

THE COLONIES AND
CULTURES OF CANADA
Old Versus New

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CANADA AS A COLONIAL NATION

THE STORY OF CANADA is the story of colonial growth and contestation. Our central political problems of today, whether they concern Native peoples, Quebec, our relations with the United States, the absence of a collective Canadian identity, or the alienation of westerners, are rooted in the contest between growing cultures. Canada exists as it does today only because older European cultures were able to recreate themselves here in competition with other cultures. Canadian politics, at its core, is about the reproductive competition of cultures.

Colonialism is the process by which an existing culture seeks to recreate itself in a new place. Historically, the process has not often been successful, but Canada is unique. Colonizing cultures typically

fail to “bud off” in new places either because the indigenous culture is able, in the long term, to resist it (as in India and Africa) or because it is eventually overthrown by the budding culture (as in the United States). But in Canada, the process was uniquely successful.

Colonialism was unusually successful here not just because two existing cultures recreated themselves in a new place and not just because these two second-generation cultures have continued to grow in central and eastern Canada. More important, Canada is uniquely successful as a story of cultural regeneration because the process of colonization is recurring: the old culture of Anglo-Canada is in the final stages of budding off in the west. The outstanding question for the future of Canada is whether the final stage of colonialism will be as successful as was the original one.

While most commentaries on colonialism have been concerned with the plight of colonized peoples at the hands of their colonizers, a third cultural player is also involved – the emerging culture of the colony itself. As the budding culture matures, it must deal with demands from both of the older cultures – that of the colonizers and that of the colonized. In British Columbia, the adolescent colony of the west is especially challenged. Not only is it faced with a remote colonial parent, but it is also faced with newly assertive indigenous cultures that have their own unsettled claims. The colony of the west has always been insecure in its political identity, but British Columbia is especially so.

The Reform-Canadian Alliance movement may be understood in terms of the politics of late colonialism. Like many counter-colonial movements, the growth of this western party was a cultural-political reaction against the dominance of another culture. But, unlike the counter-colonial movements on other continents, it is the reaction of a budding culture against a parent-culture. Thus its first instinct is to look for equal acceptance rather than to assert its sovereignty: “The West wants in.” Although its goal is inclusion rather than liberation, it shares the sense of alienation that counter-colonial movements have in common.

As the expression of a growing culture, the politics of the west is not yet based on a mature pluralistic sense of shared but competing values; instead, as a counter-colonial movement, it is defined mostly by a sense of otherness. Westerners do not know what unites them, except for the shared sense that they are looked down upon by the imperial culture of the centre, which sees the west not as an independent equal but, rather, as a junior extension of itself.

Apart from the respect of the colonizers, the people of a maturing colony must search for a unifying myth of imagined community. Members of old communities know who they are, but colonists know only who they are not. Central Canadians know that they are not Americans, and this became their idea of themselves. United by their own sense of otherness, Upper Canadians long ago began to mature as a culture; for Lower Canadians, the sense of otherness was broader but the effect was the same. However, for westerners, anti-Americanism is not enough. They know that they are not central Canadians, which means that they are more than just non-Americans: but what are they? The search for the unifying myth of the west goes on.

FROM IDENTITY TO IDEOLOGY

The search for a collective identity explains both the repeated rise and fall of populism in the west and the emergence of more successful ideological movements. The myth of populism is about the unity of the people, but populism is a thin idea that hungers for meatier beliefs. Beyond the raw need for community, populism gives no guidance about the choices that must be made in politics. We all value community, but should it be progressive or traditional? Should it be biased towards equality or towards freedom? Should its economics be founded on the values of sharing or on the rewards of success? Populism is silent on the deeper questions of politics because it puts the single value of community before all else. The complex values of a mature democracy are plural and conflicting, and it is in these conflicts that broader ideological patterns arise.

Ideologies provide us with larger stories about how competing political values should be prioritized. They provide the necessary linkage between abstract values and concrete policy decisions. In their search for political community, populist parties will be faced with choosing between the unifying myths of socialism and conservatism, but they are unlikely to converge on the liberal centre. The myth of liberalism is the moral and ontological priority of the self-sufficient individual, but this myth does not offer what populists want. Unless counter-balanced by the unifying myth promising *e pluribus unum*, liberal individualism is anti-communal. It is an ideology favoured by the economically mobile citizens of urban centres, for whom social relationships are often transitory and instrumental. The major urban centres of the west contain many urban individualists; however, in the rural and suburban regions, populism is deeply rooted. Western

populism may cleave either to the left or to the right, but it always moves away from the individualist middle. For this reason, its ideology will be oppositional rather than mainstream.

The myth of socialism is about the imminent possibility of progressive solidarity: the people can and will come together and move forward in social unity – or they would do so if it were not for the illegitimate hegemonic power of capitalism, and/or globalism, and/or patriarchy, and/or traditionalism, and/or environmental predation, and/or something else. The myth of conservatism is about social unity based on the moral order of nature, God, and tradition – an order that is singularly right and good but that has been upset by the arbitrary machinations of willful politicians pandering to a morally weakened people.¹ Although they differ profoundly on the kind of the community they desire, socialists and conservatives agree that the priority of values should often be given to the social whole rather than to the individual.

Thus western Canadians, throughout their short history, have dealt with the cultural insecurities of their colonial status by searching for collective political identities on the left and on the right. To speak broadly of overall tendencies, Saskatchewan sought a communal sense of self in the progressive solidarity of prairie socialism, while Alberta leaned towards conservative communal values. One province leaned left and the other leaned right, but each looked for a new cultural grounding in a collective ideology. (In its own search for unity, Quebec demonstrated the fluidity of the phenomenon: the Quiet Revolution was about a transition from conservative to socialistic communal values.)

In British Columbia, the two communal identities are oddly mixed. The conservative identity is currently ascendant, but both are well rooted in the province. The cultural insecurity of British Columbians is expressed in their recent voting habits: in the last federal election, they supported the most conservative party, while in the previous provincial election they supported the New Democratic Party. For political entrepreneurs, support is available on both the left and the right.

In the three-way cultural contest of colonialism, the Canadian Alliance champions the colonists against both the colonizers and the colonized. It resists both the dominance of the east and federal/

¹ For an attempt to explain and trace the origins of these ideas, see Boris DeWiel, *Democracy: A History of Ideas* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).

provincial attempts to support Native self-government. Agreements like the Nisga'a Treaty are meant to ensure the survival of indigenous cultures in their competition with colonizers and colonists. From the point of view of the colonizing culture of central Canada, Native self-government agreements are not significant to its own survival; rather, they are a means of transferring power and wealth from the colonists to the colonized. For alienated British Columbians, however, these agreements diminish the power and unity of the province, at least to the extent that the redistribution of power and wealth is a zero-sum game. If colonialism is the original sin of all Canadians, then its wages will be paid locally.

This alignment of political forces seems likely, at least in the near future, to tip the balance of politics in British Columbia to the communal right rather than to the communal left. The latter side tends to support the collective autonomy of Native peoples, who are viewed as models of re-emerging solidarity. While there will continue to be pockets of support for the left-communal values in the province, the right-communal values of conservatism will gain appeal if British Columbians come to see their collective interests threatened by the treaty process. On the right, self-government arrangements are not about solidarity for the colonized but, rather, about unnatural political divisions and economic limitations imposed on the colonists by distant colonizers. The politics of western alienation is, therefore, likely to reinforce the resistance to the Native self-government movement, which will be interpreted as a deliberate attempt by central Canada to balkanize, weaken, and abandon the west.

THE END OF COLONIALISM IN CANADA

Because the region lacks unity, the greater threat to Canada's future in the west is not the broad axe of separatism but the selective scalpel of partition, beginning in British Columbia. The beginnings of the process may be in the emergence of subnational groups from the three-way colonial contest. Parallel fault lines separating left from right, north from south, and rural from urban areas already divide the province politically. If it were to become further fractured, or if it were to be perceived by its citizens as having become so, then the danger is that Western subregions would look elsewhere for identity and inclusion.

Again, the western sense of otherness should not be confused with the anti-American prejudice of the centre of the country. The cultural

insecurity of Toronto, for example, is based on its status as a second-tier midwestern city competing for recognition against urban peers like Cleveland and Detroit. Toronto has reasons to be insecure as it crouches in the shadow of Chicago and New York. Its insecurity is due to the permanent fact of physical location; the insecurity of western Canada, on the other hand, is transitional and political. Today Vancouverites may be ruled by a federal government elected by a majority elsewhere, but theirs is among the largest urban regions in the northwestern half of the continent. Toronto may have grown from a colony to become a colonizer, but it will never surpass second-class status in its region.

In this difference lies the greatest threat to the success of the final stage of colonialism in Canada. The cultures of the old colonies in the east are also founded on otherness, but the insecurity of their situation is permanent. The west, as it continues its own search of a larger collective identity, has a future with greater options.

If, once completed, the treaty process is perceived to have led to the *de facto* partitioning of northern British Columbia, then the remaining non-Native regions might attempt to use the Supreme Court's 1998 reference decision on secession to force a negotiation allowing it to join Alaska. The temptation would be real: Prince George would instantly become a major urban centre of the American north, and Prince Rupert would be its major port.

Canada would survive the partition, but once the stigma of separation loses its hold, other western regions would be tempted to raise their own political and economic status. Were Vancouver to join the State of Washington, it would overnight become a dominant city in the fastest-growing quarter of a global superpower. If Calgary were to join Montana, it would dominate the state, sending two members to the most powerful triple-E Senate in the world. On the American side, incremental annexation at the state level would avoid the political problems associated with changes to the number of states in the union. And in central Canada, without western wealth, could Quebec be enticed to remain?

If the first domino of partition were to fall, then most of western Canada could disappear and, with it, the nation. The danger may be decades away, but the pieces are lining up in portentous ways. In Canada colonialism may, as it did in other nations, yet end in failure.