“The West and the Liberal government at the beginning of the new mandate: the need to work better together”

Notes for an address
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Our country is so vast and so diverse that our knowledge of it is always limited. This could be a disadvantage. I believe on the contrary that we draw three advantages from this. First, a permanent call to modesty: all Canadians know they have a lot to learn about their country. Next, an invitation to listen: we know that it is by listening to one another that we will learn. Finally, a creative candour: a Saskatchewanian’s fresh viewpoint on Quebeckers can be useful for them, and vice-versa.

It has now been five years since Prime Minister Jean Chrétien gave me the opportunity to serve my country within the Government of Canada, five years in which I have worked side by side with Canadians from all regions of the country. I have learned much, and continue to do so, by looking at how one Saskatchewanian is effectively contributing, with all his energy, to the development of agriculture and natural resources in my province. But I learn just as much by helping him with all my strength, here in his province. I am proud to work alongside this son of Saskatchewan, Ralph Goodale.

I have learned a great deal from my relations with provincial representatives elected throughout the country, including, of course, your recently retired premier, Mr. Roy Romanow. I believe that he embodies your province’s great tradition of public service, from which all Canada benefits so much.

But what has taught me the most in the past five years have been my contacts with ordinary Canadians. I knew Western Canada before I entered politics. I know it much better today. But I am aware that I do not know it as well as you or Ralph. There are some things I think I understand, but there are many that puzzle me.

I am going to talk with you today, with my candour as a Quebecker, about some of these things that puzzle me in the West. I would like to open the discussion on two questions that have often been put to me, especially since the last federal election: does Western alienation exist for the Chrétien government, and if so, what do you plan to do?

1. Does Western alienation exist?

I am not really keen on battles over wording. So let’s go with alienation if that is how you define your situation in Canada. But many Western Canadians are saying and writing that this is not the case. Be that as it may, it seems to me that the vast majority of Western Canadians have no desire to define themselves as alienated in the way that, at one time, Mr. Bouchard went around everywhere reiterating that he was humiliated. In any case, I can assure you that there were many of us in Quebec who refuted Mr. Bouchard: Quebeckers are not humiliated in Canada.
But beyond the choice of words, I will tell you what my understanding is. I am aware that you are greatly attached to and very proud of your Western identity. At the same time, you do not want that Western identity to mask in any way the differences between the four provinces and those within each one of them. As soon as we speak about the West, those of you from Saskatchewan have a word of warning: careful, we’re not Alberta! And in Edmonton, they warn: careful, we’re not Calgary!

You have made your Western identity a source of enhancement for Canada, and never something that would be against Canada. I know the extent to which Westerners are committed Canadians. When some of you talk of alienation, it is not your country that is the subject of your discontent. Rather, you are referring to powers that have marked your history, powers you did not have, powers often found in what you call Central Canada—a phrase which, I have to tell you, is unknown to Quebeckers. You are thinking of economic, financial, and also political powers.

The capital of your country often seems very far away from you, and not just geographically speaking. More often than not, the party in power in Ottawa is not the one that garnered the most votes in your province or in the West as a whole. You feel a concern about the federal government’s ability to listen to you, to understand you and to work with you. It is a feeling I believe I understand as a Quebecker. Although we Quebeckers have been in such a situation less often than you, we are always afraid of it happening. A federal government made up of few or no Quebeckers—and which moreover, in our case, would barely be able to speak our language—would certainly have its work cut out for it in Quebec.

And this is the situation you find yourselves in once again after the last federal election. The Liberal party forms the Government but came in second in the West (with 25.3%), and third in Saskatchewan (with 20.7%). Faced with a government which is once again made up of few members from your region, you feel the apprehension I have just mentioned. That is why we need to talk with each other, so as to start off on the right foot at the beginning of this new mandate.

That is why Prime Minister Jean Chrétien has asked eight of the fourteen Liberal members of Parliament elected in the Western provinces to sit at the Cabinet table. For a number of years now, he has assigned the chairmanship of the two most important Government committees—the social union and the economic union—to two great Western Canadians, Anne McLellan and Ralph Goodale.

Red Book III, which includes our commitments to Canadians, is something we are going to achieve together with you, the people of Saskatchewan. In all areas, we are going to work harder than ever to ensure that our actions are adapted to your everyday realities, and are undertaken together with you.
It is all the more important for your federal government to intensify its contacts with you considering that the West, and your province in particular, have traditionally been a breeding ground for innovations that have inspired all of Canada. The process of putting our financial house in order that began in the 1990s, for example, owes a great deal to the initiatives undertaken by your provincial governments and to approaches developed in your academic and business communities.

We have a long way to go to meet together all the challenges facing us at the beginning of this mandate in all areas, be it agriculture, the environment, or research and development. Together with Ralph Goodale and Rick Laliberté, the Government of Canada is determined to work with all of you to help Saskatchewan’s agricultural sector in these difficult times, to ensure that your young people are better prepared than ever to take on the new economy, and that your Aboriginal populations have the same opportunities in life as other Canadians. All of the commitments in Red Book III must be fully realized, in Saskatchewan as they must be throughout Canada.

Some people will say bravo for that determination, but will add that it would be naive to believe that this will be enough to allay the feeling of Western alienation. What is also needed, they believe, is a large-scale, fundamental reform, a shift, a shock treatment.

But other voices are also being heard in the West, which are expressing doubts as to whether such a major reform would make the difference. For example, in an open letter written recently to the Prime Minister, the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Canada West Foundation, Professor Roger Gibbins, wrote:

*The root of the regional problem at the current time is not to be found in profound disagreements between east and west. There is no single policy issue that separates the West from the rest of the country. As a consequence, there is no single legislative act, no policy commitment in the upcoming Throne speech, that will put Western discontent to rest.*

One of the reasons that I share Professor Gibbins’ opinion is that when you examine the plans for fundamental reforms that have been put forward, they seem unlikely to forge consensus in the West. Many Westerners do not consider them to be desirable. This is true for the three main shifts that have been proposed: a conservative shift, a decentralist shift, and a populist shift.
2. A conservative shift?

Some people say that Liberal policies will never fit the West because the West is fundamentally conservative. I am very interested in knowing your opinion on this theory, but for my part, it raises certain doubts, especially when I am in Saskatchewan, the birthplace of Canadian social democracy!

In any case, more than one opinion poll suggests that the ideological differences between Western Canadians and Canadians in other regions are not that great, if not "only slightly". It is not uncommon for ideological differences between the West and the rest of the country to be less prominent in polls than those differentiating the Western provinces from one another (or the urban and rural regions of each province).

For example, consider the question of fiscal conservatism. If one is to believe the polling data, when Canadians are asked whether the federal government should use its surpluses mainly for 1) debt reduction, 2) tax cuts or 3) investment in social programs such as health care, there are no spectacular differences of opinion between the different regions of the country (Graph 1 and 2). Alberta does appear to be less favourable to investments in social programs, especially compared with the higher-unemployment regions of Quebec and Atlantic Canada (Graph 1), but otherwise, there is no indication of the alleged solid Western conservatism.

Similarly, the key issue for Canada of openness to immigrants and visible minorities in no way pits the West against the rest of the country (Graph 3).

It is with respect to moral issues that there is greater indication of a distinctly Western conservatism (Graph 4). Support for capital punishment is slightly higher in the West than in Ontario or Atlantic Canada, and distinctly higher than in Quebec. With respect to both abortion and homosexual rights, your province, Manitoba and Alberta are more conservative than other regions, but British Columbia is less so than the Canadian average.

You can tell me whether these findings confirm your own observations, but the impression I get is the following: regional differences exist, but the broader picture does not indicate that the West is systematically more conservative than the rest of the country. After all, if your region were truly more conservative, my party would be permanently unpopular in the West. In fact, though, the Liberal party regularly leads the polls between elections in three out of four provinces, and places a respectable second in Alberta. When there is an election in the offing, however, Liberal support diminishes in the West. I hope I will not seem too partisan in saying that this phenomenon concerns me, and I would like to know the explanation behind it.
Another electoral phenomenon in the West puzzles me: why do your rural ridings so strongly support the Alliance? It seems doubtful that such a party, which is committed to slashing federal spending and reducing its revenue sources, would invest more in agriculture or transportation than the current government does.

One thing is certain: I refuse to view these electoral phenomena as inevitable. Mr. Chrétien, Mr. Goodale and all of our Liberal team are resolved to redouble our efforts so that the next time we keep your support right into the voting booth. The only way to achieve this is to work together with you to give you the best government possible.

A conservative shift? My sense is that there would not be any more of a consensus on such a move in the West than there would be elsewhere.

3. A shift toward a radical decentralization?

Some people claim that Western Canadians (or at least those from Alberta and British Columbia) would be very favourable to a substantial strengthening of provincial power: they would like to see the provincial governments inflated with responsibilities currently assumed by the federal government. For example, you know that six Albertan intellectuals recently wrote to Premier Klein urging him to opt out of the Canada Health Act or withdraw from the Canada Pension Plan. They call that the “Alberta Agenda.” But I am not sure that is what Albertans really want–let alone Saskatchewanians. In any event, according to the poll published in the Globe and Mail on February 14, 2001, two thirds of Albertans do not support the so-called Alberta Agenda.

My contacts with ordinary Canadians, like all the public opinion polls I have seen, show that the majority of Canadians in every region of the country do not want massive transfers of powers toward the provincial governments in this federation which is already one of the most decentralized in the world. What they want above all is for their governments to work better together. That is the direction in which the Chrétien government has concentrated its efforts, with results such as the agreement on the social union and the agreement on health and early childhood development. We are committed to continuing to make that sort of progress in all fields. That is why I was quick to make contact with your new premier, Mr. Lorne Calvert, and my new intergovernmental affairs counterpart, Mr. Chris Axworthy.
4. A populist shift?

Some people say that Western Canadians are more populist than those in the rest of the country. They say, for example, that you want to see frequent use of citizen-initiated referenda, relaxation of party discipline and a proportional voting system. They say that the refusal of other Canadians to accept such reforms is a major source of frustration in the West. They anticipate that Western alienation would be greatly reduced if the federal government proceeded with such reforms.

I do not need to tell you that populism is deep-rooted in the West. The West has been the cradle of major populist parties from the Progressive Party to the Alliance. But populism has taken on many different shapes in the West. In Saskatchewan, as is well known, it was expressed through the cooperative movement rather than use of referenda. You even held a referendum in 1913 to repeal the provincial referendum legislation passed in the same year!

But coming back to the present. If it is true that Western Canadians are more attached to referenda and other measures of this kind, it puzzles me that the four provincial governments do not put these ideas into practice to a greater extent. After all, such reforms depend only on them and on you. They do not require any constitutional amendment or any negotiations with the federal government or other Canadians.

Currently, two provinces—yours and British Columbia—have legislation in place that allows for citizen-initiated referenda. So how is it that in those two provinces, not a single popular initiative referendum has been held since that legislation was passed?

Can it be that Western Canadians have a reticence similar to that of their fellow citizens in the other regions of the country about resolving often complex and sensitive issues through referenda? Do you think that the Californian example of referendum after referendum is a positive development? Or that of Oregon, whose residents had to vote on 26 questions last November? Matthew Mendelsohn, a Canadian political scientist who has studied the American experience, has concluded that “no growth in political efficacy accompanies the introduction or expansion of direct democracy. Citizens in those states that use initiatives do not feel more efficacious […].”

Do we need to do away with party discipline? If your answer is yes, I would expect party discipline to be significantly more relaxed in your legislative assemblies than in the House of Commons. Is that really so? Perhaps, for your part, you too support the principle that candidates of the same party elected on a platform need to work as a team to implement that platform. One can wonder if, here again, the American example is instructive: the absence of party discipline does not make the US Congress any more popular with Americans than our Parliament is with us.
Does the voting system need to be amended to incorporate proportional representation? If so, your legislative assemblies can proceed with such amendments for your provincial elections. After all, that is what a federation is for: to try out different solutions so that the good ones can be borrowed elsewhere. Foreign experience can also be useful here. New Zealand recently abandoned the British voting system in favour of a formula of proportional representation. The conclusion that Professor Jonathan Boston of the Public Policy Group at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, has drawn from this experience is not at all encouraging: “[On the basis of New Zealand’s experience to date], [a]ny suggestion, therefore, that electoral reform may provide a cure for the constitutional discontent that currently afflicts many democracies can be quickly dismissed. Indeed, there is a risk that it might simply make matters worse.”

And then there is the issue of Senate reform, which for its part, requires the agreement of all the regions of Canada. My feeling is that this issue does not oppose the West to the rest of the country. In all regions, there are more supporters of an elected senate than an appointed senate (Graph 5). In fact, abolition would appear to be Saskatchewanians’ solution of choice.

If we were to opt for Senate reform that made it elected, I believe that the major problem we would need to resolve would be the allocation of senators: the same number for each province? For each region? Some other formula? No one can seem to agree on this. Even Alberta’s two “senators in waiting” have different views, with one in favour of equal distribution by province and the other opposed.

I do not know how or when we are going to resolve this problem. But I do know one thing, and that is that this has nothing to do with any lack of respect for the West and everything to do with the plurality of opinions everywhere in Canada.

**Conclusion**

As you can see, I have a lot of questions for you, which are also things that puzzle me. And I have not covered everything there is to cover.

For example, I could have addressed the issue of the West’s “fair share” in relation to the other regions. The Prime Minister is in the habit of saying that Canadians share two views on this issue. The first is that Canada is the greatest country in the world. The second is that their own province does not receive its fair share. This second belief would seem to have more resonance in the West at this time than in the other regions of the country, according to some studies.
This is a complex issue in a region where two provinces receive equalization payments and two do not. For today, let me just say that the key to finding ever-greater fairness lies in ongoing dialogue. We must all ensure that the programs administered by the Government of Canada and addressed directly to Canadians are based on the most objective criteria possible and that they reflect the needs of Canadians in every region of the country. And we must move ever closer toward the ideal of all our provinces and our three territories being able to provide their population with services of comparable quality.

But I would like to conclude on another aspect of the Western issue, which I have not sufficiently dealt with. That is the notion of respect. In his open letter to the Prime Minister that I mentioned earlier, Roger Gibbins placed this notion of respect at the heart of the matter:

*Simply put, the heart of the problem is not policy or money, but the lack of respect.*

This feeling of not being sufficiently respected is of great concern to me. Because if there is one thing that is worthy of respect, it is certainly this extraordinary human adventure that is Western Canada.

Exactly ten years ago, I was a research fellow at the Canadian Centre for Management Development in Ottawa. I will never forget the conversations I had with my office mate, a most distinguished gentleman named Al Johnson. He was one of the greatest public servants in the history of our country. He was the leader of a group of influential public servants who, after having achieved so much in your province, went on to help the federal government modernize itself in the 1960s. They were known as the *Saskatchewan Mafia*. Canada owes a great deal to your province, the pioneer of our health system and the first to have adopted a charter of rights. It has perhaps been the country’s most innovative province.

If you believe that you are not well respected, then that is a serious problem that we need to talk about. Because the last thing I would want is for you to doubt the tremendous pride that a Quebecker feels in having Saskatchewan and Western Canada as part of his country.


7. Blais et al.

Graph 1: Priorities for using surpluses

As you may know, the Government of Canada has said it will have a budget surplus over the next several years. How would you prefer the Government of Canada make use of this budget surplus? Would you like to see the Government of Canada ...

Source: Ekos, Federal Election Survey-1, October 2000 (2,265 respondents)
a) Governments should put more money into the health care system even if it means that Canadians would have to pay more taxes

b) Taxes are simply too high and Canadians deserve a tax break regardless of cuts to social programs

Graph 2: Preference between lowering taxes and reducing federal spending

Those who agree with the statement

Source: a) Ekos-Toronto Star, June 2000 (1,200 respondents)
b) Ekos, Rethinking Government 2000-3, July 2000 (1,505 respondents)
Graph 3: Attitudes toward immigration and visible minorities

a) In your opinion do you feel that there are too many, too few or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada?

b) Forgetting about the overall number of immigrants coming to Canada, of those who do come, would you say there are too many, too few or the right amount who are visible minorities?

c) Does the fact that we accept immigrants from many different cultures make our culture stronger or weaker?

Sources: a) and b) Ekos, Rethinking Government 2001-1 (December 1999), 2000-2 (April 2000) and 2001-1 (January 2001); Ekos-Toronto Star, June 2000 (7,353 respondents; average of the four polls);

c) Ekos, Rethinking Government 2000-2 (April 2000) and Ekos-Toronto Star, June 2000 (2,705 respondents; average of the two polls)
Graph 4: Attitudes on moral issues

Those who agree with the statement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>B.C.</th>
<th>Alberta</th>
<th>Man./Sask.</th>
<th>Ontario</th>
<th>Quebec</th>
<th>Atlantic</th>
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<tr>
<td>a) Every woman who wants to have an abortion should be able to have one</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>b) Same-sex couples should have the same rights as heterosexual couples</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>c) I support the reintroduction of capital punishment</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>49</td>
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Source: a) Environics, Focus Canada 2000-2 (2,020 respondents); b) and c) Ekos-Toronto Star, June 2000 (1,200 respondents)
Graph 5: Changes to the Senate

In your opinion, should the Senate of Canada be ...?

Source: Environics/CROP for the Centre for Research and Information on Canada, average of the polls of September 1999 and October 2000 (4,000 respondents; average of the two polls)