

**Regional Diversity and Coherence in Western Canada:  
Reflections on the Canadian-American Relationship**

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In this brief presentation I would like to make three basic points:

- First, western Canada reflects in microcosm the broader national debate on the Canadian-American relationship. One can find *within the West* the full range of opinion towards the Canadian-American relationship, and thus if you want diverse perspectives, western Canada is the place to be.
- Second, and notwithstanding the above, western Canadians have a somewhat unique economic, cultural and demographic relationship with the United States, one that is not replicated elsewhere in the country.
- Third, and as a consequence, there is an overarching coherence to regional orientations toward the Canadian-American relationship that sets the West apart from other regions, at least to a degree.

As I address these three points, you must keep in mind that I will be painting with a very broad brush. Western Canada is a diverse and complex region encompassing four quite different provincial communities and 30% of the national population. Thus phrases like “the West” must be used with a fair measure of caution. Nonetheless, regional patterns can be identified.

### **Diversity of Western Canadian Perspectives**

The West, unlike Ontario, is not a politically homogeneous region. Political views run across the full ideological and partisan spectrums, and, at least federally, are not bottled up within a single party caucus. It is not surprising, therefore, that regional views on the Canadian-American relationship also run the full range from strong support for greater continental integration to strong opposition.

Let me mention just a few examples of this diversity of regional opinion:

- Former Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed was one of the principle architects and proponents of the 1989 Free Trade Agreement, although he now also expresses concern about the hollowing out of corporate Canada.
- British Columbia has given the region the extremes of Social Credit Premier W.A.C. (Wacky) Bennett, the prime mover of the Columbia River Treaty, and NDP Premier Glen Clark, the province's pit bull opponent of American involvement.
- Political parties in the region including the Canadian Alliance and the NDP, pockets of Liberal support and, in the recent past, the Progressive Conservatives and even the brief existence of Mel Hurtig's National Party, all brought forth distinctive orientations on the Canadian-American relationship.
- Even within the western wings of national parties we see great diversity of opinion, illustrated by Joe Clark and David Orchard, uneasy compatriots in the Progressive Conservative party.
- We have a full range of opinion within the regional think-tank community, anchored on one end by the Fraser Institute in Vancouver and on the other end by the Parklands Institute in Edmonton, with the Canada West Foundation, as usual, holding down the moderate center!

This list is far from a complete enumeration of diversity within the region, but it does underscore that diversity. The West does not speak with a single voice, or through a single parliamentary caucus, on the Canadian-American relationship.

### **Unique regional relationship with the United States**

While the diversity of regional perspectives is important to acknowledge, we must also acknowledge that western Canada has a somewhat unique economic, demographic and even cultural relationship with the United States. Let me quickly mention a number of points in this respect:

- Most of western Canada, with the partial exception of the west coast, borders the “empty quarter” of the United States. Thus the immediate border relationship lacks the intensity and depth characteristic of that relationship in other regions.
- Western Canadian trade is less dependent on American markets than is trade elsewhere in Canada. In 2001, for example, 93.3% of Ontario’s exports went into American markets, compared to 88.8% for Alberta, 80.0% for Manitoba, 70.9% for British Columbia and 59.0% for Saskatchewan.<sup>1</sup> A significant part of western Canadian exports, moreover, flow through the United States and American ports to other countries. There is, then, a greater global orientation for western Canadian trade, although the Canadian pattern of increased integration with American markets over time is still evident.
- Western Canadian trade with the United States is less affected by border security issues than is trade from other regions. There is, for example, a huge difference between trade moving through pipelines and trade tied to just-in-time automobile manufacturing.
- Western Canada is particularly vulnerable to swings in American trade policy. Examples here include the soft wood lumber dispute, US agricultural

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion see Robert Roach, *Beyond Our Borders: Western Canadian Export in the Global Market* (Calgary, Alberta: Canada West Foundation, May 2002).

- subsidies, proposed American labeling policy for agricultural goods, and US energy policy.
- Significant immigration from the United States into western Canada came generations later than American immigration into other regions, and tapped the sentiments of agrarian populism and democratic reform rather than the 18<sup>th</sup> century conservatism of United Empire Loyalists.
  - There is, I suspect, less fear in the West of American cultural imperialism. National identities are robust in the West, and the cultural industries that champion protection for the Canadian culture are largely located outside the West. Western Canadians, therefore, are able to contemplate the merits and demerits of closer economic integration without the accompanying cultural angst characteristic of other regions.

### **A distinctive regional orientation**

Because of these differences, western Canadians have developed a number of overarching orientations to the Canadian-American relationship that may, to a degree, set the region apart. Here, of course, I have to be careful not to exaggerate either the regional consensus or the degree to which the West stands apart. Nonetheless, I would like to note the following:

- Historically, from the agrarian community at the turn of the last century through Peter Lougheed, the West has been characterized by relatively strong support for greater free trade. The economic benefits of tariff protection largely accrued outside the West while tariffs offered only higher costs and no protection whatsoever for the resource-based industries and agricultural producers of western Canada.

- At least at times there has been greater ideological congruence between the West and political trends in the United States. Here I would note the infusion of populist ideals from the United States and the more contemporary fit between Canadian Alliance and Republican sentiment in the United States.
- The United States has sometimes been seen as a regional ally in ongoing disputes with the federal government. For example, during the 1988 general election campaign, the Progressive Conservative Minister of Energy, Pat Carney, urged a Calgary audience to support the proposed Free Trade Agreement because it would ensure that Ottawa would never again be able to impose a National Energy Program. If Ottawa tried, Carney argued, Washington would come to the West's defence. Putting aside the oddity of a federal minister of the Crown arguing that western Canadians should look to a foreign government to protect themselves from their own national government, Carney captured the reality that, at times, regional and American interests may coincide more than do regional and central Canadian interests.

In short, western Canadians find themselves in an interesting situation. To begin, they appear to have little anxiety over the prospects of greater continental integration: national identities are secure, the cultural threat is not seen as serious, and border security issues are relatively unimportant. At the same time, however, the western Canadian economy remains exposed and vulnerable to changes in American trade and domestic policy. In order to address this vulnerability, western Canadians face a choice: pursue greater continental integration with the United States, or rely on assistance from the federal government. The region's history suggests that greater weight be given to the former option than to the latter. Indeed, as the national debate on the Kyoto Accord intensifies, western Canadians may be drawn more and more to the Pat Carney argument:

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Washington may provide the ally the West needs when confronting a national government erratically embarked on Kyoto commitments.