most experienced detectives were overseas with the cavalry squadrons. While he awaited their return he requested immediate authority to hire twenty additional agents. Perry estimated the cost of

26 *Ibid.*, B-1, 958, Circular Memorandum 807, 6 Jan. 1919

27 *Ibid.*, Circular Memorandum 807A, 6 Jan. 1919

28 *Ibid.*, General Order No 13176, 2 Feb. 1919

29 *Ibid.*, G-2-6, Perry to Maclean, 14 Jan. 1919

the new secret service operations during the coming fiscal year at \$87,500. This sum included salaries for the agents at \$125 per month, their expenses, and the pay of informants. The government readily agreed to his request and the funds were made available in February 1919 from the War Appropriation.³⁰

Procuring suitable men to operate undercover at such short notice was not easy. As the officer in charge of the Crow's Nest Pass District wrote after turning down a clean-cut Anglo-Saxon applicant: 'What we need is men who can speak several Slavic languages, and do the work of a coal miner.'³¹ At the end of February the commanding officer in Winnipeg was still without suitable men who had the language requirements to investigate the unions in the Fort William area.³² Not surprisingly, many of the agents and many of the regular members who were recruited to work undercover were of central eastern European origin.

One of the most successful of these was Detective Constable F.W. Zaneth. Born in Italy, Zaneth (Zanetti) emigrated as a boy with his family to Moose Jaw where they eventually became naturalized British subjects. Later the family moved to the United States, but the young Zaneth returned and joined the RNWMP in 1917. In the spring of the following year he was sent to Drumheller to investigate the radicals believed to be behind the coal strike there. Like many other agents he had no prior experience or training. His success depended largely upon his own initiative. A factor in his favour was his ability to speak several languages. If he succeeded in infiltrating the union and providing useful intelligence, he would be kept on. If not, he would be withdrawn and transferred back to regular police work.

Zaneth did so well that Perry sent him back to Drumheller in September 1918, posing as Harry Blask, a member of the IWW from the United States. He soon gained the confidence of the union leaders and was initiated into the 'secret grip' and other clandestine practices. In December he moved to Calgary where he became an organizer for the Socialist Party of Canada, and an acquaintance of most of the leading radicals in Alberta. A month later he attended the conference of the Alberta Federation of Labour in Medicine Hat. In March 1919 he was a delegate at the all-important Western Labour Conference in Calgary that spawned the One Big Union. Zaneth was one of Perry's prime sources of intelligence during the critical months that led up to the strike in Winnipeg. He was also to be the star witness for the prosecution in the trial of the strike leaders.³³

30 PC Order 363, 20 Feb. 1919

31 RCMP Records, B-1, 955, Junget to Spalding, 21 Jan. 1919

32 Ibid., Starnes to Perry, 27 Feb. 1919

33 Ibid., SF 0-284

To many of the labour organizations the secret agents and detectives of the RNWMP were police spies or agent provocateurs, a despicable group of men who carried out what they believed were dishonest and unlawful assignments simply for money. Elaborate precautions were often taken to prevent them from penetrating unions and political parties. In Winnipeg Superintendent Starnes reported that his agents had to operate with great care, as members of the Socialist Party of Canada suspected every stranger of being a police spy.³⁴ The commanding officer in Vancouver, meanwhile, reported that the radicals had formed their own counter-intelligence service called the 'Holy of Holies,' which had his offices under constant surveillance and attempted to follow his men whenever they left the building.³⁵

By one means or another the Mounted Police were able to evade these precautions skilfully. In Calgary, for example, some rww sympathizers suspected that there was a 'stool pigeon' in their midst. It was decided that he had to be unmasked. The object of their anger, D/Constable Zaneth (Harry Blask), who was present, heartily endorsed their resolve to do away with the 'son of a bitch.' To allay any suspicion from falling upon himself Zaneth made an excuse to travel to Regina. Once there, Perry arranged for him to be arrested under the Wartime Regulations as an alien travelling without a permit. He was subsequently brought to court, fined, and released. The local press gave considerable prominence to the case, which didn't go unnoticed in Calgary. As a result Zaneth was able to return to that city without any doubt in the minds of his fellow radicals that he was anything other than a union organizer.³⁶

A more serious threat to the intelligence network occurred in Vancouver. Two secret agents of the Mounted Police had infiltrated the Russian Workers Union, one of the organizations declared illegal on Cahan's recommendation in September 1918. In June of the following year fourteen of its members were arrested and deportation proceedings were started against them based upon the evidence supplied by the two agents. Shortly after their arrest friends of the Russians brought charges of perjury against the Mounted Police agents, contending that the testimony they gave at the deportation hearings was completely false. The case dragged on through the courts, attracting a great deal of publicity as the identity of the two men was revealed. Perry anxiously awaited the outcome. If they were convicted, the whole secret agent system would be endangered. The credibility of the force's agents was at stake. In addition, no intelligence organization was likely to succeed

34 *Ibid.*, B-2, 20, Starnes to Perry, 15 April 1919

35 *Ibid.*, B-1, 930, Horrigan to Perry, Feb. 1919

36 *Ibid.*, SF, 0-284, Pennefather to Perry, 26 July 1919

unless the agents it employed could be sure that their anonymity would be protected, even after they had left its service. Fortunately for the commissioner they were finally acquitted.³⁷

The decision to re-organize the secret service in Western Canada was not without its critics. Opposition centred on the transfer of duties in British Columbia, where M.J. Reid, an official of the Immigration Department, had acted for several years as agent for both the Dominion Police and British Intelligence. Reid had built up an organization of secret agents and informers who were investigating radical labour unions as well as Chinese and Hindu nationalist groups. Cahan objected strongly to the reorganization. He felt that it was ridiculous to replace Reid, who had years of experience in security on the west coast, with the Mounted Police who had none.³⁸ Cahan was supported in his view by two influential Conservative members of parliament, H.H. Stevens and J.A. Calder.³⁹

Pressure was brought to bear upon Perry to retain Reid's services in the same manner that he had been employed by the Dominion Police. With the apparent support of Rowell, the commissioner dug in his heels and refused to agree to any modification of the policy to place federal security matters in the west under the direct control of the R^NW^MP. For one thing Perry's staff in Vancouver had already gathered intelligence on Reid which led him to believe that he could not be trusted.⁴⁰ While Ottawa considered the subject, Reid dragged his feet, finding one excuse after another for not turning over his files to the officer commanding the Mounted Police in Vancouver. Perry, meanwhile, took steps to reinforce his position. Upon his prompting the comptroller wrote to the heads of the other security agencies in Ottawa, informing them that henceforth any enquiries on security matters in British Columbia should be directed to the R^NW^MP. Perry also moved to have British Intelligence authorities informed that the Mounted Police had taken over from Reid, and that in future they should communicate with his office, if they required any investigation carried out.⁴¹ The commissioner was determined to put an end, in western Canada at least, to the disjointed kind of security system that had existed. In the end Cahan and Stevens failed to get their way, which was perhaps one reason why the former eventually resigned as director of public safety.

In spite of the difficulties, by April 1919 the R^NW^MP had organized a highly successful covert intelligence operation in western Canada. Se-

37 *Ibid.*, A-1, 589

38 *Ibid.*, A-1, 1919, Cahan to deputy minister of justice, 9 Jan. 1919

39 *Ibid.*, C-2-6, Stevens to Rowell, 20 Feb. 1919

40 *Ibid.*, Horrigan to Perry, 24 Jan. 1919

41 *Ibid.*, Maclean to Rowell, 24 Feb. 1919

cret agents or detectives had managed to penetrate every important radical organization, some of them occupying executive positions in which they had the confidence of the leadership. Their reports gave a detailed account of the activities of the radicals, as well as a verbatim record of their public speeches. It is in these that one finds the problem of language which Bercuson and McNaught have noted.⁴² Union agitators are frequently described as 'Reds' or 'Bolsheviks,' their speeches as 'Revolutionary.' One suspects that these descriptions reflect not only the prejudices of the agents and informers, but also the universal difficulty encountered with the rhetoric of the radicals. Baxter has shown the diversity of opinion at the time as to the meaning of phrases like 'Russian Revolution' and 'Bolshevism.'⁴³

It was this kind of undigested intelligence that the crown used to prosecute its case against the strike leaders. Although some of this raw material found its way to Ottawa, it did not form the primary means by which the Mounted Police informed its minister on conditions in the west. In each division the agents' reports were analyzed by the commanding officer who used them to draw up his own monthly assessment of the situation in his area. These, as Perry had ordered, were forwarded to the CIB at Headquarters in Regina. From there copies were sent, often with additional assistments by the commissioner, to the comptroller in Ottawa who circulated them among the departments concerned. In this manner the government was being kept fully informed, as Rowell had requested.

The first of these monthly reports, which were for February, began to reach Regina early in March. It was clear from the beginning that the industrial areas were the ones which would give cause for concern. The commanding officer in Prince Albert, for example, in his report for March informed the commissioner that there was little in the way of radical activity among the unions, and no evidence of any sinister agency at work. A month later he expressed the view that the OBU would get little support in his area.⁴⁴ From the Maple Creek district, meanwhile, it was repeatedly reported that investigations had revealed nothing in the way of labour unrest, nor were they expected to as the area was largely rural and there were no organized unions.⁴⁵

Of more concern were the Lethbridge and Fort Macleod Divisions which had large mining industries in their areas. By March agents from

42 McNaught and Bercuson, *Winnipeg Strike: 1919*, 43

43 T.C. Baxter, 'Selected Aspects of Canada Public Opinion on the Russian Revolution and its Impact in Canada, 1917-19' (MA thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1973)

44 RCMP Records, B-1, West to Perry, 5 May 1919

45 *Ibid.*, Demers to Perry, 12 April 1919

Fort Macleod had already established themselves among the mining unions in the Crow's Nest Pass. They reported that a number of revolutionary speeches had been made, and that most of the agitators were Russians connected with the Russian Social Democratic party in Winnipeg. The commanding officer estimated that 90 per cent of the miners supported the radicals, and that a serious strike could result if they did not get their demands.⁴⁶

In Lethbridge the February report indicated that the miners in the district were not as radical as those in the Crow's Nest Pass, and that there appeared no organized attempt to make trouble. These conditions changed after the March meeting of the Western Labour Conference in Calgary, and its decision to organize the One Big Union. The reports for April, May, and June highlight the effect of this event. The influx of OBU propaganda was noted as well as the presence of OBU spokesmen who were holding meetings at the various mines. The commanding officer believed that the OBU was gaining considerable support, especially amongst the 'foreign element,' and that a strike was possible, but nothing more sinister than this.⁴⁷

From Edmonton the reports followed much the same pattern. There, however, considerable attention was paid to the activities of Joe Knight, the organizer for the Socialist Party of Canada. In June the sympathetic strike was reported as 'orderly.' A month later, at the behest of the crown prosecutor in Winnipeg, Knight's home, as well as the Trades and Labour Council office, was raided and material seized and forwarded to that city to be used in the trial of the strike leaders.⁴⁸

One of the earliest areas of concern was British Columbia, where the Mounted Police had to start its security organization from scratch. What with the size of the province, the lack of staff, and Reid's obstruction, the commanding officer encountered some delay in establishing agents in all the industrial areas, especially outside the Lower Mainland.⁴⁹ By the end of March this situation appears to have been rectified and agents had penetrated most of the radical labour groups. As elsewhere, discontent appears to have quickly polarized in support of the OBU following the Calgary conference. In the March report the British Columbia Federation of Labour was stated to be all in favour of the new organization and the use of a general strike as a means of securing economic change. As a result, particular attention was paid to the activities of Kavanagh and Naylor, two OBU organizers. Superintendent Horrigan, the commanding officer, predicted the possibility of a

46 Ibid., Tucker to Perry, 28 Feb. 1919

47 Ibid., Pennefather to Perry, 8 May 1919

48 Ibid., Wroughton to Perry, 6 Aug. 1919

49 Ibid., B-2, 70, Horrigan to Perry, 24 Feb. 1919

general strike occurring, probably in June. His reports, however, were more concerned with the likelihood of trouble from the returned soldiers and the small 'anarchial' organizations like the Russian Workers Union than they were in the OBU.⁵⁰

As the OBU emerged as the catalyst of western discontent, attention naturally focused on the reports of the Western Labour Conference in Calgary's Paget Hall, from 13 to 15 March. This gathering was attended by two Mounted Police agents, D/Constable Zaneth and Agent No 10, who Perry described as having 'for many years taken an active part in the Industrial Workers of the World and kindred associations, and is therefore peculiarly competent to discuss the leaders in such movements and their aims and objectives.'⁵¹ No 10 was alarmed by the events which took place at the conference. The radicals, he reported, largely members of the Socialist Party of Canada, had gained control and their resolutions had all been accepted. The ultimate aim of this leadership, he continued, was the overthrow of the existing 'social order.' To achieve this, they intended to unite organized labour in the west into One Big Union, and under the rallying cry of the 'Six Hour Day' pull off a general strike about 1 June. Publicly, he stated, these leaders, who he identified as Knight, Kavanagh, Midgely, Pritchard, Naylor, and Johns, declare that they intend to reach their objective within legal bounds, but privately, he continued, their hope is that the strike will precipitate such drastic action by extreme individuals or groups as to lead to a breakdown of civil order which they can then exploit.

No 10 had some recommendations which he believed would prevent this from happening. First of all, he suggested that the leadership of the present labour organizations should be strengthened as they were by no means unanimous in their support for the OBU. Following this, some progressive reforms in the area of wages, unemployment, and minimum working hours should be undertaken by the government. His most startling suggestion, however, was that the leaders should be illegally detained and held in secret custody until the danger period had passed. This he considered necessary if the government was to avoid going 'down to defeat.'⁵²

None of the other intelligence reports of the Mounted Police had suggested anything quite like this. It was just the kind of evidence the hardliners in Ottawa would seize on to support their position. The officer in charge of the CIB in Regina recognized that it needed careful

50 *Ibid.*, B-1, 930, Horrigan to Perry, 4 April 1919

51 Borden Papers, 56825, Perry to Maclean, 2 April 1919

52 *Ibid.*, 56831-5, Report of Agent No 10 re Inter-provincial Labour Convention, Calgary, March 1919

analysis before being forwarded east. He believed that No 10's assessment of the situation was 'considerably "over drawn,"' based upon the mistaken view that the radical leaders 'had actually accomplished something, and the masses were ready to do their will.' The aims of these individuals for a change in the social order are only 'far fetched dreams,' he wrote in his forwarding note to Perry, and unlikely to be accepted by the general public once they are shown in their true light. After all, he continued, the labour organizations seem to be 'split' over the question of support for the One Big Union. 'I have refrained from forwarding No. 10's report to Ottawa,' he informed the commissioner, 'as I concluded that you would wish to express your personal opinion with regard to the situation.'⁵³

Perry's subsequent comments on the proposed OBU were probably the most judicious and accurate assessment of conditions in the west that one can find among the plethora of intelligence reports to reach Ottawa. Avoiding inflammatory references to revolutionaries and Bolsheviks, he clearly identified that what he meant by 'reds' were socialist 'agitators.' The commissioner agreed that the ultimate aim of the OBU was a fundamental change in the social and economic order of the country, but nothing would be done to achieve this, he informed the comptroller, until the five-man organization committee appointed at the conference had had an opportunity to gain the support of a majority of the union members in the western provinces.

Perry's analysis was largely based upon an extraordinary meeting that he had with three members of that committee – Midgely, Pritchard, and Kavanagh – shortly after the Calgary conference. At this face-to-face encounter there appears to have been a frank discussion between the head of security in the west and the union leaders concerning their aims and objectives. Perry described them afterwards as 'Revolutionary Socialists,' able and determined men who sought to bring about a change in social and economic conditions, but were 'opposed to force or violence.' Their immediate objective, they informed him, was to perfect the organization of the OBU following which they would call a general strike to demand a six-hour working day. This, they believed, would occur sometime in June.

'I am not prepared to say that they are aiming at a revolution,' wrote Perry, but they are 'influencing a section of labour in the west, and unchaining forces which, even if they so desire, some day they would be unable to control.' There was a 'possibility' of a revolution, the commissioner believed, if the strike was to lead to a breakdown of civil order which could be exploited by extremists. He identified Vancouver and

53 Ibid., 56830, Notes for Commissioner's Perusal re Report of Agent No 10, nd

Victoria as the most dangerous points, and suggested that the naval forces there be strengthened as a precaution. Perry concluded his analysis with a number of recommendations which were to go largely unheeded by government leaders in the weeks ahead. Above all, he warned against interfering with the organization of the OBU, prosecuting its leaders, or preventing them from publicly expressing their opinions. Such action, he continued, would only antagonize the larger and more moderate element of the labour movement who were sensitive about their civil liberties. Finally, he urged, measures must be adopted to provide employment for the returned soldiers.⁵⁴ He did not identify the existence of any sinister plot to overthrow the government by force, either by the western radicals or foreign agents.

Perry's report reached the comptroller's office in Ottawa by 12 April, on which day a copy was forwarded to White, the acting prime minister.⁵⁵ Government leaders, it appears, were already in a near state of panic over the situation in British Columbia. On 16 April White cabled Borden in Paris expressing the cabinet's alarm over plans 'being laid for a revolutionary movement' among the 'workers and soldiers there.' Fearing serious disturbances, White asked Borden to arrange for a British cruiser to be sent to Vancouver or Victoria.⁵⁶

Understandably, Borden, who was in the throes of asserting Canada's sovereign status at the Peace Conference, balked at the suggestion. Assistance from the British government, he replied, should only be solicited 'as a last resort.' Why not, he suggested, use the RNWMP with its strength increased if necessary?⁵⁷ Plans began to increase the strength of the Mounted Police to 2500 men, but White was still not satisfied. He cabled Borden again a few days later on account of the 'serious conditions in British Columbia and projected revolution movement about June first,' again urging the despatch of a British warship.⁵⁸ The source of this intelligence, he informed Borden, was the comptroller of the RNWMP and the Militia Department.

The RNWMP source that White referred to was most likely a 'Memorandum on Revolutionary Tendencies in Western Canada' drawn up by the assistant comptroller of the force, C.F. Hamilton, early in April. Hamilton had only recently returned to his position with the Mounted Police after serving during the war as deputy chief censor for Canada. His assessment reflected the views of the hardliners in Ottawa like Cahan, and it differed both in tone and substance from those of Perry and his officers.

54 *Ibid.*, 56825-8, Perry to Maclean, 2 April 1919

55 *Ibid.*, 56824, Maclean to White, 12 April 1919

56 *Ibid.*, 60923, White to Borden, 16 April 1919, telegram

57 *Ibid.*, 60924, Borden to White, 18 April 1919, telegram

58 *Ibid.*, 60926, White to Borden, 28 April 1919, telegram

Hamilton identified the existence of a sinister organization which was under the control of a 'central directing body somewhere in Canada.' Its influence could be seen not only in the OBU but in many other radical groups. The ultimate aim, he reported, of those behind it was the subversion of the existing social and political institutions and the establishment of a 'Soviet Government' based upon the 'Dictatorship of the proletariat.' Although the 'weapons and explosives' they had were insufficient for serious fighting, a 'revolution by force of arms,' he advised, 'was conceivable under existing conditions.'⁵⁹

Within a few days of White's last cable to Borden regarding the situation in British Columbia, government leaders in Ottawa began to turn their attention more and more to events which were taking place in Winnipeg. On 1 May in that city workers in the buildings and metal trades walked off their jobs over demands for wage increases and the refusal of employers to bargain collectively. Two weeks later they were joined by some 30,000 other workers and the Winnipeg General Strike had begun.

The commanding officer of the RNWMP in Manitoba was Superintendent Cortlandt Starnes, who was later to succeed Perry as commissioner. Throughout the months that led up to the breaking of the strike, Starnes never identified it as anything other than a labour dispute.⁶⁰ He did not connect it to the OBU, although many of his agents' reports, which were also forwarded to Ottawa, did contain alarming rumours of events in Winnipeg and accounts of the inflammatory statements of the strike leaders.

As in the case of British Columbia, the Mounted Police had no existing organization in Winnipeg. This resulted in some delay, but by the end of March Starnes was able to report that his agents had penetrated the three main areas of radical activity, the Socialist Party of Canada, the Ukrainian Social Democratic party, and the socialist organizations among the Finns at the Lakehead.⁶¹ Early in April Starnes was optimistic about the labour scene in the city, and his assessment gave no hint of the bitter conflict that was to occur a month later. The Socialist Party of Canada, he reported, had been working hard to win the support of the returned soldiers, but was having little success. As to the possibility of a strike, he expressed the view that many of the unions had just received wage increases 'and danger of a large scale strike has been averted.'⁶² A month later conditions had changed. The effect of

59 PAC, RG 24, vol. 3985, file NSC 1055-2-21, Memorandum on Revolutionary Tendencies in Western Canada, contained in Gwatkin to Stephens, 12 April 1919

60 See, for example, Canada, *Sessional Papers*, Report of Commissioner of RNWMP, 1919, 11-12.

61 RCMP Records, B-1, 929, Starnes to Perry, 22 March 1919

62 Ibid., Starnes to Perry, 9 April 1919

the Calgary conference was once again evident. There has been much discussion, he reported, in union circles over the OBU and all appear to be in favour of it. He also warned that the dispute between the workers in the building and metal trades would likely lead to a 'sympathetic strike involving all the unions in the city.'⁶³

In spite of Starnes' reports, officials in Ottawa continued to see the strike as a seditious conspiracy. On 21 May 1919 two federal cabinet ministers, Meighen and Robertson, arrived in Winnipeg to try to bring an end to the general strike. Like the Citizens Committee and others, they already regarded the strike as an attempt at revolution.⁶⁴ As the crisis heightened, in the weeks which followed, this conviction among government leaders would grow until steps were finally taken to break the strike. Incredible as it may seem, however, Starnes was still reporting on 10 June that 'Indications are that the backbone of the strike is broken, and it should only be a matter of a few days before the majority of the strikers are back at work.'⁶⁵ He also informed his superiors that his agents had found no trace of any outside support for the strike. Seven days later, with the cabinet's approval, the strike leaders were arrested and charged with trying to overthrow the state.⁶⁶

In the months that had preceded the arrests the Mounted Police had developed an effective intelligence service. All suspected organizations were successfully penetrated and enough information obtained to give a reliable indication of their aims and the plans of their leaders. To obtain this intelligence the RNWMP had established a body of paid informers and undercover agents who had covertly infiltrated the various groups posing as fellow radicals. In selecting these agents the police had shown a willingness to recruit individuals of a suitable cultural or linguistic background, and to maintain them, if necessary, in their double role for months or even years at a time. These were professional developments which were to be important for the future.

A systematic means of reporting and analyzing the results of undercover operations had also been established. The agents submitted regular lengthy accounts of their investigations and the information supplied by their informers. These were evaluated by local area commanders, who used them to draw up monthly reports on the conditions in their districts. These in turn were forwarded to CIB at Headquarters in Regina for yet further analysis and comment.

Where this system seems to have fallen down was in Ottawa. It appears to have been the practice to forward to the comptroller's office

63 Ibid., Starnes to Perry, 9 May 1919

64 McNaught and Bercuson, *Winnipeg Strike: 1919*, 57

65 RCMP Records, H-V-1, vol. 2, Starnes to Perry, 10 June 1919

66 McNaught and Bercuson, *Winnipeg Strike: 1919*, 79

not only the monthly reports and the additional assessments of Commissioner Perry, but also the grass roots material provided by the undercover agents. These were often heavily laden with the alarming and inflammatory statements of the radical leaders. They were recorded verbatim with the intention that they could be used later, if criminal charges were laid. What the agents reported could differ markedly from the conclusions and assessments of their commanding officers. These would be based upon the information provided by several agents working independently of each other.

In Ottawa there was no central body responsible for evaluating the material forwarded by the various security forces, resolving any contradictions in it, and advising the cabinet on conditions. All the comptroller could do was to circulate copies of such reports as he felt necessary, or important, to other department heads and ministers. They in turn reciprocated in a similar manner. No overall analysis of the information received on the situation in the west seems to have been attempted. Instead, government leaders were faced with a miscellaneous collection of material that at times must have been understandably alarming and confusing.

Apart from Hamilton's unsubstantiated claims, there had been nothing in the reports of the RNWMP during the months prior to the breaking-up of the strike which revealed a revolutionary plot. Perry had expressed his concern over the possibility of disorder, if strikes and demonstrations should get out of hand, but he had not identified caches of arms, secret armies drilling, or foreign agents hatching a conspiracy.

Government leaders, nevertheless, stuck to the sinister-plot theory expounded by Cahan in the fall of 1918. One cannot be precise about why Borden and some of his colleagues continued to take the position they did. It is possible that they were affected to some degree by the widespread fear of red revolution that gripped the country. The strikes in the United States, revolutions in Europe, the rhetoric of the radicals, and the conduct of the strikers may have helped to reinforce their convictions. There were also intelligence reports from other sources which usually conflicted markedly with those of the Mounted Police. It was reported by Chambers, the chief censor, for example, that a prominent Ukrainian socialist in Winnipeg was actually an ambassador of the Soviet government.⁶⁷ Meighen, the acting minister of justice, learned from a member of the Manitoba legislature that the Ukrainians in his province had guns and ammunition ready for a revolution.⁶⁸

67 D. Avery, 'The Radical Alien and the Winnipeg General Strike,' in C. Berger and R. Cook, eds., *The West and the Nation* (Toronto 1976), 218

68 *Ibid.*, 219

There was also Cahan's dogged belief in a Bolshevik conspiracy. The former director of public safety told Borden, on the latter's return from Europe, that the OBU intended to 'kick the Government off Parliament Hill.'⁶⁹ This conclusion was supported by reports received by the Directorate of Military Intelligence in Ottawa. The commander of the military forces in Winnipeg stated the 'Evidence so far searched proves conclusively Bolshevik money from United States has been received; also Strike Committee working closely with supporters "One Big Union." No doubt seriousness of conspiracy throughout West.'⁷⁰

It is strange that the largest and best organized security force in western Canada, whose agents had penetrated the senior levels of the most radical organizations, should have had such little impact in Ottawa. Perhaps it fits the familiar pattern of miscalculation and ignorance on the part of Ottawa with regard to western conditions. How far did officials in Ottawa select those intelligence reports which suited their own preconceptions of the situation there? How far did they still see the prairies as a violent uncivilized frontier, albeit populated with radical foreigners rather than savage Indians, which had to be firmly dealt with?

Borden's obscure role is yet another factor in the whole affair. We know from the warning he cabled in December 1918 of Soviet plans to launch a propaganda campaign in North America that he had access to British intelligence sources. It appears that during his months in Paris these same sources continued to inform him on matters relating to Canada, and that after his return he regularly received a digest of a special weekly intelligence report prepared by the British Intelligence Service for the British cabinet.⁷¹ What these reports told him, and how they affected his decisions regarding events in Winnipeg, remains a mystery. It is possible, however, that the British may have been deliberately selective in the nature of the information they made available to Borden in the hope of promoting anti-Soviet feelings in Ottawa which would strengthen Canadian support for measures like the allied intervention in Siberia.

The Winnipeg General Strike does seem to have brought one thing home to Borden – that the country's secret service system was inadequate. When the responsibility for security had been geographically divided in December 1918 between the RNWMP and the Dominion Police, Sir Percy Sherwood, the chief commissioner of police, had retired. During the war years Sherwood had established a high profile

69 Borden Papers, 61631, Cahan to Borden, 28 May 1919

70 Ibid., 62009, general officer commanding Military District No 10 to adjutant-general of militia, 18 June 1919

71 Ibid., 60930, colonial secretary to governor general, 27 May 1919, telegram

as the head of the nation's security forces. His departure left a vacuum that his interim replacement, A.J. Cawdron, could not fill, and it also appears to have disrupted the close intelligence liaison between the Dominion Police and Scotland Yard's Special Branch.⁷²

The lack of leadership was brought to Borden's attention by the premier of Ontario who informed him that the chief of the Toronto Police Department had complained that 'at this very difficult and crucial time there is really no head to the organization of the Secret Service of the Dominion.'⁷³ Borden readily agreed that a successor had to be found for Sherwood, and his comment in reply that 'until my return I supposed that this had received attention' indicated a lack of direction on security matters within the cabinet itself during his prolonged absence.⁷⁴

Obviously concerned about any recurrence of industrial unrest or general strikes, the prime minister proceeded to bring about a radical change in the federal system of security and policing. On 5 August 1919 he held discussions on the subject with Perry in Ottawa. As a consequence the commissioner, who had already decided views on the deficiencies of the existing security system, drew up recommendations for a new federal police force.⁷⁵

Perry's primary criticism was the division in ministerial responsibility; the Mounted Police reported to the president of the Privy Council, the Dominion Police to the minister of justice. His first recommendation, therefore, called for the two forces to be brought under one department without delay. This he suggested could be accomplished in two ways:

- (a) by bringing them under one minister, leaving each with its existing area of jurisdiction, and its own executive head;
- (b) by amalgamating the two forces into one, which might take the form of absorption of one by another.

In considering the merits of these two choices, he drew Borden's attention to the differences between the RNWMP and the Dominion Police. The first, he pointed out, was subject to military-type training, strict discipline, and was also armed. As well as being peace officers, he continued, its members were prohibited by law from becoming unionized. Perry was also careful to note that it had experienced detectives, commissioned officers who had a recognized social status and a reputation that was respected throughout the country.

The Dominion Police, in contrast, was organized like a municipal

72 *Ibid.*, 60940, colonial secretary to governor general, 4 June 1919

73 *Ibid.*, 60947, Sir William Hearst, premier of Ontario, to Borden, 5 June 1919

74 *Ibid.*, 60954, Borden to Hearst, 6 June 1919

75 *Ibid.*, 50763, Perry to Borden, 7 Aug. 1919

force. It was not armed, had no military training, and its discipline could only be enforced by a civil court. Because of its size, about 140 men as compared to the Mounted Police strength of 2500, it had to rely on other agencies to assist it in carrying out its duties. Here thought Perry was the basic weakness of any federal police service established under the Dominion Police. The latter agency depended upon the public, the assistance of the municipal police forces, and the employment of agents from private detective firms, about half of whom were American, to operate its secret service. It could not provide the basis for a federal police and security institution which was truly national in organization, sentiment, and direction.

Perry also believed that it was no longer possible to depend upon the ordinary citizen as a source of intelligence. During the war Canadians had been patriotically united in the cause to defeat Germany. But the war was over and the public was divided over the issues facing the country. As for the municipal police forces, they were no longer reliable either. Many of them had become unionized. In Winnipeg and Vancouver they had participated in the recent strikes. In the United States there had also been some serious labour disputes involving city forces. In London, England, even the Bobbies had gone on strike. Municipal forces, argued the commissioner, could not be depended on where industrial disputes were concerned. The government must have a force which would stand by the civil authorities when a breakdown in public order occurred.

Perry reserved his final criticism for the Dominion Police practice of hiring private investigators. The federal force had not developed its own body of experienced detectives. Some believe, he stated, that the detectives provided by such companies as the Pinkertons were the best in the world. This, he continued, had not been his experience. The country's secret service investigations should not be conducted by Americans, but by detectives who were 'Canadian in nationality and sentiment.' In concluding his memorandum Perry recommended that the best interests of the nation would be served by extending the jurisdiction of the RNWMP to all of Canada.⁷⁶

The commissioner's recommendations became the blue print for a new federal police force. After some discussion with Rowell, the president of the Privy Council, Borden took steps to implement the proposals. On 10 November 1919 the RNWMP Act was amended.⁷⁷ The legislation provided for the absorption of the Dominion Police and its duties by the western force. The Headquarters of the new body was to be

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ *Statutes of Canada*, 1919 (2nd Session), 10 Geo. v, c 28

located in Ottawa, and it would be answerable to one cabinet minister for its 'control and management.' It was to be responsible for federal law enforcement and national security throughout Canada. In keeping with its new role the RNWMP was to be renamed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. To head the force the government named Perry. As a young man he had been one of the first graduates from the Royal Military College of Canada. Later he served as an officer with the NWMP during the North-West Rebellion. Laurier had promoted him to the office of commissioner in 1900 when the Boer War gave the government an opportunity to rid itself of his troublesome predecessor. Now, at the age of sixty, he prepared to take on the task of organizing the new body when the legislation came into effect on 1 February 1920.

Canada's secret service dated back to the days of Confederation when John A. Macdonald employed a number of agents under the umbrella of the Dominion Police to ferret out the plots of the Fenians. Thereafter, the Secret Service Section, as it came to be called, saw only flurries of activity prior to 1914. With the outbreak of war the dominion was faced with the biggest security problem in its history. At issue was the possibility of espionage and sabotage by the large population, mainly in western Canada, of enemy aliens. To meet this threat the government secured passage of the War Measures Act and organized a highly decentralized intelligence network which, although co-ordinated to a degree by the Dominion Police, relied upon municipal forces, officials in a number of federal government departments, and private detective agencies to carry out its investigations. The threat from the German and Austrian settlers, however, proved to be a hollow one, and the wartime security system was never severely tested.

In the industrial dislocation of the postwar period Ottawa thought it saw a far more serious threat to its authority. Its response was the establishment of a non-civilian centralized federal police and security force. The change contrasted with developments in the same area among its closest allies, Great Britain and the United States. In Washington and London responsibility for security and intelligence was to remain divided among a variety of government departments. It also reflected the growing influence of the federal government in the life and affairs of the nation. With the War Measures Act Ottawa showed that it was prepared to assume powers unto itself when questions involving the security of the country arose. With the creation of the RCMP it gave itself a capability of enforcing that authority. These developments were to provide the means for future action in times of national emergency. As a model for the new organization, the government turned back to the country's frontier experience, selecting a semi-military police force which had been founded half a century

before to bring order to the western plains, an institution whose origins lay in the traditions of British colonial rule.

The change made the federal government the number one police power in the nation. It was not without its critics. There was concern that the RCMP would infringe upon the rights of the provinces under the BNA Act to administer justice. Prior to 1920 the enforcement of federal statutes was largely left to local police forces. As a result, Ottawa proceeded to tread softly throughout the 1920s, maintaining little more than a token federal police presence in provinces like British Columbia and Quebec. In Parliament, meanwhile, J.S. Woodsworth, who saw the RCMP as an authoritarian threat to civil liberties, would persist for years without success in trying to reverse Borden's decision. One of the most important developments, however, of the reorganization of 1920 was that it paved the way later for federal-provincial contracts for the RCMP as a provincial and municipal police force, eventually giving Canada a unique system of law enforcement in all but two of its provinces. Finally, of course, it is no exaggeration to say that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is but one more offspring of the Winnipeg General Strike.