

Politics as a Canadian Game

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The title suggests what I hope to demonstrate — that the deeper and richer our understanding of B.C., the more Canadian it seems. In part, this avers no more than the fact that our understanding of Canada has become more generous and capacious, that it now takes account more fully of the reality of B.C. and Quebec and aboriginals and other experiences at least partially ignored for a long time. In good part, the Canadian-ness of B.C. does appear to reveal that the varied provinces of this vast country have changed in ways which make their politics more similar, although superficially still extremely varied.¹ In some measure, this interpretation of B.C. and Canadian politics may be a version of the hoary arguments about whether a glass is half full or half empty.

It is worth noting in preface that one possible implication of my interpretation is that *BC Studies* has contributed nothing to our understanding of B.C. politics, since no article in its twenty-five-year history has explicitly tried to show how Canadian this province is.² That implication is lacking in merit, since the particular images of B.C. which have appeared in this journal constitute a significant proportion in the literature generally. By reading — and writing — articles in this publication, I have come up against points of view and facts which have caused me to think again about my own viewpoint. Re-thinking has, in fact, led to a reaffirmation of my

¹ Edwin R. Black and Alan C. Cairns, "A Different Perspective on Canadian Federalism," *Canadian Public Administration* 9 (1966): 27-44 is the earliest and still cogent statement of the view that "nation-building" and "province-building" are parallel processes and are not mutually exclusive.

² In fact, many try to show the opposite, or at least imply that B.C. is unique. The conclusion that events or circumstances are uniquely British Columbian has usually been implicit. See, as examples, Ian Parker, "The Provincial Party," no. 8 (Winter 1970-71), 17-28; David J. Elkins, "Politics Makes Strange Bedfellows: The B.C. Party System in the 1952 and 1953 Provincial Elections," no. 30 (Summer 1976), 3-26; Walter Young, "Ideology, Personality, and the Origins of the CCF in British Columbia," no. 32 (Winter 1976-77), 139-62; Emmett Sinnott and Paul Tennant, "The Origins of Taxicab Limitation in Vancouver City . . .", no. 49 (Spring 1981), 40-53. Note that all references that lack a journal name refer to *BC Studies*.

contention that B.C. is properly a part of Canada, but that re-thinking helps me to feel more comfortable with the conclusion.

Two Types of Political Science

This is not the place to write a history of the discipline of Political Science, but one particular observation will set the stage for the rest of this review. There has been a tension throughout the history of efforts to understand politics — and indeed throughout most of the social sciences — between what may be called *geographic* approaches and *functional* approaches. The former seeks primarily to understand a particular country, region, province, or group of related countries (Europe, say, or Africa). The latter asks very different questions which appear to have nothing to do with particular places, such as the effects of types of electoral systems or the pre-conditions of democracy.

Journals also reflect in varying degree this tension. Some are quite explicit about their geographic focus — *BC Studies*, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, and *Pacific Affairs*. Others also make plain that they are not tied to any geographic place — *Democratic Theory*, *Comparative Politics*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Many of the most widely read journals straddle the fence and embody the tension within the discipline — *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, and *British Journal of Political Science*.

It comes as no great surprise, therefore, that one finds different types of articles with different interpretations appearing in these journals. Almost all articles in *BC Studies* focus exclusively on politics in British Columbia, whereas virtually no articles in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* do so, choosing instead to analyze B.C. in comparison to other parts of Canada or as an example of a wider phenomenon such as polarized party systems or the relative importance of local compared to national issues in the political agenda.

This tension is inherent in the discipline, not just a manifestation of old-fashioned approaches holding out against the wave of the future. It is at least as old as the differences in approach between Plato and Aristotle twenty-four centuries ago. It is a good tension. It “disciplines” both types of practitioners of the study of politics — as each generalization about executive-legislative relationships or party financing is put forward, there are scholars and other observers ready to show why B.C. or Canada or wherever fails to fit the “law” or generalization. Likewise, every assertion of the unique features of a place will be met by an equally well-argued demonstration that the uniqueness dissolves when the facts are placed in a

wider or more abstract framework. And both sides of these arguments are correct! And both are incomplete.

If you read my articles in *BC Studies*, you will find an analysis of the peculiar constellation of events, personalities, and processes which have resulted in the unique features of this province, such as the dominance in the provincial arena of two parties at best marginal in the federal arena.³ If you read my books or my articles in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, you will instead find out how B.C. fits into a wider Canadian pattern.⁴ This is not because I believe contradictory things or wish to pander to my audience. An author emphasizes one side or the other of this inherent tension in understanding politics according to what one believes is missing or underplayed for that audience.⁵

Almost by definition, if you are reading my words now, you are concerned more than most people with the details about B.C. politics because that is one of your interests. Thus, I need not expound those details or try to demonstrate to you that *BC Studies* focuses on B.C. rather than on democratic theory or the politics of ethnicity. It may be useful, however, to provide a very brief overview of some characteristics of the articles about politics in *BC Studies* and their authors as prelude to developing at some length my contention that B.C. fits within Canada.

A Profile of Political Analysis in BC Studies

The articles in this journal have not been definitely labelled as political rather than historical or whatever. Thus, in isolating sixty-three of them as "about politics," I have made some arbitrary decisions. A few were actually written by historians — such as Patricia Roy and Barry Gough — but I judge them significant in understanding the continuities and evolution of B.C. politics.⁶ A couple of articles authored by Professors of Political

³ Elkins, op. cit.; Donald E. Blake, Richard Johnston, and David J. Elkins, "Sources of Change in the B.C. Party System," no. 50 (Summer 1981), 3-28.

⁴ David J. Elkins and Richard Simeon, *Small Worlds: Provinces and Parties in Canadian Political Life* (Toronto: Methuen, 1980); Elkins, *Manipulation and Consent: How Voters and Leaders Manage Complexity* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993); and Elkins, "The Perceived Structure of the Canadian Party Systems," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 7 (Sept. 1974): 502-24.

⁵ David J. Elkins, "Sophisticated Frontiers: Queensland and British Columbia," in Bruce W. Hodgins, et al., eds., *Federalism in Canada and Australia: Historical Perspectives, 1920-88* (Peterborough: The Frost Centre, Trent University, 1989).

⁶ Patricia Roy, "Regulating the British Columbia Electric Railway: The First Public Utilities Commission in British Columbia," no. 11 (Fall 1971), 3-20; Roy, "Progress Prosperity and Politics: The Railway Policies of Richard McBride," no. 47 (Autumn 1980), 3-28; and Barry M. Gough, "The Royal Navy and the Oregon Crisis, 1844-1846," no. 9 (Spring 1971), 15-37.

Science have not been counted since I judged them to be more literary and/or historical than political in intent. Nevertheless, other people who count the articles in the first 100 numbers of *BC Studies* will not get figures too widely different than mine.

Of the sixty-three articles and comments or rejoinders about articles, thirty-five have an exclusive focus on B.C.⁷ That is, I could find no comparison with other provinces, no elaborated theoretical framework which provides an implicit comparison, and no attempt to generalize from B.C. to the wider world. Fourteen⁸ did have overt comparisons — usually to other provinces or to some Canadian norm or average — and seventeen⁹ utilized an explicit framework to situate B.C. in an appropriate context; and three articles did both and have been counted in both of these categories.¹⁰ Despite the comparisons or theoretical frameworks, only one of

⁷ Or sub-units within B.C., such as several articles on Vancouver politics or particular constituencies. Footnote 2 above gives some examples of articles in this category. I should emphasize that I intend no negative judgement on articles which focus exclusively on B.C., especially since my own articles in this journal have that focus. My point here is to highlight a contrast with other types of journals.

⁸ Examples include Douglas Sanders, "The Nishga Case," no. 19 (Autumn 1973), 3-20, which contains considerable material on aboriginal title and land claims in the United States and Australia; Norman J. Ruff, "Party Detachment and Voting Patterns in a Provincial Two-Member Constituency," no. 23 (Fall 1974), 3-24, which summarizes all other studies of double-member constituencies in Canada; P. R. (Roff) Johannson, "A Study in Regional Strategy: The Alaska-British Columbia-Yukon Conferences," no. 28 (Winter 1975-76), 29-52, which puts these international conferences in the context of expanding international activities of all the Canadian provinces; and Donald E. Blake, R. K. Carty, and Lynda Erickson, "Federalism, Conservatism, and the Social Credit Party," no. 81 (Spring 1989), 3-23, which compares ideological positions of party activists at the leadership conventions of Social Credit (1986), Liberals (1984), and Progressive Conservatives (1983).

⁹ Examples include Paul Tennant, "Native Indian Political Organization in British Columbia, 1900-1969: A Response to Internal Colonialism," no. 55 (Autumn 1982), 3-49, which "frames" the data in terms of "internal colonialism," a theoretical approach used frequently in Europe; Nükhet Kardam, "Interest Group Power and Government Regulation . . .", no. 60 (Winter 1983-84), 49-74, which uses two case studies to address the issue of why some organizations survive and others fail; and Donald E. Blake, "The Electoral Significance of Public Sector Bashing," no. 62 (Summer 1984), 29-43, which places the confrontation over 1983 budget cuts in the context of the evolution of class structures, especially the different situations of public sector unions and private sector unions.

¹⁰ These three were: Fern Miller, "Vancouver Civic Political Parties: Developing a Model of Party-system Change and Stabilization," no. 25 (Spring 1975), 3-31, which uses a general model and comparative data on other cities; Raymond Payne, "Corporate Power, Interest Groups and the Development of Mining Policy in British Columbia, 1972-77," no. 54 (Summer 1982), 3-37, which situates case studies within frameworks developed by Eckstein and Olson as well as comparisons with NDP governments in other provinces; and Philip Resnick, "Neo-Conservatism on the Periphery: The Lessons from B.C.," no. 75 (Autumn 1987), 3-23, which uses "lessons" from Europe to understand B.C. and suggests ways that the federal government has learned lessons from the B.C. experience.

the sixty-three articles actually devoted most of its space to the comparisons or frameworks.¹¹ All the rest were overwhelmingly focused on conveying information and interpretations about B.C.

Authorship reveals a similar emphasis on B.C. Counting authors and co-authors equally, fifty-two authors were described as a professor or a student at one of the B.C. universities,¹² two at B.C. colleges, four in B.C. but not connected to a college or university (e.g., at a high school or in a provincial government department), for a total of fifty-eight. Eight authors were at universities or colleges elsewhere in Canada, and five were students or faculty at universities outside of Canada, generally the United States. Of course, if we knew where they received their education or lived while doing the research, the pattern might differ somewhat,¹³ but most likely the conclusion would be the same: most people who write primarily about B.C. as a place rather than as an example of a general process reside in B.C. People generally write about where they live, or choose to live in the place that interests them, or come to be fascinated by a place (as I have) after living there.

One puzzling set of numbers concerns the declining occurrence of articles about politics. Dividing the hundred issues of *BC Studies* into four groups of twenty-five each, there were twenty-seven articles (23 per cent of those published) in nos. 1-25; seventeen (16 per cent) in nos. 26-50; ten (11 per cent) in nos. 51-75; and nine (about 9 per cent) in the most recent twenty-five numbers. The decline in political coverage can be explained only partly by the decrease in total number of articles published (and thus on average longer articles). Only the editors could reveal whether fewer articles about politics have been submitted, or whether the quality has declined so that fewer are accepted. It certainly cannot be explained by less interesting politics in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

Before leaving this profile, let me note a few ways in which the authors and the content of their articles or comments fit patterns elsewhere in

¹¹ Patricia Marchak, "For Whom the Tree Falls: Restructuring of the Global Forest Industry," no. 90 (Summer 1991), 3-24.

¹² The distribution was not random: thirty-one authors had UBC affiliations, four had Simon Fraser attachments, and seventeen had ties to University of Victoria. Thus, Victoria may have been slightly over-represented relative to its faculty and student numbers, while SFU was extremely under-represented.

¹³ For example, Fern Miller (footnote 10) was teaching at the University of Waterloo when her article appeared, but she had previously been educated at UBC and Yale. Andrew Petter wrote "Sausage Making in British Columbia's NDP Government: The Creation of the Land Commission Act, August 1972-April 1973," no. 65 (Spring 1985), 3-33, while at Osgoode Hall, York University, but did the research while at University of Victoria.

Canadian scholarly work and probably in almost every country in the world. The authors are almost uniformly professional scholars, as the above affiliations remind us. A few are not, and that is good; but one wonders whether non-professionals shrink from submitting articles or are rejected when they do. The vast majority are men — sixty of the authors or co-authors compared to seven women and a couple of authors whose gender was masked by the use of initials rather than given names.¹⁴ Finally, there were only five articles which concerned in any conspicuous way aboriginals, their politics, or land claims.¹⁵ But five of sixty-three articles on aboriginal politics comprises a higher proportion than in “mainline” journals like the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*.¹⁶ Is the glass half full or half empty?

A Very Canadian Province?

Let me review briefly some evidence for my view that B.C. falls well within the general “norm” of Canadian politics. First, there is evidence about the ways in which B.C. and other provinces have *converged* — in other words, the ways in which all the provinces have become more similar or more integrated politically. Second, one must be very careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that B.C. is “like Canada” or “not like Canada.” These matters involve degrees of similarity, and one of the ways to conceptualize the form of similarity concerns comparisons using the same “yardstick.” Finally, recall as we examine the evidence that one may reach different conclusions about degrees of similarity for different features or dimensions of politics.

The first type of evidence — about convergence and integration — may be found in countless places. One might point to the Trans-Canada Highway and to the increasingly dense array of transportation and communications facilities over the past decades. More specifically political are the

¹⁴ The seven are: Patricia Roy, Patricia Marchak, Carol F. Lee, Andrea B. Smith, Fern Miller, Nükhet Kardam, and Lynda Erickson.

¹⁵ Wilson Duff, “The Fort Victoria Treaties,” no. 3 (Fall 1969), 3-57; Douglas Sanders (footnote 8); Paul Tennant (footnote 9); Tennant, “Native Indian Political Activity in British Columbia, 1969-1983,” no. 57 (Spring 1983), 112-36; and Michael M’Gonigle, “Developing Sustainability: A Native/Environmentalist Prescription for Third-Level Government,” no. 84 (Winter 1989-90), 65-99.

¹⁶ *The Canadian Journal of Political Science* has published five articles, one comment, and one reply on aboriginal politics in its first twenty-five years of publication, 1968-92, and one of those articles concerned Maoris in New Zealand. The first such article appeared only in 1984. A few other references occur in some articles on ethnicity and politics. Thus, the proportion of publications seems to be much lower than in *BC Studies* since *CJPS* publishes about ten times as many articles on politics.

hundreds of interprovincial and federal-provincial meetings of politicians or public servants every year in the period since the 1960s, compared to the desultory, intermittent, and peripheral meetings previously.¹⁷ Rare references slip into newspaper articles about the meetings of health ministers or such like, and no mention disturbs our attention about the thousands of productive meetings or conference calls at middle or lower levels of the public service. Nevertheless, the number and significance of such meetings has increased by a factor of at least a hundred since the 1960s, and B.C. politicians and public servants participate as actively as those of any other government.

Let us look briefly at what those meetings accomplish and more generally at what activities have grown in magnitude in recent decades.¹⁸ Governments in all ten provinces engage most often in very similar activities: for example, almost exactly the same proportion of all ten provincial budgets are spent on the same activities. Health leads the list, and that reflects the influence of the federal government in nurturing a national health system. But even in moneys spent on community colleges or day care or preventing drunk driving, there is much more similarity than in the first century after Confederation. Of course, some differences seem certain to remain — such as the higher cost of highways (per capita and per mile) in B.C. than in flatter provinces — but such sharp differences are found in fewer and fewer categories of government activity. And yes, of course, the exact details of legislation and regulations differ, but they differ within the same broad categories. At many times in the past, the categories were null or virtually irrelevant in some provinces,¹⁹ whereas they have all emulated each other in so many ways that that is no longer true.²⁰ Is the glass half full or half empty?

Let me conclude this review of convergence and integration with a snapshot of public opinion.²¹ To some extent, the growing similarity of govern-

¹⁷ The first major scholarly study of these meetings was Richard Simeon, *Federal-Provincial Diplomacy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972). Subsequently, their study has expanded almost as fast as the meetings themselves.

¹⁸ For changes in the 1950s through the 1970s, see Elkins and Simeon, *Small Worlds* op. cit.

¹⁹ For example, Quebec had no Ministry of Education until the mid-1960s because schooling through high school was in the hands of the various religious organizations (Catholic, Protestant, etc.).

²⁰ For example, the federal government had a Federal-Provincial Relations Office for quite a while before any of the provinces set up a comparable co-ordinating body. Now each province has one, although the exact names vary: Department of Inter-governmental Affairs, Department of Canadian Relations, and so on.

²¹ For more details, see Elkins and Simeon, *Small Worlds*, op cit.

ment activities just mentioned seems to be a response to ever more similar popular demands. When people move, they expect to receive services they got used to elsewhere; the media report initiatives elsewhere, and Canadians ask for them in their province. The trends of opinion, however, go much deeper. They involve convergence on elements of the political culture. Rates of participation in politics and feelings of political efficacy have come to be quite uniform across the country compared to what they were only a generation or two ago. The degree of trust in politicians — or conversely, of cynicism — has gone up in some areas and down in others so that one can now speak of national norms.²² Unfortunately, at the moment, the national norm is extensive mistrust and cynicism everywhere, just as in the late 1960s there was more trust everywhere.

Some profound differences in opinion and political culture remain. This is most notable on issues related to language and ethnicity, because of Quebec's long-standing concerns, and on restructuring the economy, with profound disagreements over free trade and whether governments should intervene in market adjustments.²³ Having admitted that differences exist, one must equally note that B.C. seems to fit in with the majority on the most contentious issues, such as favouring free trade, opposition to constitutional reforms, and providing abortions to women who seek them. Indeed, the existence of divisive issues — the same divisive issues — in all parts of Canada leads me to the other major type of evidence about our growing national integration. We are mostly arguing about the same issues, albeit sometimes on opposite sides, when we are not actually agreeing about more topics.²⁴

²² It has been the fashion to debate whether one should speak of national, regional, or class "norms" in political culture, attitudes, and voting. As usual in such "either-or" debates, all of these interpretations have some validity. See Elkins and Simeon, *Small Worlds*, op. cit.; Michael D. Ornstein, et al., "Region, Class and Political Culture in Canada," *CJPS* 13 (June 1980): 227-71; and Elizabeth Gidengil, "Class and Region in Canadian Voting: A Dependency Interpretation," *CJPS* 22 (Sept. 1989): 563-87. There have also been attempts to analyze class as taking on special significance within B.C., especially by Patricia Marchak, "Class, Regional, and Institutional Sources of Social Conflict in B.C.," no. 27 (Autumn 1975), 30-49, and a rebuttal by Daniel J. Koenig and Trevor B. Proverbs, "Class, Regional, and Institutional Sources of Party Support within British Columbia," no. 29 (Spring 1976), 19-28.

²³ Richard Johnston, et al., *Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of a Canadian Election* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1992); and Richard Johnston, *Public Opinion and Public Policy in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), vol. 35 in the research program of the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada.

²⁴ The "national question" in Quebec is the major exception. Of course, issues may be seen as different by particular groups, as the issue of bilingualism reminds us: in most

One way to conceptualize conflict and put it in a comparative framework involves specifying the dimension on which conflict or disagreement occurs. In B.C. for several decades now, intense partisan conflict has masked an extensive area of agreement between the NDP (and the CCF before it) and the Social Credit party. Although the traditional rhetoric in B.C. election campaigns concerns "free enterprise" versus "socialism," virtually no one actually believes in free enterprise in the classic, Adam Smith sense of a completely unregulated market in which a Darwinian struggle determines winners and losers. Instead, the common dimension over which conflict generally occurs may be better labelled "individual versus collective responsibility."

Virtually all British Columbians (and Canadians generally) agree on goals like prosperity, economic development, social well-being, improved health care and education, and individual betterment.²⁵ Unfortunately, these goals often conflict with each other.

In weighing "trade-offs" among these goals and among their varied costs, British Columbians have adopted two characteristically different orientations. One focuses on each individual's responsibility to take care of self and family and to aid the common good by being a productive member of society. The other emphasizes the risks one faces in an individualistic and competitive economic system; it focuses on sharing of certain risks and collective benefits which can be gained through co-ordinated actions. The latter orientation notes that some individuals "fail" because of random events like illness, accident, or handicap which could in principle affect anyone, and it avers that such risks should be shared collectively.²⁶ The individualist point of view — being more optimistic and more fatalistic — retorts that these are the breaks, and each person must bear the costs and consequences whether positive or negative.

of Canada, it has been interpreted as primarily a way of protecting the French language in many provinces, but in Quebec it is seen as protection for the powerful English-language minority there.

²⁵ Edwin Black, "British Columbia: The Politics of Exploitation," in Hugh G. Thorburn, ed., *Party Politics in Canada*, 4th edition (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1979); and Donald E. Blake, *Two Political Worlds: Parties and Voting in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985).

²⁶ Most people in recent decades have assumed that collective responsibility entails government action, which in turn makes some people more favourable and others less favourable to the idea. Of course, private organizations can also play a role. The CCF, for example, grew out of private wheat co-operatives and more broadly the shared concerns of self-help among Prairie farmers. As so often happens, we lose track of what were means and what were goals; and eventually the means assume an importance beyond the purely instrumental. The concepts of individual and collective responsibility help to focus our attention on goals, values, and principles.

These orientations to individual or collective responsibility do not, in the public, exist as water-tight compartments. A few fanatics may take extreme individualistic or collective positions, but most people fall in mid-ranges, favouring individual responsibility in somewhat more situations but not eschewing collective solutions in others, and vice versa. The major parties in provincial elections, however, do not use such nuanced ideas in their attacks on each other. Thus, the provincial political arena appears to be radically polarized, whereas the tradition of national parties like Liberals and Progressive Conservatives is described as “brokering” across the major cleavages and smoothing over ideological chasms.

Before jumping to the conclusion that B.C. politics lacks common cause among its partisans, consider some concrete actions which have underlain the intense partisanship for decades. Recall that the government of B.C. (1) bought a railroad from its private sector owners and ran it at a deficit for seven decades, (2) nationalized (or provincialized) the world’s largest ferry system, (3) expropriated B.C. Electric and turned it into a provincial crown corporation (B.C. Hydro), (4) created one of the largest holding companies in Canada and gave the shares to its citizens, and (5) built a stadium, convention centre, and housing development with the intent of giving them away.

All of these major actions were undertaken by outspokenly anti-socialist parties claiming to uphold the banner of “free enterprise.” All were accomplished by Social Credit except for the purchase of B.C. Rail by a Liberal government in 1918. Furthermore, while pursuing such actions, Social Credit ran against a party (CCF, then NDP) which itself advocated the same measures. Thus, rancorous legislative debates, extravagant campaign rhetoric, and acrimonious partisanship have often masked an underlying consensus about what is good for British Columbia.

One should recall how Canadian these examples are, even if B.C. is a bit more “collective” in orientation than some other regions. The first great nation-building enterprise, after all, was the use of public monies to finance a private railroad. Medical and hospital care, publicly supported universities, “incentives” to businesses to locate in peripheral regions, federal ownership (until recently) of Air Canada, and the Alberta Progressive Conservative government’s ownership (until recently) of Pacific Western Airlines might be offered as national contexts within which to evaluate British Columbia’s position on the dimension of individual and collective responsibility.

The complex and frustrating ways in which individual and collective responsibility play themselves out in Canadian politics take different form

in the federal arena than in B.C. or other places. At the national level, one would not exaggerate too much in stating that Canada's existence reflects a bargain struck over individual and collective responsibilities for religion and language. We have come to debate and understand what was originally a contest between Protestant and Catholic as English and French language rights, and that has sometimes been over-simplified as Canada versus Quebec. Whatever the labels people apply to these issues, Confederation reflected in significant measure a recognition that individuals as individuals could not maintain their religion or language or way of life if the majority favoured a different religion or language or way of life. Therefore, two levels of government were created so that a national majority could hold accountable a government charged with responsibility for common concerns and so that provincial majorities (Protestant-English in most places, Catholic-French in Quebec) could hold accountable governments charged with responsibility for "local affairs" and "property and civil rights."

During the twenty-five years that *BC Studies* has been publishing, Canadians have debated, argued, contested, and fought over individual and collective responsibilities and rights. This has been most visible in regard to Trudeau's vision of exclusively individual choices about language versus Quebec's vision of its historic and collective responsibility for "the French fact." Both visions are partial and incomplete, and each poses a false choice. Zero-sum choices between mutually exclusive positions are destructive of community, whether national, provincial, or local. The task of democratic politics has always been to find a balance in which something gained is offset by something lost, in which no one wins completely and no one loses completely. Unless language communities are protected, individuals cannot exercise real choices about retaining their language and passing it to their children or not. This verity is easily overlooked by speakers of the majority language, whose linguistic security does not rest on legislation but on the unquestionability of majority rule. Reliance on a community, however, is obvious to all those who are submerged in the sea of another language.

British Columbians are, in strict terms, well outside of this most Canadian issue of religion and language. With a lower proportion of Catholics or francophones than any other province for most of its history, B.C. has seemed cut off from that great national debate, as it has been cut off by other things like distance. Yet the deep consensus on striking a balance between individual and collective responsibility — with most citizens favouring quite a lot of both kinds of responsibility — characterizes B.C. as

well as Canada, although the overt issues in which the dimension crops up may be more often economic than cultural in B.C. The slow, intermittent, and hesitant evolution in this province's efforts to confront what it has done to its aboriginal peoples may finally mean that B.C. voters and governments can come to appreciate the trade-off between individual and community in cultural and linguistic terms as well as in regard to our economic prosperity.²⁷ In this respect, B.C. may also be very Canadian.

Accepting Ambiguity and Contradiction

Without some form of underlying consensus (whether conscious or not), there is no community. Without conflict, there is no need for politics. Thus, to speak of "political community" is akin to an oxymoron: unity in diversity, diversity in unity. British Columbia partakes of this inherent ambiguity and contradiction, just as individual British Columbians feel ambivalent about many things and harbour contradictory self-images.²⁸

This province is isolated from Canada — and many people are proud of that — but steadfastly attached to Canada — and they are proud of that too. It is a very British place, but with the highest proportion of Asian-born Canadians of any province. It is a place which has welcomed immigrants from scores of countries and migrants from other provinces, but it has a history — like Canada itself — of racism, intolerance, and smugness.²⁹ It has British parliamentary institutions and a free press; but its legislature is an arena for bitter and vicious acrimony as much as debate, and journalism (with a few exceptions) is as yellow as anywhere in Canada. It is famous for an affluent, "laid-back" lifestyle, but it manifests Canada's highest rates of substance abuse and suicide. If ambiguity and contradiction are hallmarks of Canadian identity, as many argue, then B.C. is the most Canadian of provinces.

The ambiguities and contradictions begin with the land itself. As we bring people, history, and institutions into the picture, the meaning of the land changes; but it is always present as "ground" to our "figure," as friend and antagonist, as wealth and cost. Distance is real when measured

²⁷ See the articles on native Indian politics by Paul Tennant cited above, and more comprehensively, his recent book, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990).

²⁸ The next few pages have been adapted from my chapter, "British Columbia as a State of Mind," in Blake, *Two Political Worlds*, op. cit.

²⁹ See for example, W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978) and Thomas R. Berger, *Fragile Freedoms: Human Rights and Dissent in Canada* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1981).

physically, but distance in its richest sense is a human invention. Ottawa is 2,500 miles from B.C., but B.C. is 25,000 miles from Ottawa.

British Columbia is usually portrayed as standing apart from the rest of Canada, walled off by the imposing barrier of the Rocky Mountains. But nearly one-fifth of B.C. lies east of the Rockies in the Peace River area, which is closely tied to the economy of Alberta. The Rockies are probably most people's predominant image of B.C. They figure in travel brochures; they symbolize the wildness of which B.C. partakes; and they perhaps make concrete the image of leisure and the "west coast lifestyle." Yet the picture postcard resorts are in Alberta (Banff, Jasper, Waterton Lakes); and the majority of the resorts and recreational areas of B.C. are not in the Rockies but in the Coast Mountains (which are far wilder and more "remote" though closer in miles than the Rockies), in the dry interior, and in the lush islands just off the coast.

If it is myth that B.C. is "cut off" by the Rockies, it is nevertheless true that B.C. was isolated from the rest of Canada for a long time.³⁰ As late as 1903, there was no road from Alberta to the coast. Only in the 1950s were the highways paved from Calgary and Edmonton to Vancouver. It is not the case that British Columbians want to be cut off — they participate actively in the federal political system; and after all, the great lure of joining Confederation was the transcontinental railway. Important as that link was — for Canada as well as B.C. — the distances were so immense and the route within B.C. so twisting and slow that few bothered or could afford to travel across the continent. Now, of course, jet airplanes whisk travellers in a matter of hours to any part of Canada. Distance has thus been redefined. Despite these feats of technology, it still takes longer to get from Vancouver to Newfoundland than to Tokyo. And from Nanaimo or Kimberley, it takes a lot longer.

Of equal significance, B.C. is cut off from itself.³¹ The dry plateau of the Cariboo-Chilcotin is hemmed in on all sides by one or another range of mountains. Small towns deemed next door to each other by eagles might

³⁰ For more details about the development of transportation in the province, see R. Cole Harris, "Moving Amid the Mountains, 1870-1930," *BC Studies* 58 (Summer 1983): 3-39.

³¹ For comprehensive information on B.C. geography and the changing patterns of communication and isolation as they affect electoral politics, see R. Jeremy Wilson, "The Impact of Modernization on British Columbia Electoral Patterns: Communications Development and the Uniformity of Swing, 1903-1975" (Ph.D., University of B.C., 1978); "The Impact of Communications Development on British Columbia Electoral Patterns, 1903-1975," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 13 (Sept. 1980): 509-35; and "Geography, Politics, and Culture: Electoral Insularity in British Columbia," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 13 (Dec. 1980): 751-74.

as well be in different provinces as far as road connections are concerned. Vancouver Island resisted strongly its amalgamation with the mainland in one province because of the historical differences in development, the barrier of water travel, and the "threat" of New Westminster and later Vancouver as a rival. There are many communities which can even today be reached only by float-plane or boat, weather permitting. It is not hard, therefore, to understand why B.C. has the largest fleet of ferries in the world, why it has one of the largest fleets of float-planes, why its highways department has such a large budget, and why it feels the need for its own railroad to compensate for what is viewed as neglect by Canadian Pacific and Canadian National.

For all of the problems of internal communication and transport, there is a perception that B.C. is still fairly homogeneous. It is believed to be a very British place. Unlike Alberta and Saskatchewan, which were established by the federal government, B.C. was a settled British outpost in the mid-nineteenth century, and the street names in Vancouver, Victoria, and elsewhere stand tribute to that history. This, together with its early resource-based industrialization, gave it more in common with Ontario than with the agrarian West.

Despite that side of its history, B.C. has been peopled by an extraordinary variety of races, cultural groups, and mixes of all sorts. The figures from any census will reveal the proportions who spoke other languages than English or French, who came from other countries, or who moved from elsewhere in Canada. As late as 1881, a majority of the population of B.C. was Indian,³² and a century later, B.C. had a higher proportion of native peoples than any other province and nearly double the proportion for Canada as a whole. Although more than 16 per cent of the residents of Canada were born in some other country, the figure for B.C. is approximately one in four. Furthermore, B.C. has twice the proportion of Asian-born citizens (4.9 per cent) as does Canada (2.3 per cent). One-quarter of all Asian-born Canadians reside in B.C.

More vivid than raw figures, however, are a few striking facts and impressions. Vancouver has the second-largest Chinese community of any city outside of Asia (second only to San Francisco). Half the children in the Vancouver public school system have English as their second language. (Those with English as their first language seem to prefer the French immersion schools!)

³² W. Peter Ward, "Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939," *BC Studies* 45 (Spring 1980): 17-35.

The Diaspora is not confined to Vancouver. Every small town has its old and new families of Chinese, Japanese, east Indians, Germans, Finns, Dutch, and others. Every town has at least one restaurant serving “Chinese and Canadian” food, and probably crepes, tacos, and pizza as well.

The population is ever renewed by in-migrants, and the long-term residents always appear to be on the move to other parts of the province. Even if the proportions of in-migrants and internal migrants drops, the absolute numbers are high. Like the ambiguous facts about distances, terrain, weather, and communication, the complex facts about the population set limits, pose problems, and offer opportunities to parties, movements, and governments. These are circumstances worth attention in their own right; but they have played their roles as well in shaping the character — or political culture — of British Columbians. Indeed, complexity and diversity makes the consensus which does exist even more remarkable. The same may be said of Canada.

What Is Politics?

Some readers will query whether these ambiguous or contradictory images have much to do with politics. Why mention them rather than the legislature, courts, and municipalities? Of course, I have discussed some overtly political components such as parties, issues, and ideologies. One of the hard questions for any serious student of politics — or of the social sciences generally? — concerns the boundaries of the phenomenon and thus the proper objects of study. The land, people, history, and cultures of B.C. are, to my way of thinking, inextricably linked to the conduct of political life in the province. This is often easier to see when reading a journal like *BC Studies* than journals more oriented to the academic discipline of political science. I was, for example, tempted to include in my profile of “political” articles George Bowering’s study of B.C. literature, and how its theme of “home” complements the theme of “survival” which Margaret Atwood ascribes to Canada.³³

Politics as an activity concerns the processes by which people with contradictory goals, values, needs, or desires may work together to achieve common benefits. If all the rules are agreed, bureaucrats can handle the issues. If not, we must find compromises, devise trade-offs, make priorities clear, and do some things before others, even though no one finds these totally satisfactory.

³³ George Bowering, “Home Away: A Thematic Study of Some British Columbia Novels,” no. 62 (Summer 1984), 9-28.

Goals, values, needs, and desires become political by being contested, but they are not inherently so. Hence, “inputs” or raw materials of politics make that realm permeable to all sorts of things which cannot be defined as political in and of themselves. Social welfare policy is clearly “political” because a government sets the policy. In the nineteenth century, however, such policies were the business of churches and other local, private organizations. Is there something to be learned by noting that what was once “religious” or “charitable” has now become “political”? That change of definition reflects more than an arbitrary intellectual enterprise. It grew out of evolving concepts of individualism, economic rationality, privacy, community, and nationalism. To understand it fully, one must not restrict one’s field of view to matters arbitrarily called “political.”

One thing political life teaches its practitioners — and one hopes its students — is that zero-sum choices should be avoided whenever possible. So too with academic disciplines: what is sociology’s gain can also help a political scientist’s understanding. And some literary critics have learned from political analysis, as anyone knowledgeable about feminism is aware.

The quarter-century of articles on politics (broadly or narrowly conceived) in *BC Studies* comprises a very large proportion of scholarly writing about politics in the province. That these articles have very pronounced limitations and ignore the many ways B.C. “fits in” to Canada or the wider world tells us that they have tried to do something else than “fit B.C. in” to other places. I hope that *BC Studies* will retain its unique strengths and weaknesses, just as other journals do too. One may read and reflect on alternative perspectives in order to “test” which is correct; but one may do so equally in order to remedy the limits of each by gaining new and fresh perspectives.