

# The political power of the West

MY colleague Roger Gibbins recently told me he will succeed David Elton as president of the Canada West Foundation, a Calgary research institute best known for originating the idea of the Triple-E Senate. Not long before hearing Roger's news, I had received a wonderful little book from the Fraser Institute, entitled *Global Warming: The Science and the Politics*, in which distinguished scientists explain exactly why greenhouse-gas hysteria is so silly. These two events started me thinking about the power of the West in Canadian politics.

For all practical purposes, the rise of Quebec separatism has excluded westerners from exercising authority at the head of Confederation. There has not been a real western prime minister since John Diefenbaker. The short-lived governments of Joe Clark and Kim Campbell were only blips on the radar screen. Pierre Trudeau's policy of official bilingualism, designed to keep Quebec content within Confederation, created the expectation that the prime minister must be bilingual, thus eliminating from contention western leaders such as Peter Lougheed, Gary Filmon, Roy Romanow and Ralph Klein.

Quebec's bloc voting is also a big factor. Joe Clark spoke French as well as Jean Chrétien speaks English, and Kim Campbell got by *en français*; but neither could win seats in Quebec, where anglophones and allophones always vote Liberal, and francophones vote only for parties headed by a leader from Quebec.

There are, however, many forms of political power. Westerners reacted to their inability to exercise direct authority in the federal government by creating new vehicles for influencing public opinion. Six of these are nationally known: the Fraser Institute in Vancouver; the Canada West Foundation, the Reform Party and the National Citizens' Coalition (NCC), all based in Calgary; the Alberta Report family of magazines, headquartered in Edmonton; and the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, with its national office in Regina.

To be sure, only Canada West and Alberta Report are explicitly western. The others are all national: indeed, the NCC was founded in Toronto and maintains a second head office there. But all benefit the West by espousing smaller government and more reliance on competitive markets. In that respect, they work in tandem with market-oriented organizations across the country, such as the C.D. Howe Institute and the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies.

AN interventionist federal government is, in the long run, a threat to everyone, but it is particularly dangerous to Western Canadians. The West is growing rapidly, both demographically and economically; but its population is still small compared with Ontario and Quebec, and its economy depends heavily on cyclical resource industries (forestry, minerals, coal, potash, oil, gas) that produce large rents from non-renewable resources. Inevitably, federal politicians are tempted to keep themselves in power by appropriating these rents and distributing the plunder to the more numerous voters in the rest of Canada.

The Canada Pension Plan, old-age security, employment insurance, equalization, health care, social assistance — the West pays far more into these national schemes than it gets back. Other egregious examples of confiscation are the role of the Canadian Wheat Board in the 1940s and 50s, and the National Energy Program (NEP) in the 1980s, in keeping the price of western commodities artificially low.

The NEP was a low point, but also a turning point. The West has learned how to fight back. Its research institutes and political movements produce the ideas that dominate today's political agenda. The results are evident in the two biggest issues of all: fiscal policy and national unity. Balanced budgets are now conventional wisdom. Tax cuts are coming. The role of the state relative to civil society is shrinking as government programs are downsized, redesigned and privatized.

True, the West has not got a Triple-E Senate. However, Senate reform has been a shield to fend off Quebec's demand for special status, which, if ever enacted, would entrench the West's special status as the milch cow of Confederation. And don't forget Plan B, realistic terms for Quebec's secession originally demanded by western thinkers and now being vigorously implemented by the Liberal government.

What lies ahead? Another raid on western resource industries, disguised as saving the world from global warming? The Liberals, who have never apologized for the NEP, might dream about it; but they know that, given the opposition of all the western political organizations, the price could be those western seats that give them their narrow majority in the Commons.

This kind of political power may not seem like much, but it's broadly based. In the long run, it may be more effective than expecting the West's interests to be represented by a prime minister or a few members of the federal cabinet.

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