The Transition to Partisanship:

ALBERTA POLITICAL PARTY PLATFORMS, 1905

ABSTRACT

Despite a tradition of non-partisanship during the period of territorial government in Western Canada from 1882-1905, partisan Liberal and Conservative rivalries emerged with the establishment of the new provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905. David Hall says the platforms of the Liberal and Conservative parties provide important insight into the similarities and differences between the two. Hall says many of the same themes would resonate in Alberta politics for decades to come.

The principle of non-partisanship dominated the politics of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Assiniboia during the period of territorial government (1882-1905). Yet partisan Liberal and Conservative rivalries emerged simultaneously with the establishment of the new provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905. This paper will examine this process, and particularly how the parties in Alberta sought to justify the change and differentiate themselves through their platforms, issued in anticipation of the first provincial elections in 1905.

No one so personified the non-partisan tradition as the Territorial premier, F. W. G. Haultain. This policy enabled the local government to treat all constituencies and regions more equitably than likely would have been the case with a strongly partisan organization. Even more important, the Territories were a dependency of the federal government, and Haultain believed that a non-partisan government in Regina would fare better in dealing with Ottawa, regardless of whether the Conservatives or Liberals happened to be in power. The annual budget, the vast majority of which was provided by Ottawa in annual grants, demonstrated this dependency graphically. However, Ottawa's paternal presence often seemed omnipresent: it determined policy with respect to lands and settlement, exploitation of natural resources, ranching and grazing, railway construction, and native peoples; and it provided policing through the Royal North-West Mounted Police. Haultain promoted provincial status, especially after 1900, with the expectation that the Territories would be transformed into a single large province with the same powers and responsibilities as the older provinces of Central Canada, the Maritimes and British Columbia. He also believed that the new province would be best served by continuing the non-partisan tradition.[1]

The Liberal federal government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier did grant provincial status in 1905, but in a manner highly displeasing to Haultain and many people in western Canada. It created two provinces, Alberta and Saskatchewan, instead of one. It withheld control of public lands and natural resources, as Ottawa had done with Manitoba in 1870, and it placed limits on the provinces with respect to education policy. These provisions were highly controversial, both in Parliament and the Territories, because they gave the new provinces a second-class status within the Dominion. Ottawa further angered many Albertans by selecting Edmonton as the provisional capital of Alberta, at the behest of Frank Oliver, Minister of the Interior and MP for Edmonton; and by a blatant gerrymander of the constituencies in the new province for partisan advantage.[2]

Indeed the federal government simply steamrolled over the non-partisan tradition, determined to install Liberal regimes in both new provinces. G. H. V. Bulyea, a strong Liberal from Assiniboia, who had been a minister in Haultain's government, was named Alberta's first Lieutenant Governor; he was clearly intended as an agent of the Laurier government. The provincial Liberals held their founding meeting in Calgary in early August, 1905. They hammered out a platform, and chose Alexander Cameron Rutherford as leader. Bulyea then duly appointed Rutherford the first premier of Alberta on September 2, and Rutherford selected a wholly Liberal cabinet.[3] The Conservatives, much less organized, responded with a convention in mid-August in Red Deer, at which they also worked out a platform and selected a young Calgary lawyer, Richard Bedford Bennett, as interim leader.[4]

Before 1905 politicians in the Territories often had affiliations with federal political parties, even working on one side or the other in federal election campaigns. Yet they set aside these associations when it came to Territorial issues. With the popular Haultain declaring his opposition to the introduction of party lines in the politics of the new provinces, and asserting that he would run only as an independent,

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how were those anxious to begin provincial parties to justify the move to the electorate? The Liberals pointed to Haultain's very public association with the federal Conservatives in 1902 and 1903, and claimed that the Conservatives were very likely to set up a provincial organization. The *Edmonton Bulletin* contended platitudinously that a Liberal convention did not preclude maintaining a non-partisan approach, but that it was best for Liberals to agree on policy so that they could stand for "pure and efficient government". Because the Conservative convention followed that of the Liberals, it was easy for them to argue that they were regretful about abandoning non-partisanship but were forced to it by the Liberals.[5]

The party platforms provide insight about the similarities and differences between the two parties, as they tried to identify the popular issues of the day on the one hand, and to differentiate themselves on the other.[6] Amongst the similarities was an emphasis on government assistance for agriculture, establishment of agricultural colleges and experimental farms, dissemination of the latest farming information, and improvement of livestock. Both parties agreed, to use the words of the Liberal platform that "the progress and prosperity of the Province will depend almost entirely upon the development of the agricultural and ranching industries." They also agreed that prosperity also would depend upon developing a good system of roads and bridges, and the necessity of the western provinces banding together to build a railway to Hudson Bay in the belief that a shorter route to tidewater and a shorter ocean route to Europe would benefit prairie agriculture. Both parties declared that there must be a provincial university, with the Tories adding that it should have "practical departments designed for the benefit of the masses."

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Yet there were significant differences in the platforms. The Liberals began with a statement of popular democratic principle, linking themselves to the Liberal/Reform tradition in Canada: "that the intelligent opinion of the people is the true and just source of all political power," and that "the true end of government is the promotion of the welfare of the masses of the people by the creation and preservation… of equal opportunities in life for every individual," by preventing "monopolistic corporations" from infringing upon the rights of the people, "by amelioration of the conditions of life, and by the redress of injustice," by progressive public administration, and "continued attention to the wants of those new settlers whose courage, industry and thrift are creating the prosperity of the West." Emergent populism is also seen in the provision that "the administrators of public affairs should be under continued responsibility of the electorate." It is true that Liberals of the day were more inclined than Conservatives to general statements of ideals and principles, but it also was important to establish these principles in face of Conservative efforts to tar the provincial Liberals with the brush of the machine politics associated with Laurier Liberalism.

Another difference appeared in the approach to public utilities. It was a matter of hot popular debate in the early twentieth century, with the Bell Telephone monopoly especially vilified. The Conservatives simply called for "the public ownership of public utilities," a position consonant with federal Conservative policy on railway construction and Ontario Conservatives' approach to electrical utilities.[7] The Liberals contended that municipalities should be able "to retain or acquire control of all public utilities whenever they desire to do so," and be protected "against the encroachments of private corporations." They did not, however, insist on a broad policy of public ownership.

The Conservatives also naturally tried to force the Liberals on the defensive with respect to the unpopular aspects of the *Alberta Act.* The Tories denounced the education clause which limited provincial powers, and which "forever preclude[s] the possibility of establishing a national common school system," as "a flagrant and unwarranted interference with and usurpation of the rights of the province under the constitution." They went on to support the idea of an appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council on the constitutionality of the clause. They of course denounced the withholding of lands and resources from the province, and understandably took a stronger position on provincial rights – or what the *Calgary Herald* termed "home rule" – than the Liberals were able to do.[8] Yet the Liberals did commit themselves to a strong system of publicly supported and government-controlled common schools that would provide "the children of all classes of the population an equal opportunity to obtain a good primary education."

The Conservatives affirmed their imperialist tendencies. One plank in their platform, entitled "Defenders of the Empire," called for a "land grant, scrip, or other suitable reward" for citizens, including members of the RNWMP, who had fought "in defense of the empire either at home or abroad."[9] Another resolution of the Tory convention endorsed Joseph Chamberlain's proposal on behalf of the British government of an imperial preference, "as conducive to the national interests and unity of the empire."[10]

The Liberals, by contrast, emphasized what historian Lewis G. Thomas termed "the Liberalism of the frontier."[11] This populism, noted above, emphasized government by

and under the control of the people. While the Tories denounced the Liberals as tools of the "machine" in Ottawa, the Liberals spelled out the ways in which they believed in local, municipal government in protecting the people from the evils of large corporations and monopolies, and in keeping the provincial government accountable. They claimed that there was no justification for incurring "any Provincial debt," or for pledging the assets of the province for any public purpose.

If the provincial Liberals were hampered by having to defend the *Alberta Act* with its defects, the Conservatives had to deal with the fact that their leader, R. B. Bennett, was Calgary solicitor for two corporations despised in rural Alberta: the CPR, and Bell Telephone. The Liberals incorporated into their program an expression of regret that the *Act* contained a clause perpetuating the exemption of the CPR railway lands from taxation, and committing a Liberal government to press for its removal. The Tories produced a wordy paragraph contending that the exemption given the CPR in its contract was "an obligation of the whole of Canada," which the entire country should absorb, and not just the western provinces. In effect this legitimated the exemption, while objecting to its specific application.

Lewis G. Thomas characterized the Tory platform as "defensive", lacking in "vigour and definiteness." He thought it a rather "non-partisan platform."[12] In fact, it was very much in line with the national Conservatism of the day, in emphasizing provincial rights and public ownership, a preference for a strongly assimilative school system, and the provisions regarding the empire. There was not much in the platform to reach out to non-British newcomers. The Liberals clearly were more populist, emphasizing provincial rights, equality of opportunity, electoral control of elected and administrative officials, protection of civil rights, encouragement of local municipal governments, resistance to predatory corporations, economical government and avoidance of public debt, among other things. In somewhat differing ways, both parties were critical of Ottawa and mistrustful of eastern corporations. Many of these themes would resonate in Alberta politics for decades to come.

Endnotes

[1] Haultain's views are best set out in Lewis H. Thomas, "The Political and Private Life of F. W. G. Haultain," *Saskatchewan History* (winter, 1970); C. C. Lingard, *Territorial Government in Canada: The Autonomy Question in the Old North-West Territories* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1946); and Grant MacEwan, *Frederick Haultain: Frontier Statesman of the Canadian Northwest* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985).

[2] Lewis G. Thomas, *The Liberal Party in Alberta: A History of Politics in the Province of Alberta, 1905-1921,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959, 3-14; D. J. Hall, *Clifford Sifton,* 2, *A Lonely Eminence, 1902-1929,* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985, ch. 8; J. William Brennan, "The 'Autonomy Question' and the Creation of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905," in Howard Palmer and Donald Smith, eds, *The New Provinces: Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1905-1980,* Vancouver: Tantalus Research Ltd., 1980), 43-63.

[3] D. R. Babcock, *Alexander Cameron Rutherford: A Gentleman of Strathcona,* Calgary: University of Calgary Press and Friends of Rutherford House, 1989, 22-27; Patricia Roome, "Alexander C. Rutherford, 1905-1910," in Bradford J. Rennie, ed., *Alberta Premiers of the Twentieth Century,* Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2004, 6-8; D. J. Hall, "Bulyea, George Hedley Vicars," forthcoming in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography,* XV, Toronto: University of Toronto Press [November 2005]; *Daily Edmonton Bulletin,* August 3-5, 1905.

[4] James Gray, *R. B. Bennett: The Calgary Years,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, 90-91; *Daily Herald* (Calgary), August 17, 1905; *Canadian Annual Review,* 1905, 228-29. Useful background may be found in George H. W. Richardson, "The Conservative Party in the Provisional District of Alberta 1887-1905," MA thesis, University of Alberta, 1976.

[5] *Bulletin,* August 3, 1905; *Herald,* August 3, 18, 1905.

[6] The Liberal platform is conveniently reprinted in Babcock, *Rutherford,* 145-47; see also *Bulletin,* August 5, 1905, and *Canadian Annual Review,* 228-29. The Conservative platform is found in the *Herald,* August 18, 1905, and *Canadian Annual Review,* 229-30.

[7] "Liberal-Conservative Platform of 1904," in D. Owen Carrigan, ed., *Canadian Party Platforms 1867-1968,* Toronto: Copp Clark, 1968, 47; H. V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines & Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario, 1849-1941,* Toronto: Macmillan, 1974, ch. 7, "Power Politics".

[8] On this, see Thomas, *Liberal Party,* 24. On Bennett's provincial rights campaign, see *Canadian Annual Review, 1905,* 236.

[9] Presumably these were veterans of the campaign against Louis Riel in 1885, or of the South African War.

[10] *Herald,* August 18, 1905; Carrigan, 47; Robert Craig Brown, *Robert Laird Borden: a Biography,* I, *1854-1914,* Toronto: Macmillan, 1975, 63-64.

[11] Thomas, *Liberal Party,* 25.

[12] Thomas, *Liberal Party,* 24.