Student Essay Contest 2008 Best Essays

Should Canadians switch to a system of proportional representation?

Wasted Ballots
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CanadaWest
F O U N D A T I O N

STUDENT ESSAY CONTEST

The third annual Canada West Foundation Student Essay Contest invited students attending a post-secondary institution in BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, or Manitoba during the Fall 2008 or Winter 2009 semester to write an essay in response to the following question: Should Canadians switch to a system of proportional representation? A $5,000 cash prize for the best undergraduate essay and a $5,000 cash prize for the best graduate essay were the incentives.

The Canada West Foundation wishes to congratulate and thank the two winners, the two runners-up, and all of the students who submitted essays. It is hard to think of a more important topic to democracy than how we select our elected representatives. The essays we received demonstrate that this issue is one that resonates among students in western Canada and that there is a wide range of views on this critical issue.

It should be noted that the judges reviewed the essays without knowing the names or schools of the writers.

Should Canadians SWITCH to a system of PROPORTIONAL representation?

Wasted Ballots

By Brian Baker

What does it mean to be Canadian? Last summer, as I backpacked around Europe, I was more aware than ever of my nationality. The little red and white flag sewed onto my bag meant that I was friendly and approachable, and very likely a staunch hockey fan. But my identity as a Canadian citizen goes beyond hockey; it also embodies a set of values and ideals. Most importantly, these include a commitment to democracy, cultural diversity, and an emphasis on social justice and human rights. As Canadians, we believe strongly in the equal representation and rights of all people, regardless of race, religion, or sexual orientation. Sadly, Canada's reality does not actually reflect these fundamental Canadian ideals. Our archaic electoral system impedes democracy, discourages diversity, and challenges the very essence of Canadian identity. Clearly this is not a good fit for Canadians. Fortunately, an alternative electoral system, proportional representation (PR), holds the promise of remedying many of the problems that the current electoral system facilitates.

A democratic culture and a diverse, participatory civil society are central Canadian values. The foundation of our representative democracy is the electoral system; how we select the representatives that speak and act on our behalf in government is critical. Canada's current electoral system is pluralist, and is commonly called "first-past-the-post" (FPTP). Under this system, candidates must win the most votes in an electoral district in order to win a seat in Parliament. It is an all-or-nothing system: an electoral candidate either walks away with the seat or leaves empty-handed.

This selection process is lacking in democratic integrity. Assume a theoretical electoral riding has three candidates competing with each other. Two candidates get 30% each of the total votes, while the final and winning candidate gets 40%. The winner then goes on to represent 100% of the people in the riding, but has the support of less than half of them! The majority of the riding is represented by someone they did not vote for.

Unsurprisingly, this distortion extends to the division of party seats in

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Parliament as well. The total votes a party receives is often far removed from the number of seats it wins; larger parties gain more seats than their national popular vote dictates and smaller parties do not receive representation proportionate to their support. For example, in the last federal election, the Green Party received nearly a million votes, but did not get a single seat in Parliament.

Meanwhile, the Bloc Quebecois won 16% of the seats in the house with only 10% of the popular vote. The composition of our government is neither fair nor accurate.

Given this situation, voter apathy is inevitable, and indeed, recent voter turnouts have been lower than ever. Knowing that a vote only counts if it goes to the winner, voters feel robbed of their political voice, and in the last federal election a mere 59% Canadians bothered to go to the polls. Low voter turnout compounds the problem and widens the democratic deficit, as the government becomes even less representative.

The FPTP electoral system also undermines, and even discourages, the core Canadian ideal of diversity. As Canadians, we pride ourselves on being a "cultural mosaic" and have embedded the idea of "multiculturalism" into our constitution. We are accepting of all lifestyles and our free and robust media encourages the free exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives. As a multi-racial individual, nothing could make me prouder to be Canadian. However, our voting system stifles diversity in Parliament, and our government does not reflect the diverse nature of Canadians.

As explained by Duverger's Law, plurality voting systems create a two-party system in government and discourage the development of smaller, third parties. Minority parties, such as the Green Party in Canada, are unable to gain parliamentary seats in this all-

or-nothing system. Canadians are too diverse to be represented by only two parties, and the numerous minority groups that make Canada so culturally rich deserve a voice in Parliament.

Adopting a system of proportional representation, specifically a Single Transferable Vote (STV) system, would remedy the problems described above, and reinforce, rather than undermine, Canadian values and ideals.

Under a system of STV, more than one Member of Parliament is elected in each electoral riding, and rather than voting for only one candidate, voters rank their options according to preference. No votes are wasted; all of a voter's preferences are taken into account. This would foster a culture of political participation that is necessary in a healthy democracy.

Under this system of PR, a party's share of parliamentary seats is more proportional to its national support. Rather than a distorted legislature, Canada would have a government that is representative of what the people want, and thus more legitimate. Canadians would have greater ownership over their government, bringing Canada closer to the democratic ideal of "rule by the people."

Adopting a system of PR would not only encourage democracy in Canada, but it would also uphold the Canadian value of diversity. This system is not all-or-nothing; parties with a minority support base can gain some voice in Parliament. This would ensure the

representation of minority groups. Furthermore, governments formed by proportional representation are historically more diverse in terms of the number of ethnic minorities and women in government. Rather than legislatures composed mainly of two large parties, our government would mirror the composition of the Canadian people; it would be diverse in interests, perspectives, people, and ideas.

Proportional representation would mean a Canadian government that was more representative of the views of its people. This would, in turn, encourage voter participation, and ensure that the voices of all Canadians are heard in government. We are not a monolithic people, and we rightly celebrate every facet of the Canadian mosaic. We need a diverse Parliament to accurately represent us, and our current FPTP system simply fails in this aspect. PR would mean more accurate representation for all Canadians in government. As members of a diverse and democratic nation, we deserve an electoral system that celebrates this diversity, rather than impedes it.

Should Canadians SWITCH to a system of PROPORTIONAL representation?

Systems for Sanity: The Processes Toward Democracy

By Luke Freeman

There is an old saying: "Insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results." This has particular relevance to the current electoral system in Canada, which has been showing its age. Political events and elections during 2008 demonstrated the truth of this adage and it must now become clear to the Canadian people that to continue with the current electoral system and expect things to change on their own could be defined as "insane" by conventional wisdom.

The election held in October 2008 was Canada's third federal election in four years and yet it achieved virtually nothing except to further discontent toward the archaic political processes currently in place. None of the political parties achieved what they set out to do. Canada produced another record low voter turnout and the Canadian people were subjected, yet again, to completely disproportionate representation. Ironically, the Canadian people had to pay approximately $300 million dollars for this privilege, right in the middle of a global economic crisis. Insanity.

The motion of non-confidence and the proposal of the Liberal-NDP coalition soon followed in November. This only resulted in a demonstration of the self-serving partisan nature of many Canadian politicians, the ignorance of voters about their political process and not to mention a fear of change in the very same year that those south of the border championed it. All that Canada has to show from this is a situation in Ottawa that lacks coherent platform, planning or co-operation for the economic and environmental crises that are facing not just Canada, but the entire world.

There are a plethora of issues to be resolved. Canadians are faced with orphaned voters, false majority governments, geographically splintered representation, a polarized political spectrum, strategic voting and a lack of representation for minorities. The plurality system encourages political parties to preach

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to the status quo, leaving voters with little choice. Simply by looking at countries such as New Zealand, Ireland or Germany it is evident that in a more proportional system these issues would not be as significant.

Election results in Canada make it clear that adopting a more proportional voting model is an important step in the health of Canadian democracy, but it is certainly not the only one. Proponents of proportional representation make arguments ranging from the obvious (more accurate representation of the political spectrum) through to the speculative (increased female representation) and the possibly

idealistic (co-operation between parties). Although the effects of proportional representation in Canada cannot be fully predicted, many of its argued benefits can be justified by just looking to some of the most efficient, responsible and sound democratic countries in the world that have some form proportional representation.

However, the answer is not as simple as merely adopting a model of proportional representation. There are important changes that must go hand-in-hand with its adoption or it could likely result in a worse political climate. It is not just the process that needs to change; it is the people and the supporting processes. There are myths about proportional representation that tend to be misleading and self-defeating; in reality the steps are quite straightforward and the rewards are immeasurable.

Canada cannot just switch to any system of proportional representation that is popular with just the politicians, academics or other countries. A suitable system would need to be tailored in the most democratic and intelligent way possible. Selecting a voting system should be neither the job of politicians nor an independent commission. The most democratic way would be to put it in the hands of the people. Is not choosing how we vote essential to voting itself? The citizen selection must be random, proportionate and followed by extensive education and deliberations. The Citizens' Assembly model of selection that was implemented in British Columbia is a very good step in the right direction. The Citizens' Assembly

in British Columbia demonstrated that voters think differently than politicians and academics. Greater voter choice was one of three basic values of an electoral system identified by the Assembly.

Proportional representation generally results in smaller political parties that represent a broader range of political views. This makes it much more difficult for one party to have a majority, therefore forcing politicians to learn to work together. Perusing compromise and consensus is much more democratic than a winner-takes-all mentality. A more effective and democratic way of effectively governing together would be to form "issue coalitions" (unlike coalition governments). While still belonging to a political party, politicians could align themselves with a variety of multi-partisan issue coalitions. For example a "green coalition" could represent all politicians concerned with the environment and even have the power to propose "green bills" within Parliament. Furthermore, the variety of issue coalitions could include rural representation, provincial rights, international relations, health care and the protection of human rights.

The face of politics can only be revolutionized if voters are empowered to choose between local candidates of the same party (by single-transferable-vote in multi-member districts). This would allow politicians to align themselves with various issue coalitions as a way of defeating members of their own party, thus providing voters with more range and accuracy of choice at a local level.

Although their adaptations vary, models of proportional representation are the most popular electoral systems worldwide. Benefits of all proportional representation systems include the increased representation of women and minority groups, reduced orphan voters, increased voter turnout, representation of minor parties, higher accuracy in representation of citizen opinions and better geographical distribution. Canada has a history of progress and innovation, would it not be wise for that to transfer to contemporary politics? Canadians need a political system that serves them best and reduces the games of power in politics. Rethinking what democracy means to the country, giving power to the people to make an educated decision and embarking on some democratic innovation are the only ways to achieve progressive change in this nation. Democracy can always be innovated and improved. To succeed, first we must try.

Should Canadians SWITCH to a system of PROPORTIONAL representation?

Shared Destiny:
A Common Sense Approach to Strengthening Canada Through Proportional Representation

By Matthew Sharp

Roy Romanow once wrote that "against a backdrop of individual and community proclivities and of divergent belief systems, shared destiny has been accepted as necessary for survival, growth, and what we must do for each other to build an exceptional nation." Indeed, the history of Canada could be written as a 142-year struggle to craft institutions that both accommodate our diversity and strengthen the bonds that unite us from coast to coast. While in many ways we have been successful in this task, there is one political institution that remains wholly unreformed since 1867, one that has occasionally wreaked havoc on our quest for shared destiny: the first-past-the-post electoral system.

For the first 50 years of Canada's existence, our electoral system served us well in our pursuit of peace, order and good government. Two parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, battled for the centre by brokering regional compromises within their respective parties and aggressively seeking votes in every province and territory. With only two significant parties competing for seats, there was minimal need for artificially "manufactured" majorities: the party that formed the government always had close to or more than 50% of the popular vote.

However, World War I sent shockwaves through our electoral system that still reverberate to this day. The 1917 election, the most bitter in Canadian history, polarized the country over the issue of conscription. The vote divided Canada along linguistic lines, with the Liberals winning 76% of their seats in Quebec and the Liberal–Conservative Unionists taking 84% of their seats in Ontario and western Canada. Since then, elections where the major national parties have all had significant representation in every province have been few and far between. There is no doubt that part of this is due to the vast geographic and the linguistic cleavages that exist in Canada: brokering differences across more than 5,000 kilometres of sparsely populated land is no easy task. But a more important part of the explanation lies in the mechanics of first-past-the-post elections.

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The winner-take-all incentive built into the system is responsible for what Alan Cairns once labeled the "politics of sectionalism." Parties with strong regional bases where votes are concentrated into a small number

of seats are rewarded handsomely by the first-past-the-post system; those with thin but significant broad national support are punished. For 92 years, the most successful strategy for forming the government has been to top up a large regional base with a sprinkling of seats from other parts of the country, while ignoring regions where the likelihood of winning seats is low. This leads to a vicious cycle where the underrepresentation of certain regions in the major national parties reinforces their inability to effectively win seats in those particular regions. Elections where the government has had a limited presence in one or more regions have been a common occurrence throughout Canada's history, undermining Canadians' desire to speak with one national voice. It is no surprise then that Canadians have often turned to their provincial premiers to speak for them, with the result being increased intergovernmental bickering and recurring calls for devolution of power.

The first-past-the-post system has also led to periodic electoral earthquakes caused by deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. In 1958 and 1984, the first-past-the-post system translated popular vote shares of just over 50% for the winning party into devastating blows to the opposition parties, hampering their ability to effectively scrutinize the government. In 1993 and 1997, the disproportionate strength of regional protest parties destroyed any hope for an opposition party that could speak for pan-Canadian values and goals. While our parties are remarkably adept at picking up the pieces after these dramatic episodes,

each successive explosion—artificially generated out of what are relatively stable vote shares—has become more and more dangerous to the fulfillment of our shared destiny.

Meanwhile, a new fault line has appeared in Canadian politics. Voter participation at the federal level fell from 75% of eligible voters in 1988 to 59.1% in the most recent federal election (the lowest turnout level in Canadian history), largely as a result of the low turnout of young people over the last 15 years. While the causes of this phenomenon are complex, it is fair to lay at least some of the blame at the feet of our electoral system. Political parties play a critical role in providing the information voters need to make an informed choice, and political knowledge is in turn a key predictor of a person's likelihood of voting. In our current system, every election features a large number of uncompetitive ridings where there is no incentive for parties to dedicate precious resources to informing voters. In addition, young people often favour parties with principle-based positions that offer genuine opportunities for grassroots participation, and it is precisely these parties that are treated most harshly by the present system.

In light of these observations, it is no wonder that more and more Canadians think the time has come to fundamentally change the way we elect our representatives. Many believe it is time to implement some form of proportional representation, where each party receives seats in proportion to their share of the popular vote. This could be achieved either by

ending geographic representation and moving to party lists for each province or by introducing a mixed system where the legislature is split into riding-based and party-list Members of Parliament.

There is no question that a fully proportional system would have several clear advantages over our current one. Without the distortion of the first-past-the-post system, drastic shifts in the number of seats held by each party would no longer occur, leading to greater stability and fewer inexperienced representatives. Under proportional representation, opposition parties would always have a strong voice in Parliament, leading to greater government scrutiny and an increased diversity of viewpoints. Most importantly, proportional representation might just reverse the current trend of declining voter turnout. Voters would be empowered since every vote would truly count, no matter where it is cast. Parties would have the incentive to fight for votes everywhere, regardless of their regional popularity, giving more people the information they need to vote. And the parties that are typically most attractive to young people would finally get their fair share of seats, encouraging new voting cohorts to participate.

This is not to say that fully proportional representation would be without serious drawbacks. Single-party majority governments would become obsolete, ending Canada's tradition of strong government. The need to build and maintain coalitions in order to govern would likely hamper the
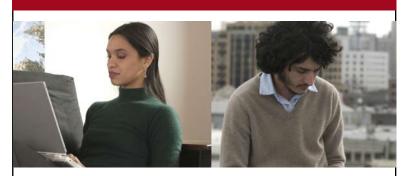
government's ability to make difficult decisions aimed at long-term benefit. With the increased influence of smaller parties in the absence of majority governments, parties focussed exclusively on regional gain might hold the balance of power in Parliament. Interregional disputes would no longer be brokered within the national parties; instead, there would be clear regional winners and losers based on which regional parties gain access to the governing coalitions. All of this would be a serious detriment to national unity.

However, Canadians need not choose between the stark trade-offs of the first-past-the-post system and proportional representation. Instead, we could add an element of proportional representation to our current system by increasing the size of the House of Commons by about 15% and turning these seats into "compensation" seats. Under this system, parties that receive a lower percentage of seats than their share of the popular vote would be awarded list seats, with priority given to those with the highest disproportion between votes and seats. To block fringe parties, only those that receive more than five percent of the popular vote in each province would be eligible for these seats.

Such a system would have clear advantages. Most of the benefits of a fully proportional system would be achieved, including the incentive for parties to campaign in every riding across the country and the ability of smaller parties with broad national support to win seats. Election results would be more stable, with fewer electoral earthquakes. While minority governments would become more common, single-party majorities would still be a regular occurrence. Most importantly, the major national parties could earn representation from every province, increasing their ability to speak as truly national parties. The government would be able to draw on authentic, elected members to represent each province as ministers rather than being forced to draw from our unelected Senate.

Before 1982, Canada proceeded with changes to our political institutions gradually and on a consensual basis. Adding an element of proportional representation to our electoral system would be a return to this great tradition of incremental reform. It could be achieved through a simple act of Parliament and would be palatable to the major national parties because it would increase their legitimacy from coast to coast. Most importantly, it would strengthen Canada and reinforce our sense of shared destiny. It is time for us to take the next step in building our exceptional nation.

Should Canadians SWITCH to a system of PROPORTIONAL representation?

Canada and Proportional Representation:
The Rhetoric of Voting Reform versus the Reality of Representative Democracy

By Michael Kulicki

Proportional representation (PR) is a cause that attracts Canadians who believe that our single-member plurality (SMP) voting system is unfair. Under our SMP system, majority governments can be formed by parties that do not receive a majority of votes; parties with concentrated levels of regional support receive more legislative representation than parties with diffuse national support; and many citizens do not receive constituency-level representation from a legislator for whom they voted. This seems undemocratic, and it is becoming more widely believed that we should adopt some form of PR in order to remedy these consequences of our voting system. Under a PR system, the distribution of legislative seats would better reflect the will of the voters: seats would be awarded in proportion to the level of popular support parties received in general elections, and this proportional representation of the will of the voters would, it is argued, contribute a great deal to increasing the fairness of Canadian democracy.

While it is indisputable that our SMP system has the consequences to

which I have referred, and I am as eager as any Canadian to address grave injustices within our political system, I disagree with the view that Canadians should adopt some form of PR. My disagreement, however, does not stem from many of the standard criticisms of PR, criticisms that I find rather hollow: for example, that PR would result in perpetually unstable minority government; that it would provide unwarranted legitimacy to parties with "extremist" views; that it would be too complex for the average voter to understand; or that it would, in practice, empower party leaders at the expense of party members. I will assume here for the sake of argument that most Canadian supporters of PR are interested in relatively moderate reform—say toward some type of multi-member system that would still allow for independent candidates to contest elections, a system along the lines of that proposed by BC's Citizens' Assembly in 2004—and that this sort of reform would continue to result in government that would be stable enough to earn the trust and confidence of most Canadians.

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Nevertheless, it seems to me that PR supporters have failed to make the case that our SMP system is unfair and that our democratic practice would improve if we were to adopt a new voting system. While I am familiar with the claims that PR supporters have made against the SMP system— that it wastes our votes; that it fails to represent everyone; that it counts our votes unequally—it is difficult for me to see any real substance in these kinds of remarks. This rhetoric is based on the premise that we cannot be represented in our legislatures except by "our candidate"—but it is a premise of representative democracy

that we *can* be represented by those with whom we do not agree on all political matters, even by members of other parties. If we do not believe in this premise, then we do not believe in the basic justice of representative democracy: we must then be direct democrats, anarchists, fascists, or something else altogether. So one reason I am sceptical about the cause of voting reform in Canada is that it is difficult to overlook the rather glaring contradiction between two of that cause's premises: that we should believe in the basic justice of representative democracy (i.e., we should believe that we can be represented by those with whom we disagree), but that we cannot be represented by anyone except our candidate. Again, the latter view is entirely at odds with the former, and this provides an initial ground for scepticism about the PR supporter's cause.

But if we look even more closely at our candidate, we can find additional grounds for scepticism. Speaking from my own experience as someone who has voted in a number of elections and who has worked on some political campaigns, what I have noticed is this: I always disagree with my candidate on some matters, often very serious matters. I doubt very much that I am alone in this experience; in fact, it seems to be the experience of almost anyone who has been involved in politics in any capacity. But this means that even my candidate does not represent me on *all* the issues—and this would, of course, continue to be the case even under PR. So where, then, is the tangible benefit to be found

in reforming the voting system? The PR supporter's conception of political representation, it seems, is much too simple: it is just not the case that all citizens are perfectly represented in the legislature even by the candidate for whom they voted.

Does this lack of representation mean that our votes are wasted? Hardly—all it means is that, contra PR rhetoric, the concept of wasted votes in an SMP system is nonsense. If my vote is wasted when my candidate fails to win the election, then it must also be wasted when she wins because she does not represent me on all the issues anyway. But this lack of representation is not some problem that could or should be fixed through reform of the voting system; it is simply a consequence of living in a representative democracy with citizens with whom we disagree. We elect legislators to debate and decide matters of law and public policy, and we agree to live with laws and policies that we vigorously oppose because we have the constitutional right to organize politically in an effort to convince our fellow citizens that these need changing. We do not have the right to have our views always carry the day, and our votes are not wasted if we do not get our way. The reality of political representation in our democracy is more complex than the PR supporter believes, and his analysis of our democratic practice fails to account for this complexity.

To provide just one more example of the way that the PR supporter's analysis fails to account for the complexity of political representation: according to

his pessimistic view, it is impossible for a Liberal to be represented in the legislature by a Conservative; but then, rather myopically, he does not notice that political parties themselves have factions. Yet if it is really the case that a Liberal cannot be represented by a Conservative, then it must also be the case that a Raeite cannot be represented by an Iggyphile, and a Prenticite cannot be represented by a Harperite. In other words, if the PR supporter's analysis is correct, why shouldn't a party's *factions* receive proportional representation in the legislature? Or the splinter factions of the factions? Or the splinter factions of the splinter factions of the factions? By the pessimistic logic of the PR supporter they should. But we are now beginning to see clearly enough that the logic of the PR supporter actually entails that Canada should adopt some form of *direct* democracy: after all, is there anyone more qualified to represent me than I?

In the final analysis, then, there is a serious contradiction in the PR supporter's cause that should not be overlooked. As a believer in representative democracy, he must believe that we can be represented by someone with whom we disagree, but this belief is completely at odds with the pessimistic account of representation that he relies upon to make the case for the supposed unfairness of the SMP system. If the PR supporter's pessimistic analysis of the SMP system held true, it would not, as he thinks, provide us with grounds for adopting PR, but for adopting *direct* democracy. And if the PR supporter's pessimistic analysis of the SMP system does not

hold true, then we have no reason to adopt PR.

In conclusion, I have not argued here that an SMP system is unconditionally superior to a PR system. I have not argued that countries which already have PR systems would benefit by adopting SMP, and I have not argued that SMP is perfect. I have not sought to deny that SMP has the consequences that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. What I have been arguing is that those consequences do not qualify as evidence that SMP is unfair because those consequences are troubling only to those who believe that they cannot be represented by anyone other than their candidate. But those who believe in representative democracy should not be of this view because that is a view entirely at odds with the spirit of representative democracy. And those who are of this view should not believe that PR would be fairer than SMP because no candidate can represent us perfectly in the first place. Canadians, therefore, have no reason to adopt a new voting system because the one that we have is already in accordance with the basic principle of representative democracy—that we can be represented by those with whom we disagree, even by members of other political parties. ■

About the Canada West Foundation

Our Vision
A dynamic and prosperous West in a strong Canada.

Our Mission
A leading source of strategic insight, conducting and communicating non-partisan economic and public policy research of importance to the four western provinces and all Canadians.

Canada West Foundation is a registered Canadian charitable organization incorporated under federal charter (#11882 8698 RR 0001).

In 1970, the One Prairie Province Conference was held in Lethbridge, Alberta. Sponsored by the University of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge Herald, the conference received considerable attention from concerned citizens and community leaders. The consensus at the time was that research on the West (including BC and the Canadian North) should be expanded by a new organization. To fill this need, the Canada West Foundation was created under letters patent on December 31, 1970. Since that time, the Canada West Foundation has established itself as one of Canada's premier research institutes. Non-partisan, accessible research and active citizen engagement are hallmarks of the Foundation's past, present and future endeavours. These efforts are rooted in the belief that a strong West makes for a strong Canada.

More information can be found at www.cwf.ca.

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