

THE TWO BRITISH COLUMBIAS

By
Phil Resnick

The outcome of the federal election of November 2000 underlined a deep rift in the politics of British Columbia. Almost 50 percent of British Columbia voters – for the most part living in the suburbs or in the Interior of the province – voted for the Canadian Alliance, whose leader, Stockwell Day, represents an Okanagan riding. The other 50 percent of British Columbia voters – more concentrated in metropolitan centres like Vancouver and Victoria – voted for the Liberals, the NDP, the Conservatives, or the Greens.

There was nothing new about the pattern that emerged on 27 November. The Alliance's predecessor, the Reform party, had won between twenty-four and twenty-five of the province's seats in Ottawa in successive federal elections since 1993, with the Liberals reduced to six to seven seats and the New Democratic Party (NDP) to two to three. True, the Alliance's share of 49 percent of the British Columbia popular vote in the most recent election was larger than the 38 percent and 43 percent share that Reform had received in 1993 and 1997, respectively. And some of the margins of victory secured by Alliance members of Parliament (MPs) this time around – 20,000 and more in a number of constituencies – helped reinforce the sense of alienation from the federal government of significant sections of the British Columbia electorate.

Ever since the Second World War, the federal Liberals have rarely enjoyed majority support in British Columbia. In the 1980 election, for example, when Pierre Trudeau secured a majority government, there was not a single Liberal MP elected from British Columbia (or, for that matter, from Alberta and Saskatchewan). The "government party" at the federal level for much of the last 100 years has never had the sort of roots in this province that it has had in the Maritimes, Quebec, or Ontario. It

is as though British Columbia, as the province on the westernmost periphery of Canada, has felt freer to show a figurative "middle finger" to the Liberal party and then to complain bitterly about how British Columbia does not get its fair share of federal expenditures.

There is a deep reservoir of resentment vis-à-vis the federal government into which the Alliance can tap. One can go as far back as British Columbia disenchantment with the slow pace of construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1870s; with the level of federal contributions to British Columbia's infrastructural expenditures in the first decade of the twentieth century; to the refrain about "British Columbia selling cheap and buying dear" in the province's 1938 brief to the Rowell-Sirois Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations; to discontent with respect to federal transfer payments to the have-not provinces expressed during the W.A.C. Bennett years; to a widespread feeling that Quebec has dominated the national unity debate ever since the 1960s.

And there is a venerable third-party tradition in British Columbia that meant that, for long decades, Social Credit, on the one hand, and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation-New Democratic Party (CCF-NDP) on the other, dominated the provincial party system. Some of the populism in the Alliance platform (e.g., with regard to the holding of referenda) recalls the right-wing populism of Social Credit. The socially conservative views of many of its supporters on such questions as abortion, gun control, and/or homosexuality come out of much the same tradition. And the Alliance's strong defence of greater provincial powers with respect to the federal government would have done a W.A.C. Bennett or Bill Bennett proud.

On the other side of the divide, many of British Columbia's urban dwellers and many members of its multicultural community hold small-l liberal values and are supporters of the charter, social programs, and the role of the federal government more generally. They can no more identify with mainstream Alliance values

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than can a majority of urban dwellers in Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, or beyond.

When I was writing up the chapter on public opinion in my book, *The Politics of Resentment: British Columbia Regionalism and Canadian Unity*, I was struck by the deepness of the divide between two segments of British Columbians who presented briefs to the 1997 British Columbia Unity Panel. One segment (usually from the Interior) expressed strongly regional sentiments, while the other (usually from the Lower Mainland or Victoria) expressed strong support for federal powers. Let me cite some representative examples.

On the pro-regionalist-side:

Provincial sovereignty does not arise in the province of British Columbia because of language or culture, it's because of the usurping of provincial jurisdiction that's been going on by the federal government. (Cranbrook)

The Liberal and Conservative party vision, federally speaking, envisions more and more provincial jurisdiction being usurped by the federal government. (Cranbrook)

We've got to take the power back to the provincial governments to look after their own situation and get that Ottawa crap out of here. (Kamloops)

I feel as if we're too far away. We're left out. You can see it ... If they need stuff in Ontario or Toronto, they seem to get it a lot quicker than here. (Campbell River)

On the pro-federalist side:

Downloading more federal jurisdiction onto the provinces would be a mistake, as it weakens our country by turning it into a number of competing little fiefdoms, as in the case of Yugoslavia. (Victoria)

It is my belief that Meech Lake I and II and the Charlottetown Accord were basically "power grabs" by the provinces under the pretext and guise of the "Unity Issue." I absolutely do not wish to see this happen again. I do not wish to see the cherished principles of "accessibility, universality, comprehensiveness" sacrificed to provincial subrogation. The only way to have national standards in every sphere (health care, education, social assistance, pensions, cultural rights) is to have them federally imposed (albeit after negotiation with the provinces). (Vancouver)

I was born and raised in Manitoba, worked for some years in Ontario and have now lived in British Columbia for over forty years. I am not "Manitoban," "Ontarian" nor "British Columbian." My nationality is *Canadian*. It is my *birthright* ... It seems to me that "fed-bashing" is a very selfish practice that tends to affect the opinions of unwary citizens and ultimately feeds on itself. (West Vancouver)

On the subject of federal vs. provincial powers: If you were to poll the general population of Canada, I believe that you would find majority support for a strong federal government, with enforceable *national standards* for education, health care, social welfare, contributory pensions, etc. These are unifying issues that help to bind this country together. Recently there has been far too much emphasis on tearing the country apart, by demands from the provinces for control over a wide range of programs that properly belong under federal government jurisdiction. (Victoria)

This led me to argue that British Columbians were profoundly divided when it came to the respective roles of the federal and provincial governments and that there are, in fact, two British Columbias where such matters were concerned.

I might add that similar divisions extend to other matters of public policy. Generally,

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Alliance supporters are strong opponents of federal gun control, are hostile to Aboriginal land claims and the treaty settlement process, see Quebec as the spoiled child of Confederation, and would like to see taxes cut drastically even as the role of government is pruned back. Supporters of other political parties are inclined to be more open to accommodating both Aboriginals and Quebec, to be less friendly to the right to bear arms (to use the American phrase), and to accept a broader, interventionist role for government along the lines that have developed in Canada over the period since the Second World War.

What, if anything, can be done to bridge the divide? At one level, not very much. The voting pattern we saw in November 2000 will not be changing quickly: it has now held good through three federal elections. But if we were prepared to take the bull by the horns, one telling reform would lessen the polarization overnight. I am talking about changing our electoral system from the first-past-the-post system we inherited from Great Britain to one more clearly based on proportional representation (PR). What would this entail?

If we opted for something like the German system, it would mean that half the federal seats from British Columbia would be elected on a constituency basis, much as they are today, but that the other half would be elected on a party list system. Parties underrepresented in the direct constituency voting would be compensated with a larger share of the seats designated through the party lists. All parties with at least 5 percent of the votes in British Columbia would be guaranteed a share of the federal seats from British Columbia – a share roughly proportional to their share of the vote. Under such a system, the Alliance would have secured approximately 50 percent of the seats on 27 November, the Liberals around 28 percent; the NDP around 12 percent; and the Conservatives around 7 percent. The Greens, were they able to secure 5 percent of the popular

vote in some future election, would actually secure representation at the federal level for the first time.

Conversely, under a PR system, a province like Ontario, which provided the lion's share of the Liberals' seats for the third straight time – 100 seats in all – would no longer be coloured so monolithically Red. The Liberals would have secured no more than the roughly 50 percent of the total Ontario seats that their share of the Ontario vote merited, the Alliance just under one-quarter; the Conservatives around 18 percent; and the NDP around 9 percent. What appears today to be an extremely regionalized party system – east versus west – is only so because of the type of electoral system to which we are wedded.

Is this likely to change any time soon? Not really, what with the federal Liberals comfortably ensconced as the governing party and what with the Opposition divided into four fractious camps. It would, however, be interesting to see whether, at the provincial level, British Columbia might not be prepared to set an example for the rest of the country. British Columbians have proposed and supported such ideas as referenda and recall in the recent past. There is reason to believe that there would be a considerable head of steam to support an initiative like PR. There is an active lobby group, Fair Voting BC, headed by a former Socred member of the legislative assembly Nick Loenen, that has been making exactly this pitch over the past twelve months.

Would the next British Columbia government – almost certainly a Liberal one and with a massive majority in the Legislature to boot – be prepared to introduce such a reform after it comes to office? Could British Columbia do what the Scots and the Welsh did in 1999, when, pursuant to the Devolution Bill, regional assemblies came to be elected under a PR system, even though the Westminster Parliament continues to be elected by the old first-past-the-

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post system? Could we begin to practice at the provincial level something many of us would like to see happening at the federal level? It would certainly be worth trying. And it is something about which the two British Columbias might, for once, actually be able to agree.

THE WEST WANTS IN! (BUT WHAT IS THE WEST? AND WHAT IS "IN?")

By
Peter McCormick

What a difference a few months can make in Canadian politics!

Earlier this year, when this conference was being planned, it would have been absurd to have a panel on "Pressure Points in Canadian Politics" without including "the West" as one of the pressure points. In November's federal general election, a Western-based party had revealed itself to be much more regional than it had wanted to be – it held most of the seats west of the Ontario border, but almost nothing east of it. Bitter words were being spoken in the Western provinces. An Alberta Independence Party held a founding convention in Red Deer, and immediately announced it was changing its name to the Western Independence Party (Alberta branch) to accommodate working alliances with parallel branches in other provinces. There was talk of the new party contesting the next Alberta provincial election, and vaguer talk of running candidates in British Columbia. Familiar faces from the Alliance were there in the background, making noncommittal remarks but sympathizing with the complaints. Six prominent Albertans wrote a public letter to the Alberta premier, suggesting a series of moves to build a political "firewall" around the province, strategies that would allow Alberta to pursue its own policies in greater isolation from national initiatives. Straws on the wind to be sure, but it was impossible to be sure that they were not the start of something bigger, something more dramatic, even something vaguely apocalyptic. The federal government talked sternly of a "tough love" strategy against the West, denouncing it as transparent blackmail at the same time that they promised not to yield an inch. Arguably, this was precisely the wrong move at the wrong time, simultaneously holding the critics to their shrillest complaints and confirming their claims of implacable and unyielding opposition.

Now, just a few months later, the political temperature has cooled considerably. The Alberta election has come and gone without a sign of secessionist candidates, and they were similarly absent from the British Columbia election as well. The Alliance party, then a symbol of the West's nearly monolithic alienation from the government of the rest of Canada, is in total disarray, apparently imploding as it squabbles over its own leadership. Far from leading Westerners in an attack upon Ottawa's arrogance, it seems unable even to lead its own MP's into question period. And the Alberta government, demonized during the federal election campaign for its deplorably un-Canadian flirtation with two-tier medicine, has been wooed by a string of senior federal cabinet ministers, including Chrétien and Martin. Even Stéphane Dion, he of the firmest statements about having no truck with pseudo-separatist blackmailers, recently praised Ralph Klein as a strong force for national unity and spoke sympathetically of the need for listening to the voices of the West.

So which is the real West? The angry voices of January, or the "business as usual" of April? The answer, as is so often the case, is – a bit of both but (at least temporarily) mostly the latter.

Let me begin by conceding the vagueness of the term "the West." In one sense, there is no West. Another person on this panel has told you about the Westernmost province of all and has insisted that it is very much a unit unto itself, not in any way part of a larger multi-province region, and this is entirely correct. Indeed, even that old term of convenience, the "Prairie Provinces" has completely outgrown its usefulness and no longer corresponds to any meaningful political or economic entity. Only one province – Saskatchewan – still organizes its economy around agricultural production; and it is also the only province where agriculture still centers on the huge grainfields that are most people's image of "the prairies." Economically and politically, the four Western provinces are far from a tight alliance; their trade and their

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politics face different directions and respond to different cleavages. The political device that seems to signal some degree of unity and coordination – the Western premiers conference – has lost its visibility and in any event never had a clear structure, a clear agenda-generating process, or an adequate support structure. These are four quite distinct provinces, which sometimes stand together but only after they have run their calculations and double checked the sums to make sure that this is one of the times when it is appropriate to stand together.

Yet in another sense, there is a West, which exists largely as a perceived contrast to what we see as “the East” (more accurately, central Canada – and, even more precisely these days, Ottawa). Its political expression is the Canadian Alliance, which consolidated its strength and gained more seats in the West even under an unimpressive leader who ran an unimpressive campaign. The last three election results are still the most visible sign of a great fault-line that we could otherwise almost ignore, an indication that something politically and psychologically important runs along the Manitoba/Ontario border, something that has lasted a decade and still is not fading.

The paradox comes through perfectly in a recent public opinion poll, taken in March of this year. 85 percent of respondents in the four Western provinces agreed, and most of them strongly agreed, that the West constitutes a distinct region within Canada with many unique features. Yet on the same survey, only 12 percent identified themselves as living within a region called the West – fewer than identified a particular province, or who identified themselves with a city or a region smaller than the province. And the most popular single response was – Canada. This may still constitute a kind of Western regionalism, but today it does not seem to involve very much in the way of Western alienation.

So even though I agree that “the West” is a slightly misleading term, I will still use it because a lot of people out in my part of the country use it. Particularly since someone else has just spoken about British Columbia, my “West” is going to be pretty heavily centered in Alberta. This is partly because (once you take out British Columbia Alberta is “most of the West” but I would suggest immodestly that it is also because Alberta is the core of the West. It is the birthplace of the Reform Party, it is the home of the “Calgary mafia” with its think-tanks and its firewalls, it is the stomping ground of the blue-eyed sheiks whose oil wealth is a source both of strength and of nervousness. Think of “the West” as a song that is being written by Alberta, with the other provinces singing along with the parts that they like. There are enough of these parts that the song still has to be taken seriously.

I think there are two major aspects to the West that I am describing, and they make a rather curious package. I am going to call the first one the anxious west, and the second one the arrogant west. They combine to create the resentful West, a phenomenon that may yet hold either promise or threat for the future of the nation.

First, let me describe the nervous west. The biggest political fault-line within western Canada is the one that separates the cities from the countryside. Track the 2000 election results across the West and you will find that all the rural or largely rural seats went to the Alliance; the holdout seats are all urban. When Liberal David Iftody went down in Provencher in 2000, this completed the sweep. And the safest Alliance seats, the ones where the margins of victory are the most lopsided, are the most rural. In Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the rural anger was augmented by the very genuine economic difficulties caused by a string of bad years – of flooding in the spring, delaying seeding which in turn delays the harvest, pushing it late enough into the fall that early snow can block the harvest

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or down-grade the grain. Bad weather, of course, is a risk that farmers always face, but it has clearly been a larger problem than usual in recent years, the extremes presumably one of the effects of global warming. This year will be no better – Manitoba is already fighting the flooding again, while Alberta worries about a possible drought. Farmers in western Canada have for the last two or three years felt themselves caught in a crisis that is comparable to the devastation of the Atlantic cod fisheries; and they have felt that governmental response has been slow and inadequate. To be sure, this is less an anti-Ottawa mood than an anti-government mood – the anger of the farmers helped to topple Gary Filmon in Manitoba, and it almost swept Roy Romanow out of power in Saskatchewan. Ralph Klein's affable invulnerability is the odd one out of the set. There was plenty of anger left for the federal Liberals last November.

But the problem cuts a little deeper than this. Even without the bad weather, farmers are in very serious trouble – caught in the middle between Europe and the United States, squeezed between static prices and rising costs. This is something more than a string of small (and sometimes not so small) businessmen caught in a financial squeeze. What is fading is the way of life that used to dominate Western Canada, the family farm. Increasing mechanization has pretty well wiped out the very concept of the hired hand; returns to scale are making it hard for farms that are small or less efficient than they should be; and as the current generation retires they increasingly find that they have no children or grandchildren who want to take over. As the size of the average farming operation goes up, and the number of people it takes to farm any given area of land goes down, the small towns that used to service them feel the squeeze and those businesses close down as well. Urbanization is simply one of the realities of modern society, a trend that has prevailed for more than a century, but in the west there are

still enough people in the rural areas that their pain has political impact. This is in a strict sense not anybody's fault, but it is still transforming the face of Western Canada.

Add the challenges of globalization and the reality of the wired society, and you have described one of the West's greatest challenges for the next decade – dealing with the rural/urban divide. All of the Western provinces are concerned with containing the depopulation of the rural areas, and creating the conditions in which they can share the growth rather than becoming economic backwaters. In the meantime, there is an anger in the countryside with real political consequences; it is no accident that the short-lived Alberta Independence Party held its founding convention in Red Deer, not in one of Alberta's two large cities. But it is also no accident that the story was a seven-day wonder with no lasting power.

Let me next describe the arrogant West, which I see as catching something of the way that my students and my neighbours generally react to the world. We see ourselves as the new Canada – growing in population and economic clout as we enter the new century, deserving greater recognition for this new strength and greater respect for our accomplishments. (In truth, of course, we exaggerate both elements of the growth – in both population and GDP we have over the last thirty years kept pace with Ontario rather than pulling away from it, but that is not the general impression in my part of the country, and most of the people I talk to are clearly unconvinced when I tell them about it.)

We also see ourselves as well-positioned for the new era of globalization, since our resource-based economy has always exposed us to the cold winds of international competition and world markets, while the old political and economic elites of central Canada are hot-house flowers shivering behind the walls of economic

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protection. (This, too, is overstated, but again it is what many of us believe.)

We see ourselves as multicultural in a way that central Canadians will not be for decades, a mixture of wave after wave of immigration that have left no ethnic group as a dominant majority. Such cultural mixtures are not without their frictions, but it is absurd to paint us as know-nothing nativists striving to keep the land racially pure. During the Alberta provincial election, I came across the strangest web-site, operating under the charming domain name "ralphkleinsucks.com." It turned out that a white supremacist movement in Montana was trying to warn Albertans that Premier Klein was an enemy of the white race. It was a bizarre attack, and it is hard to see why they bothered or who they thought they were influencing, but it is closer to the mark than people who want to write off Albertans and its leaders as red-necks and racists.

Free trade has done what government subsidies and grandiose megaprojects have failed to do – it has diversified the Western economy, expanded our industries and our processing facilities, moved our exports away from raw materials to finished products. Agricultural products now account for 29 percent of Saskatchewan's exports, 19 percent of Manitoba's and only 5 percent of Alberta's. The days of the wheat economy are over. To be sure, growth brings its own problems – Calgary's recent surge of growth has within the last few years completely overwhelmed the city's road system. And the benefit of increased trading with the world's largest economy carries with it a vulnerability to its economic ups and downs, its policy cycles and its policy whims. But there is no question that the last decade has been good for the West, and westerners are more willing than they were 25 years ago to give Canada a good part of the credit.

Curiously and counter-intuitively, the three provinces still send a lower percentage of their

total exports to the United States than the rest of Canada, and the relative value of interprovincial trade is about a third again as high as it is for the rest of the country. Twenty years ago, the Canada West Foundation asked Western Canadians if they agreed with the statement that "The West gets so little benefit from Canada that we might as well go it on our own" and about 80 percent of them agreed. This year, the Foundation asked whether we would be better off economically if we separated from Canada, and 75 percent of them disagreed, most of them strongly.

But if Western alienation has lost its economic motor, then what is the problem? A rather folksy and heavily cliched metaphor makes the essential point. Think of the West as a younger sibling, brash and obnoxious, who has gone out into the world and started to do pretty well and now wants to be taken more seriously at the family reunions. Being at least mildly successful, the sibling has something to say; but being brash and obnoxious, it is not always said very well, and if the older and more established siblings want to find things to laugh at, want to find reasons for keeping the youngster in his place, they will not have to look very hard.

A well-worn cliché with oversimplifying tendencies, I agree, and yet it carries much of the weight. It is particularly galling when the ideas that are laughed at and scorned when the younger sibling brings them up are shortly afterward embraced with enthusiasm and pride – the obvious examples are deficit control and a Supreme Court pronouncement on the rules for possible Quebec secession, but there are others. I think the next example, within the next couple of years, will be a major rethinking of our national social programs, including the way that health care services are delivered. And we may get some very productive mileage out of the West's naive preoccupation with, on the one hand, the old direct democracy staples of prairie populism, and on the other, the undeveloped potentials of the new technology.

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Reform/Alliance is not just a bunch of angry bumpkins who do not like Liberals and aren't too sure about francophones, although I will concede that a number of them answer to this description as well. They are also a bunch of well-meaning people who think that they have some new ideas about where this country ought to go and how it ought to get there.

I have just come from a conference where a lot of people were bemoaning the problems created by the regional fragmentation of our party system and the declining rates of political participation. Ours is a paradoxical age that is seeing democracy triumph while democratic institutions decline. In this context, there is something truly remarkable in the fact that over a fifteen year period a group of people in the West have created a new political party, with a mass membership that has followed the movement through some pretty major reconfigurations to deliver a stable and growing block of elected members. One of the reasons that Western Canadians feel less alienated just now is the fact that "their party" forms the official opposition, and has received the ultimate compliment of having some of its policy ideas stolen by the Liberals. If it cannot grow into a solid political party that presents a genuine alternative government, all Canadians will lose – the growing complacency of the increasingly unassailable Liberals is a glimpse of a less than desirable future, one in which our democratic institutions have even less relevance and less attraction to growing numbers of our citizens. The Canadian Alliance has brought its troubles upon itself, but try not to feel too much glee, too much "I told you so" satisfaction. To return to my cosy metaphor: the brash young sibling may have bad table manners and may get the punch-lines to the stories wrong, but the family reunions won't amount to much if he stops taking part, stops trying to join in, or even stops coming at all.

Western alienation may be at a low ebb, but it would be premature to conclude that this

implies a trouble-free future. I don't want to suggest that future panels of this sort will be able to dispense with someone sitting in this particular chair. Far from it. Alberta is proud of its economic diversification, but any euphoria is qualified by an awareness of our heavy reliance on the export of oil and natural gas, non-renewable resources with wildly fluctuating prices. Mention "carbon tax" or "Kyoto agreement" anywhere near Ralph Klein, and you can guarantee an angry response; the West will be sullenly suspicious of conservation or anti-greenhouse gas policies that ask them to make most of the sacrifices. Western premiers have long grumbled that Ottawa is slow to respond to their concerns about encouraging immigration and directing it appropriately; for Ottawa, the priorities in immigration have long been refugees and family reunification. Western premiers are particularly concerned about aboriginal issues, which loom far larger in the West than in any other province – aboriginal peoples already account for one person in every nine in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and their population is growing much faster than any other element of Western society. And the western provinces, like all the others, worry about the impact of the coming demographic crunch on their health services and social assistance programs. There may yet be political flash points that will recall the NEP or the CF18 decision – but unless and until circumstances change quite dramatically, Western secessionism lacks any credibility.

This is certainly a far cry from the "doom and gloom from the West" that I have conveyed on similar occasions in the past. In the 1970s and 1980s, the West really was as mad as hell, but it was still looking for a solution through one of the traditional national parties. Mulroney snapped that trend, and at the end of the 1980s there really was a political space available for something truly ominous; but Preston Manning was there, and he created a party whose slogan still catches the mood of the region: "The West

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wants in.” Through the 1990s, the West was still angry, and now it had its own party, but its energies were directed within, not against, the country and its political structures. Now, I think the anger has died down – but there still is a West, however fuzzy it might be, it still has a political party that is trying to express its political point of view, and it still wants to be taken more seriously in national politics. This is a much more promising phase than the one we have just left; we must make the most of it.

To end with a quote from an unusual source – I think Stéphane Dion had it exactly right when he said that Alberta (for which I would substitute the West) had something to say and it was important that it be heard. Exactly. At least now we all agree what the problem is; the point is to find a way of accomplishing it.