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CANADA AT THE CROSSROADS

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and Jeff Keshen

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Accommodating the New West

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When I was a boy in the 1950s, growing up in Ottawa, Illinois, I was a dedicated baseball fan. Life was very simple then. The American and National leagues each had eight teams, located in the East and Midwest. No city west of the Mississippi River or south of the Mason-Dixon line had a major league team. I can still remember how strange it seemed when in 1958, around my fourteenth birthday, the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles and the New York Giants to San Francisco.

What happened? Baseball grew up to match the population distribution of the United States. I grew up to understand that the United States was a big country with baseball fans and players everywhere. Now the question is, will Canadian politics ever grow up?

The United States in the second half of the twentieth century has seen a remarkable migration of people and investment from the North and East to the West and South, from the 'rust belt' to the 'sun belt'. The trend in Canada is equally obvious but a little harder to characterize geographically, with steady growth in Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia and relative decline in all other provinces.

Politics in the United States has reflected demographic and economic trends in that country. Since 1964, every president who has won an election has come from the West or South. California has had two (Nixon and

Reagan), as has Texas (Johnson and Bush). Georgia and Arkansas have each had one (Carter and Clinton).

The contrast with Canada is remarkable. Since 1968, the only successful Prime Ministers have come from Quebec (Trudeau, Mulroney, Chrétien). Alberta's Joe Clark formed a minority government after the election of June 1979, but he lasted only ten months in power. John Turner and Kim Campbell were in office only briefly and neither won an election. Quebec's dominance of the Prime Minister's office seems likely to continue for some time because Jean Chrétien wants to serve into the next millennium and his most likely successor is Paul Martin, who represents a Montreal riding.

If the American political system has conferred leadership on Democrats and Republicans from expanding, dynamic regions, why has the Canadian system conferred leadership on Liberals (and one Conservative) from a declining province? The answer is the perceived threat of Quebec separatism. Since the 1965 publication of Daniel Johnson's *Egalité ou Indépendance*, the big question has been, who can keep the country together?

Bilingualism was Canada's first great response to the separatist threat. The 1969 *Official Languages Act* does not require the leaders of political parties to be bilingual, but it certainly reinforces that expectation.

Among Canadian prime ministers prior to Pierre Trudeau, only Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Louis St-Laurent were bilingual; since Trudeau, all prime ministers have been able to get along in both English and French.

However, anglophone aspirants for 24 Sussex Drive who overcome the bilingualism hurdle, as Joe Clark did, will find an even higher obstacle in their path — the extraordinary level of bloc voting in Quebec. Federal voting behaviour in Quebec can be summarized in two rules. The first is simple: anglophones and allophones always vote Liberal. The second is a little more complicated: francophones vote only for parties headed by a Quebec leader. When there is only one leader from Quebec, the result is an avalanche of francophone seats for that leader's party (the Liberals in 1968 through 1980; the Conservatives in 1984 and 1988). If there are two (1993) or three (1997) leaders from Quebec, the francophone vote will be more divided. In all cases however, it is virtually impossible for a leader from outside Quebec, bilingual or not, to carry any significant number of seats in the province, except for the bedrock anglo/allo ridings that John Turner's Liberals won in 1984 and 1988. Having seventy-five seats off limits is a huge barrier for any would-be prime minister from outside Quebec.

These two objective factors give rise to a certain dynamic in public opinion. Political commentators, understanding the expectation of bilingualism and the strength of bloc voting in Quebec, use these criteria to assess candidates for prime minister. Thus the pundits never thought seriously of John Crosbie as Conservative leader, or of Preston Manning as prime minister.

Of course, the predominance of Quebec has excluded from the highest office politicians from other regions of Canada, not just from the West. However, the exclusion is more keenly resented in the West. During this period of time, Alberta and British Columbia have grown steadily in wealth and

population and feel they have some claim to political leadership. Moreover, Ontario and the Atlantic provinces are much closer to, indeed share land and sea boundaries with, Quebec. The separation of Quebec would bring them much greater loss, or at least disruption, than it would to the West. Hence their voters seem more willing to accept it as natural that the prime minister should always be from Quebec and that placating Quebec is the chief task of politics.

When the Liberals have been in power, members from the West have been a marginal force in caucus and cabinet, but that was not true during the Mulroney years. From 1984 through 1993, there was a large bloc of Western MPs in the Conservative caucus, while Joe Clark, Don Mazankowski, Harvey André, Jake Epp, and Pat Carney were important figures in the cabinet. And prime minister Mulroney did take some steps to favour the West, such as moving the National Energy Board to Calgary and locating the immigration-processing office in Vegreville, Alberta.

The West's overall experience of the Mulroney years however, was that numerical strength in caucus and cabinet was not enough to override the political interests of a prime minister from Quebec. The only really major advantages the West got from the nine years of the Mulroney government were an end to the National Energy Program and free trade with the United States which, not coincidentally, was also popular in Quebec. From the West's perspective, the negative side of the ledger was far longer, including items such as: intensification of official bilingualism; privatization of Air Canada with a large endowment so that it could make war upon Canadian Airlines; selective reductions in transfer payments to the 'have' provinces of Alberta and British Columbia; failure to curb deficit spending and the running up of debts weighing more heavily on Alberta and British Columbia because they contribute a disproportionate share of tax revenue to federal

coffers; obsession with the constitutional demands of Quebec; and the award of the CF-18 maintenance contract to a Montreal-based consortium 'in the national interest', even though the Winnipeg-based bid was adjudged cheaper and technically superior by the expert reviewers.¹

The net result of the Mulroney years was to complete the alienation of Western voters from the two founding parties of Canada, the Conservatives and the Liberals. This is an old story in the West, beginning with the breakthrough of the Progressives in the 1921 election, and the appearance of Social Credit and the CCF in the election of 1935. For decades, many voters in the West have felt that the old parties did not represent their true interests. The 1980s and 1990s saw another round of experimentation with new parties, including the Confederation of Regions, Christian Heritage, Mel Hurtig's National Party, and Preston Manning's Reform Party, the latter being the one to emerge as the new champion of Western voters.

There is an old, slightly vulgar expression that I will allow myself to use in this province [Ontario] where Howard Stern is on the airwaves five days a week. Some say that 'it is better to be inside the circle p***ing out than outside the circle p***ing in.' But Western voters have clearly decided that they want to be outside the circle and they are p***ing in with a vengeance. In the 1997 election, a majority of voters in three of the four Western provinces voted either for Reform or the NDP — parties that have never formed a federal government and probably never will (see Table 1). Ironically, they seem

to be getting better results by being outside the circle than they ever got by being inside.

The CCF/NDP showed long ago that citizens can get political results by voting for an opposition rather than for a government. The Canadian welfare state owes its existence largely to decades of unremitting pressure from the NDP, which used its position as an opposition party — never even the official opposition — to popularize its brand of interventionist and redistributive politics. I think the New Democrats were headed in the wrong direction but I admire their political success and regard it as a model for the Reform Party to follow.

Western voters supporting the Reform Party have got a remarkable amount for their money in the 1990s. To mention only a few highlights in more or less chronological order:

- the introduction of the constitutional referendum procedure which allowed the Charlottetown Accord to be defeated;
- a return to balanced budgets;
- the end of the Canada Assistance Program, thus allowing more provincial control over welfare;
- an emphasis on the rule of law in dealing with Quebec separatism, making secession less likely to occur and more manageable if it does; and
- small and tentative tax cuts, with the promise of more to come.

Like many other ideologically conservative Western voters, I faithfully supported the Progressive Conservative Party under Bob Stanfield, Joe Clark, and Brian Mulroney. But in 1990 I realized that the socialist hordes had been right all along in saying that the

Table 1¹: Reform and NDP Vote in the Western Provinces, 1997

Province	Reform %	NDP %	Total %
British Columbia	43.0	18.2	61.2
Alberta	54.7	5.8	60.5
Saskatchewan	36.0	30.9	66.9
Manitoba	23.7	23.2	46.9

interests of the West were poorly served by supporting the Liberals or the Conservatives. With many more seats at stake in the East, the leaders of the traditional parties are always tempted to buy votes by redistributing the wealth generated by the dynamic Western economy. Western MPs inside the government party tend to become spokesmen for government policy, explaining it to those benighted voters who have trouble understanding the higher logic of the 'national interest'. In the vernacular of Western protest, they end up 'representing Ottawa to us' instead of 'representing us to Ottawa'.

The West does better in the present political configuration because most, but not all, of its MPs are Reformers. It is fortunate that the governing party holds a narrow majority overall and has some MPs in every Western province. This means that the Liberals must think very carefully before ignoring or offending Western sentiment. Liberals who represent Western ridings know that their seats are far from safe and the party leadership knows that without those seats there might not be a Liberal majority next time. In contrast, the Mulroney government, with its large majorities and large Western representation, gave in to the temptation of taking the West for granted.

This is a delicate balancing act, to be sure. Things could get worse for the West if an election produced a government with no support in the West and no hope of gaining any. The Liberal governments of the Trudeau era could afford to pillage the West because, with only one or two Western caucus members, they had nothing to lose and nothing to gain. Nothing to lose, because they were already down to virtually no Western members; nothing to gain because they were so unpopular that they could not visualize winning seats no matter what they did. It would thus not be in the interest of the West for the Reform Party to win too many Western seats in the next election. It is more advantageous for the West if the government retains the fear

of losing more seats and the hope of winning some back.

But if things could get worse, they could also get better. It is not impossible that an election could produce a minority government that would have to rely on the Reform Party's support in order to remain in office. Such a configuration could allow Reform to extract major concessions, as the Progressives and the NDP did in past situations of minority government.

There is also another possibility, as yet untried in Canadian federal politics. At some stage, it may become possible for the Reform Party (or some other Western party) to enter into a governing coalition with the Progressive Conservatives (or some other mainly Eastern party).³ This would be not a merger but a cooperative alliance of parties retaining their separate identities as coalition partners. In such an arrangement, the Western party would have to make many compromises and could not achieve all its goals; but by retaining the power to dissolve the alliance it might avoid the danger that befell Western MPs in the Mulroney era, of becoming apologists for policies inimical to Western interests.

Who knows whether such an alliance will ever come to pass? The obvious partners at the moment are the Progressive Conservatives and the Reform Party, whose combined popular vote in the 1997 federal election was equal to that of the Liberals; and the Reform Party has issued an invitation to the Conservatives to join in a so-called 'United Alternative.' But Joe Clark, the old (and new) leader of the PCs, still believes that he can destroy Reform and go on to defeat the Liberals. Perhaps another ten years of the one-party system will teach him better.

Whether or not such an alliance is ever created, the fragmentation of the Canadian party system is a long-term development that will not easily be reversed. For the foreseeable future, the West is likely to be represented by parties that are mainly Western in fact, if not in theory. Even if the Reform Party was to

disintegrate, a Western successor would likely arise. From a systemic point of view, this seems to be the West's response to exclusion from the exercise of power at the highest level. Shut out of the prime ministership and reduced to playing a subordinate role in the traditional governing parties, the West has found it can exercise more influence by creating its own political vehicles. This does not exactly amount to 'accommodating the West', but it seems to be the best that can be done under the circumstances.

NOTES

1. On the importance of the CF-18 affair to the founding of the Reform Party, see Preston Manning, *The New Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1992), 126-127.
2. Alan Frizzell and Jon H. Pammett, eds., *The Canadian General Election of 1997* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1997), 253.
3. Stephen Harper and Tom Flanagan, 'Our Benign Dictatorship,' *The Next City* (January 1997), 35-40, 54-57; Tom Flanagan and Stephen Harper, 'Conservative Politics in Canada: Past, Present, and Future,' in William Gardner, ed., *After Liberalism* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998), 168-192.