The Tale of Two Different Futures:

SASKATCHEWAN IN 1905 AND 2005

ABSTRACT

When Saskatchewan became a province in 1905, political leaders of the day believed it would become Canada's most powerful province. Saskatchewan embarked on an ambitious province building program based on the Anglo-Canadian culture and wheat production for the Canadian export market in the southern half of the province. Bill Waiser argues the future of Saskatchewan turned out much differently than that narrow vision. Two-thirds of the province live in urban areas, there is a diverse economic base and rich cultural life. Waiser says the challenge for the province now is trying to come to terms with its agricultural past and aboriginal population.

When Frederick Haultain, the territories first and only premier debated the future of the North-West Territories in December 1901, he attacked the federal plan to "cut this country up into little provinces" and called instead for one large province to be called "Buffalo." Haultain never got his wish in 1905, but the new province of Saskatchewan was no less confident about its destiny. Indeed, if galloping population growth and wheat production in the early twentieth century were any indication, then Saskatchewan seemed well on its way to greatness. The future would just have to catch up.

And what was this future? Saskatchewan was to become Canada's most powerful and populous province. The political leaders of the day not only believed that the future belonged to the province, but more importantly, that the province could decide and shape that future. The Saskatchewan government consequently embarked on an ambitious province-building program, determined to put the old territorial days and any lingering sense of colonialism behind it, while cultivating a new and separate identity as Canada's powerhouse prairie province. Saskatchewan was to be based on one dominant culture (Anglo-Canadian) engaged in one dominant economic activity (the production of wheat for the export market) in one dominant zone of activity (the southern half of the province). By such means, Saskatchewan was confident that it would fulfill its great destiny. Any deviation from this one culture and this one economic activity was regarded as a threat to the province's future. Saskatchewan had hitched its wagon to these key ideals and was not about to be diverted from its chosen path.

Perhaps the best place to start is with numbers. So many immigrants were pouring into western Canada in the early twentieth century that Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier ordered a special census of the three prairie provinces in 1906 to serve as a kind of statistical snapshot of the phenomenal growth. The statistics told a remarkable tale of unprecedented growth. In Saskatchewan alone, the 1891 population (41,522) grew 127 per cent by 1901 (91,279) and then another 182 per cent just five years later (257,763). The immigrants effectively swamped the First Nations population. It would be a mistake, however, to see settlement of Saskatchewan during these years as a deliberate attempt to create a multicultural province. The Saskatchewan government fully expected immigrants to accept and embrace the ways and traditions of their new country, to be "Canadianized" according to the popular terminology at the time. And the only way to bring about this transformation was to get them established on the land and interacting with Anglo-Canadian institutions.

This concern about the cultural makeup of province dominated Saskatchewan political life during the first third of the twentieth century. By the 1920s, many residents of British origin had come to regard the persistence of ethnic identities as a blight on the province's future and actively pushed for cultural uniformity. Some had even come to question whether the integration of continental European immigrants into the larger society was desirable, let alone possible, and called for an end to the kind of immigration that had helped make the province the third most populous province (921,000) in Canada. Saskatchewan may have had the most ethnically diverse population in Canada at the time, but it stubbornly resisted becoming a multicultural society.

Saskatchewan also pinned its destiny on one dominant economic activity (wheat farming) in one dominant region (the southern half of the province). The government's gaze rarely extended to the northern half of the province [the geographically centre is about 100 miles north of Prince Albert]. One provincial cabinet minister even called northern Saskatchewan "another country altogether."

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Saskatchewan concentrated its energies on growing wheat for the Canadian export market. It believed that this activity – and this activity alone – would be the means to greatness for the province and help realize its ambitions within confederation. The statistics behind this activity are truly remarkable. As the vast network of branch lines and grain elevators spread over the southern Saskatchewan landscape in the early twentieth century, the wheat economy took root and flourished. By World War One, Saskatchewan was producing half the wheat grown in Canada.

Farmers grew wheat for the simple reason that Saskatchewan's settlement and development had been organized around its production. The homesteads, the railway branch lines, the country elevators – even the harvest excursions – were all part of a grand design to supply wheat to the international export market. The wheat economy would not have been established so quickly and efficiently if not for the active encouragement of the federal and provincial governments and the investment in the region by large, powerful companies. The large rural population, together with the steadily growing importance of agriculture, made farmers a dominant force in provincial life.

The dependence on a single crop also influenced urban growth in the southern half of the province. The tens of thousands of prospective farmers who poured into the West after 1900 required the services of villages, towns, and cities if they were going to transform their homesteads into viable commercial operations. It was this new rural demand, precipitated by the record number of settlers that fueled a town-building frenzy the likes of which have never been seen again over the past century. What is often misunderstood, however, about this urban growth was that it was entirely dependent on the wheat economy and that Saskatchewan was first and foremost a rural province where three out of every four residents lived in the country.

These, then, were the defining features of the province a century ago – one dominant culture, one dominant crop in one dominant region. Together, they would pave the way to Saskatchewan's future as Canada's powerhouse province. It was an extremely narrow vision. But it was readily embraced by the political leaders of the day. The great expectations for the region led Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier to tour the province in 1910 and see first-hand how Saskatchewan had grown and more importantly, soothe farmer anger over federal agricultural policies. A strong Regina-Ottawa connection, meanwhile, quickly developed in the first half of the twentieth century. Saskatchewan's first two premiers, Walter Scott and William Martin, served their political apprenticeship on the Liberal back benches in the House of Commons. Ottawa also came calling and recruited two serving Saskatchewan premiers, Charles Dunning and Jimmy Gardiner, for the federal cabinet. By the 1920s, it seemed that the political stars were in alignment for the province, when Prime Minister MacKenzie King sought a safe seat in Prince Albert. These arrangements ensured that the interests of the province were not ignored nor neglected and that Saskatchewan enjoyed some real political clout. It is not too exaggerated to suggest that province not only expected to dominate the region, but within time, be the banner province of Canada. Saskatchewan was the region, and the region would lead the nation.

Saskatchewan's chosen path would create problems during the Great Depression and in the following decades. In fact, the past insistence on one dominant culture and one dominant economic activity in one dominant region would compound the difficulties that the province faced in the post-Second World War period. In 2005, Saskatchewan faces a much different, more difficult future. Unlike a century earlier, though, it is the province that will have to catch up, since the future will not wait. As one Regina civic official philosophically commented in direct contrast to Haultain's earlier bravado, "There is no clear road map to the future. The path will not be 'found.' It must be 'created'."

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This future will be profoundly different from the comfortable image of the province today. In the national consciousness, sleepy Saskatchewan is frozen in time, a land of wheat fields, grid roads, and country elevators, where nothing important ever happens and anybody with talent or ambition leaves to make their mark elsewhere. Journalist Peter Gzowski, who got his start in Moose Jaw, called it the most Canadian of provinces. The reality is an increasingly urbanized society (two-thirds of the population lives in urban areas) with a diverse economic base and a rich cultural life, trying to come to terms with its agricultural past and Aboriginal population. Indeed, at the start of this new century, the province is grappling with the twin challenges of meeting the needs of its Aboriginal community and maintaining a decaying rural Saskatchewan thanks to the peculiar provincial situation where there is both a growing young, urban Aboriginal population and a declining, aging non-Aboriginal population.

One of the big challenges for the province will be retaining people. At one time, Saskatchewan was the third most populous province after Ontario and Quebec. But those days are long past; Saskatchewan's has slipped below the one million mark since October 2001 and seems unable to reverse the downward trend. Regina, Saskatoon, and other large provincial cities will continue to grow, but at the expense of rural areas which seem to lose people like passengers from a sinking ship. Distance, in the meantime,

has once again become a factor in rural lives as the low population density and low demand mean that many services are now available only in larger centres.

Despite the relentless population decline over the decades, Saskatchewan remains the most rural of the three prairie provinces. (36.7 percent of the population still resided in rural areas in 1996 compared to only 28.2 and 22.3 percent for Manitoba and Alberta, respectively.) Nor is rural society any less complex, any less vibrant than its urban counterpart – it is certainly not static or one-dimensional. What has changed in the new century, however, is that rural residents probably have more in common with their urban counterparts than at any other time in the province's history because of new technology, such as the internet and email, and mass consumer culture.

One Alberta political scientist has asked that if rural communities are no longer truly distinctive, then why are they worth protecting? But rural Saskatchewan remains an integral part of the provincial identity and the people there deserve a certain minimum standard of living and basic services. Small communities, however, need to find something beyond special fund-raising events or there will be winners and losers as the consolidation continues. Educated children need a reason to stay or return.

The precipitous decline of rural Saskatchewan is a reflection of the changed provincial economy. Over the past century, geography and climate were two constant concerns as farmers grew and marketed crops to feed the world's population. The problem today, though, is that agriculture now makes only a marginal contribution to the provincial economy. Nor does the federal government seem to care about the plight of producers or the place of agriculture in the national economy, and has severely limited assistance.

The environment, not markets, will probably be Saskatchewan farmers' biggest worry in the new century. Global warming, also known as the greenhouse effect, is expected to raise mean temperatures over the western interior by as much as five Celsius degrees by 2100, generating more intense weather, in particular increasing the severity of drought. A more immediate problem is the chemically-dependent farming that has evolved since the Second World War and its impact on the prairie ecosystem. European customers have also begun to challenge the safety of the genetically-modified (GM) products and recently forced the shelving of the introduction of GM wheat.

The decline in the relative importance of agriculture does not mean that the provincial economy is any less vulnerable. Even though Saskatchewan's range of trade resources is diverse, from potash and energy to grain and beef, and trade is carried on with several countries, the province has no control over international price and demand. Even the loss of a foreign market, such as the prolonged closure of the American border to Canadian beef because of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or "mad cow" crisis in 2003, can have catastrophic consequences for Saskatchewan producers.

Some maintain that the best hope for the province's economic future continues to be greater diversification through provincial incentives. But no amount of forced growth can overcome the natural disadvantages of Saskatchewan's location and market size. Any new economic development must also involve northern Saskatchewan residents and end decades of marginalization during which time the region was treated as little more than a colony by imperial Regina. Had not Frederick Haultain demanded provincehood for similar reasons more than a century earlier?

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The integration of the provincial north will mean jobs. In fact, new jobs must be created throughout Saskatchewan to replace those being lost in agriculture. This quest for new jobs means addressing the fact that Saskatchewan has the least-educated population in Canada. Education and training will be needed if the provincial work force is to participate in the new knowledge-based economy.

By far, though, the most critical for Saskatchewan in the new century will be the role and place of the growing Aboriginal population – something that many citizens would rather not think about, let alone deal with. As of 2001, Aboriginal people – Indians and Métis – made up almost one in eight of Saskatchewan residents (13.5%). By 2045, just four decades away, they are projected to account for one in three people. Saskatchewan cannot afford to discount its Aboriginal population, particularly given its lowly place in provincial society, or there will be bigger, more serious problems in the future.

It has been suggested that the change already underway in the province "offers a new opportunity for Saskatchewan to lead Canada once more." These words might seem overly ambitious, if not unrealistic, given the complex challenges facing the province in the new century. It will take vast amounts of time and energy – but most of all, commitment. But Saskatchewan has never been a province to think small, never one for believing that things were out of its reach and settling for second place. The road to the future will be bumpy.

Solutions will be found – it is just that there will be no easy answers.