

CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICS AS SEEN FROM THE WEST

by Roger Gibbins

Discussions of western perspectives on Canada's constitutional crisis invariably focus on Senate reform. That is unavoidable, but regrettable, for it causes people to misread the constitutional landscape.

It is possible to tease out a western Canadian constitutional vision that extends well beyond a long-standing preoccupation with institutional reform. Despite, or perhaps because of the region's multicultural roots, the vision is based on the mythology of the American melting pot, on individual rights and equality within a social order that respects, but does not constitutionally enshrine ethnic and linguistic diversity. It is a vision based on enterprise, on economic development more than on cultural protection and appears, therefore, to be based on the low ground of money rather than on the high ground of culture. It is an ahistorical vision that looks outward to a rapidly changing international environment and which gives little weight to founding peoples and founding cultures. Finally, it is a vision based on inclusion — "the West wants in" — but with a price tag of institutional reform attached.

Westerners, however, have had no success in bringing this vision into play during the present constitutional process. The central problem, and I use this adjective advisedly, is that Canadian myths and national creeds have been built and continue to be built around the pre-eminence of Quebec and implicitly around the notion of two founding

cultures and peoples. Visions which neglect the centrality of Quebec are given no credence among Canadian political, social and cultural elites; they are deemed illegitimate, if not dangerous. Although it looked for a while as if the growing popularity of the Reform Party would create an opening for western visions, this opening has been largely closed now that the Progressive Conservatives have decided to attack rather than co-opt the Reform platform.

SENATE REFORM AS SYMBOL

As a consequence, western constitutional aspirations have been herded by the rest of the country into the narrow issue of Senate reform, an institutional pariah that is treated with hostility in Ontario, annoyance in Ottawa, and something between indifference and contempt in Quebec. Even within the West itself, there is no clear evidence that support for either Senate reform or the Triple E model, in particular, is wide or deep. Yet, because Senate reform has been forced to carry the totality of western Canadian aspirations, the issue has become the symbolic key that many western Canadians will use to unlock the regional implications of any constitutional deal.

There is a troublesome irony at work. To date, the West's interest in more effective regional representation, and in Senate reform more specifically, has not been taken seriously by the key players in Ottawa, Quebec and Ontario. Their strategy has been to run out the clock, to wait until the last moment to address Senate reform and then to assume that its supporters would knuckle under in order to achieve a package acceptable to Quebec. In short, it has been assumed that Senate reform need not be taken seriously, that the national unity trump card could be played in the last hand. Thus, the supporters of Senate reform have faced an unrelenting barrage of pleas

to compromise, to be flexible; never is the suggestion made that any compromise should or would be forthcoming from the other side.

THE ROMANOW COMPROMISE

The irony is that if the supporters of Senate reform do not fold, if they force a deal, they may end up with a Senate that could be even worse than the status quo. The final stages of the Senate reform debate have been marked by ideas that range from the silly to the unworkable and absurd. The fact that the "consensus" model proposed by Saskatchewan's Roy Romanow is based on equal provincial representation and unequal Senators demonstrates the mess that we are on the verge of creating. That the West might be shouldered with the responsibility for creating such an institutional abomination would be a bitter irony, indeed.

There is one simple fact that the western Senate reformers have got right. If Senate reform or, indeed, any institutional reform that would produce more effective regional representation is not achieved in this round, then the issue will disappear from the constitutional agenda for generations to come. Any promises to the contrary are not to be believed and, hence, the dilemma. If Senate reform supporters such as Don Getty do not fold, they will be accused of risking the survival of Canada. If they do fold, any western leverage on the constitutional process will be lost. The knife is, indeed, at the regional throat and, at the very least, the western supporters of Senate reform deserve our sympathy for the very difficult choice they face.

Roger Gibbins is Professor and Head, Department of Political Science, The University of Calgary. Western Report is a regular feature of Canada Watch.

