

# WESTERN CANADIAN NATIONALISM IN TRANSITION

Roger Gibbins

The narrow "No" win in the 1995 Québec sovereignty referendum has left western Canadians and their provincial governments in a difficult position. Indeed, from a regional perspective there could not have been a worse outcome. Far from bringing closure to the ongoing national unity debate, the outcome has exacerbated the crisis and, in so doing, reinforced the pre-eminent position of Québec on the country's political agenda. Moreover, it has increased the political leverage of Québec players across the constitutional spectrum, from soft nationalists and conditional federalists to hard-core sovereignists. At the same time, the outcome of the referendum has pushed the West even more to the margins of the national unity debate. The region's political impotence was dramatically illustrated by the prime minister's post-referendum decision to provide a quasi-constitutional veto and distinct society recognition to Québec, an initiative that flew in the face of long-standing and vociferously expressed opinion in the West. Even in the most charitable light, Mr. Chrétien's initiative displayed a callous indifference to the region's values, aspirations and political leadership.

In many respects, of course, all this suggests that little has changed: Québec continues to dominate the country's political agenda, Québec politicians continue to set the terms and parameters of the unity debate, and Ottawa's preoccupation with the Québec aspects of the debate effectively precludes western-Canadian input. (In the minds of the Prime Minister's advisors, the "West" must refer to the west end of Montreal.) However, it can be argued that the political dynamics of the situation have changed in some important ways. First, the strength of Canadian nationalism in the West, and for that matter across the country, is being challenged on more than one front, and within this context western alienation may be transformed from a chronic and easily dismissed

complaint to a matter of more acute concern. Second, western Canadians now confront a more truncated range of constitutional options, all of which are likely to erode rather than strengthen regional attachment to the national community. Third, the partisan dynamics of the national unity debate in western Canada have changed. The West's most prominent political voice, the Reform Party of Canada, has begun to stake out a more radical and confrontational position on the national unity issue. In addition, there is reason to expect that both Reform and the West will be increasingly vilified in the years to come as the federal Liberals train their electoral sights on the central-Canadian heartland.

In combination, these three changes point to a significant deterioration in the regional political climate. That deterioration takes on greater importance when it is placed against the fragile, even precarious condition of Confederation, and against the complex interplay of nationalism and globalization as we move into the twenty-first century.

## NATIONALISM IN THE WEST

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> western Canadians have generally been characterized by a strong sense of Canadian nationalism, one that generations of alienation and political discontent have failed to erode. However, that nationalism, and the attachment to Canada embedded within it, may become increasingly difficult to sustain in light of the outcome of the 1995 referendum. As noted above, Québec and its place within the Canadian federal state will continue to dominate the national agenda. More than ever, the potential to win seats in Québec will be held up as *the* litmus test for national parties. (Within this pervasive logic, the Progressive Conservatives, with one of their two seats coming from Québec, are

portrayed as a more national party than Reform, none of whose 52 seats are from that province.) If we put aside Reform for the moment, and if, like voters across the country, we put aside the NDP, then it seems clear that Québec leaders will continue to dominate the major parties and provide Canada's prime ministers. National programs will continue to be tipped to the benefit of Québec, particularly now that the federal bureaucracy will be acting under a Parliamentary directive to take Québec's distinct character into account whenever programmatic or budgetary decisions are made.<sup>2</sup>

All of this will strain national sentiment in the West as the conviction grows that Canada is being redesigned to fight the next referendum campaign in Québec. However, what makes the situation even more troublesome is that the strength of Canadian nationalism is being challenged on other fronts at the same time. The withdrawal of the federal government from the funding and therefore, inevitably, the orchestration of national social programs, in part as a response to the national unity crisis but also as a response to budgetary pressures, will make it less and less relevant for the lives of most Canadians, including those in the West. The North American Free Trade Agreement and the more general economic dynamics of globalization are making Ottawa increasingly irrelevant as a source of protection for the national and regional economies. If, as Donald Smiley has convincingly argued,<sup>3</sup> Canada is a "political community" stitched together by political programs and institutions, then there is cause for concern as those programs weaken and as institutions become less national in light of the need to accommodate Québec's concerns. The problem, then, is that the federal government's unity strategy reinforces a more general weakening of the institutional and programmatic fabric of the national community.

In this context, it is worth mentioning parenthetically that the need to sustain electoral support in Québec, and the vigilance of the Bloc in the House of Commons, will make it difficult for the federal government to move aggressively with respect to the national debt and deficit. Therefore the gulf between western provincial governments, who have been quite successful in bringing deficits under control, and the central Canadian governments — Ottawa, Québec, and Ontario — will continue to widen. Admittedly, the recent actions on the budgetary front by the Mike Harris government in Ontario may soften this regional distinction, but concern with respect to

Ottawa's deficit reduction strategy remains. The concern does not arise because an aggressive attack on the deficit is the "right" policy, but because the budgetary priorities of western provincial governments and the federal government may be out of synch, thereby heightening regional discontent.

The more general point to be stressed is that the renewed national unity debate and the incremental withdrawal of the federal government from programs touching the lives of individual Canadians both work to weaken Canadian nationalism. While this impact is by no means restricted to the West, it is amplified in the region because there Ottawa's national unity strategy is most at odds with regional values and aspirations. Therefore the question arises as to whether a "constitutional fix" might be found that could repair the increasingly frayed connections between the West and the national community.

## CONSTITUTIONAL OPTIONS

Western Canadians have long believed that the institutional design of the political system works to their disadvantage. In the past, they have sought to rectify this situation, to gain some effective regional leverage on the national political process, by advocating the reform of central government institutions. This strategy was best exemplified by the quest for Senate reform, although western Canadians have also toyed with a variety of other reforms designed to weaken the grip of party discipline and, indirectly, to provide greater influence for western Canadian MPs.<sup>4</sup> Thus the Reform party, provincial governments, the Canada West Foundation, academic commentators, and the Committee for a Triple-E Senate coalesced behind Senate reform as a counterweight to the electoral strength of Ontario and Québec. Contrary to the contemporary preoccupation with decentralization, Senate reform was seen as a way of *strengthening* the legitimacy and therefore the role of the federal government, an aspect that accounts for the occasional wariness displayed by western premiers. Support for Senate reform captured the regional conviction that what was needed was greater regional leverage on national policies rather than greater provincial powers, a conviction stemming from the recognition that many of the West's concerns with such matters as inter-provincial and international trade would necessarily fall under the jurisdictional umbrella of the federal government. In this respect, as in many others, western Canadian constitutional aspirations diverged sharply from those of Québec.

Now, however, western Canadians appear to have reached the point where they have abandoned not only the specific goal of Senate reform but also the more general reform of central institutions. The most recent set of institutional proposals from the Reform party, for example, calls simply for an elected Senate; references to an equal Senate have disappeared.<sup>5</sup> Provincial governments have stopped beating the drum for Senate reform. More important, the Prime Minister's decision to "lend" Parliament's constitutional veto to Québec effectively kills any prospect for Senate reform. Quebecers of all constitutional stripes have consistently opposed an equal, elected, or even effective Senate, and there is no question that Québec will use its veto should western Canadians attempt to put Senate reform back on the table. Given that Québec's veto is now in place, western Canadians cannot hope to bargain for Senate reform in exchange for a Québec veto, or for recognition of Québec as a distinct society; the Prime Minister's initiative has taken away any cards they might have had to play. It should also be noted that the incumbent Liberal government has shown no inclination to relax party discipline in the House; backbench Liberals who have opposed government legislation have been swiftly punished, even when their dissent did not threaten passage. It is clear, then, that the prospects for any significant reform to parliamentary institutions are bleak at best as such reform holds no appeal for the federal government, the Québec Liberal party, or sovereignists (hard or soft) in Québec.

If it is now impossible to reform central institutions to increase the political leverage of the West, what options remain? There seem to be two, although neither one should be greeted with much enthusiasm by western Canadians, or indeed by any Canadians outside Québec. The first is to adopt neo-liberal principles, and seek to shrink the size of the federal government and the federal state more broadly defined. As Ottawa shrinks, it will be less capable of transferring financial and programmatic resources to Québec, and for that matter Atlantic Canada, and thus some of the edge of western Canadian discontent may be blunted. Unfortunately, this approach, if consistently applied, would also entail the shrinkage of provincial governments. For anyone who still believes that government has an important role to play in knitting together the community and providing a social security net, this option is problematic.

The second option is to endorse extensive decentralization. Here again, the logic is simple: the more

that programs and financial resources are moved from Ottawa to the provinces, the less national programs will be used for the interregional transfer of wealth. The fewer resources the federal government has at its disposal, the less of a threat it will be to provincial and regional interests. However, quite apart from whether decentralization makes sense as a framework for social policy within a transcontinental federal state, it is by no means self-evident that it would succeed as a national unity strategy. Why should Quebecers become more attached to Canada in the face of massive decentralization? If taken very far at all, decentralization strengthens rather than blunts the appeal of Québec sovereignists; Canada has less to offer, and becomes less relevant to the lives of Quebecers. Yet the point to stress in the present discussion is that decentralization is likely to have the same effect in the West, weakening rather than strengthening citizen ties to the federal government. Decentralization might arguably lead to better or worse public policy, but it will not lead to a stronger national community. To the contrary, it will widen that gulf that many western Canadians already perceive between themselves and the federal government. As a national unity strategy, anything approaching massive decentralization has little to offer in either Québec or the West.

Unfortunately, western Canadians may be backed into this corner as other constitutional options are shut down. Although decentralization runs against the traditional grain of national sentiment in the West, it may be the only constitutional game in town now that the reform of central institutions has been abandoned. Western Canadians, like soft nationalists in Québec, may have little choice but to dismember Canada in the attempt to save it.

## THE PARTISAN DYNAMICS OF THE NATIONAL UNITY DEBATE

The constitutional dilemma outlined above is further complicated by a significant change in Reform's strategic game plan. From the 1993 election to the 1995 Québec referendum debate, Reform took a relatively soft and low-key position on national unity issues. The party talked about expanding its presence in Québec, and created a set of non-constitutional proposals for fiscal and institutional reform that would have some appeal both inside and outside Québec. In this regard, Reform began to look more and more like a conventional national party, arguing that it too could win seats in Québec. While

it can be argued that the hope for appeal to the Québec electorate was wildly optimistic, the party did little to mobilize latent hostility in English Canada to Québec and the aspirations of Québécois nationalists. Now, however, Reform has taken a much tougher position with respect to Québec. It has been pushing the federal government to clarify the terms under which Québec might be allowed to separate, and the conditions under which another sovereignty referendum might be held. In short, there is no more "Mr. Nice Guy;" Reform has decided to mobilize growing English-Canadian anger at the threat posed to the country by the nationalist movement in Québec.

This position, of course, was always a possibility for Reform. From the party's birth in western Canada in the mid-1980s, it has been clear that the Reform "vision" had little appeal in Québec, and could be more readily realized were Québec to leave. Indeed, it might be argued that the Québec referendum, and the anger created in the rest of the country by both the close outcome and the threat of another referendum, have created the "wave" so badly needed by Reform if it is to have any chance of winning national office.<sup>6</sup> However, the fact that the Reform party has now chosen to mobilize public discontent with Québec is of profound importance, for it is a strategy that goes against the consociational core of Canadian party life. From at least the onset of the Quiet Revolution in the early 1960s, national parties have been very reluctant to cater to public discontent with such policies as official bilingualism, even when it was in their short-term strategic interests to do so. Parties, or at least their leaders, have recognized the explosive potential in trying to mobilize the national anglophone majority against Québec or the francophone minority. But now, the close call in the referendum vote and the seemingly unrelenting growth of the nationalist movement have broken this taboo. As a consequence, long-standing western Canadian discontent with the constitutional aspirations of Québec<sup>7</sup> will have a partisan champion. There is little doubt that the next federal election campaign will be fought on very acrimonious terrain as Reform goes head to head with conventional national unity strategies. Given the sour public opinion climate in the West and the growing resistance to further constitutional accommodation, this strategy may well enhance Reform's regional appeal. What remains to be seen is whether it will have the same effect in Ontario.

Reform's new strategy coincides with an intensifying partisan attack by the federal Liberals. Reform and its leader have been routinely subjected to vitriolic abuse in the House of Commons where they have been described as being in bed with the Bloc, and even as being "the real separatists," committed to the destruction rather than the salvation of Canada. This line of attack, it should be stressed, coincides with but was not caused by the change in Reform strategy noted above. While that change has given additional credence to the Liberals' attack, that attack was underway well before Reform decided to bite the national unity bullet. During the 1995 referendum campaign, for example, Preston Manning was treated like a rude in-law for trying to butt into what was considered to be a family debate among Quebecers, one in which western Canadian input was neither sought nor welcome. Then, when Manning did step back from the debate, he was criticized for not pitching in, as Mr. Chrétien and Mr. Charest had done, to help save Canada. In short, Reform was damned when it did and damned when it didn't. Under those circumstances, and facing a daily onslaught of criticism from the federal Liberals for not being true Canadians, Reform had little alternative but to go on the offensive itself.

The critical question, however, is whether the Liberals' assault on Reform should also be seen as an attack on the West, or should it be seen more appropriately as a conventional, even high-minded attempt to woo western voters into the Liberal and, by implication, national unity camps? Here it is likely that the former interpretation will prevail, and not only because a majority of the region's representatives in the House are Reform MPs. The vilification of Reform *and* the West will address the Liberals' partisan agenda heading into the next federal election. The critical battleground in that election will be Ontario, where Reform placed second in more than half the ridings in the 1993 election and where it poses the most immediate threat to 98 incumbent Liberal MPs. If Reform's growth in the province is to be checked, the best bet will be to portray Reform as a narrowly-based western Canadian party, and therefore one of little potential interest to Ontario voters. This can be done by tying Reform to western Canadian discontent, and by suggesting that Reform's "national vision" does not extend beyond the Manitoba / Ontario border. The West, then, may well be written off in the larger interest of Ontario seats. This strategy will in turn intensify regional discontent in the West, further straining the already frayed bonds of national unity.

## LOOKING AHEAD

The argument to this point has been that the traditional attachments western Canadians have felt toward the national community are being eroded, and are likely to be further eroded in the years to come, as the federal government withdraws from national programs, continues to search for informal constitutional accommodations for Québécois nationalism, and vilifies Reform and, through it, western Canadians. If this argument holds, then we should expect to see the progressive estrangement of the region from the federal government and the national political process. The big question, however, is whether this estrangement will be of any consequence. Will the West simply sink back into a state of regional angst, similar to what we have seen in the past, but of little consequence for the broader unfolding of Canadian political life? After all, alienated westerners are no strangers to the national scene.

Certainly there is no indication that the federal government or the Liberal party will attach any particular importance to western discontent; it may even be seen as a useful resource in angling for votes in Ontario and among "soft nationalists" in Québec. If anything, we can expect harsher attacks on Manning and Reform, and by association the West, as the Liberal party positions itself once again as the only truly national party. This strategy will be mimicked by Jean Charest and the Conservatives as they try to position themselves as the only opposition party with a toehold, no matter how insecure, in Québec. And, there is little indication that provincial governments in the West are about to mount the barricades of western alienation and lead public opinion in creating a new definition of the West in Canada. If anything, provincial governments, and particularly those in Alberta and British Columbia, are likely to respond to the ongoing national unity crisis by pushing for greater decentralization. It may be, then, that the weakening of national sentiment in the West will not be of any great consequence; western Canadians will fret and fume, but the country will simply go on about the more important business of accommodating Québécois nationalists and arming the Québec Liberal party for the next referendum.

Any such conclusion depends in part on how one reads the larger currents of globalization that are transforming the political status quo in western democratic states. If globalization signals the decline

of nationalism, then the decline of nationalism in the Canadian West fits into the more general pattern; western Canadians will become less attached to Canada just as other national attachments weaken across the globe. Regional angst and the incremental dismemberment of the country through decentralization may simply put Canada at the forefront of the post-modern era. However, there is also an argument to be made that nationalism, or at least some form of nationalism, is a necessary and even inevitable counterweight to globalization. As individuals contemplate the choppy seas of a global economy, and confront the bewildering social and cultural diversity that globalization entails, there may be an increased need for a firm sense of national identity. Those best able to negotiate the uncertain waters of globalization may well be those who have a secure base, who can, when necessary, retreat into a national community which they can control and within which their peculiar characteristics and aspirations have some meaningful political recognition.

If this is the case, if western Canadians need a secure sense of national identity in the face of challenges posed by globalization, then they confront a true dilemma. Unfortunately, a Canada that shapes national institutions and cultural conventions to the convenience of Québec, and that ridicules regional protest when that occurs, will not provide a secure national home for western Canadians. If nationalism, or at least a secure sense of national identity, is a requirement for success in the global environment of the twenty-first century, then western Canadians may be forced to find that security elsewhere. And it is here that western alienation may be transformed into a new sense of western nationalism, one that puts the region or parts thereof ahead of the country as a whole.

There is nothing in the West's history to date to suggest that this would be the preferred option for most western Canadians. In fact, everything points in just the opposite direction; western Canadians would prefer a strong Canada that reflected regional values and aspirations. A dismembered Canada has never been of any significant attraction, and separatist movements in the past have never found a substantial audience. But, if there is a clear lesson from recent events, it is that a strong Canada reflective of western values and aspirations is not in the cards. The most probable future is a radically decentralized country whose institutions and constitution have been shaped to meet the short-term strategic interests of soft-nationalists in Québec, the Québec Liberal party, and

the electoral aspirations of the federal Liberal party. Faced with *this* alternative, western Canadians may reluctantly decide that the only realistic option is to begin to build a new national community, for without such a community they will be without a national anchor on the seas of globalization.

None of this is to suggest that we are looking at swift or precipitous change in western Canada; no one is rushing to the barricades or unfurling the flag of a new western Canadian state. Indeed, there has been very little thought given to even the roughest outlines of such a state. Moreover, there is no question that western Canadians have deep roots in the existing national community, one that they have done so much to build. Those roots will not be pulled out without a great deal of hesitation and anguish. However, when we take into account the forces across a number of fronts that are weakening Canadian nationalism, when we consider that post-referendum constitutional and institutional change will almost certainly be against the grain of western Canadian values and aspirations, and when we consider the potential impact of globalization on national sentiment, there is ample reason to be concerned. The fact that such concern is unlikely to penetrate the federal government should be of little

comfort to those who still believe in a Canada that stretches from sea to sea. □

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### Endnotes

1. Roger Gibbins and Sonia Arrison, *Western Visions: Perspectives on the West in Canada* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995).
2. The Act calls for the House "to encourage all components of the legislative and executive branches of government to take note of this recognition and be guided in their conduct accordingly."
3. Donald V. Smiley, *The Canadian Political Nationality* (Toronto: Methuen, 1967).
4. For a detailed discussion, see *Western Visions*, *supra* note 1, Chapter 4.
5. Reform Party of Canada, "Reform's New Confederation Proposals," November 1995.
6. See Thomas Flanagan, *Waiting for the Wave: The Reform Party and Preston Manning* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995).
7. See *Western Visions*, *supra* note 1, Chapter 5.

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