A WESTERN CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

For a number of years, concerned Westerners have suggested that Western alienation could be alleviated by more regionally fair federal government procurement/cultural spending, democratic changes in the practices of the House of Commons, and Senate reform. By reference to survey findings, the history of high tariffs on Western farmers, freight rate and political inequalities in Prairie Canada, and the energy wars, the writers challenge the economic domination of the Western region since Confederation by Ontario and Québec, and make a plea for political, economic and cultural equality as a means for ending western alienation.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis un certain nombre d'années, les Canadiens de l'Ouest ont suggéré que l'aliénation de l'Ouest pourrait être atténuée par les dépenses du gouvernement fédéral en approvisionnement/en culture plus équitablement distribuées pour les régions, par des changements démocratiques dans les pratiques de la Chambre des communes et la réforme du Sénat. En référence aux résultats de sondages, l'histoire des droits de douane élevés pour les agriculteurs de l'Ouest, le taux de fret et les inégalités politiques dans les Prairies canadiennes, et les guerres de l'énergie, les auteurs questionnent la domination économique de la région de l'Ouest depuis la Confédération par l'Ontario et le Québec, et plaident pour l'égalité politique, économique et culturelle comme moyen de mettre fin à l'aliénation de l'Ouest.

Since more than two decades have elapsed since one of the writer's authorship of books on regional disaffection in the West and elsewhere in Canada, it is time to call again for more regionally fair federal government procurement/cultural spending, democratic changes in the practices of the House of Commons, and Senate reform.

First, some comments on three surveys commissioned by the Association for Canadian Studies as background for its 2010 conference on Evolving Federalism:

1. It should surprise no thoughtful Canadian that those surveyed in the West, Quebec and Atlantic Canada were more concerned than Ontarians about the amount of respect accorded to their provinces.
2. Majorities in all provinces wanted the federal government to play a key role on issues like climate change and the economy, and were concerned that federal and provincial governments were not working well together.
3. Most respondents didn't see Canada as ten equal provinces, preferring instead the Charter of Rights concept of 33 million equal members of a national family. The Western region, given its populist tradition, held this opinion as strongly as anywhere.
4. Outside Quebec, most respondents identified with "Canada only" and with having national interests prevail rather than those of one's province. Stronger Identification with one's province in the West appears to have weakened, probably because of the passage of more than three decades from the enactment of regionally divisive policies such as the National Energy Program.

ORIGINS OF 'WESTERN ALIENATION'

The phrase still reflects a perception among many Westerners that some Canadians are "more equal than others" or that they are in a permanent minority. My books

(Uneasy Patriots-Western Canadians in Confederation (1988) and *Inside Outer Canada* (1990)), accessible at www.david-Kilgour.com, offer examples of this phenomenon as of the times of writing and earlier. One would hope that things have improved in terms of regional fairness since then, but current research data is unavailable.

FARMER ANGST

The first albatross was hung around the necks of western farmers in 1879 when Prime Minister Macdonald began to enact the high tariff feature of his National Policy to encourage new Ontario and Quebec manufacturers by penalizing the entry of competing products, primarily from the United States and Britain. For western producers, however, the result was that they were forced to pay high duties on imported farm machinery and the like, or to buy more expensive substitutes from Central Canada. For almost a century, Westerners, who obtained no visible benefit from high tariffs in terms of manufacturers locating their plants near their most important customers, believed that they were paying for most of the mahogany in the homes and offices of manufacturers in Toronto and Montreal.

Their complaint, persisting until well into the 1970s, was that world export realities required Westerners to sell their agricultural products, notably wheat, into highly competitive world markets, while concurrently being obliged by Ottawa to buy production necessities in a domestic market made less competitive by high protective tariffs.

"DAMN THE RAILROADS"

Another ongoing major farm issue in the West was the railway monopoly in general and freight rate equalization in particular. Except for a few items, rates in the West were 50% higher than the Grand Trunk Railway's rates for Central Canada for the same services. Wheat travelled 200 miles for ten cents a bushel in Ontario and Quebec but for twice that in parts of the Prairies. Manitobans paid a higher rate than Central Canadians, residents of what is now Alberta and Saskatchewan paid a higher rate than Manitobans, and British Columbians paid the highest rate of all. Ottawa rail officials later approved this as "fair discrimination."

Westerners argued unsuccessfully during most of a century thereafter for equalization of rates so that all Canadians would pay the same rate for the same distances for the same kind of material shipped in any part of the country. However, convincing Ottawa's Board of Railway Commissioners to do that became an almost untenable goal.

POLITICAL INEQUALITY IN PRAIRIE CANADA

This generated as much alienation as tariffs and freight rates combined. The issue surfaced particularly in disputes over natural resources ownership and the setting of provincial boundaries. Manitoba barely crawled into being as a province in 1870, lacking control of even its crown land and resources, which it didn't obtain until sixty years later. The Macdonald government felt that giving Manitoba a constitutional status equal to the five existing provinces, including Prince Edward Island, would deprive the federal government of much of the rich Prairie lands. The Manitoba Act declared that crown lands in the new province were reserved 'for the purposes of the Dominion.' The same principle was applied in 1905 to Saskatchewan and Alberta when they too achieved provincial status. British Columbia maintained control of its resources on entry to Canada in 1871, presumably because no one in Ottawa would have dared to try to take away what was already won.

The eventual success of the three provinces in obtaining control of their own resources probably had more to do with political clout than the self-evident merits of their case. Some still argue the transfer symbolized the end of the establishment phase of the first National Policy. Many weary Westerners concluded that the real reason Ottawa transferred land and resources was because it felt neither was worth keeping. Prairie economist V.C. Fowke deplored: "The remaining natural resources [...] transferred to the prairie provinces in1930 would not have tempted any railway company, nor any hard-bitten farmer from Ontario, or [...] even the unsuspecting immigrant."

The Calgary Herald described the Laurier government's refusal to accord Alberta and Saskatchewan equality with the original provinces on the resources issue as an "autonomy that insults the West." Even now, some believe that this act of gross discrimination by Ottawa demonstrated clearly that it regarded the West as an exploitable colony.

1970S AND 1980S

A number of issues arising during this time increased the western sense of being disfavoured by their national government: Ottawa Mandarins.

Many of my observations made two decades ago don't seem to have changed markedly, although statistical analyses to confirm such conclusions today are lacking.

"There can be little doubt that Canada has been dominated economically since Confederation by Ontario and Québec and particularly by a relatively small group of people and companies located in Montréal and Toronto," concluded David Walker of the department of geography, University of Waterloo in 1983.

A continuing conviction shared by Outer Canadians is that they are chronically under-represented in Canada's public service. Kenneth Kernaghan, Professor Emeritus of Brock University, concluded in a 1978 study that middle levels of the public service were more representative of the country as a whole than were senior ones in terms of both birthplaces and geographical regions. Two years later, Dominique Clift, journalist and author of *Québec Nationalism in Crisis*, wrote that a disproportionate number of top officials were from Ontario. The *Globe and Mail*'s Jeffrey Simpson noted during 1981 that only one deputy minister and three of 198 assistant deputy ministers were Albertans.

Data on the regional or provincial composition of federal officials are difficult to find because they are rarely recorded. My own 1989 survey of the 220 most senior individuals in twenty-eight federal departments and agencies indicated that about 10% were born and educated in Western Canada, 4% were from Atlantic Canada, and 70% were born and educated in Ontario or Québec. 8% of the top job holders at that time were born outside Canada, but all had received some of their education in Ontario or Québec.

Canada's federal public service and its ability to respond to legitimate regional aspirations have been largely ignored for research purposes. Donald Savoie, an expert on Parliament, has suggested that it may be because so few academics understand the workings of our Ottawa public service. "Many people still cling to the belief that politicians set policies and public servants simply administer them and carry out ministerial directives." Having served as a parliamentary secretary to four different cabinet ministers and in the Chrétien cabinet for seven years, I came to the conclusion that, in reality, appointed Ottawa officials play key roles in shaping most policies and in the decision-making process.

Our national government appears to remain a highly centralized organization with a disproportionate number of key-decision makers originating from Inner Canada. Its organizational capacity to reflect regional circumstances seems to remain both inadequate and unreformed.

CULTURE AND COMMUNICATIONS

The CBC should be a major unifying vehicle, providing a broad cultural highway of national self-expression which allows Canadians everywhere to share a cultural heritage that reflects their full national diversity.

However, up until 1990 at least, neither its English nor its French television network provided an adequate contribution with respect to regional and cross-cultural communications. This issue was first documented in 1977 when the Boyle Commission of Inquiry concluded that virtually all regular network CBC English television series were produced in Toronto, with Ottawa providing some political programs. Other than *Little Mosque on the Prairies*, *Heartland*, and *InSecurity*, both the English and French CBC television networks still appear to give insufficient attention to Outer Canadians. Canadians generally will have to assess for themselves whether CBC television is doing significantly better today.

Regarding CBC English radio news, one internal corporation analysis about 20 years ago suggested an exemplary record in reporting regularly from many centres across Canada. Radio news is clearly much more portable than television news, but even so it deserves accolades as a vehicle for having Canadians speak to each other across often vast distances.

In this new decade, our technology of communication has changed dramatically from 24-hour news to personal news on twitter. The regional origins of today's news and creative content across Canada of both new and traditional media are fodder for research.

ENERGY WARS

It is often forgotten that the national Liberal party was historically strong in Western Canada. Pierre Trudeau and his Just Society and One Canada, blended with his iconoclastic personal style, were attractive to many Westerners during the 1968 election campaign. Trudeaumania provided an excellent opportunity for him to break the existing political mold in the West.

How the Liberals destroyed their political base both federally and provincially in the region between 1968 and 1980, when they won but two of the West's seventy-seven federal constituencies, has been well chronicled. More than anything else, the National Energy Policy reinforced the western suspicion that the Trudeau government regarded the West as a continuing colony of Central Canada. Energy undoubtedly has divided Canadians on a regional basis on price and is perhaps now doing so somewhat on the basis of global warming and 'going green'.

The National Energy Program (NEP) was introduced in the House of Commons by the Liberal government after the 1980 general election. The four announced objectives seemed the soul of reason: greater energy self-sufficiency, conservation, "nation-building" and Canadianization. The unspoken objective was clearly continued Liberal party hegemony in Central Canada at the expense of Western Canadians generally and Albertans in particular. As most oil and gas exploration stopped throughout the West, the regional economy suffered enormously.

The NEP's conservation feature was praised initially across Canada, including the West. Some NEP programs, such as grants for better home insulation and for converting to natural gas heating, were excellent. Unfortunately for the authors of the NEP, price is the major factor determining the amount of oil and gas used by both individuals and commerce. In keeping domestic oil prices across Canada at about half of international levels from 1980 to 1984, the government ensured great waste. A longer term consequence of cheap energy to both industry and agriculture was that both sectors were able to postpone investing in the more efficient machinery with which competitors around the world were retooling. The future international competitiveness of the exports from every region of Canada was thereby harmed by the NEP.

Its defenders agree that one of its objectives was to establish the leadership of Ottawa in the energy sector. The means chosen was a bold attempt to create a new community of energy leaders with a primary loyalty to the federal government. This group was to join industrial-financial elites in Toronto and Montreal who have historically identified closely with Ottawa because of various federal measures such as the Bank Act. The NEP was thus profoundly anti-western because until 1980 the energy industry was one of the very few sectors centred in Western Canada. It was, to many Westerners, as if a national government with no elected representation on either coast had told our east—and west-coast fisheries that they should relocate their industry decision-makers to Ottawa.

In many western minds, the key goal of the NEP was to keep Central Canada on the Liberal side of the political fence by pursuing a consumer-oriented oil strategy. Rather than creating a policy which attempted to balance the interests of both the producing West and the consuming centre and east, Trudeau's government came down almost entirely on the consumer side. The Liberals, having learned to govern with virtually no representation from the West, wished to be seen as the defender of Central Canada regardless of economic consequences in the West.

In late July 2011, Canadian federal and provincial energy and mines ministers convened in Kananaskis, Alberta, to discuss a "national energy strategy," not to be confused with the NEP.

In his July 12, 2011 article in the *National Post* "Harper faces green caliphate," Peter Foster, *National Post* columnist and author of *The Blue-Eyed Sheiks*, excoriated the NEP, saying that it was "part naked tax grab, part industry nationalization, part labyrinthine system of price controls, and part strategy to subsidize frontier exploration." The result was "a poisoned atmosphere not only between Ottawa and Alberta but between Ottawa and Washington, a spate of ill-timed acquisitions, the rapid expansion of Petro-Canada as a financial sinkhole, and an Arctic conflagration of taxpayers' dollars."

"Thirty years ago," wrote Foster, "the main threat to the petroleum industry was economic nationalism; now it's radical environmentalism. Although both creeds are motivated by the same moralistic, authoritarian mentality […] the threat no longer comes from the policymakers themselves, at least at the national level."

Noting that Prime Minister Stephen Harper had suggested that Canada could be an 'Energy Superpower,' Foster observed, "The problem is that the energy in question is mainly oil and gas, which has put him on a collision course with environmental NGOs and their climate rationale for a green caliphate."

Foster lauded the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE) for calling for emphasis on "rational" regulation and market diversification, which are in fact related, since the major diversification under question involves shipping more energy from the West Coast. He also stressed that the impediment to megaprojects to serve new markets, such as Enbridge's Northern Gateway proposal, is coming from Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOs). "ENGOs' misinformation campaigns not only stand across the path to West Coast exports but also are behind the campaign against TransCanada's Keystone XL pipeline to take up to 800,000 barrels a day of diluted oil sands bitumen to the Gulf Coast […] Indeed, the holdup of a project which offers so much in terms of jobs and energy security to a country that claims to be desperate for both is a measure of ENGOs' grip on the White House. This is another reason why the Harper government will continue to concentrate on climate change primarily as an issue of trade and diplomacy rather than a global existential threat."

Foster's viewpoint is that a Canadian national energy strategy should attempt to create a coherent framework to exploit its bountiful fossil-fuel resources, adopting a balanced environmental policy that confronts the dangers of radical environmentalism's impacts on jurisdictions with which Canada trades, and addresses a Balkanized approach to regulation at home.

Part of the government's national energy strategy, he urges, should be to hold hearings on the state of climate science, "even if it invites the wrath of the ENGOs, the United Nations, the European Union and the U.S."

CONCLUSION

TOWARDS 'EQUAL REGIONS'

What is the policy remedy? Some institutional changes are clearly required, but the major obstacle is probably the ongoing indifference of government and private sector policy-makers in Inner Canada. Westerners seek major changes on both the attitudinal and institutional fronts. They believe strongly that their region is vital to Canada. Experience indicates that democratization of Canada's national institutions is long overdue. Canada has developed a truly multicultural and confident society. Westerners wish neither to dominate nor to be dominated as a region; they ask only for what they would also seek for their fellow citizens across the country.

Political, economic and cultural equality is the means of ending western alienation. Western Canadians from Kenora to Nanaimo seek only fair play from their national government and institutions. They want every Canadian to be treated as well as those in the central provinces; they expect to be full players when their region's contribution and potential is recognized. The old national policy created diversified, stable and strong communities in Central Canada at least until the Great Recession of 2008; a new one must do the same for the entire country. Western Canadians have achieved much for Canada and they can help make it a place where every young person from sea to sea will believe that opportunities in life are equal regardless of where one happens to have been born.

Westerners cannot afford to be short of either wind or goodwill. Indifference is the real enemy of those seeking regional justice. To quote Nobel Laureate Eli Wiesel's words in another context, indifference is "the worst disease that can contaminate a society; evil is not the worst; indifference is the worst [...] indifference is the end." Combating this form of inertia is a cause worthy of the best efforts of all Canadians."