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*From Riel
to Reform:
Understanding
Western Canada*

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Working paper of the Fourth Annual Seagram Lecture,
presented on October 26, 1999

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The most interesting aspect of politics in western Canada is its tendency to generate new political parties. This has been going on for over a century and shows no signs of stopping, as illustrated by the success of the Saskatchewan Party in that province's September election. Formed only in 1998, the Saskatchewan Party won 25 seats as compared to 29 for the New Democrats, thus reducing Roy Romanow's party to the expedient of forming a coalition with the Liberals. Indeed, the Saskatchewan Party got more popular votes than the NDP.

The NDP is the heir of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, founded in Calgary in 1932. The CCF/NDP has always aspired to be a national party, but it still bears the marks of its western origins. After the recent Manitoba election, the NDP now governs three of the four western provinces. And yet, in the 1997 federal election, voters in the same region filled 60 of their 90 seats in the House of Commons with members of the Reform Party, which stands at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from the NDP. What can one make of this except to say that, while western voters may swing either left or right, they like to support parties rooted in their own region?

Without claiming to be complete, *Table 1* lists some of the most important parties founded in western Canada. Several, such as the CCF, Social Credit, and Reform, have also operated outside the West; but all were founded in the West and had their main

base of support in that region. The parties are designated F, P, or F+P, depending on whether they were purely federal, purely provincial, or operated at both levels. Some of the dates may be debatable because the founding of a political party is not always a clear-cut event. The list would be considerably longer if it included the instances in which a Liberal or Conservative party was reborn after a long period of dormancy in one province or another.

1905	Provincial Rights Party	P
1916	Non-Partisan League	P
1919	Progressives (including United Farmers' parties)	F+P
1932	Co-operative Commonwealth Federation	F+P
1935	Social Credit	F+P
1952	Social Credit Party of British Columbia	P
1980	Western Canada Concept	F+P
1980	Western Canada Federation	F+P
1983	Confederation of Regions	F+P
1987	Reform Party of Canada	F
1989	Reform Party of British Columbia	P
1992	National Party	F
1997	Saskatchewan Party	P

Not surprisingly, Quebec, the other region of Canada which many voters are fundamentally dissatisfied with the terms of Confederation, has demonstrated a similar proclivity for creating new political parties, as shown in *Table 2*. Again, the list does not claim to be complete but only to identify some of the most important cases.

1885	Parti National	P
1911	Nationalist League (as political party)	F
1934	Action Libérale Nationale	P
1935	Union Nationale	P
1939	Union des Electeurs	F+P
1942	Bloc Populaire Canadien	F+P
1957	Ralliement des Créditistes	F
1968	Parti Québécois	P
1970	Ralliement Créditiste du Québec	P
1989	Equality Party	P
1990	Bloc Québécois	F
1994	Action Démocratique du Québec	P

The parallelism between Quebec and the West is nicely illustrated by the fact that in 1993 a new party from Quebec – the Bloc Québécois – was elected the Official Opposition in the House of Commons and was then replaced in that role in 1997 by a new party from the West – the Reform Party of Canada. Meanwhile the Liberals continue to govern through their overwhelming domination of Ontario. The federal politics of the 1990s are an exaggerated version of a tableau that has often reappeared in modern Canadian history, in which political forces based in Ontario fight off challenges arising from Quebec and/or the West. Attempts to bring Quebec and the West into coalition with each other met with only infrequent and short-lived success under Robert Borden (1911-17), John Diefenbaker (1958-62), and Brian Mulroney (1984-93).

The repeated emergence of new parties in the West is the most obvious manifestation of the special character of politics in that region of Canada. Historians and political scientists have identified three major features of western politics that seem to perpetuate themselves across the generations in the various new parties as they arise. I would describe these three characteristics as suspicion of external control, rejection of Canada's federal parliamentary system, and a thirst for fundamental solutions. It would take me too far afield to make the case today, but I believe that similar

characteristics tend to appear in Quebec's unique political parties, except that in Quebec nationalism plays the role that populism plays in western Canada. Let me expand on these three characteristics as they apply to western politics and parties, particularly the Reform Party of Canada, with which I happen to have some personal familiarity.

Suspicion of External Control

The course of western history has indelibly etched suspicion of external control into the western psyche. The story begins with the grant in 1670 by King Charles II to the Hudson's Bay Company of a trading monopoly in, and ownership of, all the lands drained by all the rivers flowing into Hudson Bay. The presence of fur traders naturally gave rise to a mixed-race population, now known as the Metis, who grew to resent the Company's control. Encouraged by traders from the Northwest company, they resisted Lord Selkirk's settlement scheme, leading to the tragic Seven Oaks Massacre of 1817; and they broke the Company's trading monopoly in the 1840s by forcibly insisting on their right to sell furs and buffalo robes to American buyers. In 1869, led by Louis Riel, they resisted transfer to Canadian jurisdiction until their concerns about land titles and local self-government received consideration.

The federal government, although it partially granted Riel's demand for immediate provincial status, retained control of public lands and natural resources, thus making Manitoba a second-class province dependent on federal subsidies to carry on its government. Federal control of lands in the North-West, though not as inefficient as often depicted, set the stage for Riel's second rebellion in 1885. The federal government then extended the policy of federal ownership and control long past the time when it might have been justified, when Alberta and Saskatchewan achieved provincial status in 1905. It took twenty-five more years before the three prairie provinces got control of their natural resources plus some compensation for lands alienated by Ottawa in making land grants for railway construction and other nation-building purposes.

The prairie provinces got control of their lands and resources just as the Great Depression brought nightmarish conditions for western grain farmers, who were heavily indebted to eastern banks and trust companies. Bankruptcy became a way of life for western farmers, and Alberta, the hardest-hit province, had to default on its

provincial debt. Throughout all these decades, western farmers had to sell their grain on world markets while the protective tariff, legislated for the benefit of eastern manufacturers and workers, prevented them from taking full advantage of cheaper American farm machinery and consumer goods. Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the Progressives, Farmers' parties, CCF, and Social Credit trained their artillery on eastern corporations, financiers, and the "old-line" politicians who collaborated with them. William Aberhart's denunciation of the "fifty big-shots" is perhaps the most memorable of the epithets hurled at such targets.

In more recent times, heavy-handed federal interventions paved the way for the Reform Party's remarkable rise to prominence. In the early 1980s, Pierre Trudeau's National Energy Program, which tried to benefit eastern consumers by setting western oil and gas prices below world-market levels, destroyed any lingering support the Liberals might have enjoyed in the West. Then came Brian Mulroney's 1986 decision, allegedly taken "in the national interest," to give the billion-dollar Cf-18 maintenance contract to Canadair in Montreal, even though a Winnipeg consortium's bid was cheaper and judged by the federal government's own experts to be technically superior. The CF-18 decision outraged adherents of all parties in the West, but particularly the Progressive Conservatives, who had thought the Mulroney government would give higher priority to their concerns. To be fair to Mr. Mulroney, he did do several things designed to conciliate the West, such as ending the National Energy Program and moving the National Energy Board to Calgary; but the blatant unfairness of the CF-18 decision robbed him of the favour he might otherwise have gained with western voters.

These developments of the 1980s made it plausible for Preston Manning to argue that neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives would ever represent the interests of western Canada, and that only a new, western-based party could do so. As a would-be national party, Reform has phrased its policies in national rather than regional terms; but it is clear to everyone that its positions are popular in the West because they represent the objective interests of the western provinces, especially Alberta and British Columbia, which are heavy contributors in the redistributive game of contemporary Canadian politics and have the least to lose in case of a serious confrontation with Quebec separatism. Reform has prospered with this strategy and continues to exercise substantial influence upon the federal government's agenda, but its own success has trapped it in the perpetual dilemma of regional politics. It reflects the views of its

western supporters so well that it has not been able to assemble enough voters in Ontario and elsewhere to elect MPs. Be that as it may, it is obvious that Reform is the latest in a long line of western parties and movements that see themselves as protectors of western interests against external exploitation.

Rejection of Canada's Federal Parliamentary System

The West is famous for its large number of central and east European immigrants; yet these newcomers, whatever their other contributions to western life, adopted rather than created the political culture. The creators of that culture were three rather different groups of English-speaking settlers: those from Ontario and the other original provinces, who brought with them the traditional Liberal-Conservative axis of Canadian politics; British immigrants familiar with socialism and trade-union politics; and American ranchers and farmers imbued with populism and Progressivism. This American influence is felt to some degree everywhere in the West but is particularly strong in Alberta, which has experienced three different waves of American immigration: frontier ranchers in the 1880s; dry-land farmers, especially Mormons, shortly after the turn of the century; and petroleum-industry workers and executives in the last 50 years.

People who have grown up with the American separation-of-powers system often dislike the parliamentary system. They tend to be put off by rigid party discipline, block voting, and the polarization of all issues between government and opposition; they yearn for representative independence and non-partisan support for major policies. Thus the legacy of American immigration has created a political basis for movements critical of parliamentary government.

The connection, however, is even deeper. Americans coming to western Canada have tended to come from the western plains states where the populist and Progressive movements were strongest around the turn of the century. Populism is much more than a candidate wearing denim shirts to convince gullible voters he's a regular guy. Populism is a distinctive style of politics which holds that political supremacy ought to rest in the common people, whose interests and desires are fairly homogeneous; which craves direct links between people and government and is suspicious of intermediate institutions such as interest groups, political parties, and elected assemblies; and which tends to see the cause of misgovernment as rule by elites or

special interests that have lost contact with the common people. Underlying all these characteristics is the myth of the popular will, and the belief that politics should consist of discovering that will and putting it into effect.

Populism has run like a red thread through western Canadian political movements since the early years of this century. It reached its highest development in Henry Wise Wood's theory of group government, which the United Farmers of Alberta acknowledged in principle but never put fully into practice. Ideally, for Wood, parties were supposed to represent functional groups in the society--farmers, labour, merchants, employers--and all parties with members in the legislature would participate in the cabinet. The legislature would be a congress of delegates who could work in harmonious co-operation because there were no fundamental conflicts among the interests they represented. This would truly be a government of the whole people, not just a government of the majority enforced by party discipline and propped up by patronage and corruption.

Wood's theory of group government was never fully accepted, even in Alberta; but more conventional populist ideas were espoused by all the Farmers' parties -- the enfranchisement of women, so that the whole people could be politically active; direct democracy in the form of referendum and initiative, so that the people could make governmental decisions for themselves; recall, so the people could quickly replace politicians who did not do their bidding; proportional representation, so that all interests could receive adequate expression in the elected legislature; reduction in party discipline to break the power of "machine" politics; election of Senators, so that all lawmakers would be dependent upon the popular will; and reform of electoral finance to reduce the "money power" of the "special interests."

All of these ideas -- some in their original form, some in slightly modernized guise -- are recognizable in the Reform Party's platform. Preston Manning is a keen student of populism; in the years when I worked for him, he kept a well-thumbed copy of W.L. Morton's classic book, *The Progressive Party in Canada*, on his shelf. But the populist notions in the Reform Party's platform ideas did not just come from Mr. Manning; they also sprang spontaneously from the members of the party. Grassroots enthusiasm has even required Mr. Manning to accept proposals of which he is personally rather sceptical, such as recall and proportional representation. Although he does not expend

much of his personal capital defending such ideas, he has found it politic to let them into the party's official policy manual.

The media portray Reform as an ideologically conservative party, and it certainly is that. However, the energy of its most active members and workers comes not so much from conservative ideology as from populist enthusiasm. They want a grassroots party in which the members control policy, organization, and even strategy; they dream of governing Canada through a combination of direct democracy and independent-minded MPs responsive to what Mr. Manning calls the "consensus of the constituency." They, at least most of them, are not wholly opposed to parliamentary government because they believe it can be reformed; but their populist reforms, if ever thoroughly implemented, would change the parliamentary system almost beyond recognition.

To the outside observer, such populism may seem more like myth than reality. It is obvious that Mr. Manning carefully controls the Reform Party, using his genius for agenda manipulation. Although I haven't done an exact count, my impression is that the Reform caucus engages in at least as much block voting as the Liberals. Certainly Mr. Manning has set some kind of record for party discipline by suspending or expelling five caucus members in six years. But myths are notoriously resistant to critical analysis, and the myth of populism continues to lend Reform its energy, just as the Liberals derive energy from increasingly hollow assertions that they have given Canada the best system of medical care and the most compassionate welfare state in the world.

There is, of course, more than populism to the politics of western Canada. The CCF was a grassroots party, but not populist in the sense in which I use that term here. Its 1933 Regina Manifesto proposed a hyper-parliamentary system in which the Senate would be abolished and federalism would be centralized, leaving the federal government a free hand to nationalize the means of production – or at least the "commanding heights" – and direct a planned economy. This vision never found much support in southern Alberta and other parts of the West where American-style populism predominates; but it sank deep roots in areas of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia, where it appealed particularly to British and other European working-class immigrants.

The anti-parliamentary populism of the United Farmers of Alberta, Social Credit, and the Reform Party is antithetical to the hyper-parliamentary system proposed by the

CCF, but there are also points of similarity. Both reject the Canadian federal parliamentary system, albeit for opposing reasons – populists, because the system gives the governing party in Ottawa too much power; socialists, because the system does not give the governing party in Ottawa enough power. Both, moreover, desire root-and-branch solutions to the perceived problems of Confederations – not just modest, incremental reforms, but the thoroughgoing renovation of political institutions. In that sense, both visions exemplify the third enduring feature of western politics, the thirst for fundamental solutions.

The Thirst for Fundamental Solutions

Millenarian dreams have crisscrossed the western landscape as far back as Louis Riel's second rebellion. Thinking he was divinely inspired, Riel called himself the "Prophet of the New World" and tried to set up a reformed version of Roman Catholicism in North America. Speaking from the steps of the parish church at Batoche, he opened the North-West Rebellion with the apocalyptic statement "Rome has fallen," which in his special vocabulary meant that the Holy Spirit had left the Roman Catholic Church and now spoke through him as "Prophet of the New World." Both the Farmers' parties and the CCF were strongly influenced by the Social Gospel movement, which reinterpreted the kingdom of God on earth as the product of political reform rather than otherworldly piety. Protestant clergymen preaching the Social Gospel – men such as William Irvine, J.S. Woodsworth, and Tommy Douglas – were important early leaders in these parties.

William Aberhart rejected the Social Gospel, but he was strongly influenced by Dispensationalism – a fundamentalist eschatology he inherited from the Plymouth Brethren by way of the Scofield Interpreter's Bible. In the radio play "The Branding Irons of the Antichrist," which he wrote together with his protégé Ernest Manning, he brought the themes of the Rapture and the Second Coming vividly to life. He would not have been surprised to see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven the day after tomorrow. When he turned to politics, he embraced C.H. Douglas's Social Credit theory, which is best understood as an example of secular millenarianism. In the Douglas vision, Social Credit "experts" would bring about permanent peace and prosperity by manipulating the money supply, dividing the "social dividend," and determining the "just price" of commodities. It was, in Aberhart's memorable phrase, as simple as electricity; it just had to be plugged in to transform the human condition.

Aberhart's unique contribution was to build a victorious political party around Social Credit ideology, something that Douglas never knew how to do. Once in power, Aberhart learned, I think, that Social Credit was an impractical chimera, but he died before he had to face all the consequences of that insight. As his successor, Ernest Manning gradually turned Social Credit into a new doctrine that he called social conservatism. Under that aegis, he cautiously used Alberta's new resource wealth to repay Alberta's debt, balance the public accounts, and fund a provincial welfare state that, for its time, was arguably the most expansive in Canada, even if it rejected socialist measures such as the introduction of medicare in neighbouring Saskatchewan. Yet to the end of his time in office, he retained much of the original Social Credit terminology, whose futuristic character struck a certain chord with Alberta voters.

Reform, led by Ernest Manning's son Preston, is far less millenarian than any of its forebears, but there are still eschatological echoes. Preston Manning was raised in an atmosphere of both fundamentalist eschatology and Social Credit theory. He has been candid in his autobiography that he sees his mission in politics as a divine calling to reconcile Canadians through self-sacrifice, modelling himself upon the supreme self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ the divine Redeemer. He does not evoke future utopias, either sacred or secular, but his political rhetoric is surprisingly futuristic for someone typecast as a conservative. He entitled his book *The New Canada*, and he frequently repeats that traditional concepts like left and right are already obsolete and will play no role in the politics of the 21st century. He tries to position himself beyond ideology, evoking systemic changes and new paradigms that can only be dimly glimpsed at the present moment.

The rampant millenarianism and futurism of western politics are undeniable facts, but their causes are a matter of speculation. Maybe the experience of opening up a vast new country fosters the feeling that almost anything is possible, that the old rules of politics need not apply forever. To be sure, the West has been largely settled since the early decades of the twentieth century; but a resource frontier continues to exist as virgin forests are still being cut and new deposits of coal, oil and gas, potash, and hard-rock minerals are being discovered and exploited. Although Reformers are conservative in their emphasis on property rights, free markets, and individual responsibility, their mood is often as impatient and forward-looking as that of firebrand socialist organizers from the early days of the CCF. Anyone who has attended both Reform and NDP

meetings will recognize that, whatever their ideological differences, the true believers of both parties exhibit frustration with present reality, confidence in abstract ideas, and eagerness to put them into practice – in other words, a thirst for fundamental solutions as opposed to modest, incremental changes.

Conclusion

I have argued that the course of western Canadian history has produced a distinctive political culture manifested in the repeated creation of new political parties. Ideologically, these parties may stand either on the left or right, but they all share three characteristics that I have called suspicion of external control, rejection of Canada's federal parliamentary system, and a thirst for fundamental solutions. Political cultures, once established, tend to be self-perpetuating and can last for a very long time, certainly past the original conditions under which they were formed. One need only recall the remarkable fact that the dividing line between Catholic and Protestant in central Europe is roughly the same as the boundary of the Roman Empire to see how long cultural influences can endure. Canada, to be sure, has more geography and less history than central Europe. Nonetheless, I think it is fair to expect the distinctive western Canadian political culture to last, if not a thousand years, at least a few decades more.

Let me try to apply this line of thought to the current political situation in Canada. Under the heading of the "United Alternative," Preston Manning is trying to widen the tent of the Reform Party, hoping that it will provide a home for Progressive Conservatives as well as anyone else wanting to defeat the Liberal government. Joe Clark, the new-old leader of the Progressive Conservatives, says that his is the only true national party and that Reformers should return to their roots and once again become PCs. If there is any truth in my analysis, both leaders are pursuing strategies that are unlikely to work in the long run.

For more than seventy-five years, large numbers of western voters have shown themselves unwilling to remain with the two old-line parties. For a short time the Progressives were the dominant force in the West. Then those on the left opted for the CCF/NDP, while those on the right opted for Social Credit and then, on a much larger scale, for Reform. It may be conceivable that conservatively-minded westerners could crowd in under the same tent with the Progressive Conservatives, as they mostly did

in the period from John Diefenbaker to Brian Mulroney, but how long would the togetherness last? It might go on for a few years, but history suggests that before too long a new leader would arise to form a new party more in keeping with the distinctive western political culture – proudly and defiantly western, critical of parliamentary government, and proposing changes that sound radical, at least in Toronto and Ottawa.

In my opinion, the formula that is most likely to “unite the right” in Canada for any length of time would be one that has not yet been tried, that is, an electoral coalition of two or more regionally based parties that would retain their separate identities, refrain from running candidates against each other, co-operate in parliament to advance shared positions, and form a coalition government if the voters ever saw fit to endow them with enough seats. Formulas not unlike like this have worked successfully in Australia for eighty years and Germany for fifty. There is no guarantee that such an approach would work here, but it seems to me to be worth trying in light of the abundant historical evidence that national conservatives parties in Canada are fated to suffer shipwreck on the shoals of regional differences.

Dr. Tom Flanagan worked as an advisor to Preston Manning and the Reform Party from 1991 to 1993, but he was fired for giving too much advice. This experience is described in his book, *Waiting for the Wave: The Reform Party and Preston Manning* (1995). Dr. Flanagan was elected to the Royal Society of Canada in 1996. His most recent publication is *Game Theory and Canadian Politics* (UTP, 1998).



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