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**Review of *Western Visions: Perspectives on the West in Canada*
by Roger Gibbons and Sonia Arrison**

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BOOK REVIEWS

Western Visions: Perspectives on the West in Canada. Roger Gibbons and Sonia Arrison. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995. 153 pp. Tables, notes, index. C\$16.95 paper (ISBN 1-55111-073-3).

In the 1997 Canadian election, Preston Manning's Reform Party emerged as Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition with 60 seats in the House of Commons. The Liberal Governing Party of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien would have been reduced to a minority had Liberals not won 101 of Ontario's 103 seats. Why and how did this development occur? What are some of its probable consequences? *Western Visions* provides a timely and revealing set of answers to these questions so closely related to Canada's perennial national unity crisis. Most academics and interested citizens think about that crisis primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of the secessionist movement in Quebec. Little wonder, as Gibbons and Arrison remind us, that Canadians living in the four western provinces, now comprising 30% of Canada's population, feel like "strangers in a strange land."

The authors' goal in this all-too-brief monograph "is to describe the evolution and contemporary nature of nationalist sentiment in Western Canada, and to offer some predictions as to how that sentiment might unfold in the years to come." The nationalist sentiment under scrutiny, unlike the secessionist variety preached by a growing proportion of Quebec's Francophone elites, is a Western Canadian version of a pan-Canadian nationalism reflecting the historical experiences of Westerners as well as their current demographic, social, cultural, economic, and political conditions, values, norms, and aspirations. All of these elements are succinctly and clearly outlined in chapters two and three which deal with the roots of regional discontent and the formulation of various western visions. Nationalist sentiment in the West emphasizes "the equality of individuals, provinces, regions," while embracing "many of the contemporary tenets of populism." Westerners employ the mantra of equality and the populism of process—initiative, referenda, and recall—to gain a more influential role in national politics.

The authors correctly point out inherent contradictions in this potent ideological mix which stand to undermine Westerners' reform aspirations. Provincial equality, fine in theory, is virtually impossible to institutionalize

in substantive terms given the provinces' vast differences in population and resources. It also creates a conflict with Francophones' equally problematic conception of equality, one between nations or cultural communities. Populism, described by the authors as a form of "secular fundamentalism," runs counter to Canadians' long-established commitment to responsive, representative government and its party and institutional mechanisms for achieving political consensus and compromise. To score victory in national referenda, the West must win a sizeable percentage of voter support in Ontario and Quebec, which comprise 62% of Canada's total population. This is highly unlikely if what Westerners seek undermines "the moderate, pluralistic and secular national mainstream." In short, this Western version of Canadian nationalism competes with the dominant social-welfare-state "liberal" nationalism espoused by a majority of Canadians, at least until just recently.

These constraints assist the authors in explaining why Westerners' many efforts at reform have failed. There have been attempts to win the support of the established political *authorities* by electing the Diefenbaker Tory government in 1958 and the Mulroney Tory government in 1984 and 1988, or by creating a whole series of third parties culminating with Reform. There have been direct challenges to the political *regime* by the proponents of group government, the embrace of various forms of populism, the enhancement of interstate federalism through the devolution of more powers to the provinces, and the institutionalization of intrastate federalism via the Triple-E—equal, elected, and effective—Senate. Finally, there has been the direct threat to the political *community* by a small minority of Westerners who have advocated "getting out of Canada." The authors see this latter development as merely a strategic threat to draw attention to, and respect for, Westerners' conception of Canadian nationalism.

The New West is in the process of transforming the nation, helping to remake Ottawa in its own image. The authors argue persuasively that Québécois secessionism offers Westerners the leverage to achieve acceptance, in some form, of their conception of Canadian nationalism. They show that Westerners' animosity toward Quebec does not stem from a prejudice toward French Canadians but rather from the belief that Quebec exercises disproportionate power and influence within the federation at both levels, federal and provincial. Constant references to "French power" by politicians, bureaucrats, and journalists during the Trudeau and Mulroney administrations merely confirmed this perception. Trudeau's policies of official bilingualism and multiculturalism, and his National Energy Program, which subsidized central and eastern Canada at the expense of the

West, added fuel to the fire. Mulroney's ill-conceived attempts to appease Québécois nationalists with the 1987 Meech Lake Constitutional Accord and the 1992 Charlottetown Consensus Report pushed a majority of Westerners into open political revolt, virtually destroying the Progressive Conservative government and Party in the process.

Indeed, Manning's Reform Party is the national political expression of Westerners' Canadian nationalism and their disenchantment with the federation's existing political structure. Reform won 52 seats in 1993 and 60 in the 1997 election which came on the heels of the near victory of the secessionists' 1995 referendum. The authors would probably agree that Reform's increased political clout in Ottawa and its greater presence in the national media are beginning to have a significant impact on the formulation and implementation of the full range of national policies and programs. The Chrétien Liberal government's reduction of the forty-two billion dollar deficit in four years by slashing transfer payments to the provinces for health, social welfare, and post-secondary education testifies to the potent presence of Reform in national politics. Moreover, the Chrétien government's adoption of Plan B spelling out the conditions of any Quebec secession and referring the question of a unilateral declaration of independence to the Supreme Court was spurred on by Reform's approach to this crucial matter.

The authors' last chapter on the future of the West is now dated, lacking as it does an analysis of the tremendous impact of the 1995 Quebec referendum and the 1997 federal election on Western Canadian, Quebec, and national politics. Given the separatists' near victory and Manning's leadership of the Official opposition, the authors will be forced to reconsider their somewhat tentative scenarios for the future. I look forward to a new, expanded version of this erudite, though-provoking monograph, by far the best thing to appear on national unity in a long while. **Michael D. Behiels**, *Department of History, University of Ottawa*.