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Shun the Three-Headed Monster

Wayne Ratzlaff is a grain and cattle farmer in the Blaine Lake district. Ratzlaff was involved in the Western Canada Concept Party (WCC) from 1981 – 1985. He held the position of president for one year, and was vice-president before that.

Ratzlaff was one of approximately 15 Saskatchewan delegates to attend the Reform Association of Canada conventions in Vancouver (June) and Winnipeg (October).

The Reform Association of Canada was formed last year and co-founded by Stan Roberts, former president of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, former president of Simon Fraser University and Preston Manning, son of Ernest Manning, past premier of Alberta. The Reform Party of Canada was born at the October 31st convention held in Winnipeg.

The following is the personal viewpoint of Mr. Ratzlaff.

The June 1987 Western Assembly on Canada's Economic and Political Future, organized by the Reform Association of Canada was about fairness and unfairness, about compassion and selfishness, in the economic treatment of Western Canada within confederation. Twenty years ago, Canada was ushered in as a new era with the promise that the "just society" was imminent. The rhetoric has not changed, yet real fairness remains an issue. The reality is that there exists substantial economic evidence of serious unfairness toward Western Canada during this period.

Canada is a country of enigmas. Indeed, it seems that only in Canada an enigma really makes sense. Only in Canada—a country of incredible diversity—can the term "confederation" be used by proponents of strongly centralist government. Only in Canada—a bastion of workers' freedom—can the use of a rare legislative free vote to defeat a popular policy be called "democracy at its best" by the Prime Minister. Only in Canada—a nation of loyalists—can the apathy of citizens be traced not to contentment, but to a fundamental sense of alienation. And only in Canada would that alienation be most profound among those who have most clearly demonstrated their patriotism, whether through their courage in times of war or through their industry in time of peace.

And so it was the consensus of the June 1st Vancouver convention that a new broadly based federal political party was needed to put forward the West's agenda for change. On the weekend of October 31, 1987 in Winnipeg I attended a convention where just such a party was born.

There were a large number of excellent speakers at both conventions, one of which was Ted Byfield of the *Western Report* who set the tone for the event... “People of every political strip know that something is grievously wrong in Western Canada. Farmers can’t afford to seed their crops, mines are closed, oil rigs lie derelict, shipyards are idle, food banks are besieged, the savings of many lifetimes have vanished, homes have lost their value and a host of unemployed bust the welfare rolls of every town and city.”

Steve Harper of the University of Calgary presented a paper that included figures compiled by professor Robert Mansell which show that from 1961 to 1985, a rough \$70-billion-net surplus (or positive difference between what the feds collected in revenues from the region, and the expenditures and transfers it returned to the region) was extracted from Western Canada. On a per-capita basis, nearly \$2,000 per person per year was taken from Alberta, 15 times the contribution of Ontario. He pointed out that in the 1980s; Ontario has joined Quebec as a major net-beneficiary of regional transfers, while Alberta has remained a net-loser. Even while the two central provinces have generally had strong economies, and Alberta has consistently been on the ropes.

Stephen Harper also gave examples of unfairness that could basically be described as cyclical. This refers to unfair changes in policy with changing circumstances. OU is the most blatant example. The recent downturn in the Western economy has provoked lectures on how we are dependent on international prices. But of course, this defence was not appropriate when there was a boom here. Then Westerners were told that Central Canada could not pay the prices set in international markets. Massive oil-wealth transfers from the West to the east in the '70s and early '80s are countered with miniscule incentive programs today.

This kind of hypocrisy has appeared again in just the past few weeks. On the trade issue, much has been made about the importance of getting cheap Western oil and gas to provide a competitive edge for central Canadian manufacturing, especially in times of high prices. But when Western farmers are having hard times, as they are now, have they ever been guaranteed secure access to under-priced Central Canadian products to help them to compete in the ruthless international marketplace where there is virtually no tariff protection? No!

He pointed out that all the unfairness is the result of a federal political system that concentrates its concerns with the golden triangle power block of central Canada. How else can it be explained, he asked, that the parliament of Canada debate at length 500 lost jobs at an oil refinery in Montreal while at the same time remain almost silent about the 50,000 lost jobs in the energy sector of the West.

And so it was with a great deal of satisfaction that I, as a long-time activist and promoter of Western Canadian concerns, listened to a long list of grievances put forward, not by what the media might call “rednecks” or “extremists” but by professors, constitutional lawyers, company executives, former president of the

Canadian Chamber of Commerce, president of the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce, an ex-mayor of Vancouver, the Canada West Foundation and former executives or M.L.A.'s of the Liberal, Conservative and NDP parties. Jack Horner was a surprise speaker, his topic, party discipline, deserves an article in itself.

Despite the fact that so much of what I heard at these well-organized conventions was so familiar and forced me to reflect that those of us in the WCC had just been ahead of our time. And despite the fact that I was very impressed with the leadership of this new party. And despite the fact that I believe this party will have a positive impact on the federal political scene in Western Canada. I declined taking an active role within the "Reform Party of Canada" for a number of reasons.

My reservations started with the fact that at the Vancouver conference, a planned address by someone advocating Western Independence was struck from the agenda. In fact this "speaker" was asked to not even show up. I got it under the radar.

Now I can well understand why the organizers of the Reform Association may have wanted to distance themselves from some elements of the "Western Canada Concept", but I thought it a mistake that they throw out the baby with the bath water! I felt it was in the best interest of this new movement to have some input by those of us who have gone on before. Also, I feared that in their effort to distance themselves from the WCC and a "separatist" point of view, they were overlooking some fundamental flaws in their strategy, which some of us could have helped explain. Yet, the organizers claimed that they did not want to "cook the outcome" of the Vancouver meeting... but by limiting debate, it definitely was cooked!

I don't know, but I suspect that the decision not to have a separatist speak was based on a desire to avoid scrutiny by the national press. If that was the case, then they were not heeding the very good advice of magazine editor Ted Byfield when he told them that if they worried about what the national press would say about them, then the press would have them where they wanted them. In other words, stick to your objectives, explore all options, and never mind the press.

Steve Harper also gave good advice. He told the party that they must put political convictions ahead of political expedience and that they must have the courage to address the issues. Yet when faced with the task of choosing a new name for the political party they were about to form, the Winnipeg gathering immediately rejected the use of the word "Western" in the party name. This was ignoring the fact that the preamble to the constitution that they had just ratified states that the party is "born out of the discontents and frustrated aspirations" of Western Canadians, and the stated goal of bringing Western Canada more fully and completely into confederation.

That to me was an exercise in timidity. I would have preferred that the name of the new party state with pride who we were and why we were there. And so I was forced to ask myself some questions. Would the leadership and the majority of this new

party have the courage to “bite the bullet” when it came to the crunch, or would they become caught up in the hype of politics and measure success in terms of how many seats won and how honourable the cause or, alternatively, *in the achievement of their goals*? Would they measure their success in terms of how well organized they are, and how well they define the problems, or the actual implementation of our agenda?

There was no doubt that the membership and leadership was eager to address the symptoms of Western Canada’s ills, but I noticed an unwillingness to face reality about the cause. And when I bounced some of these realities off many people at the Winnipeg convention, I always got the same answer—“Yes, yes, I know... but... but...”

Many resolutions were passed at both conventions. They read like a Western Canadian wish list, having been involved in another western “protest” party the subject matter of most resolutions I was familiar with. Most dealt with a desire to make fundamental constitutional changes to the Canadian Constitution. In fact we came away from this convention with 10 priorities, 8 dealing with constitutional issues! And therein lays the fundamental flaw in the strategy of the Reform Party of Canada. A western party running federally with specific constitutional goals is on a dead-end road!

The stated (Preston Manning) goal of the Reform Party was “to elect enough members to hold the balance of power in a minority government!”

My Question... either before Meech Lake or after... would Liberals or Conservatives, or the NDP, representing central Canada—or even Eastern Canada agree with the Reform Party and amend the constitution to eliminate Section 36 regarding the equalization (inter-provincial socialism) process? Would they agree to all the “Es” of a Triple E Senate?

Those who answer yes or even maybe... to that question I suggest are dreamers. The strategy also ignores the fact that it takes the co-operation of the provinces (not federal political parties) to bring about constitutional change.

To suggest that by holding the balance of power in Ottawa we might persuade Hamilton and Toronto MPs to give up the status quo and help us become full partners is, with all due respect, foolish and is raising false hopes in a lot of good people. One need not study much history to come to the conclusion that *power has never, ever, been known to give itself up!* It can only be wrestled away.

Those who wish to ignore these facts like to cite the perceived successes of former western movements (Progressives, SoCreds and CCF) that eventually held the balance of power in Ottawa. However, the life of every minority government in Canada has been short, and to suggest that the NDP implemented their agenda while holding the balance in the Trudeau government doesn’t wash. The NDP are just Liberals in a hurry. Any other federal legislation that addressed western

concerns during any minority government was in one form or another what Ted Byfield described as “sucking from confederation” instead of being a part of it. And nothing was ever passed by a minority government that didn’t also benefit some strong central Canadian interest as well.

The Reform Party may well create some anxiety for Western Mulroney MPs, and so it should, but I don’t believe the constituents of the 170 seats in Ontario and Quebec will lose any sleep over it.

But what if... the Reform Association had come out of the Vancouver conference with a strongly worded protest aimed at the western provincial governments that the Meech Lake Accord was unacceptable and any concurrence with it would be met with a public awareness campaign that would make them look like fools. And that because of the spineless and greedy position of the Western Premiers in agreeing to Meech Lake, new parties would form, provincially, across the west, with a constitutional agenda, to put an end to this madness. That would be a real threat to a power base, which is where a western party can gain power. Staying power!

After all, has it not been demonstrated time and again that it has been western provincial governments that have sold out western “provincial” interests. From property rights to the National Energy Program to Amending Formulas, it is the actions of western premiers that is hard to comprehend. I at least do not feel we need to experiment one more time within the federal system, to see where it will take us. History shows that it’s a given.

The Reformers in Vancouver and Winnipeg have their hearts in the right place, and their sense of justice is keen. But, their strategy is based on the premise that the balance of power lies between two other federal parties or, holding power in Ottawa. It does not! As was stated by Stephen Harper in Winnipeg... “The federal Liberals, Tories and NDP are the three heads of the same monster...” So I ask... how can you hold the balance of power between them?

I would remind the Reformers of the words of John Dryden: “Better shun the bait than struggle in the snare.”

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Note: Brian Mulroney with the biggest majority in Canadian History could not change the constitution! So why run federally if constitutional change is your goal? If Western Canadians want to gain fairness with in confederation they must elect provincial governments who will commit to, and insist on the Reform Parties 1987 “Western Agenda for Change”.

Anything short of that is a colossal waste of time and money and effort, as the Reform experiment has so vividly demonstrated.