

The West and the Rest

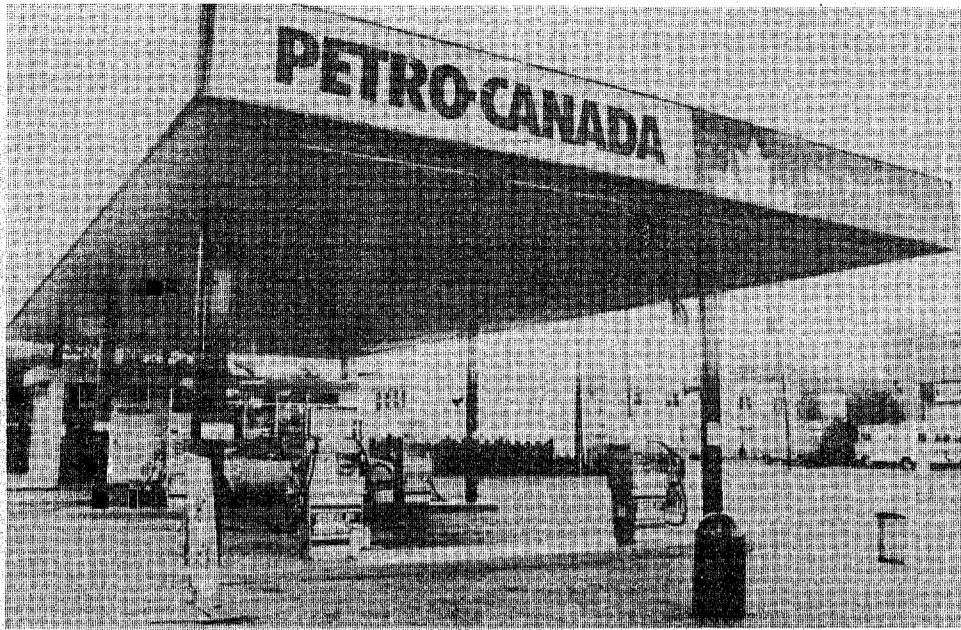
by Eve Zaremba

Now that the dust is settled from the presidential assassination attempt, the papal assassination attempt, the flight of the space shuttle and other exciting world-scale events, it behooves us to turn to our own dull Canadian doings.

Actually I don't find our politics boring at all, especially not lately. The cosy myth that nothing worth getting excited about ever happens in Canada has long been an excuse for political passivity in this country. This comfortable assumption could cost us dearly in future.

Three major items are of special interest and enduring national importance. I am referring, of course, to the Quebec election, hassles over oil and the Constitution. Each merits separate discussion at length but this short column can only touch upon some threads common to all three — the struggle of federal versus provincial powers and divergences between different parts of the country, especially the West versus the Rest. Confusions, dilemmas, and ironies abound in this typically Canadian scenario.

Within a year of the referendum on sovereignty-association and shortly after giving the federalist party — the Liberals — all available parliamentary seats, Quebecers confirm the anti-federalist PQ in provincial power. It seems that Quebecers have caught on to a system long practised by the canny Ontarians, who like to support a strong federal government in power while voting in a different provincial party, thus making sure of a loud voice in national government while always having a countervailing force on hand. The Quebec provincial government has been given clear direction by its citizens: it can't dictate where it wants to take them. The liberals have also been told in no uncertain terms not to take Quebec for granted.



Quebeckers political sophistication should not be lost on Westerners. They have long beefed that Central Canada hogs all the national power and runs the federal government. This undoubted fact has somehow seemed 'natural' as long as the Western provinces were relatively poor. On the whole people realize that having a good case is not enough: governments are not neutral. Now the newly rich Westerners find it perverse that their wealth has not bought them what they want. Prevailing wisdom equates wealth with power. But it turns out that even money is not enough, at least it does not immediately and automatically confer power. (Women have long known that mere numbers plus a good case confers nothing at all.)

It's not that Alberta's oil dollars, for instance, do not have an impact on Ottawa. The problem is that the impact is a negative one. In the long run, for sure, money would finally triumph but will there be a long run?

Western frustration is compounded by the fear that since their wealth is mainly based on oil, a non-renewable resource, it will not last. If they don't grab the national brass ring now, as good an opportunity might not come again. In ten or twenty years the oil will be gone and coal and potash depleted. Thus, within these few years Alberta, Saskatchewan and BC must diversify their industrial bases and take their rightful place in the councils of the nation. It's one thing to be wealthy suppliers of raw materials to central Canada, the US, and Japan and quite another to return to being poor and dependent hewers and drawers.

Viewing the federal government as a permanent barrier to their ambitions, Western governments have consistently treated it as the enemy, ensuring constant and painful confrontations. To the extent that these governments (Manitoba included) are motivated by rational long-term economic consideration, I believe they are wrong; wrong in their assumptions and wrong in their strategy.

The assumption that Ottawa is the 'enemy' is self-fulfilling and self-defeating. In a federal system such as ours the central government can be had and must be had — a fact which Quebecers apparently long understood. They never allowed their national aspirations to push them out of Ottawa. Quite the contrary. At the height of separatist sentiment Quebec remained well ensconced in the seat of federalism. In the event, Quebec is de facto sovereign and de jure associated: the best of both worlds. A neat trick and one Western Canada must

hurry up and learn.

Voters of Western Canada took all their marbles out of the national game and handed them to narrow regional and industrial interests. Now they are captives of these interests and have nowhere to go. The West excluded itself from federal affairs just as it had begun to have some potential clout. It would have taken time, it would not have been easy but it could have been done. The West could have had its legitimate interests (and illegitimate ones, for that matter) represented in Ottawa.

Instead, Alberta and its allies have painted themselves into a corner on the issue of oil. Of course the price consumers pay for oil in Canada is too low. Of course, the feds are wrong to keep it low and subsidize it to suit the voters and the manufacturing sector. It's OK to press for an increase in the price of oil. But holding out for an enormous share of the proceeds, just when the rest of the country and the federal government were badly strapped financially, was to blow it politically. And that is what the oil provinces, led by Alberta, did. Someone in Edmonton lost grip on reality. The present one-day flow of dollars from east to west could not be increased unless and until the West has the political clout to make it happen. The western provinces have neglected to obtain that clout. It's naive to make a demand like that before acquiring the means to make it stick.

What in fact stuck was the National Energy Policy. It hadn't come out of an Easter egg. It was Ottawa's answer to what it perceived as a threat to Canada's fiscal and industrial stability; a threat not so much from OPEC as from Alberta, its allies and the US-controlled oil companies. The Liberals' wonderful conversion to nationalist economic policy was as much the doing of Lougheed as of Trudeau. For the feds it amounts to a policy of national self-preservation. All this time the provinces have done and said nothing to contradict significantly the view that they are not to be trusted. On the contrary, by cutting oil production, holding up oil sands development and getting into bed on the Constitution with Lévesque, an avowed separatist, they badly undermined their credibility.

How can they do these things and still claim to act for the good of Canada? The feds case is that on constitutional change the views of the provincial premiers are equally tainted — narrow, self-serving and hypocritical. It's not a bad case.

In patriarchal politics, where only winning counts, the eight dissenting premiers have been outclassed and out-manoeuvred. Now, barring a major upset by the Supreme Court, we will have a new Constitution in Canada by summer. Not to mention Petro-Canada gas stations coast-to-coast.

Who said the Canadian political scene was dull*+/?!

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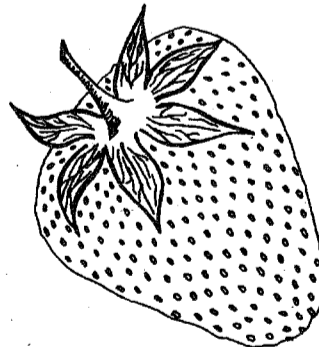
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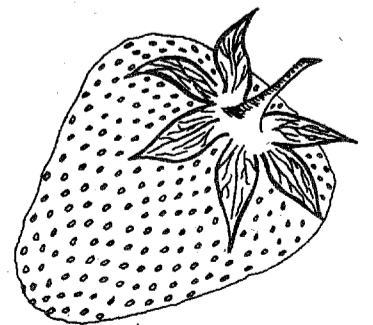
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