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THE PLEA

**curb your
fanaticism**



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Don't stop learning now!

There's nothing wrong with believing in ideas. But there are limits. Sometimes, ideas become singular truths. And singular truths become indisputable doctrines. When people tip into a world of excessive and uncritical faith, they tip into a world of fanaticism.

What does it mean to say that someone is a fanatic? Are all fanatics necessarily bad? Are we at risk of becoming fanatics ourselves? What can happen if fanatics get their hands on the levers of power?

This issue of *The PLEA* asks these questions, illustrated by a selection of fanatical movements from the 20th century. Ideal for most any reader, *Curb Your Fanaticism* fulfills several objectives in Saskatchewan's Social Studies 30 curriculum.

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COVER Kingston, Ontario Ku Klux Klan meeting, July 31st 1927. Note the maple leaf badge on the regalia.
Library and Archives Canada, Item ID #3193371

What is Fanaticism?

As Winston Churchill quipped, “A fanatic is one who can’t change his mind and won’t change the subject.”

The word **fanatic** is everywhere. Sports fanatics. Video game fanatics. Political fanatics. Religious fanatics. With so many uses for the word, what exactly does it mean?

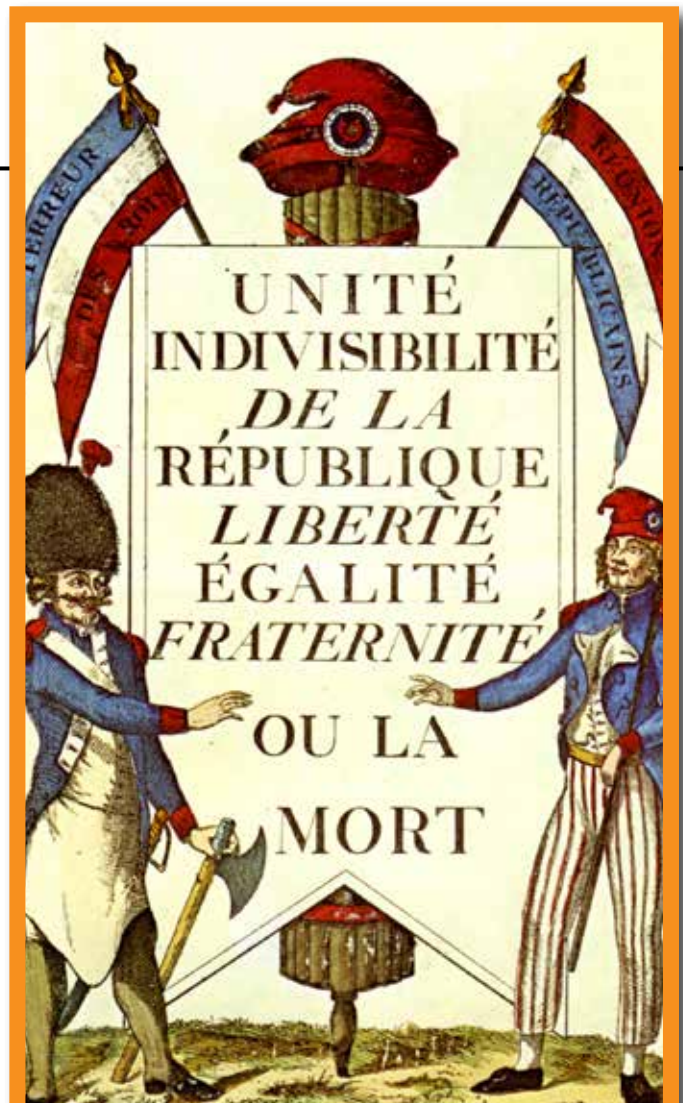
The *Oxford English Dictionary* can help. It provides several senses of the word fanatic. None are flattering. But all are consistent with what we know about fanaticism.

Out of the gate, *OED* tells us that fanatics are frenzied. In fact, they may even be possessed: “Of an action or speech: Such as might result from possession by a deity or demon; frantic, furious. Of a person: Frenzied, mad.” Fanatics behave so crazily, we’re warned, it’s like they’ve been overtaken by a supernatural force.

And it only gets worse.

OED goes on to say that fanatics are not reasonable. Rather, they are “characterized, influenced, or prompted by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm, esp. in religious matters.” *OED* does add that sometimes fanatics are visionaries, but cautions that in those rare moments when a fanatic is onto something, their excessive enthusiasm overrides their ability to reason.

On the whole, the *OED* tells us that fanatics are unreasonable extremists plagued by two character flaws. Their views are extreme, and they are unwilling to consider facts that don’t square with their beliefs. These hardly are traits we would like to see in our friends, family, and our community.



The French Revolution originally called for “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, or Death.” Revolutionaries dropped “or Death” after the Reign of Terror. †

Wrong and Mistaken?

The general idea that fanatics are unreasonable extremists is sometimes traced back to Edmund Burke. Burke was an 18th-century Irish statesman. His opposition to fanaticism was brought out by the violence and chaos of the French Revolution.

Burke believed that when change happened thoughtfully, guided by laws, traditions, and people’s lived experiences, the change would be better for everyone.

To voice his opposition to the French Revolution, Burke wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. *Reflections* painted France’s revolutionaries as fanatics. As he put it, the revolutionaries had “a certain inward fanatical assurance and illumination upon all sub-

jects.” Because France’s hardline revolutionaries thought that they were right—and everyone else was wrong—Burke said that they were no better than the hardline French monarchists that they were trying to overthrow.

WHEN FANATICS INTERFERE WITH PEOPLE’S RIGHTS, PAINT FELLOW MEMBERS OF SOCIETY AS “OTHERS,” OR PROPOSE OR ACTUALLY HARM PEOPLE, WE HAVE REASON TO WORRY

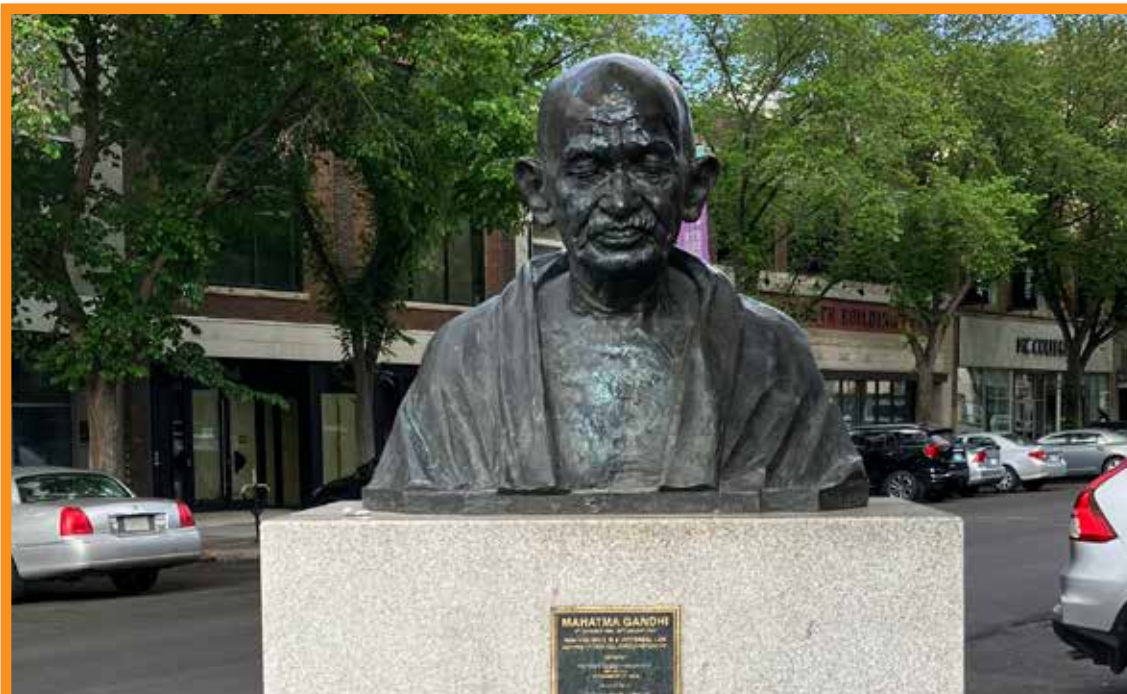
To think about this differently, the revolutionaries thought that most everything in France needed to change, and change right away. The monarchists thought that most everything in France was fine just the way it was, so no change was needed. Neither side was entirely right.

The fact of the matter is that the French Revolution was a complex historical event. Liberal societies such as ours owe the French Revolution a debt of gratitude. It pushed against a corrupt ruling class. And it demanded society be

based on ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Many of the “radical” ideals advanced by the French Revolution are now cornerstones of liberal democracy. Yet some aspects of the revolution—such as the Reign of Terror where 16,000 people were killed, or the creation of Temples of Reason for people to worship reason—were horrifying and absurd.

The Good and the Bad

Because Burke portrayed France’s revolutionaries as fanatics—and many of them were—philosopher Alberto Toscano has charged Burke with “set[ting] the template for treating all advocates of radical equality as dangerous fanatics.” This is a fair point. Many radical equality movements that followed the French Revolution—such as slavery abolitionists, labour organisers, suffragettes, and peace activists—were painted by their opponents as fanatical. Yet these “fanatics” were on the right side of history. They



Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). The British-trained lawyer used *ahimsa*—the Indian concept of not harming living things—to help guide India’s independence movement. However, his unwavering belief that *ahimsa* was the “only true force in life” led some of his critics to call him a fanatic. †

helped establish many of today's liberal democratic norms.

This is why we should carefully use the word fanatic. Not all fanatics are bad. In fact, many people who have been called "fanatics" have helped move society forward. If we carelessly call everyone who we don't agree with a fanatic, we may fail to learn from them. And we may further polarise society. Values and beliefs should be thoughtfully considered before passing judgment.

This understood, not all ideas are good. History is littered with objectively terrible fanatical movements. Think of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. Their fanatical drive for a "pure" society ended in genocide and war. The same goes for Joseph Stalin and the Russian Bolsheviks. Stalin's fanatical quest to achieve communism left 20 million dead.

This is why some fanatical movements are more worrisome

than others. There's nothing wrong with, say, being fanatical about a sports team. Such fanaticism is often in good fun. Even radical political or social movements often have merits. So long as supporters keep their enthusiasm in check, use reason, and respect democratic rules, we can consider them a healthy—if at times uncomfortable—part of society.

But there are times to be concerned. When fanatics interfere with people's rights, paint fellow members of society as "others," or propose or actually harm people, we have reason to worry.

Let's think more about the fanatics that we should concern ourselves with. The coming pages look at some fanatical movements of the 20th century. As you read, ask yourself what would make these movements appealing? Why would otherwise decent people come to support such terrible things? And what could have been done to stop them?

TALK IT OUT

1. Canadians are free to believe in and promote ideas. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees fundamental freedoms, including:
 - freedom of conscience and religion;
 - freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression;
 - freedom of peaceful assembly; and
 - freedom of association.However, *Charter* freedoms may be reasonably limited if to do so is "demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society."
 - a) Can you think of circumstances where it is necessary to limit some freedoms? Why must we approach such limits with great caution?
 - b) Can laws alone stop a person from believing in something?
2. Our opinions matter. What ways can we express our opinions respectfully?

WHAT'S THE APPEAL?

What attracts people to fanatical movements? Following World War II, Eric Hoffer asked this question.

Hoffer found that fanatical movements attract followers by imitating religions. It's a way to give people a meaning in life. As he pointed out with the Nazis and the Bolsheviks:

The hammer and sickle and the swastika are in a class with the cross. The ceremonial of their parades is as the ceremonial of a religious procession. They have articles of faith, saints, martyrs and holy sepulchers.

Ceremonies and symbols provide a sense of identity. They appeal to our human desire to belong. Articles of faith provide firm beliefs. They give purpose to people's lives. And "holy people" of a movement provide heroes to worship. They give people role models to aspire to.

Fanatical leaders use these techniques for manipulation and control. A fanatical movement, after all, cannot be "wrong." It will try to take away reason and replace it with blind faith.

fanatical

Why do some fanatics turn violent? Terrorism researchers Bart Schuurman and Max Taylor found three common features of violent fanatical movements. They...

- 1) predicted an imminent apocalyptic disaster**
- 2) insisted that there is no alternative and no space for debating alternatives**
- 3) justified militant behaviour**

If a movement insists that something terrible is about to happen, if it does not allow its followers to openly question the movement, and/or if it starts to explain away violence, it may become violent.

Consider the following fanatical movements that turned violent. Which of these above features did the movement have?

The Manson Family

In the late 1960s a doomsday cult formed around Charles Manson. Manson, who had a history of mental illness and drug misuse, began preaching an anti-establishment doctrine. To find followers, he would target social outcasts and young middle-class women.

Soon his cult, called The Manson Family, had about 100 members.

The “Family” set up a commune at a disused Californian ranch. Manson became increasingly deranged, and preached of a coming race war. He based his doomsday prophecy on a bizarre interpretation of *The White Album* by the Beatles.

In 1969, Manson arranged for the murder of several people, including actress Sharon Tate, for reasons that are still unknown. The cult largely disbanded once Manson and some of the Family were charged, tried, and imprisoned for the murders. However, some family members never renounced their radical beliefs.



Manson family member Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme being placed in a police car after pointing a loaded gun at American President Gerald Ford, 1975. §

violence



American Klan members burn a cross in opposition to progressive presidential candidate Henry Wallace, 1948. Ⓞ

The Ku Klux Klan

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is probably North America's most notorious white supremacist group. Its first wave, from 1865-1871, was a Confederate backlash to rights gained by Black Americans following the Civil War. It peaked in a second wave, from 1915 to the early 1930s, with over 4 million members. A smaller, determined resurgence took root in the 1960s, again as a backlash to Black rights. Today, its membership is estimated at perhaps 6000 people.

Because the Klan is decentralised, it is difficult to sum up their beliefs. That said, they are generally motivated by a misguided belief that minority rights are destroying society. Their ceremonies are ritualistic, featuring wardrobes, mantras, and powerful imagery.

Thousands of horrific crimes and murders have been committed by the KKK, most often targeting Black people. But it also has taken aim at sexual minorities, Indigenous people, Asians, Jews, Catholics, and many others.

Front de libération du Québec

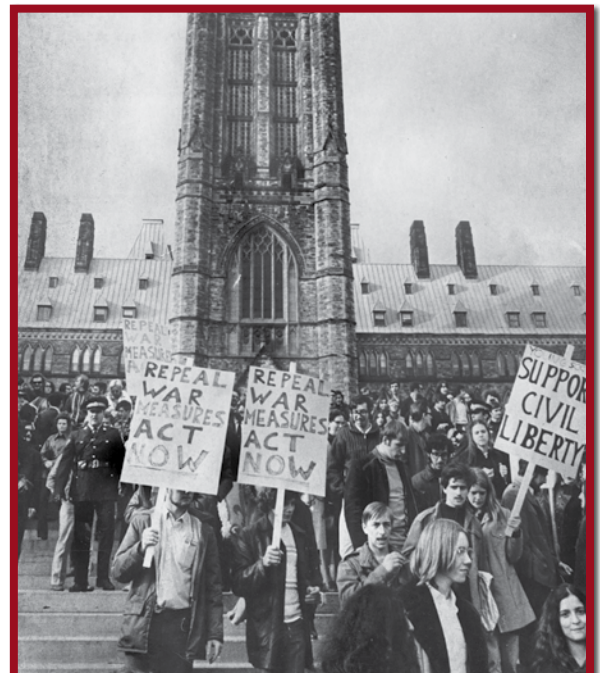
In 1963, three militant Quebec nationalists founded the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ). Inspired by Communist and anti-colonialist movements, particularly in Cuba and Algeria, the FLQ called for an independent, socialist Quebec through armed revolution.

By 1970, the FLQ committed 200 bombings and robberies, and even hijacked a plane. Nine people died and dozens were injured. Then that October, FLQ cells kidnapped British diplomat James Cross, and Quebec cabinet minister Pierre Laporte.

In response, the federal government invoked the *War Measures Act*, a law that temporarily suspended many civil liberties. The following day, Pierre Laporte was found dead in the trunk of a car.

Police performed almost 3000 searches without a warrant, and arrested and detained nearly 500 people. Of these 500, only 62 were charged and 18 convicted of a crime.

Cross was eventually released through negotiations, and Laporte's four kidnapers were caught, tried, and imprisoned. The FLQ, which had less than 40 members in 1970, soon disbanded.



Demonstrators on Parliament Hill protesting the invocation of the *War Measures Act*, October 18th, 1970.]

Broadcasting Bigotry

A radio show meant to fight bigotry mutates into a fascist movement.

Father Charles E. Coughlin dreamed of building a great church. In 1926, the Bishop of Detroit gave Coughlin the opportunity. He assigned him to the Shrine of the Little Flower.

Father Coughlin arrived to a warm welcome from the small suburban congregation. A much hotter welcome came from the Ku Klux Klan, who burned a cross on the church yards. Coughlin used this act of hate to convince WJR radio to give him a weekly show. After all, a little church fighting bigotry would make for great radio.

Coughlin put his remarkable oratory skills to work, and donations poured in from across the WJR listening area. He used the donations to buy airtime on other stations. The more airtime he bought, the more money flowed in. By the 1930s, Coughlin's radio ministry expanded to nearly 60 stations across America. His show was a Sunday staple for 30 million listeners.

Part of Coughlin's appeal was his ability to enrage listeners. The angrier he made them, the more they listened. Preaching as the Great Depression set in, he'd make reasonable demands—such as debt relief or worker's rights—and then tack on a torrent of hate, usually targeting politicians.

Social Justice
NATIONAL WEEKLY
Founded 1936 by Father Coughlin
Royal Oak, Michigan June 5, 1939 Subscription: Three Dollars Per Year 10c

BOYCOTT FORCES 'WINS' TO CANCEL FR. COUGHLIN

BLAME FOR ACTION PUT ON JEWISH-CONTROLLED ADVERTISING PRESSURE

NEW YORK, N. Y.—Atheistic forces once more score against Christianity and Americanism in New York City. Because of a threatened advertising boycott, presumably, Radio Station WINS, owned by the Hearst interests, has cancelled the Sunday broadcasts of Father Coughlin.

Father Coughlin has been thrown off the air—not for what he said over Station WINS; not because the executive of WINS found fault with Father Coughlin, but because WINS trembled before the pressure groups of radicals who hate Father Coughlin.

This is a sorry day for the United States. Asked for an explanation, the modern Pontius Pilates simply washed their hands of the incident by saying: Free speech for the radical press.

Social Justice, June 5th, 1939. Coughlin and his fanatics accused Jews of everything from controlling the banks to starting World War II. β

In 1934, Coughlin turned his show into a political movement: the National Union for Social Justice. Cleverly named—who would say that social justice is bad?—he promoted 16 principles, reminiscent of Italy's fascist constitution. Local chapters popped up across America, and by 1936 he was ready to contest the presidential election. A North Dakota congressman was declared

his Union Party's candidate, but Coughlin was in charge.

Many feared that Coughlin was trying to create a dictatorship. Now being escorted by a paramilitary, he'd scare people into believing America was on the brink of communism, demand that Jews proclaim loyalty to his principles, and threaten "bullets over ballots" if

he lost the election. At the national party convention, a lone delegate warned 10,000 Coughlin supporters about the emerging mob psychology. The crowd chased him out.

Thankfully, Coughlin's on-air popularity and rabid following didn't translate into electoral success. He only received 2% of the vote. In fact, a later opinion poll said 75% of his listeners disagreed with him.

The loss spiralled Coughlin into deeper fanaticism. When he started to preach that Jews were to blame for their Nazi persecution, several radio stations dropped him. In response, Coughlin

FILLED WITH HATE TOWARDS JEWS, JAPANESE-AMERICANS, AND BRITAIN, IT SOLD A MILLION COPIES A WEEK

followers staged protests outside the stations. Nevertheless, radio wasn't his only outlet. He also founded *Social Justice* magazine. Filled with hate towards Jews, Japanese-Americans, and Britain, it sold a million copies a week.

In 1938, Coughlin fanatics independently formed The Christian Front, a violent antisemitic group. Coughlin refused to condemn them. In 1940, 17 Fronters were put on trial for a plot to overthrow the government. They were acquitted, but the trial led to the Front's disintegration.

By 1940, the National Association of Broadcasters—the trade

association of America's radio stations—had enough of Coughlin's runaway preaching. They updated their Code of Standards so that he would be forced off the air. Around the same time, the Postal Service banned *Social Justice* from the mail, saying it violated the *Espionage Act*. Coughlin was still free to preach his terrible ideas, but his ability to spread them was being curtailed. Meanwhile, the government launched investigations into him with cooperation from his church superior.

With no radio show, no magazine, and no church support, Coughlin simply faded into obscurity. He returned to preaching at the Shrine of the Little Flower. Coughlin retired in 1966 and died in 1979, never having renounced his crusade.

REGULATING HATE

America's governmental radio broadcasting regulator—the Federal Communications Commission—ignored Father Coughlin. They believed their responsibility was to regulate technical aspects of the new medium. Radio stations were left to self-regulate content. This is how Coughlin stayed on the air until 1940, when the National Association of Broadcasters banned him.

For the Catholic Church, Coughlin posed a complex problem. The Vatican considered him a local issue, but the only American Catholic with the power to remove him—the Bishop of Detroit—supported Coughlin. When prominent Catholics spoke out against Coughlin, his fanatics unleashed a torrent of hate. It was only when the Bishop of Detroit died in 1937 that the Church reeled Coughlin in. The new Bishop censored him, cooperated with federal investigators, and ultimately—although perhaps belatedly—ordered him to stop all national politicking in 1942.

TALK IT OUT

1. Father Coughlin did not view his opponents as people with different ideas. He viewed them as enemies. Why may this perspective be a problem?
2. Historian Charles Tull suggested that Coughlin's support of fascist Italy was related to his strong Irish-Catholic identity. Coughlin was "so obsessed with hatred of Great Britain that he would side with virtually any cause the British opposed." How can group identity sometimes cloud our better judgment?

Saskatchewan's Klan Years

Like a prairie fire, the KKK burned through the province in the late 1920s.

During the 1910s, the Ku Klux Klan was making a comeback in America. In 1921, recruiters crossed the border. Canada was not immune to its advocacy for White Protestants above all others. Soon, local lodges called Klaverns popped up from the Maritimes to British Columbia.

One Indiana Klansman, Pat Emmons, set his eyes on Saskatchewan. With immigration changing the province's British-Protestant make-up, in late 1926 Emmons caught a train to Moose Jaw and started recruiting.

By 1927, Emmons had sold some 25,000 memberships. The province's Klan was linked to the American organisation, but the local members soon demanded local control. In response, Emmons simply vanished with all the Saskatchewan Klan's money.

Saskatchewan's Klan was now penniless. But it was not defeated. Members regrouped, severed all ties with the American Klan, ditched the white robes, disavowed violence and lynching, and set out to maintain a "British" Saskatchewan.

The Klan's view of a "British" Saskatchewan was unfortunate,

Ku Klux Klan Rapped By Premier Gardiner In Speech At Dysart

Repeats Legislature Speech And Declares His
Statements Have Been Proved To The Hilt:
Scores Conservative Activities

DYSART, June 1—"Every word which I uttered on the floor of the House has been said tonight and every word has been proven to the hilt," declared Premier J. G. Gardiner in the course of an address here tonight, in discussing his speech at the legislature on the Ku Klux Klan. Political activity on the part of the Klan in which Conservatives were interested was charged by the premier, who repeated the name of Dr. J. T. McAnderson, the leader of the Conservative party, in this connection. Other topics discussed by the premier were the teaching

Saskatoon *Phoenix*, June 2nd, 1928. Premier Gardiner toured the province to denounce the Klan. *p*

to say the least. They took the nonsensical position that minorities should have the same rights as everyone else yet they also should be segregated from the rest of society. They opposed non-British immigration. They created a "culture war" against Catholic schools. And they were hostile to Asians and the few Blacks in the province.

Curiously, the Klan had no interest in Indigenous people. This may be due in part to the era's segregationist reserve system, with Indian Agents able to limit Indigenous peoples' mobility.

From its arrival, Saskatchewan's premier Jimmy Gardiner fiercely opposed the Klan. Like the KKK,

Gardiner favoured a “British” Saskatchewan, though he argued that the Klan’s intolerance was un-British. By contrast, his Liberal government was warm to minorities and immigration, so long as they were European minorities. Sadly, white supremacy was common in the 1920s.

Gardiner’s fight against the Klan became central to the looming provincial election. The Liberals had been in power since the province’s founding. With the opposition parties weak and divided, people saw the Klan as a vehicle to oust a tired government.

Klan rallies filled community halls and stirred up political firestorms, with entertaining and sometimes vulgar speakers going after the “elite.”

The Conservatives and the Klan soon cozied up. They had no formal arrangement, but the Conservatives went into the June 1929 election with Klan support. Add to that, the Conservatives formed non-compete agreements with the Progressive Party and Independent candidates. In 47 constituencies, opposition to the Liberals was united behind one candidate.

Klan issues such as immigration and Catholic schools dominated the campaign, and it worked. On election day, Conservatives and their allies took enough seats to form a government. The new government enacted some policies to please the Klan, such as restrictions on Catholic schools.

**BY 1927,
EMMONS
HAD SOLD
SOME 25,000
MEMBERSHIPS**

Despite having allies in government, Saskatchewan’s Klan soon fizzled out. Oddly, having allies in power was one reason for the Klan’s demise. The Klan was largely built around

opposing people in power. With the new government Klan-friendly, who was there to now oppose? Even more devastating to the Klan’s cause was the Great Depression. It led to a halt on immigration, taking away a major critique of the Klan. Further, as the land dried up, people couldn’t afford to eat let alone pay for Klan memberships.

By 1931, the Klan no longer served a purpose. So as quickly as the Klan rose in Saskatchewan, it largely vanished.

KLAN VICTIMHOOD?

Premier Gardiner may have overplayed his attacks on the Ku Klux Klan. He would draw equivalencies between the American and the Saskatchewan Klan, claiming Saskatchewan’s Klan endorsed violence and wore white hoods.

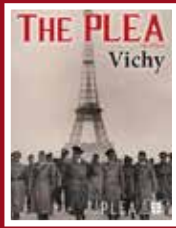
After 1928, Saskatchewan’s Klan continued to engage in cross burnings and acts of bigotry. However, they did not wear hoods, did not undertake lynchings, and swore to obey the law.

Gardiner’s hyperbolic accusations gave the Klan a boost. It allowed the Klan to portray themselves as victims. His vigorous critique also hardened social divisions along religious lines, leading some non-British Protestants to support the Klan.

TALK IT OUT

1. In the 1920s, many of the KKK’s views were socially acceptable. Today, all people by and large reject such views as fanatical.
 - a) What does this say about the progress of society?
 - b) Is progress a steady march forward? Can society slip backwards?
 - c) Why does society need laws to protect minorities from discrimination?
2. In a letter to a Klan supporter, Jimmy Gardiner wrote that “People are not going to be made more moral by having a doctrine of hatred and intolerance preached among them.” Comment.

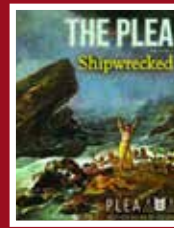
Sources and Resources



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What can happen when fanatics take over a country?

Free class sets available.



SHIPWRECKED

How can we create a kinder society?

Free class sets available.

Manage your subscription to *The PLEA* at teachers.plea.org

Here's a few resources that helped inform this issue of *The PLEA*. Find them at your public library.

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"tolerance, openness, and, most important, a sense of humor... is the greatest enemy of fanaticism"

- Neil Postman, *The End of Education*

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