

THE TWO BRITISH COLUMBIAS

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THE OUTCOME OF THE FEDERAL ELECTION of November 2000 underlined a deep rift in the politics of British Columbia. Almost 50 per cent of BC voters – for the most part living in the suburbs or in the Interior of the province – voted for the Canadian Alliance, whose leader, Stockwell Day, represents an Okanagan riding. The other 50 per cent of BC voters – more concentrated in metropolitan centres like Vancouver and Victoria – voted for the Liberals, the NDP, the Conservatives, or the Greens.

There was nothing new about the pattern that emerged on 27 November. The Alliance's predecessor, the Reform party, had won between twenty-four and twenty-five of the province's seats in Ottawa in successive federal elections since 1993, with the Liberals reduced to six to seven seats and the New Democratic Party (NDP) to two to three. True, the Alliance's share of 49 per cent of the BC popular vote in the most recent election was larger than the 38 per cent and 43 per cent share that Reform had received in 1993 and 1997, respectively. And some of the margins of victory secured by Alliance members of Parliament (MPs) this time around – 20,000 and more in a number of constituencies – helped reinforce the sense of alienation from the federal government of significant sections of the BC electorate.

Ever since the Second World War, the federal Liberals have rarely enjoyed majority support in British Columbia. In the 1980 election, for example, when Pierre Trudeau secured a majority government, there was not a single Liberal MP elected from British Columbia (or, for that matter, from Alberta and Saskatchewan). The "government party" at the federal level for much of the last 100 years has never had the sort of roots in this province that it has had in the Maritimes, Quebec, or Ontario. It is as though British Columbia, as the province on the westernmost periphery of Canada, has felt freer to show a figurative "middle finger" to the Liberal party and then to complain bitterly about how British Columbia does not get its fair share of federal expenditures.

There is a deep reservoir of resentment vis-à-vis the federal government into which the Alliance can tap. One can go as far back as

BC disenchantment with the slow pace of construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1870s; with the level of federal contributions to British Columbia's infrastructural expenditures in the first decade of the twentieth century; to the refrain about "BC selling cheap and buying dear" in the province's 1938 brief to the Rowell-Sirois Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations; to discontent with respect to federal transfer payments to the have-not provinces expressed during the W.A.C. Bennett years; to a widespread feeling that Quebec has dominated the national unity debate ever since the 1960s.

And there is a venerable third-party tradition in British Columbia that meant that, for long decades, Social Credit, on the one hand, and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation-New Democratic Party (CCF-NDP) on the other, dominated the provincial party system. Some of the populism in the Alliance platform (e.g., with regard to the holding of referenda) recalls the right-wing populism of Social Credit. The socially conservative views of many of its supporters on such questions as abortion, gun control, and/or homosexuality come out of much the same tradition. And the Alliance's strong defence of greater provincial powers with respect to the federal government would have done a W.A.C. Bennett or Bill Bennett proud.

On the other side of the divide, many of British Columbia's urban dwellers and many members of its multicultural community hold small-l liberal values and are supporters of the charter, social programs, and the role of the federal government more generally. They can no more identify with mainstream Alliance values than can a majority of urban dwellers in Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, or beyond.

When I was writing up the chapter on public opinion in my book, *The Politics of Resentment: British Columbia Regionalism and Canadian Unity*, I was struck by the deepness of the divide between two segments of British Columbians who presented briefs to the 1997 BC Unity Panel. One segment (usually from the Interior) expressed strongly regional sentiments, while the other (usually from the Lower Mainland or Victoria) expressed strong support for federal powers. Let me cite some representative examples.

On the pro-regionalist-side:

Provincial sovereignty does not arise in the province of British Columbia because of language or culture, it's because of the usurping of provincial jurisdiction that's been going on by the federal government. (Cranbrook)

The Liberal and Conservative party vision, federally speaking, envisions more and more provincial jurisdiction being usurped by the federal government. (Cranbrook)

We've got to take the power back to the provincial governments to look after their own situation and get that Ottawa crap out of here. (Kamloops)

I feel as if we're too far away. We're left out. You can see it ... If they need stuff in Ontario or Toronto, they seem to get it a lot quicker than here. (Campbell River)

On the pro-federalist side:

Downloading more federal jurisdiction onto the provinces would be a mistake, as it weakens our country by turning it into a number of competing little fiefdoms, as in the case of Yugoslavia. (Victoria)

It is my belief that Meech Lake I and II and the Charlottetown Accord were basically "power grabs" by the provinces under the pretext and guise of the "Unity Issue." I absolutely do not wish to see this happen again. I do not wish to see the cherished principles of "accessibility, universality, comprehensiveness" sacrificed to provincial subrogation. The only way to have national standards in every sphere (health care, education, social assistance, pensions, cultural rights) is to have them federally imposed (albeit after negotiation with the provinces). (Vancouver)

I was born and raised in Manitoba, worked for some years in Ontario and have now lived in British Columbia for over forty years. I am not "Manitoban," "Ontarian" nor "British Columbian." My nationality is *Canadian*. It is my *birthright* ... It seems to me that "fed-bashing" is a very selfish practice that tends to affect the opinions of unwary citizens and ultimately feeds on itself. (West Vancouver)

On the subject of federal vs. provincial powers: If you were to poll the general population of Canada, I believe that you would find majority support for a strong federal government, with enforceable *national standards* for education, health care, social welfare, contributory pensions, etc. These are unifying issues that help to bind this country together. Recently there has been far too much emphasis on tearing the country apart, by demands from the provinces for control over a wide range of programs that properly belong under federal government jurisdiction. (Victoria)

This led me to argue that British Columbians were profoundly divided when it came to the respective roles of the federal and provincial governments and that there are, in fact, two British Columbias where such matters were concerned.

I might add that similar divisions extend to other matters of public policy. Generally, Alliance supporters are strong opponents of federal gun control, are hostile to Aboriginal land claims and the treaty settlement process, see Quebec as the spoiled child of Confederation, and would like to see taxes cut drastically even as the role of government is pruned back. Supporters of other political parties are inclined to be more open to accommodating both Aboriginals and Quebec, to be less friendly to the right to bear arms (to use the American phrase), and to accept a broader, interventionist role for government along the lines that have developed in Canada over the period since the Second World War.

What, if anything, can be done to bridge the divide? At one level, not very much. The voting pattern we saw in November 2000 will not be changing quickly: it has now held good through three federal elections. But if we were prepared to take the bull by the horns, one telling reform would lessen the polarization overnight. I am talking about changing our electoral system from the first-past-the-post system we inherited from Great Britain to one more clearly based on proportional representation (PR). What would this entail?

If we opted for something like the German system, it would mean that half the federal seats from British Columbia would be elected on a constituency basis, much as they are today, but that the other half would be elected on a party list system. Parties underrepresented in the direct constituency voting would be compensated with a larger share of the seats designated through the party lists. All parties with at least 5 per cent of the votes in British Columbia would be guaranteed a share of the federal seats from British Columbia – a share roughly proportional to their share of the vote. Under such a system, the Alliance would have secured approximately 50 per cent of the seats on 27 November, the Liberals around 28 per cent; the NDP around 12 per cent; and the Conservatives around 7 per cent. The Greens, were they able to secure 5 per cent of the popular vote in some future election, would actually secure representation at the federal level for the first time.

Conversely, under a PR system, a province like Ontario, which provided the lion's share of the Liberals' seats for the third straight

time – 100 seats in all – would no longer be coloured so monolithically Red. The Liberals would have secured no more than the roughly 50 per cent of the total Ontario seats that their share of the Ontario vote merited, the Alliance just under one-quarter; the Conservatives around 18 per cent; and the NDP around 9 per cent. What appears today to be an extremely regionalized party system – east versus west – is only so because of the type of electoral system to which we are wedded.

Is this likely to change any time soon? Not really, what with the federal Liberals comfortably ensconced as the governing party and what with the Opposition divided into four fractious camps. It would, however, be interesting to see whether, at the provincial level, British Columbia might not be prepared to set an example for the rest of the country. British Columbians have proposed and supported such ideas as referenda and recall in the recent past. There is reason to believe that there would be a considerable head of steam to support an initiative like PR. There is an active lobby group, Fair Voting BC, headed by a former Socred member of the legislative assembly Nick Loenen, that has been making exactly this pitch over the past twelve months.

Would the next BC government – almost certainly a Liberal one and with a massive majority in the Legislature to boot – be prepared to introduce such a reform after it comes to office? Could British Columbia do what the Scots and the Welsh did in 1999, when, pursuant to the Devolution Bill, regional assemblies came to be elected under a PR system, even though the Westminster Parliament continues to be elected by the old first-past-the-post system? Could we begin to practice at the provincial level something many of us would like to see happening at the federal level? It would certainly be worth trying. And it is something about which the two British Columbias might, for once, actually be able to agree.