

THE CANADIAN ALLIANCE PARTY IN BC*

WHAT PLACE FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA IN FEDERAL POLITICS?

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FOR MANY, THE CANADIAN ALLIANCE'S SUCCESS in British Columbia in the November 2000 general election was no great surprise. The party – in its earlier guise as Reform – had dominated the province in the previous two elections, and public opinion polls had made it clear that it continued to command public opinion. While British Columbians had preferred Preston Manning for the leadership of the new Canadian Alliance Party, when the Reform founder lost to the Albertan Stockwell Day they showed no hard feelings and sent Day to Parliament from a constituency in the Okanagan. After the general election, it was clear that the province's affair with the new party was continuing unabated. The Alliance's vote share climbed to half of the electorate, and it captured 80 per cent of British Columbia's seats in the House of Commons. Only once before in the last half-century did a single party (Diefenbaker's Conservatives in 1958) so dominate British Columbia's voice in Ottawa.

From another perspective the Alliance's quick mastery of the province is a surprise. British Columbia has long been characterized as politically volatile, with parties of the left, right, and centre all able

* We asked four political scientists to respond to the following question: Why did the Canadian Alliance Party receive 50% of the BC vote in the federal election of November 2000. Their answers follow.

to mobilize substantial support. The decade before Reform/Alliance's ascendancy was marked by sharp swings of the political pendulum. In 1984, the Conservatives swept the province, taking two-thirds of the electoral districts. That impulse was reversed in 1988 by large left-wing gains as the New Democrat Party (NDP) captured 60 per cent of the province's seats in the Commons. Then, in 1993, the province again rejected the vast majority of its incumbent representatives, including Kim Campbell, one of only two British Columbians ever to become prime minister, and gave three-quarters of its seats to the new Reform party. In just nine years British Columbians had provided successive electoral sweeps for three different parties and had overturned the electoral habits of virtually every corner of the province: after three elections only two of its elected federal politicians were left standing. By 1993, few political strategists would want to count on British Columbia – and so its subsequent embrace of the Reform/Alliance party only seems to have added to the puzzle of BC politics.

Sorting out what has happened to the pattern of party competition and organization in the province over the last decade allows us to recognize several key features of the current political scene and to raise questions about the future of British Columbia's federal and provincial politics. Through the Trudeau and Mulroney years, Liberals, Conservatives, and New Democrats all had viable party organizations in the province, and each managed to maintain a competitive presence in federal elections. Given Social Credit's dominance of provincial politics, the Conservative and Liberal parties had no significant provincial counterparts and their organizations were less rooted than was the NDP machine, which was capable of generating strong loyalties from its supporters. That reality, coupled with the New Democratic Party's distinctive left-wing position, and the inherent advantages of controlling the provincial government, might have been expected to inoculate the social democrats from Reform's challenge to the existing patterns of BC politics. They did not.

Though Reform ran in the 1988 free trade election on the slogan "the west wants in," by 1993 it was campaigning from the hard right and calling for significant spending cuts in order to deal with the federal debt and deficit. That claim was designed to appeal to Conservative party supporters, and large numbers of them abandoned their party for Reform: in British Columbia the Conservative vote dropped by 21 per cent and the party lost all its seats in the province.

The NDP saw its vote drop even more – by 22 percentage points. While some of this NDP collapse was caused by left-of-centre voters moving to the Liberals (whose vote went up by seven percentage points), it is clear that Reform was hollowing out the NDP base. The province had long been a populist haven, and Reform appealed to those BC populists whose federal home had long been the NDP. This was probably easier to do in the early 1990s because the provincial NDP was being forced to act like a government rather than an Opposition party.

This process, which saw Reform/Alliance appeal to both the right and the left in British Columbia, continued through the 1990s, and its vote share continued to grow. In the aftermath of the 2000 election, it is clear that both Conservative and New Democratic federal support in the province has been eviscerated. The provincial share of the vote won by each has dropped by over 25 percentage points across the last three federal elections, and neither party now seems able to mount a significant campaign in the province. By contrast, the Liberals have sailed on relatively unscathed by this reshaping of British Columbia's national party politics. If anything, their share of the electorate has grown somewhat in the past decade, and they have managed to carve out a base of seats in Vancouver.

As a result of these dramatic changes, federal political competition in British Columbia is now radically different than it has been for three generations. No longer is there vigorous competition between the advocates of a socialist, or even a social democratic, left and the defenders of a free market right: the right now easily commands the field. Although it often appeared more rhetorical and polemic than reasoned and substantive, that polarization long fuelled the political dynamic of the province. While perhaps not “the end of ideology,” this sharp change in the effective set of choices facing British Columbia's voters threatens to silence and disengage many who would challenge the status quo from the traditional left. One consequence of this one-party “competition” may be an increased sense of alienation, with more individuals withdrawing from participation in electoral politics. Collectively, most British Columbians are bound to feel increasingly disconnected from their national government if successive elections produce Liberal majority governments and confine their Alliance members of Parliament (MPs) to the Opposition benches.

The governing Liberals have prevented the Alliance from completely monopolizing the province by establishing something of a

western outpost in Vancouver. They have done so by appealing to the constituencies of urban dwellers and new Canadians that, in other provinces, support their national vision of a bilingual, multicultural country. But Prime Minister Chrétien's heavy-handed caucus discipline now quickly turns its handful of Vancouver Liberal MPs into Ottawa's defenders in the province rather than British Columbia's advocates in the national capital. The result threatens to accentuate a growing separation of Liberal Vancouver from the rest of an Alliance province, leaving the city politically isolated from its hinterland.

With the Alliance party overwhelming the opposition in all but a few urban seats, British Columbia's national politics suddenly looks like Alberta's. That province has spent virtually all its history in opposition, and its experience of one-party politics seems to have taught it little about the imperatives and virtues of compromise necessary for governing a country as diverse as Canada. The danger for British Columbia is that it now finds itself engulfed by a similar political dynamic. Together, the MPs of both provinces have shifted the centre of opposition in the country to the west, to the right, and towards populism. The election in November demonstrated that there was little appetite for that kind of politics east of the Great Plains, leaving most British Columbians trapped in the embrace of an Alberta-based opposition movement.

Both the Conservative and New Democrat national parties were severely weakened by the desertion of so many voters to Reform/Alliance. However, the strong organizational ties between the federal and provincial wings of the NDP means that Reform's erosion of the NDP vote has also had significant provincial consequences. As New Democratic supporters abandoned the party, its provincial organization shrank: membership went into decline and financial support began to evaporate. The NDP provincial government managed to win re-election in 1996, albeit with fewer votes than its opponents, but all indications suggest that it will be badly beaten in the spring of 2001. While there can be little doubt that much of the provincial NDP's troubles are of its own making, the collapse of its once faithful following in national politics has clearly undermined its core support and helped deprive it of its distinctive position in the province. This collapse of the NDP breaks one of the last strings tying federal and provincial political life together on the west coast.

It is not surprising that Albertans should have embraced the Reform/Alliance movement. After all, the party is simply the latest

version in a long line of Alberta protest parties. Little in British Columbia's past suggested that the province would turn en masse to such a new party. However, the sudden collapse of the old national party system in 1993 so disrupted long-standing political equations across the country that whole new political alignments emerged overnight. The election of November 2000 confirms that these patterns have now begun to ossify and that the dynamics of public life in the province have been fundamentally altered. The constriction of the effective political spectrum, the erosion of parties capable of shaping debate and mobilizing support, the decline in real electoral choice for voters in most constituencies, the growing political isolation of the province's great city, the corrosion of one of the remaining linkages between federal and provincial political life, and the confinement of the province's MPs to opposition have all flowed from this new alignment of forces. None of these changes ought to be celebrated.