

# THE ASCENDANCY OF WESTERN CANADA IN CANADIAN POLICYMAKING

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# Introduction

Western Canada has attracted increasing attention from Canada-watchers in recent years. The region is booming and, as a result, it is gaining greater weight in national political and economic life. The provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba today account for roughly 30 percent of Canada's population. To place this in a historical context, in 1951 the two most populous western provinces, Alberta and British Columbia, were home to 15 percent of all Canadians. In 1996, these two provinces alone held 22 percent of the Canadian population.

This population growth has been translated into greater representation in the federal Parliament. In the first postwar Parliament, the people of the provinces of western Canada were represented in Ottawa by - Members of Parliament (M.P.s). The most recent federal election, in June 1997, saw western Canadians elect 88 M.P.s, 29 percent of the total number of seats and 13 seats more than the traditionally influential province of Quebec. Many of those elected from the west are members of the Reform Party, which currently forms the Official Opposition with more seats than any other party in Parliament save the governing Liberals. Even more telling, the entire Reform Party caucus hails from the west, placing western Canadian concerns in front of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien every day during the daily parliamentary question period. The west has gained a modest voice in Chrétien's cabinet, in which 5 of 28 cabinet ministers represent western constituencies, but this is not insignificant since the provinces west of Ontario contributed only 15 seats to the Liberal majority of 155 seats.

What makes western Canada so important to Americans, however, is more than the national policymaking clout of the region. With this growth in population, western Canada has also achieved impressive economic growth. In 1997, only three provinces attained rates of provincial GDP growth above the national average of 3.8 percent. After Ontario, which led the country with 5 percent GDP growth, it was Alberta at 4.8 percent, Manitoba at 4.2 percent and Saskatchewan in fourth place with an impressive 3.4 percent. Prosperity has attracted in turn more immigrants, and reinforced the region's growing political clout.

These trends raise compelling questions: what does growing western Canadian influence mean? What do western Canadians want, and how does their new clout translate into policy terms? And what does the west's ascendancy mean for Quebec and Canada's medium-term political stability?

In this paper, David J. Rovinsky offers a lucid and frequently provocative characterization of the trends in western Canadian political thought. Beginning with the perspective on Canada as a political and economic community that has been advanced by leading western historians and scholars over the years, Rovinsky delves into the consensus ideas and distinct viewpoints that prevail west of Ontario. Shifting to a contemporary context, the analysis then turns to the political movements that have emerged from the region and their influence on the national political scene. This lays the foundation for the author's judgement that the current acceptance of traditionally western Canadian ideas in the rest of Canada is likely to mark a profound sea-change in the Canadian political landscape, rather than just a brief interlude. Reinforced by the demographic and statistical evidence cited above, the arguments made in this paper will give many readers pause for serious reflection on

the nature of Canada as we knew it, and as it may emerge in the 21st century.

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# Executive Summary

The nature and texture of Canadian political debate has evolved dramatically over the last decade. The state-centered approach endemic to the provinces of Ontario and Quebec has rapidly given way to a more economic approach rooted in the experience of western Canada, especially the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia. The rise of the west as a potent force in Canadian political life has had several consequences. It has turned federal and provincial governments toward fiscal conservatism, deficit reduction, and state retrenchment; led a reexamination of policies related to immigration and multiculturalism; and exposed the scope of judicial activism in the wake of the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to new political debate. Most important, it has induced the rest of English-speaking Canada to take a new hard line on the question of recognizing Quebec's distinctiveness in the Canadian constitution, to the point of encouraging the French-speaking province to leave the federation. Western Canada's embrace of classical liberalism, together with its increasing demographic weight within the country, has the potential to make Canadian political debate in the early 21st century much different, and probably less distinctively Canadian, than it was for the bulk of the 20th.

Students of Canadian history have one cardinal rule: one understands Canada by understanding its regions. Not only is there a distinct francophone school of Canadian historiography, there are also clear regional divisions in approaches to the Canadian experience. Even those considered to be Canada-s Anational@ historians (like Donald Creighton or J. M. S. Careless) have brought not-so-subtle Ontarian biases into their writing. Eugene Forsey, in contrast, is the best example of an Atlantic Provinces viewpoint, distinct from that of central Canadian observers.

Yet it is from western Canada that we see the most pervasive and enduring school of regional thought, a school whose approach has evolved and changed emphasis over the decades while remaining distinct from the other regions. The most important characteristics that have shaped western thought have been political alienation from the federal government, economic alienation from the Toronto-Montreal axis, and psychological alienation from the dualist thrust of central Canadian political discourse. While there have been several distinct periods of western commentary that will be chronicled below, our primary interest is the most recent period of western Canadian political thought, one that dates approximately to 1984. Not only has the latest school of writing applied traditional western political assumptions to the late 20th century, it puts forward general arguments that apply beyond western Canada and influence the political agenda of the entire country.

Before 1984, and certainly before World War II, political observers from western Canada focused for the most part on what might be called Aparochial@ concerns applicable by and large to the agricultural society of the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. These concerns were the effect of federal commercial policy (especially tariffs) on the west, and resistance to federal promotion of English-French duality in an ethnically diverse but linguistically homogenous environment. Since 1984, by contrast, western thought has adopted the style of argument of the international neoconservative movement, criticizing state intervention in the economy and government debt on overtly philosophical grounds, and expressing skepticism about duality and official bilingualism in the name of classical liberalism. By broadening the argument, the west has come to influence politics across English-speaking

Canada as governments retrench and attack deficit spending while turning their agendas away from constitutional reform and the accommodation of Quebec. As the source of the most novel and at least from the Canadian point of view and most influential ideas on the Canadian political horizon, western Canada has definitely come to be the motor of Canadian political thought in the 1990s.

## Donald Creighton: The Traditional Central Canada View

As recently as the 1960s, the English Canadian approach to interpreting Canadian history and life was undisputedly rooted in the Ontario experience. Ontario was the heart and soul of the Canadian economy, and federal economic policy was unashamedly designed to keep the Ontario economy buoyant, even if at the expense of hinterland vitality. At the same time, Ontario remained English Canada's primary interlocutor with Quebec. Ontario retained the legacy of Upper Canada's two periods of legislative union with French-speaking Lower Canada, periods distinguished by overt legislative bifurcation. Ontario had a particular affinity for dualist approaches to Canadian history, and grew accustomed to cooperation and compromise with Quebec. Even if Ontario was not always the most open of societies to the fact that there are French speakers (witness Regulation 17 and the refusal of official bilingualism on the provincial level), Ontarians, when push came to shove, typically recognized the English-French divide as the most important cleavage in Canada.

The clearest example of Ontario asserting its natural dominance of the Canadian agenda is the Laurentian Thesis of Canadian development, most cogently articulated by University of Toronto historian Donald Creighton. Creighton's most significant works were *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* ([1937], 1956) and a two-volume biography of Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald (1952, 1955). In both, Creighton put forward the argument that the economic logic of Canada flowed from the dominance of the St. Lawrence River basin. The economic health of Canada was equated with the strength of the St. Lawrence Empire, and the political development of Canada could be traced to an initiative from the English-speaking commercial class that controlled the politics of pre-Confederation Canada. After the first Empire collapsed in 1849, Confederation represented a resurrection of the Laurentian framework under Macdonald. Expansion of the new Dominion of Canada into the west (Hudson's Bay Company territory at the time) was necessary to stave off American annexation as well as to provide inexpensive natural resources for the St. Lawrence heartland, that is, the new provinces of Ontario and Quebec: "The first aim of Confederation was the settlement and development of the northwest. The northwest was the common patrimony, and its occupation the joint endeavour, of all Canadians" (Creighton 1972, 164). Creighton drew heavily upon the staple thesis of his Toronto colleague, Harold Innis, which explained both the political and economic history of Canada through the prism of the development and export of the hinterland's natural resources, such as furs or wheat, by the center.

## W. L. Morton: The West Responds

To be sure, the Laurentian Thesis did not remain unquestioned during its heyday. A handful of western intellectuals bristled at the central Canadian dominance of Canadian politics, and especially at the suggestion that this represented a natural order of things. University of Manitoba historian W. L. Morton was eager to speak out against the Laurentian Thesis and against Creighton by name. Morton was among the first historians to write specifically about western Canada. He published the first detailed history of Manitoba and in 1950 finished the definitive history of the Progressive Party, a regional populist party that peaked during the 1920s. Later, Morton turned to national history, writing about pre-Confederation Canada and the national unity question from a regionalist perspective unseen among Ontarian scholars. Ironically enough, Morton and Creighton both belonged to the Aconservative@ school of Canadian historians that focused upon Canada as a society struggling against economic and cultural absorption into the United States, and bitterly opposed the policies of the Liberal governments in the decades following World War II.

In 1947, Morton published an article entitled AClivo in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History.@ In the text, Morton did not quibble with the depth of Creighton-s research or with his facts, for while Morton and other westerners complained about the dominance of the AEmpire of the St. Lawrence,@ they also recognized its existence. Where the Creightons and the Mortons split was over which conclusions to draw. The Laurentian theorists argued that central dominance (through Macdonald-s National Policy) was the central aspect of a coherent and efficient commercial system. Morton replied that such dominance condemned regions like the west to perpetual subordination to Ontario and Quebec, especially if such subordination were reinforced by a strong central government fully committed to the interests of the center. The expression of the western sentiment that Confederation is permanently rigged in the west-s disfavor is apparent in Morton-s words:

Confederation was brought about to increase the wealth of Central Canada, and until that original purpose is altered, and the concentration of wealth and population by national policy in Central Canada ceases, Confederation must remain an instrument of injustice (Morton 1980, 108).

Much as Quebec nationalist thought has been directed to the pursuit of a loosely defined Aequality@ with English-speaking Canada, western criticism of central Canada and the Confederation settlement also hints at resentment of denied equality. In the west-s case, it is a matter of provincial powers, the status of western provinces compared to the others, and the degree of western influence over the Center-s decisions. As Morton argues, anger lingers in the west over the way the region was brought into the federation:

There is finally the fact that the West was annexed to Confederation as a subordinate region and so remained for sixty years. Such was the historical schooling of the West. It had, therefore, to fight its way up to self-government and equality in Confederation; nor is the process ended. . . . [M]etropolitan Canada has seldom appreciated the impact of Laurentian imperialism on the West (Morton 1980, 109).

## The Intellectual Backdrop to the Post-1945 West

The thinking of writers like Morton remained rooted in the traditional west of the pre-World War II era. This historiography spoke of an agricultural society with a widely dispersed population. There was little heavy industry (certainly not enough to fuel the rest of the regional economy) and no large cities on the scale of Toronto or Montreal offering the commercial and financial services such industry would need. The prairie west hit a fork in the road in 1947, when oil was discovered in Leduc, Alberta. Alberta society and politics would never be the same. The Alberta economy continued to be dominated by the extraction of natural resources, but a substantial group of processing and supporting industries was created to service the oil boom. It did not take long for a new urban middle class to arise that earned its living from the oil industry (Richards and Pratt 1977, 149). The appearance of metropolitan interests from Edmonton and Calgary (especially the latter) set the tone of Alberta political life, culminating in the 1971 election of the Progressive Conservatives under Peter Lougheed.

The result of this urbanization, according to Roger Gibbins, has been a decline in the regional distinctiveness of the prairie provinces (1980, 5). Given the provincial governments' role in the regulation of national resources, prominence in resource-related disputes with the federal government, and general growth of scope in the post-war period, provincial identities quietly usurped the idea of the prairies as a region (Gibbins 1980, 195). At the same time, the oil industry brought the west more directly into the international economy. The agricultural economy was compelled, under the National Policy, to route its trade through Eastern cities; however, Eastern Canadians were peculiarly absent from the Alberta oil patch. Oil workers and executives (as well as investors) were overwhelmingly Albertan or American (Richards and Pratt 1977, 174), causing those in the oil industry to relate to the outside world directly, rather than through a central Canadian framework.

The shift in the economies and societies of the western provinces only changed political life to a certain limit. While internal provincial politics found new issues, western discontent with the federal government and central Canada grew. After 1960, Canada moved fully into the era of constitutional debate, as Quebec's Quiet Revolution fueled questioning of the existing Canadian order. Discontent with federal economic policy continued, focused by and large upon federal designs on the revenues of the oil industry. Other complaints dealt with the Bank of Canada's Ontario-oriented monetary policy and the persistent economic anti-Americanism of the Trudeau government. Anger with Ottawa led provinces like Alberta and British Columbia to insist on enhanced provincial powers, especially in the natural resources sector, as their price for participating in constitutional patriation.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, western Canada made its views on the changes in Quebec much clearer. Duality had always been a very abstract concept for western Canadians, and had very little relevance to the daily life of the region. Factors such as the high degree of American immigration, the lonely nature of the individual farm or ranch, and the mixing of many ethnic origins in western society combined to make the prairie west the most individualistic region of Canada. Quebec's call for the recognition and entrenchment of the collective rights of francophones thus ran into difficulty on the prairies. It was no accident that Conservative John Diefenbaker, prime minister from 1957 to 1963 and

supporter of Aunhyphenated Canadians,<sup>6</sup> hailed from Saskatchewan.

After 1976, as Canada moved toward the 1980 Quebec independence referendum and the subsequent 1981 round of negotiations, a distinct western position on constitutional reform emerged. Romanow, White, and Leeson attribute the western activism directly to the rise of the oil economy (1984, xxvi-xx). After the 1973 oil crisis, Ottawa toyed openly with direct intervention in the oil industry to set up a domestic petroleum market insulated from world developments. The specific goal was to have a Amade-in-Canada<sup>7</sup> oil price while redistributing some of the oil wealth to the rest of Canada via the federal treasury. This push came to a head with the introduction of the National Energy Program (NEP) in 1980, in which Ottawa appropriated unto itself 25 percent of all new discoveries in the oil patch. Provincial governments were more than opposedCthey were lividCand through constitutional negotiations they hoped to overturn the NEP and prevent Ottawa from attempting any further intervention in the energy industry.

Yet the west-s interest in constitutional reform went well beyond oil and gas. A comprehensive vision of Canada could be distilled from western arguments. This vision was lukewarm to recognizing special status for Quebec, and to the idea of Canada as the joint undertaking of the English and French Afounding peoples.<sup>8</sup> The western response to special status was an insistence upon the idea of equal provinces (that is, identical fields of jurisdiction with no variations for individual members). This translated in the short term into the AAlberta amending formula,<sup>9</sup> under which constitutional amendments required the ratification of any seven provinces that contained at least half the Canadian population. In the longer term it led to calls for Senate reform and the implementation of the ATriple-E Senate,<sup>10</sup> an elected body with equal representation from each province with effective powers to block regionally-biased legislation.

By 1984, when the Conservatives under Brian Mulroney came to power, the west had gone some way toward establishing a new identity for itself within Canada. It had become an urbanized society with industries of its own, it had acquired wealth (enough so to make Alberta and British Columbia net contributors to the federal treasury), and it had begun to develop a distinctive late-20th-century world view rooted broadly in the liberal creed. The west was undeniably a mature society, no longer the colony central Canada had been accused of creating for its own use. The stage was set for the west to alter the Canadian political debate, to be an active rather than a reactive agent.

## The Mulroney Government: Turning Point for the West

When Mulroney-s Conservatives assumed office, it seemed that western Canada had finally found a vehicle for influence over the federal government. In contrast to the two Winnipeg seats to which Trudeau-s Liberals had been limited during their final mandate, the Tories held an extensive majority of the seats west of Ontario. There would therefore be a number of high-profile cabinet ministers from western provinces, like Harvie Andre and Don Mazankowski (Braid and Sharpe 1990, 10-12). The Conservatives also promised a right-of-center approach to government, proposing improved relations with the United States and reduced federal regulation of the economy, generally in tune with the

neoconservative movement already in power in the United States and the United Kingdom. As the first Mulroney mandate unfolded, westerners were by and large pleased with what they saw. In 1985, the government undid the NEP by negotiating the western Accord, which returned powers over natural resources to the provinces and the private sector. In 1986, the Conservatives undertook negotiations leading to the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA), part of the west's wish list for decades. Western hopes for a new federal administration had probably never been higher. This was not entirely justified, because the Mulroney government did not depend upon western seats for its survival. It defeated the incumbent Liberals in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, and would live or die based upon votes kept or lost in central Canada. This was to be the only respect in which the Trudeau and Mulroney administrations were to be similar.

Perhaps, in this light, it is not surprising that the Conservative government floundered in western Canada. Serious problems could be seen as early as 1986. Ottawa had requested bids on a maintenance contract for the Air Force's CF-18 fighters. The lowest bid came from Bristol Aerospace, a Winnipeg firm. The Cabinet instead awarded the contract to a Montreal firm on the grounds that Montreal was the heart of the Canadian aerospace industry and that the high unemployment rate in Montreal had to be taken into consideration. Western Tories fumed, charging Mulroney with pandering to his political base in Quebec.

Brian Mulroney led the Conservatives to victory in the 1984 general election by running against Pierre Trudeau. The anti-Trudeau crusade no doubt strengthened the party's appeal in the western provinces. Yet like Trudeau, Mulroney entered the national scene via Quebec politics, and retained much of his sensitivity to Quebec nationalist concerns. As a bilingual Quebecer (albeit an anglophone, unlike Trudeau), Mulroney endorsed the policy of official federal bilingualism as set forward in the Official Languages Act of 1969. Bilingualism is one area where the Mulroney government faithfully followed Trudeau's lead. It went so far as to strengthen the Official Languages Act in 1988. The revamped act caused tempers to flare in the west, especially in Alberta, where it seemed that Trudeau may as well have still been in power.

Indeed, it took westerners some time to grasp the importance of Mulroney's Quebec background and the significance of Quebec nationalist support for the government's hold on power. They learned one of their most important lessons in April, 1987. While campaigning in 1984, Mulroney had promised to seek Quebec's endorsement of the 1982 Constitution Act with honor and enthusiasm. After a year of quiet discussions among governments, Mulroney and the 10 premiers finalized the Meech Lake Accord that proposed to recognize Quebec as a distinct society and shift a number of federal powers to the provinces. It also offered the provinces a greater voice in the construction of federal policies in several areas. What it failed to do was address the west's desire for reforms to the Senate; it only gave provincial premiers a role in the selection of Senators while promising future discussions on the matter. However, Meech Lake also changed the amending formula to require unanimous provincial consent for Senate reform, making the Triple-E Senate much less likely.

Meech Lake's open recognition of the duality of Canada and the existence of two major groups as a fundamental characteristic of Canada triggered hostility in the west more than any of its fine points. Yet instead of the traditional reaction that duality has little resonance in western society, many westerners complained that the recognition of group rights was illegitimate in a liberal society. Instead of complaining

about the imposition of French, much of the western debate focused upon the need to recognize the equality of individuals and provinces. Suddenly the west was speaking in terms that transcended parochial concerns and embraced a universal liberal philosophy that resonated across and beyond Canada, reflecting the new western approach to national issues.

The third nail in the Conservatives' coffin came with the replacement of a series of arcane manufacturing taxes with a broad-based value-added tax known as the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 1991. Eighty-five percent of the Canadian population and all the other major parties opposed the tax, as did most westerners in the Tory party. Albertans were particularly furious about the new tax. Alberta is proud to be the only province not to collect a retail sales tax. Yet all but two of the 26 Alberta Conservative MP-s voted to implement the tax, and the two opponents were expelled from the party. Western observers focused attention on the inability of a united regional caucus to block a government policy it opposed. This raised dormant questions about the impact of cabinet government and party discipline upon the west, opening ground for calls to loosen party discipline and allow more popular input into government decisions.

## The Reform Party: Political Voice of the New West

Alberta has a long history of creating political parties. The three parties to have governed over most of the 20th century, the United Farmers of Alberta, Social Credit, and the Progressive Conservatives, were created or substantially revamped shortly before winning power. Alberta also participated in the founding of the Progressives after World War I, and the province even spun off the western Canada Concept and Christian Heritage parties, fringe right-wing elements that toyed with the concept of western independence. While the parties were typically ephemeral, the sentiments that drove them were lasting and they all shared the same political base. Preston Manning grew up as the son of a Social Credit premier, and contemplated building yet another movement on this base as the ASocreds® began to founder. In 1967, the two Mannings wrote in *Political Realignment: A Challenge to Thoughtful Canadians* that in the long run the Acatch-all® Progressive Conservative and Liberal parties had to be replaced by more ideologically consistent social democratic and social conservative parties (1967, 55-69). The younger Manning, after two decades as a management consultant, decided in the wake of the CF-18 controversy that the time for a new populist right-wing party had come. In cooperation with western colleagues, the Reform Party of Canada was chartered in 1987, and Preston Manning became its first leader. Reform was consciously begun as a federal-level party committed to advancing western interests on the federal stage: its first motto was AThe West Wants In.® Though it won no seats in the 1988 federal election and had only one by-election victory before the 1993 election, Reform grew visible in the debate over the Meech Lake Accord, where its individualist opposition found resonance all over western Canada. Between 1990 and 1993, Reform gained support as it attacked the Mulroney government from the right, opposing the GST, the Charlottetown Accord of 1992, and the Conservatives' failure to reduce the federal budget deficit after nine years in office. Reform supported both CU FTA and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), underlining its free-market orientation and sympathy with the neoconservative movement.

While the Reform Party has released a number of reports and policy papers, the best single source laying out the Reform vision remains Manning's 1992 book, *The New Canada*. In his elaboration of the Reform platform, Manning consciously divides it into three sections: the constitution, direct democracy, and the economy. On the constitution, Manning writes that Reform's core belief is that special status for Quebec and the interpretation of Canada as an equal partnership between English and French have no place in the constitution. Reform's rallying cry is Aequality,@ which it means in the narrow sense of guaranteeing equality of opportunity and treatment to all individuals regardless of race, language, or culture, removing the Atwo nations@ question from political discourse entirely. Manning takes up the western call for a Triple-E Senate to improve regional representation in Ottawa, and endorses the holding of national referenda to ratify all constitutional amendments. Reform also looks to a decentralization of powers within the Canadian federal system, on the grounds that provincial and local governments are closer to the governed and more able to respond to local needs. Reform is also skeptical about federal involvement in the cultural domain, because insistence upon uniform policies in a diverse country like Canada is a recipe for breakup. To the extent that governments should bother with culture at all, provincial and local governments should exercise the responsibility.

Turning to direct democracy, Manning worries about the Atyranny of minorities@ in a pluralist democracy. AMinorities@ could be replaced with Aspecial interests,@ the mediating organizations like lobbyists, unions, and advocacy groups that stand in the way of direct individual input to government. Manning also rejects the role of the political party as a mediator of interests, and promises to change party discipline and reduce the salience of party membership in Parliament. In that sense, a Reform government would nearly eliminate votes of no-confidence in Parliament, requiring them to be explicit rather than implied (i.e., the defeat of an ordinary government bill would not force the cabinet to resign), and restricted to certain times during a session. When the Reform Party was founded, Manning often spoke of allowing Reform MP-s to vote their conscience on every issue. By 1992, he acknowledged the importance of party unity in a parliamentary system, noting that Ato do what our electors expect of us, we will have to work together as a caucus@ (Manning 1992, 322). Moving beyond Parliament, Manning wants to break with parliamentary tradition by allowing binding citizen initiatives, requiring referenda on more issues, and even allowing electors in individual constituencies to recall sitting M.P.s.

Finally, Manning focuses on the economy. Unlike populist parties of the left, and unlike some of the right-wing populism once prevalent in western Canada, Manning and the Reform Party embrace the globalization of production and capital. They see the chief challenge for 21st-century Canada as finding ways to thrive in the Anew economy.@ They accept the ideology of globalization insofar as it calls upon governments to step back from the economy and allows the free market to generate wealth. The most important way that governments can disengage from the economy, according to Manning, is to stop requiring huge amounts of capital to finance public sector debt. Balanced budgets in each fiscal yearCthe single most important policy of a potential Reform governmentCwould free capital for private-sector investment and allow taxes to be lowered, thereby attracting economic activity. Like most conservative parties, Reform is adamant about not increasing taxes to reduce deficitsCspending cuts are its preferred policy. Therefore, Reform calls for the elimination or reduction of Aunnecessary@ federal programs (including most social programs) and a downsizing of the federal bureaucracy.

Policies in these three areas amount to the construction of what Manning likes to call the Anew Canada.® According to Reform, the Aold Canada,® created in 1867, is stuck in a perpetual political adolescence. Canadian politics has long been dominated by regional jealousies, narrowness, and pettiness. Manning's policies essentially call for Canada to get over its historical hang-ups (which neatly coincide with the traditional preoccupations of central Canada) and undertake serious reworking of the country.

## The Intellectuals Speak Out

Yet the Anew western thought® goes much further than the Reform Party. Manning's thought remains the outgrowth of older Social Credit policies, mixed with traditional western alienation and the embrace of the global economy. A number of academicsCconcentrated at but by no means limited to the University of CalgaryChave delved into the philosophical origins and consequences of political liberalism in the Canadian west, and have argued for its increasing prominence in federal policymaking. The works of these scholars are being read across Canada (even in translation in Quebec), and are playing a defining role in the Canadian political debate of the mid-1990s.

A look at classical liberalism among western intellectuals almost necessarily begins with David Bercuson and Barry Cooper. Bercuson, a University of Calgary historian, and Cooper, a political scientist at the same institution, each have a track record of publishing that features interest in neoconservatism and the Canadian west as a region. Bercuson has written a number of pieces on regionalism, and edited *Canada and the Burden of Unity*. Cooper has co-edited a book of comparative essays on neoconservatism in English-speaking countries and has written a stinging critique of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Bercuson 1977, 1981; Cooper 1988, 1994). Yet they truly established their notoriety with their 1991 book *Deconfederation: Canada Without Quebec*. They state openly that the most important issue for constitutional reform is the preservation of Canada as a liberal democracy rooted in individual rights. The most significant threat to liberalism in Canada is Quebec's call for special status and recognition of collective rights rooted in culture and ethnicity:

We believe that Canada is a liberal democracy, and that liberal democracies are fundamentally decent regimes. But Canada is being seriously challenged both in its liberalism and in its democratic foundation by a new kind of nationalism based on ethnic and cultural characteristics and centred in the Province of Quebec. . . .The solution is not to continue a futile process of constitutional accommodation. The demands of Quebec's ethnic and cultural nationalism are simply incompatible with the continued existence of Canada as a liberal democracy. The continued attempts to meet the demands of the Province of Quebec within Canada have imperiled the entire political order of the country and contributed significantly to our current economic and social disorders. To restore the economic and political health of Canada, Quebec must leave (Bercuson and Cooper 1991, 5-6).

Bercuson and Cooper then go on to present something of a laundry list of grievances against Quebec,

focusing on the economic consequences of the constitutional debate and implying at the extreme that much of the federal deficit may be attributed to the federal spending in Quebec used to appease nationalists and buy votes.

In 1994, Bercuson and Cooper followed up with a second book, *Derailed: The Betrayal of the National Dream*. This work goes beyond the issue of Quebec to take on the broader issue of the role of government. To be sure, there is much discussion of government spending and argument in favor of laissez-faire economics, but most of the text questions federal attempts to legislate national identity. Bercuson and Cooper divide Canadian history into periods of *Good government* and *Bad government*, the latter broadly covering the Pearson, Trudeau, and Mulroney governments. *Good government* essentially refers to a government that worries about economic growth and that assumes that other *Good things* like national unity and social harmony flow from abundant material wealth. The authors cite the governments of Wilfrid Laurier and Mackenzie King as the best examples of *What good government meant* (Bercuson and Cooper 1994, 42). *Bad government* refers to governments that engage in social engineering, especially that involving large expenditure. While examples of bad government include John Diefenbaker's introduction of equalization payments and the extension of unemployment insurance benefits to seasonal workers and Mulroney's inability to confront the deficit for fear of alienating elements in his electoral coalition, by far the worst is Pierre Trudeau. The Diefenbaker and Mulroney examples represent vote-buying as irresponsible but understandable compared to Trudeau's attempt to impose a personal philosophical vision upon the country.

Cooper further elaborated upon the theory of *Liberal constitutionalism* in a 1994 essay on the west's role in post-Charlottetown constitutional debate. Liberal constitutional regimes focus on individuals who are fully equal before the law (Cooper 1994, 100). Liberal constitutionalism is particularly hostile to the idea of offering any legal acknowledgment of groups or classes of citizens. Cooper echoes the arguments of *Derailed* in arguing that in a liberal regime, society must be allowed to bend the state to its ends, not the other way around (Cooper 1994, 91). Proposals like the Meech Lake Accord's distinct society clause (and by implication much of post-Quiet Revolution Quebec policy) violate this rule by appropriating unto the state the right to define the ideal society through policy (perhaps for blatantly illiberal reasons).

F. L. Morton and Rainer Knopff are University of Calgary political scientists who apply neoconservative views to the Canadian legal system, especially the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Their most important book has been *Charter Politics*, in which they look at the Charter as a political instrument. Much of the analysis is devoted to questions of symbolism and ideology that were embedded in the Charter's introduction. By changing *Both the symbolic framework and the institutional structure* of Canadian politics, the Charter of Rights has permanently altered the way Canadians organize their political life (Knopff and Morton 1992, 3). Given the implementation of the Charter, the process of judicial review has gone from an esoteric legal process to a contentious political one. Morton and Knopff argue that few in 1982 seemed to understand or even care that the Charter had the potential to do this. Politicians allowed the fundamental basis of Canadian politics to be changed relatively unnoticed, as they focused upon symbols of national unity and the recognition of rights in principle. In another essay, Morton takes aim more directly at judicial politics, arguing that court decisions produce *Winners* and *Losers*

who cannot appeal to the political system for recourse. More disturbingly, there has been a systematic pattern of winners and losers since 1982. The winners have been single-issue groups, judges, and lawyers (Morton 1992, 137). Quebec has persistently been a loser, so much so that Morton blames judicial politics for creating the acrimonious Meech Lake and Charlottetown rounds of constitutional negotiations.

Neoconservatives generally embrace the practice of judicial restraint, which refers to courts that defer to legislatures in the areas of drafting law and setting public policy. They seek to move the locus of policy away from activist courts and back to elected officials. Christopher Manfredi, now a political scientist at McGill University, earned a bachelor's degree at the University of Calgary and has written a study of judicial review in Canada since the inception of the Charter. Manfredi is much more blunt about the tension between judicial review and liberal constitutionalism. While judicial review within the framework of a bill of rights reinforces the liberal doctrine of protecting individual rights from transient majorities, Manfredi worries that judicial review has grown anti-democratic, with the unelected courts possessing the power to make fundamental changes to the law through their rulings. His particular concern is about a school of thought that uses the Charter to seek rights-oriented jurisprudence, which uses the courts for social engineering, on the grounds that the attempt to correct the policy errors of democratic institutions through litigation and adjudication risks undermining the capacity for self-government on which liberal democracy ultimately depends (Manfredi 1992, 11).

Another Calgary political scientist, Thomas Flanagan, had a reputation as a conservative for his account of the Riel rebellion (Flanagan 1983; Harrison 1995, 299) when he went to work for the Reform Party as the director of policy for Preston Manning, a position from which he was fired before the 1993 federal election. Flanagan was among the most conservative of Manning's advisers, and his experience working for the party shed some light on the contradictions between conservatism and populism with which Reform must deal. It was easy for Reform to adopt stridently conservative economic and social policies when it sought votes in the west. Yet to obtain support elsewhere in Canada, it would have to transform itself into a broader center-right party within a populist framework, not incompatible with Manning's stated general preference for a non-ideological party. Moderation and expansion outside the west antagonized the conservative wing of the party, and the tension between party wings and Manning led to Flanagan's firing. Flanagan later wrote a book that mixed scholarly analysis of the Reform Party's origins with reflections on his experiences (Flanagan 1995). The book is often bitterly critical of much of the Reform Party's strategy during 1992 and 1993, especially the party's ideological position and the decision to go national. Given the commotion within the party that the book generated, Flanagan became more of a conservative touchstone as a critic on the outside than he ever was as a party official.

Other western intellectuals participated in the work of the Canada West Foundation (CWF). The foundation was established in 1973 as a research house, with a mission to initiate and conduct practical and imaginative research programs regarding the economic and social characteristics and potentials of the west (McCormick, Manning, and Gibson 1981, iv). From the start, the CWF was the west's answer to a corporate-sponsored think tank. In addition to academics, the foundation included former western politicians, both provincial and federal, and a significant number of wealthy businessmen. Preston Manning's consulting firm counted the CWF among its clients during the 1970s. By the end of the decade,

the CWF's research agenda solidified squarely upon Canadian federalism. Senate reform granting the provincial governments greater input (the House of the Provinces concept) became the foundation's pet project. Political scientist David Elton has been the most prominent president of the CWF. In the early 1980s, when extreme right-wing elements threatened to hijack the CWF's research agenda, he received credit for reestablishing the Foundation's reputation for political neutrality<sup>6</sup> (Harrison 1995, 72).

Elton has been assisted by Peter McCormick of the University of Lethbridge. Red Deer-born McCormick, a scholar of the Canadian judicial system, was co-author of a well-circulated CWF text in 1981 with Ernest Manning and Gordon Gibson (who are discussed below) on provincial representation in the central institutions of a federation. Unlike the many western provincialists, notably those in the Alberta Conservative Party, McCormick and his associates focus on the inadequacy of western representation in Ottawa. They argue that the deficiencies extend to the House of Commons, the Senate, the cabinet, and political parties. They review several proposals to remedy the problem, including revising the federal distribution of powers, electoral reform, and reforms to intergovernmental institutions like first ministers' conferences. They reject each of these as half-hearted solutions to the problem. They turn to the perennial western favorite of Senate reform, following the Triple-E model currently used in Australia, which would be elected using a modified form of proportional representation on a provincial basis (McCormick, Manning, and Gibson 1981).

The western influence in national thought also shows through in the relocation of two important national right-wing organizations to Alberta. The National Citizens' Coalition (NCC) is a rightist pressure group that formerly operated from Ottawa. The NCC came to prominence in the 1988 federal election, where it spent millions of dollars on independent advertising backing the Mulroney Conservatives and the CUFTA. The NCC recently moved its headquarters to Calgary, acknowledging the city's prominence as a center of political thinking. The Canadian Taxpayers' Federation (CTF) operates from an Edmonton headquarters. The CTF pushes for greater fiscal responsibility on the part of governments, specifically balanced budgets. It received enormous publicity in the leadup to the 1995 deficit-reducing federal budget and received much of the credit in the media for the absence of major tax increases in the budget.

It is difficult to make generalizations about the Canadian west. Gibbins mildly admonishes us for thinking in terms of region when province may be a more useful concept. Certainly, in reviewing the above authors, we see that a strong Alberta flavor is apparent (and southern Alberta at that) to what we are calling Awestern<sup>6</sup> thought. Absent so far have been representatives from British Columbia. Whether or not British Columbia is part of the Awest<sup>6</sup> along with the prairies, or a region unto itself, is one of the perennial questions of Canadian politics and has become a sensitive political issue when matters of Aregional equality<sup>6</sup> or representation have been at issue. Likewise, it is more difficult to find British Columbian examples of the political thought centered around Calgary. Two of the most prominent British Columbia-based scholars of Canadian federalism, Alan Cairns (now of the University of Toronto) and Philip Resnick, write from a nonregional approach (or what some might cynically call a central Canadian approach). It may be significant that neither has right-of-center political views; Resnick is a social democrat, while Cairns, though less partisan, seems sympathetic to the Liberals. In terms of think tanks, Vancouver's Fraser Institute resembles Toronto's C. D. Howe Institute more than the Canada West Foundation. The Fraser Institute thinks mainly in national terms and focuses rather narrowly on issues of concern to larger corporations.

A relative newcomer, or at least one who has only recently received national notoriety, is former British Columbia Liberal leader Gordon Gibson, who spent some time as a fellow at the CWF and now serves as a senior fellow at the Fraser Institute. Gibson rushed onto the national stage in 1994 with the publication of *Plan B: The Future of the Rest of Canada*, which addressed the question of what form the rest of Canada would take after Quebec independence. Gibson addresses the issue from a solidly neoconservative position, arguing that the rest of Canada is not necessarily viable without Quebec: "Canada, as we have known it, is a balanced and functioning whole. If Quebec departs, the balance will be very fundamentally changed" (Gibson 1994, 132). Gibson focuses most particularly upon regional economic differences and wonders what advantages, if any, Alberta and British Columbia would derive from membership in a truncated Canada that they could not find on their own. Gibson in fact argues that the western provinces would likely be the only parts of Canada to thrive if Quebec left (Gibson 1994, 160-161). Yet Gibson only shares the Calgary argument to a point. For the most part, he shies away from grand statements of political philosophy beyond the need for fiscal responsibility and from the question of individual versus collective rights.

Early in 1995, when it seemed that a solid "No" victory in the Quebec referendum was likely, Gibson published *Thirty Million Musketeers: One Canada For All Canadians*. This self-proclaimed sequel to Plan B deals with the internal reforms, constitutional and otherwise, that Canada must undertake in the wake of Quebec's decision to remain a part of Canada. Once again, liberal individual equality is no more than a background concern—the criteria for reforming Canada is economic efficiency, especially in the public sector (Gibson 1995, 9-18). Gibson rails more stridently here against the large federal debt and argues that the federal government must be downsized for the sake of financial solvency. Much of the book analyzes government through business jargon, referring to the state as a "public utility" (Gibson 1995, 42), to political life as a "political marketplace" (37), and to taxpayers as "consumers of government" (45). Gibson's overall vision of the west is not that of a region faithful to liberalism—it is Canada's bastion of financial responsibility!

Roger Gibbins is the chair of the political science department at the University of Calgary. He has spent his entire academic career there, after growing up in the interior of British Columbia. Yet Gibbins is only tangentially a member of the Calgary school—it would be more accurate to call him its official chronicler. Gibbins has a long track record of publishing on the Canadian west, having written books on prairie politics, territorialism in federal states, and Alberta political life. In 1994, Gibbins delivered the Macgregor Lecture in Intergovernmental Relations at Queen's University on "The New Face of Canadian Nationalism." This lecture is one of the best syntheses of the new western thought and its capacity to change the political agenda of the entire country. Gibbins first spoke of several historically prevalent types of central Canadian nationalism, including two-nations dualism, anti-Americanism, and state-enterprise nationalism, all of which traditionally met with considerable skepticism in western Canada. Now the west has given birth to a new form of nationalism, which in turn is changing the terms of debate in English Canada—Gibbins argues pointedly that this line of argument finds practically no resonance in Quebec. The most important points that Gibbins makes about the new Canadian political culture (arguments which are made by the authors so far) are:

- a homogenizing nature and attendant refusal to give special accommodation to minorities
- a hostility to biculturalism and particular impatience with Quebec's constitutional demands
- an absolute insistence upon the equality of individuals
- its ahistorical nature, interested more in the economic fate of Canada in the 21st century than in responses to the problems of the 19th century
- an indifference to the tradition of anti-Americanism
- an openness to populism and rejection of policies imposed by political elites (Gibbins 1995, 12)

Gibbins sees a clear link between support for strict cultural liberalism and support for globalization: Aits most vocal proponents tend to be found among fiscal conservatives who reject the ideological underpinnings of state enterprise<sup>6</sup> (Gibbins 1995, 13). On these grounds, Gibbins reaffirms the Reform Party's role as the political expression of the newest strains in western thought. Yet Gibbins does not really cheer the New Face of Nationalism on; in fact, he worries that it will precipitate the breakup of Canada. While western influence is seeping into other parts of English-speaking Canada, Quebec rejects much of the argument out of hand. Quebec uses duality as its prism for viewing Canadian federalism, is open to collective rights, is preoccupied with the legacy of historical events, and largely rejects neoconservative economics, speaking of a *projet de société* and only reluctantly cutting public spending in response to pressures of debt. Gibbins sees an impending collision if the western-generated form of political thought entrenches itself too deeply in the rest of Canada.

## Conclusion

Western Canada, especially Alberta and British Columbia, has always presented a distinctive regional viewpoint on national issues. This evolving viewpoint, however, has come to transcend the parochial issues that preoccupied it after Confederation. Regional complaints about duality and the National Policy have given way to more universally-rooted philosophic concerns like liberal equality among individuals and provinces and the inherent desirability of free markets. This subtle change in emphasis has enabled new western ideas to strike chords in the rest of Canada in a way unseen prior to the 1980s. Instead of a mere regional agenda that criticizes a system allegedly benefiting central Canada, western thinkers now present an alternative national agenda of their own. While this new agenda contains traditional elements of western thought, the new framework, coupled with the international neoconservative ascendancy, brings the intellectual breakthrough of which westerners all the way back to W. L. Morton dreamed.

A look at Canadian political history over the last 10 years reveals the influence that western thought has demonstrated. The western liberal critique of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords helped inspire opinion across English-speaking Canada and was perhaps the single most potent force ensuring their defeat. As western provincial governments struggled to balance their budgets, other provinces and even the Chrétien Liberals in Ottawa adopted fiscal responsibility as a rallying cry. Only an increasingly marginal left wing continues to question the merits of free trade and globalization; other

parties accept them as givens and focus on how Canada ought to be adapting to them. Though intellectuals articulated conservative principles most clearly, the Reform Party brought them into the federal arena, and the Progressive Conservative government of Ralph Klein in Alberta brought them into public policy. Klein has reduced expenditures dramatically across all sectors of government, including the sensitive areas of education and health care. Though the cuts took a social and political toll, the government met its goal of balancing the provincial budget well ahead of schedule and now has issued a timetable for repaying provincial debt. Klein's government was re-elected in March 1997 with an increased majority. This success gave political credibility to the right-wing approach in the rest of Canada, and the AKlein Revolution® in Alberta is now echoed by the Harris government in Ontario. Perhaps Harris has become the leader of the deep-cut school by now (though his neo-Keynesian insistence on massive tax cuts to stimulate the economy leaves his credentials for fiscal responsibility in question). If so, the locus of Canadian conservatism could move back to central Canada, though certainly through the momentum first generated in Alberta. A government like Harris's would have been unthinkable in Ontario just a few short years previously. Even the stated intention of much of English-speaking Canada of refusing to negotiate with Quebec if it votes to separate is borrowed from western Canada. It is no wonder that the *Globe and Mail* has concluded that the constitutional debate has become a showdown between Quebec and western Canada, with other regions as bystanders (July 7, 1994).

Demographic trends hint that the west may enjoy a structural advantage if this is indeed the case. The 1996 census indicated that the Quebec share of the Canadian population has fallen below 25 percent for the first time since the formation of the Canadian federation (in 1867, its share was over one third). The two provinces growing at the fastest pace since 1991 are Alberta and British Columbia, who together are home to one-fifth of all Canadians (*Globe and Mail*, April 16, 1997). Not only does this mean that the west will have a greater share in representative institutions in Ottawa, but the west is enjoying economic and social dynamism that Quebec has not experienced for several decades.

Now in the wake of the narrow No victory in Quebec's October 1995 sovereignty referendum, Canada will be pressed to open the constitutional issue for the third time in a decade. The Chrétien government, in dialogue with Quebec federalists, proposed recognizing Quebec as a distinct society within Canada, if only within ordinary legislation, and establishing a complicated system of regional vetoes for ratifying constitutional amendments. Unlike at Meech Lake, however, a number of provincial premiers, notably those in the west, balked at the idea, so much so that the Liberals in Ottawa gave up on the idea of formal constitutional revision. Most observers of Quebec politics conclude that the rest of Canada has one last opening to offer Quebec constitutional reform, in the absence of which a third sovereignty referendum, orchestrated by Premier Lucien Bouchard, will result in a Yes victory. With the rest of Canada (led by the west) holding to its strict liberal views and the federal government simultaneously contesting Quebec's right to secede, it must be wondered if the collision Roger Gibbins warns of may be just around the corner. If the Bouchard government in Quebec City moves toward another referendum, which it certainly will even if no date is under consideration, the entire west-Quebec split may finally come to a head. This would give western political thought its most difficult test. Though writers have suggested that it is better to let Quebec secede than to accommodate it, will they be able to stick to their views if Quebec actually voted to go? Perhaps they would—Gordon Gibson writes that the west would be better off after Canada's breakup.

Regardless of the final outcome of this saga, be it through constitutional reform or less drastic arrangements, Canada will be forced to undergo severe internal reorganization over the next two decades. Due to its regionally fractious nature and statist political culture, Canada is very poorly prepared for a world of unrestricted volatile capital in which governments are to take a decidedly back-seat role in the economy and society. Not only must public debt be brought under control, but a new political culture that accepts a more limited governmental role must develop more fully. Perhaps, as neoconservatism wanes in popularity, the strident classical liberalism from western Canada will lose its appeal outside its home base. Yet if it does not, to look to western Canada's ideas may be to look at Canada's future.

## About the Author

David J. Rovinsky is an adjunct professor in the Department of Political Science at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. He is a specialist in Canadian politics, constitutional issues, and intellectual history. Mr. Rovinsky was honored as a 1994-1995 Fulbright Scholar, which enabled him to be a visiting scholar conducting research at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Mr. Rovinsky has also studied at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C. and at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. He is a distinguished graduate of Laval University in Quebec City and St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York.

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