

Western Alienation



A Century of Western Discontent

Sir John A. Macdonald's National Policy had a three-fold agenda: to complete a transcontinental railway, to settle the prairies, and to create a manufacturing base in Eastern Canada. This policy was Macdonald's solution to the problem of uniting Canada geographically and economically. Once this was achieved, it was thought, political unity would follow.

However, the National Policy became the source of considerable Western discontent. To Western Canada, the legacy left by the policy consisted of discriminatory freight rates and a resource-based economy that was subject to the boom and bust cycles of the manufacturing and financial sectors of Central Canada.

The last half of the 20th century has seen great change and growth in Western Canada, particularly in Alberta and British Columbia. The 1947 discovery of oil in Leduc, Alberta, transformed that province's economy, but also led to increasing conflict with Ottawa. During the 1970s, Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed fought for his province's right to use the proceeds from its oil resources to fund economic diversity, whereas Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's National Energy Policy, implemented in 1980, intended to use Alberta's oil to subsidize gas prices throughout the nation.

Some observers point to parallels between the "Western alienation" of the 1970s and the rise of the Parti Québécois and threat of separation from Canada during the same decade. But a fundamental difference was that while Quebec was trying to "get out," the West was trying to "get in." The Prairie premiers played a significant role in the constitutional talks of the 1970s and 1980s. The entrenchment of equalization payments to reduce regional economic disparities, as well as a clearer definition of provincial ownership of resources and the extension of provincial taxation powers, were all significant points in the *Constitution Act* of 1982 and a result of the Western agenda. And finally, although the amending formula that requires the agreement of seven of 10 provinces with at least 50 per cent of the population continues to haunt the constitutional talks to this day, it has alleviated the Western concern about an Ontario or Quebec veto.

Continuing Conflict

During the summer and fall of 1997, British Columbia made news headlines over its natural resources. First, the actions of Premier Glen Clark during the British Columbia-U.S. "salmon war" brought the unresolved issue of the Pacific Salmon Treaty to a head. This treaty, signed in 1985 with the United States, expired in 1992 and has not been renewed. But British Columbia claims the treaty was ineffective and subject to misinterpretation that consequently allowed the U.S. fishers to overfish. In an attempt to focus federal attention on this issue, B.C. fishers held a U.S. ferry hostage in the harbour of Prince Rupert for three days. Clark's strong stand on the

issue is similar to that of former federal Fisheries minister Brian Tobin over the issue of Spanish overfishing off the east coast of Canada in 1995. But whereas Tobin had been acting on behalf of the federal government, Clark was protesting Ottawa's inability to protect B.C. interests against the United States.

But it was Senator Pat Carney, who, by suggesting that British Columbia might consider using the threat of separation during further constitutional talks, demonstrated Western alienation once again. Her comments made the national news, and polls immediately were struck to see what the rest of British Columbians thought about separatism.

British Columbia is Canada's third-largest and fastest-growing province. The impact of the Pacific Rim on its economy shows no signs of diminishing. But it has been a long wait for Canada's westernmost province. When Central Canada was experiencing an economic boom during the late 1980s, B.C. was still trying to find its way out of the 1981-82 economic downturn.

Where to Now?

Salmon are more symbolic than significant to B.C.'s economy, unlike Alberta oil during the 1970s. Yet, the B.C. salmon industry has greater monetary value to Canada than all of our trade with Cuba. And many Canadians feel the Canadian government did not adequately oppose the United States' attempts to inhibit Canadian-Cuban trade. With an economy still dependent primarily on resources—forestry being its number-one industry—British Columbia is seeking to take more control over its own regional interests and away from Ottawa. And since B.C. contributes more in taxes than it receives in transfer payments, the provincial government feels it is in a position to make political demands of the federal government for those tax dollars.

The unity question that Sir John A. Macdonald thought he had solved with his National Policy still is a sore point in the federation of Canada. For many Westerners, the fact that a western-based protest party—the Reform Party—was once the Official Opposition gives them hope that their interests will finally be heard in the House of Commons. But, as far as the Constitution of this country is concerned, it may still be a long time before true political unity is achieved.