

## EDITORIAL

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**B***C Studies* cannot yet comment on the most recent BC election, which took place a few days before this issue went to press, but it can offer assessments of the provincial results of last November's federal election and does so in this issue. The two are not unrelated. The right-of-centre populism well evident in November 2000 was even more marked in May 2001. Each of the four political scientists whose commentaries follow attempts to account for this phenomenon, and the result is a set of fascinating reflections.

Of the four, the voice that stands most apart from the others is that of Boris DeWiel at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George. He argues that western populism grows out of its colonial context and should be seen as the response of colonists (immigrants and settlers) to the imperial project of the colonizer (central Canada-Ottawa) and the reaction of the colonized (Native peoples). The colonists feel themselves pinched between eastern interests that, with little direct stake in the region, are prepared to give too many resources to Native peoples who, in turn, are demanding too much. Without a very clear sense of who, collectively, they are, the colonists are sure who they are not: not Americans, not eastern Canadians, not First Nations. If pushed too hard, they will explore separatist solutions.

I suspect that Professor DeWiel has correctly identified a basic axis of cultural-political tension in this province and in many other settler societies. Theorists in the Colonial Office in the 1840s thought that the interests of settlers and of Native peoples were opposed and that unless the Colonial Office interposed itself between the two, Native peoples would be exterminated. Whenever the Colonial Office tried to mediate between the two, the settler response was hostile. The Great Trek of the Boers in South Africa was largely an attempt by settlers to distance themselves from imperial policies (regarding the fairer treatment of the Bantu) that they considered daft. After British Columbia entered Confederation, the federal government became a minimal counterpoise to settler ambitions, a role strengthened in recent years by decisions of the Supreme Court of Canada. The tensions that DeWiel analyzes have a long pedigree.

Moreover, settler societies are built on the assumption that the land they appropriated was waste awaiting development. Either Native people were not using it or were using it in unprogressive ways, whereas a modern, civilized people knew how to use land efficiently. As the settler mind combined self-interest and altruism, such land use was the way of progress and development. These values have long been taken for granted by most immigrant British Columbians and, as Elizabeth Furniss has recently shown (*BC Studies* 115/116), remain exceedingly powerful. However, they are challenged now, and it is not surprising that the challenge generates a political response.

If Professor DeWiel has identified the colonists' political voice, it does not necessarily follow that that voice offers a feasible or attractive vision of the future. Colonists tended to assume that Native people would die out or be assimilated, but, in spite of horrendous Native death rates and an unremitting project of assimilation, neither has happened. Native populations are now growing rapidly. Native senses of identity are strong. There is every prospect that many generations from now many British Columbians will consider themselves Native. Thirty years after the federal White Paper, an attempt to reintroduce a politics of assimilation will lead to civil unrest, and Native protests will be strengthened by the Canadian Constitution, judgments of the Supreme Court, and world opinion. British Columbia could easily become a dysfunctional society. Is this what British Columbians want? I doubt it.

I also doubt that it is possible to run away from the paradoxes and inequalities that colonialism has vested in this place. There is no separatist solution because Native peoples are part, inescapably, of what British Columbia is. If that is realized, and if it is also understood that settler prosperity and Native squalour both rest on the 99.6 per cent of the land of the province that an expanding settler society took from Native peoples, then the preconditions are at hand for the respectful renegotiation of the relationship between Native and non-Native in British Columbia.

British Columbia is big enough to accommodate flourishing Native and non-Native societies, and many shades of interaction between them. Negotiations will be protracted, especially if intended to lead to treaties, with all the symbolism and the illusion of finality attached thereto. I suspect that there are less spectacular means, always subject to renegotiation, to effect useful change.

A politics of difference, which is what it comes to, is consistent with the variety of which this country is composed, and of which Confederation itself is a very imperfect expression. On looking east one may see a dominating imperial culture, but also, if one wishes, two major European languages and vastly different historical experiences that have always complicated – indeed, have always invalidated – hegemonic conceptions of Canada. The Native question in British Columbia and elsewhere in Canada, emanates from what is perhaps our most basic axis of difference, but the whole country is built on difference, the respectful appreciation and enjoyment of which is at the heart of what this country is (when it chooses to see itself) and the basis of responsible Canadian citizenship.

In short, while I think that Professor DeWiel is right to identify deep-seated colonial tensions in the political mind of British Columbians, I fervently hope they do not lead as far as he posits they might. There is a Canadian opportunity which is much larger than a set of bickering localities protective of their interests and prey to American attachments, and which perhaps even British Columbians appreciate.

*Cole Harris*