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## Will the Alberta Tories heed the lesson of history?

An interesting fight--potentially an explosion--is building within the ranks of provincial Torydom.

Almost all of this year's annual grassroots policy powwow on November 15 has been reserved for discussing "Strengthening Alberta's Place in Confederation."

Specifically, they'll consider whether Alberta should take over its share of the Canada Pension Plan, replace the RCMP with Alberta Mounted Police, and start collecting provincial personal income tax.

These measures are now known as the "Alberta Agenda." The idea is to improve government services while reducing the power and influence of Ottawa in the West.

The Alberta Agenda is significant, because it goes to the heart of what makes Alberta such an unusual province.

Every quarter-century or so, Albertans become seized of some New Idea. Typically, the reigning party establishment dismisses the New Idea as too radical and unnecessary. In the very next election it is then hurled from office. This happened in 1921 with the farmer movement, in 1935 with Social Credit, and in 1971 with the Lougheed Tories.

For the past year, the Alberta Agenda has been creating seismic

rumbles, especially out in the rural Tory heartland.

The Alberta Agenda is being driven by the fact that Albertans have been kicked in the teeth federally three times since 1993. We keep trying to reform the federal system, and the federal system just gets worse.

Each year the feds siphon off \$10 billion more in revenues from Alberta than they send back in spending. That's an astonishing \$9,000-plus per Alberta household. That \$10 billion could pay for a lot of old folks' homes and power plants. Meanwhile, Ottawa keeps telling us how to run our health system, where we'll sell our wheat, who to give marriage licences to, and how much Quebec cheese we'll stock in our supermarkets.

The Alberta Agenda is a nice way of telling Ottawa to back off and butt out. It's the New Idea, and it's rapidly gaining ground. For instance, it has been endorsed by the association of all elected rural councils in southern Alberta, along with groups like the Western Stock Growers Association and the Red Deer Chamber of Commerce. These people are as grassroots as you can get.

If I were a Tory policy delegate, I'd be concerned that the old pattern shows signs of repeating itself. The party establishment is

plainly trying to scuttle the New Idea.

For instance, the background information on the Alberta Pension Plan in the "policy convention workbook" makes no mention of the authoritative, government-commissioned Robson study in 1999. It concluded that Albertans would be significantly better off replacing the CPP.

The "workbook" says that Alberta "might" require two-thirds permission from other provinces to pull out, which is not true. Two-thirds permission is required to restructure the plan, but the CPP Act clearly states (in Section 94A) that any province may unilaterally withdraw.

If I were a delegate, I'd remember three names: Charles Stewart, Dick Reid, and Harry Strom. Don't ring a bell? All three were Alberta premiers who ignored the New Idea, and led their once-mighty parties, one by one, into eternal electoral oblivion.

- Link Byfield

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