

WHAT THE WEST WANTS

Lorne Gunter



Assignment: Explain western alienation through the filter of the special CBC Radio forum on the subject held February 7, 2001.

Who dreamt up this topic? [Editor's note: The editor did!] It would be easier to explain Boyle's law of thermodynamics through the filter of Saturday morning television programming, or bond-based derivatives through the filter the World Curling Federation.

It's not that our state broadcaster hasn't expended a good deal of time and money struggling to understand the disaffection of western Canadians. Indeed, it has devoted countless hours to the subject. It's just that after all that soul-searching, its only solution is to no longer do documentaries only about disabled native lesbians from Toronto. Now it makes sure to do a proportionate number about disabled native lesbians in Regina and Kamloops, too.

Even the Liberal Party of Canada has made attempts to comprehend. By my count, its current "Eye on the West" initiative is the party's third formal attempt since coming to power in 1993. That's about one every two-and-a-half years. Not bad, really. However, you'd think after so many tries, they'd have gotten it by now.

The trouble is not that central Canadians don't try to understand the West. It's just that none of the "filters" they use are appropriate to the task. Nor are any of the solutions that come readily to the centralist mind.

You see, Ottawa is from Venus, and the West is from Mars.

No, I don't mean the differences stem from some female/male dichotomy. Rather, we're from different worlds, Westerners and central Canadians. We may speak the same language, but our world views are fundamentally different. Which is why I think western alienation is a more serious problem than even westerners realize. To rescue the situation, one of us is going to have to alter our world view, which is, at best, next to impossible.

It's the reverse of Quebec alienation. Quebecers and the central government may use different languages, but they share basically the same world view: big government offering lots of social programs, with the goal of regulating and re-engineering every citizen into a perfect copy of the official version of a model Canadian. The fundamental differ-

ence is whether citizens should be remodelled from Ottawa or Quebec City, whereas with western alienation, the debate is over whether citizens should be remodelled at all.

Western alienation is a geographic phenomenon largely by coincidence. At its root, it is more an ideological issue.

If it were a purely regional development, it would be relatively easy to solve. Even up the balance sheet. Start pouring into western Canada an amount of federal spending roughly commensurate with the region's fiscal contribution to Confederation (minus a healthy contribution to assist deeply needy provinces), and—*voilà!* (see, we westerners aren't anti-French)—the West would be content.

But—and I pause here, because this seems to be the most difficult concept for central Canadians to grasp about the West—IT'S NOT ABOUT THE MONEY!

Admittedly, western frustration, and particularly Alberta and B.C. frustration, is often expressed in fiscal terms. Why wouldn't it be? Over the past 40 years, the two provinces have been bigger net contributors to Confederation than even Ontario. And that's not per capita, that's total net contribution. The myth that Ontarians nurture—that they, altruistically, do most of the heavy lifting for the nation—is just that, a myth. Ottawa spends in Ontario each year nearly the same amount that Ontarians send to the nation's capital.

Alright, if federal spending on procurement is exempted (and there's no reason it should be given its economic impact), and we look solely at contributions to transfer and

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equalization payments, and other interregional transfers of wealth, Ontario is a net contributor, too; a big one. Yet on a per capita basis, it still can't hold a candle to Alberta. Each Ontarian contributes around \$1,800 a year, while the average Albertan kicks in over \$2,600.

Yet westerners, and especially Albertans, are labelled un-Canadian, the bad boys, the ones who refuse to play nicely with others and are in need, as Prime Minister Chrétien said before Christmas, of "tough love."

But there I go, explaining why western alienation is not about money by talking about money. Pocketbook arguments are just easier to make and understand. But that's a shame, if for no other reason than it allows those who dislike or disparage western aspirations to chalk the whole exercise up to greed.

Even Liberal Senator Nick Taylor, a lifelong Albertan who has done more than his share of defending the region's interests to Ottawa, recently told the *Calgary Herald* "When you come to Alberta separatists, you are usually talking about something based on sheer greed."

That's like calling the American Revolution merely a tax revolt. The big differences, at least in terms of what grates on westerners, are in mind-set and culture. Any divergences we have from the central Canadian view of the world, and there are many—on the size of government, the role of the courts, the importance of the natural family, welfare policy, language policy, guns, faith, parliamentary reform, and so on—are scoffed at. They're dismissed as the product of less subtle and sophisticated minds.

Permit me to use a family analogy. You're grown up now, and have a profession, a home and a thriving family. Yet your domineering father insists on treating you like a child, as if you couldn't possibly know as much as he does. A little money from you on the side is keeping the old man afloat, but he still can't shake his habit of dictating to you what to do.

On January 29, the *National Post* ran a story "Alienation's new hotbed," revealing the results of a poll the paper conducted in which Albertans expressed much greater alienation from Ottawa than even Quebecers, 47 per cent to 30 per cent. It was a good story, except the greater frustration isn't new.

As long ago as 1992, Donna Dasko, then vice-president of Environics Research, told me her firm had been tracking western alienation

versus the Quebec variant for nearly a decade at that point, and the West's core resentments had always been higher than Quebec's.

Which raises another difference between the two regions. Quebec seems desirous of exiting Canada, but can never quite bring itself to go. Meanwhile, the West has no interest in leaving, but likely would if it came to that. In truth, Quebec is more entwined in Canada than the West is. Quebec is a more central part of the country—always has been—with more influence on national policies and institutions. It's more dependent on federal cash, and would be more hurt by a split.

Breaking up would be harder for Quebec to do. It would more profoundly rent its population, do more damage to its economy, run more contrary to its history and culture. Western separation wouldn't be inconsequential, but it wouldn't be nearly as devastating on the region, either.

However—and here I pause again—western alienation ISN'T A THREAT TO LEAVE. The same *National Post* poll that found greater alienation in Alberta also found less desire for separation, just 4 per cent to Quebec's 27 per cent.

Usually when westerners compare Quebec with the West, it's out of a combination of frustration and bewilderment. We are saying, "Look, Quebec is a net beneficiary from Confederation's resources; its demands have compelled the rest of Canada to remake its politics and society; moreover, to back up its demands it constantly threatens to break up the country.

"Why then do you devote so much attention to them? We contribute more than our share to running the country, confine our demands to Senate reform and adherence to the constitutional separation of powers, and seldom ever talk about bolting. Yet we are portrayed as the bad Canadians, the ones who are motivated purely by provincial interest and avarice, the ones the prime minister insists are 'different,' and not in a good way."

At the nub of western alienation then is a plea for respect and a request to be left alone. However, for all their lip service to tolerance of diversity, post-modern liberals of the kind that dominate Canadian politics cannot respect ideologies that differ from their own. Nor can they leave well enough alone by resisting the urge to remake everyone in their own image.

It could be a bumpy ride.

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