

The Provinces



Prairies

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Reform at the Rubicon

WHEN Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River, he said, "The die is cast" ("Roll the dice," in the Canadian translation), and went on to defeat his opponents and take control of the Roman Republic. The Reform Party now stands before its own Rubicon — the decision whether to enter provincial politics.

The latest news is that some New Brunswick Reformers want to found a provincial Reform Party. Events are also moving that way in Saskatchewan, although it is not yet clear whether Reformers there will create their own provincial party or simply get behind the new Saskatchewan Party.

Federal leader Preston Manning has never favoured going provincial. B.C. and Manitoba Reformers who wanted to do so were expelled in the early 1990s (although the maverick British Columbians went on to found a moderately successful party). An Ontario attempt to do likewise was beaten back two years ago. Alberta Reformers who wanted a provincial party didn't even try to get official endorsement: they simply took the Social Credit trademark off the shelf. Now it's Saskatchewan and New Brunswick. Are there enough fingers to plug all the holes in the dike?

Mr. Manning has two chief arguments against going provincial. First is the warning that a new party must not fritter away its scarce resources by trying to do too many things. That was persuasive at the beginning, but is less convincing now that Reform has established itself as a major national party.

The second argument is that entering provincial politics will create new enemies, who will come back to haunt Reform at the federal level. It has a certain abstract plausibility, but has proved false in practice. Every provincial premier in the West, whether Progressive Conservative or New Democratic, opposed Reform in the last federal election. Ontario's Mike Harris did preserve formal neutrality, but some of his ministers and key operatives worked for federal Conservative leader Jean Charest. Staying out of provincial politics has simply not bought Reform the support, or even the neutrality, of provincial politicians.

Also, Mr. Manning has never rebutted an obvious argument in favour of entering provincial politics, which is roughly the same as the justification for running federal Reform candidates in Ontario: to weaken the Progressive Conservatives. If there were active provincial Reform parties in Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario, it is doubtful the Conservatives would govern those provinces today; and where would Mr. Charest have been in the dark years between 1993 and 1997 without support from those Conservative organizations?

THE real reason for Mr. Manning's reluctance is his conception of Reform as a populist party. The essence of populism is the belief in a unitary "will of the people," which Mr. Manning refers to as "the common sense of the common people" or the "consensus of the constituency." In his view, populism is not an ideology but a methodology for eliciting the popular will and representing it in Parliament.

Populism can be a winning political strategy in the right circumstances, but its basic premise is false. The people are plural, not unitary, and they want many different and often conflicting things. Politics is the art of managing these conflicts, not a science of discovering and doing what the people really want.

In practice, populist movements are never successful without a gifted leader. Often it is a charismatic figure, such as William Jennings Bryan or William Aberhart, who triumphs through force of rhetoric; but it can also be a cerebral tactician, such as Preston Manning, who guides his followers toward chosen alternatives through artfully worded questionnaires and carefully managed consultations. Either way, there must be a central figure to overcome the incoherence of populism.

Provincial parties would be an annoying complexity in this monistic tableau, because their leaders could claim to represent the will of the people, at least in their provinces. Conflicts between leaders would arise. Think of the strains afflicting the NDP when Bob Rae was pursuing his social contract in Ontario, to the great displeasure of the federal leader and caucus. Such conflicts are difficult in any party; they would be doubly so in a Reform Party permeated with the myth of populism.

For this reason, entry into provincial politics is a Rubicon-crossing decision for Reform. Once that decision is made, Mr. Manning's brand of populism will no longer suffice as the party's official creed, even though he will remain federal leader. Ideology will have to succeed methodology. Crossing this Rubicon will be a huge step for Reform, signalling the final transition from a temporary populist movement guided by a single, indispensable leader to a mature political party capable of reconciling disparate forces across the country. It's time to take that step.

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