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Federal problems require provincial solutions

The release of a report last week by the Canada West Foundation had about it something of the nostalgic. There it was--how to solve western alienation in ten easy steps.

It was like coming across a radio station and hearing Roy Orbison sing "Only the Lonely." When did that come out? Early sixties? Late fifties? Wow, how time flies!

The CWF replay was like a whole album: less party discipline in Parliament, a fairer distribution of Commons seats, annual first ministers' conferences, more provincial say in federal decisions and programs, more westerners (i.e. fewer Quebec francophones) in the federal bureaucracy, monitoring of the regional benefits of federal spending, provincial input into appointment of senators, etc.

In short, all the Golden Oldies we've been hearing since when, the seventies? The NEP? Meech Lake? These tunes were already vintage when 50 Reformers showed up out of the Blue in Ottawa in 1993.

And in all this time, how many western recommendations has the federal government actually implemented? Not one. The country has become more centralized, not less.

When we sent all those western Reformers to Parliament ten years ago with "the list" of suggestions, we were terribly naive. We assumed that Ottawa would do all these things because they made sense to us, and because Canada is a nice country run by reasonable people.

It isn't. It's an undemocratic country run by people who think it works just fine the way it is and who

have no interest in sharing power with the West. "Sharing" to them means siphoning Alberta money to the voters in eastern Canada who elect them.

They weaken the West with federal taxes to weaken the East with federal subsidies. The only people who actually come out ahead all work for the federal government. It's called "fiscal federalism," and it's been going on since the 1960s.

Nobody is worse served than the people of Alberta. Between 1961 and 1997, Albertans contributed a net \$167 billion to the federal government, and Quebec consumed a net \$202 billion. That's "sharing." Letting provincial premiers nominate federal senators is not the kind of "sharing" they do in eastern Canada.

The reality is that Ottawa will never change anything unless it feels threatened, and when the Reform Party stalled in Ontario, any threat from that source disappeared.

A common grassroots western response now is, "Okay, let's just separate." Or "Let's threaten to separate. That's how Quebec always gets its way."

This is no help, because you don't "just" separate, and there's a strong minority in Quebec (a third or more) who actually do want complete independence from Canada. Recall that back in the 1960s there were Cuban-trained Quebec crazies running around blowing up mail boxes, kidnapping and even murdering.

I haven't seen too many pipelines blown up out here. It isn't the way

we do political business, and Ottawa knows it.

There's a much better approach, but it would require a serious Alberta government to pull it off. Alberta should take over three federal operations, and other western governments should follow.

Instead of the Canada Pension Plan Albertans should have an Alberta Pension Plan. This would give them the same benefits as the CPP at an annual saving of over \$1 billion.

Albertans should stop using the RCMP, and establish a provincial police force called the Northwest Mounted Police. Other western provinces might be included in it as well.

Alberta should start collecting its own provincial personal income tax.

Provinces do not need Ottawa's permission to do any of these. Quebec does all three for itself already. We should follow its example.

These measures really would frighten Ottawa, because it would show that westerners are now setting their own course. Course to where? Well, that depends on Ottawa, doesn't it.

We can tell our provincial governments to take these three steps. Or we can go on belly-aching and writing up lists.

- Link Byfield

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