

Reviews

FROM THE FRONTIER

FRONTIER CENTRE FOR PUBLIC POLICY • NO. 2 • APRIL 2013



Fresh News From Laurentian Canada

Barry Cooper



1. The Problem: Laurentian Myopia

Darrell Bricker is the CEO of Ipsos Global Public Affairs and an expert in public opinion polling. John Ibbitson is the chief political writer for *The Globe and Mail*. Together, they have written a splendid little book, *The Big Shift* (HarperCollins Canada), which deals with recent changes in Canadian society and politics. Early in March, the *National Post* excerpted a couple of chapters and the book has received extensive coverage in the regular media. Of the reviews I have consulted, many simply take issue with the authors' conclusions and pay scant attention to their arguments. This may be bad academic practice, but neither the authors nor the reviewers are concerned with academic practices, so it's a good place to start.

Their main conclusion is simplicity itself. The Conservatives have become, and long will remain, the governing party of the 21st century. Regarding this turn of events, the authors claim neutrality. "We don't say this is a good thing or a bad thing. We simply say that it's a thing. The root of the Laurentian elite's frustration is their inability or refusal, to accept this truth." The real divisions in Canada's future are not those of French and English speakers or of Aboriginals and settlers but those between poor and rich regions, declining and growing regions, regions that embrace the past and those that shape the future. And the dividing line is the Ottawa River.

Here is a sampling of critics. John Moore, writing in the *National Post* (February 27, 2013), states that their polling data are flawed and declared that "nostalgia for Pierre Trudeau's left-wing utopianism is still a powerful force," which explains why "an under-qualified, mop-haired Liberal boy-king from Montreal is a threat to Harper's Conservatives." Time will tell just what kind of threat Justin poses, but in any event, Moore did not provide an argument based on evidence, but a prophecy.

A couple of days earlier, Michael Den Tandt, also in the *National Post*, declared the argument to be "fundamentally flawed, for the simple reason that political parties are not static." They evolve and steal ideas all the time. Den Tandt granted that the Conservatives had forged a new coalition between suburban Ontario and Alberta. He also agreed that their successful strategy was based on extensive polling and the purging of social conservatives who, allegedly, harboured dangerous hidden agendas. So, Bricker and Ibbitson got that part right. Nevertheless, Den Tandt argued, they ignored "[t]he loathe effect," which, apparently, "overtakes a government that becomes popularly despised" when it develops "anti-democratic tendencies that progressively corrupt individuals who hold power."

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Chapters 19 and 23 of Machiavelli's *The Prince* deal with how a new prince, such as Stephen Harper, can avoid contempt, hatred and flattery. The key is to retain the support of the people. Even if he has never read a word of Machiavelli, Harper knows this as well as Ralph Klein did (who, we can be confident, never cracked open *The Prince*). Indeed, all successful modern politicians in Canada have been by nature Machiavellian, so it seems more than likely that Harper is keen to avoid "the loathe effect," especially outside Quebec and maybe Newfoundland. However, those are two provinces where it does not matter anyway.

Even more revealing was Jeffery Simpson's February 27 column in *The Globe and Mail* titled "Conservatives in Power but Out of Step." One is reminded of the apocryphal BBC weather report: "Fog in Channel; Continent Cut Off." Simpson considered it "startling" and even "ominous" that an Environics poll indicated a decline in the importance of Quebec in the lives of many Canadians and, with it, a decline in the importance of national unity. It is fair to say that Simpson can act as the media spokesman for the Laurentian elite. But what, pray, is that?

In a book I wrote a couple of years ago, *It's the Regime, Stupid! A Report from the Cowboy West on why Stephen Harper Matters* (Key Porter), I used the term "Laurentian Canada" to refer to our fellow citizens who inhabit the St. Lawrence River Valley. At one time, there was a Laurentian School of Canadian historians centred at the University of Toronto. Bricker and Ibbitson refine Laurentian Canada and Laurentian history into the Laurentian elite, all of whom live in the same part of central Canada. They staff the CBC and the Ottawa Press Gallery. Every Ottawa mandarin is a member of this elite, as are many members of Parliament.

What sets them apart from the rest of us is not so much where they live but what they believe. This is the real problem that *The Big Shift* deals with.

The Laurentian consensus, or at least the consensus among the Laurentian elite, holds that Canada is a fragile nation; that the federal government's job is to bind together a country that would otherwise fall apart; that the biggest challenge is keeping Quebec inside Confederation; that the poorer regions must forever stay poor, propped up by the richer parts of the country; that the national identity—whatever it is—must be protected from the American juggernaut; that Canada is a helpful fixer in the world, a peacekeeper, a joiner of all the best clubs.

The Laurentian consensus also holds that "the Canadian way is to blend American capitalism with European corporatism [or even collectivism] to fashion a society superior to both," to be "a beacon of enlightened accommodation, a searcher after peace through peacekeeping, a helpful fixer whenever the big players mess things up." They all favour supply management, the late Canadian Wheat Board and even the family farm that such government programs are supposed to support.

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They defend their views with a rhetorical question: “What is a point or two of GDP growth here or there when the soul of the nation is at stake?” The verdict of the Laurentian elite on the Harper government is thus entirely predictable: It is not only bad, “it’s illegitimate. It has no right to govern. Voters are deluded and deceived. They need to be educated. The rising power of the West is dangerous. It needs to be contained.”

The reason for the big shift, Bricker and Ibbitson say, is immigration—a population sufficient for two new Torontos entered Canada in the last two decades, and it was made up chiefly of non-white people from across the wide, unknown Pacific, not the familiar Atlantic pond. As a result, the places where the new Canadians mostly live, the West and the faceless Ontario suburbs, are what matter now, not the Glebe (Ottawa), Outremont (Montreal) and the Annex (Toronto). The biggest losers have been the federal Liberals, the party of Michael Ignatieff and Stéphane Dion and before them, of Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien, Laurentians to a man. The biggest winners, we know.

More important than the end of specific policies and the desuetude of traditional beliefs, the Laurentian elite assumes “that [its] version of the country *is* [emphasis added] the country,” and it assumes that it still runs the country, as it always has. But it does not. Consequently, Canadians have asked new questions of their governments and have advanced new visions of how the country looks. “Soft power,” Bricker and Ibbitson said, “is simply pointless moralizing.” And it is sadistic as well because no one believes it, not even Lloyd Axworthy.

What about supply management? What if family farms are understood to be just the products of romantic nostalgia? Who, then, cares? Moreover, what if Canadians come to understand that all subsidies do is increase the price of milk and eggs and keep a few inefficient Quebec farms in operation? Outside the Quebec backwaters, who cares?

Alternatively, there is the weird economics of transfer payments. We have long known they produce a double distortion, first in the donor provinces, which lose GDP through money leaving their jurisdictions and then in the recipient provinces, whose governments grow dependent on the “free money” generated in the productive parts of the country and laundered through Ottawa. Even worse for the recipients, their labour markets are badly distorted. As an example, Bricker and Ibbitson point to PEI and New Brunswick where unemployment rates are around 11 per cent, but both places import Romanians, Ukrainians and Russians to work in provincial plants while the locals collect pogy.

The locals may think they are getting a free ride. They may think it is in their interest to have other Canadians subsidize their sloth. But no one, not even a Quebecker who sends her kid to \$7-a-day daycare, can be proud of sponging off productive Canadians living in other provinces.

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That is, the biggest cost to transfer-payments is the loss of self-respect by the recipients and the growing contempt in which they are held by those who pay the tab.

This is what makes the defence of transfer payments by the Laurentian elite so absurd. They never defend it on the grounds of (non-existent) economic rationality or even because it results in the maintenance of power in the hands of the Ottawa bureaucrats who effect the transfers. Rather, it is all about a mythical national unity, which brings us to the secondary problems.

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2. Minor Problems

Whether the Laurentian elite is myopic or simply refuses to wear glasses, we need not yet decide. Its members agree, however, that the 41st Canadian General Election, May 2, 2011, was “a fracture in time” because it “cemented the new Canadian politics.” Looking past the mixed and contradictory metaphors, one sees their point: Laurentian Canada saw the victory of Harper as an aberration, not a new reality. The election was also “seismic” because “it disproved the axiom that no party could win a majority government at the federal level without substantial support from Quebec.” The axiom was severely tested in 1957 and 1962 by John Diefenbaker and in 1979 by Joe Clark, but the efforts of those two Progressive Conservative prime ministers resulted only in minority governments. They did, however, challenge the Laurentian consensus a generation ago. It was no accident that they, like Stephen Harper, were westerners.

With the exception of Quebec and New Brunswick, the French-speaking population of every other province is under 5 per cent. “So, what does it cost us to maintain the fiction of being a bilingual country?” Around two-and-a-half billion a year and maybe more, since the numbers are deliberately hidden and so are hard to calculate with accuracy. Outside Quebec, the only place bilingualism matters is Ottawa, and it only matters there if one is a federal bureaucrat. The result is predictable: Mandarins are disproportionately Laurentian, and they are estranged from the rest of the country and bewildered by their own alienation. “What is going on out there?” they ask themselves. Ralph Klein once explained, “Ottawa is where your taxes go to die.” He was expressing the contempt so many westerners have for the increasingly useless mandarins—rather like the sentiment expressed by Tocqueville when he noted the contempt the French revolutionaries felt for aristocrats who could not even be bothered to oppress the peasants.

Moreover, the prejudices of the Laurentian mandarins have made their condemnation of the failure of Harper’s Ottawa to “reconcile the two nations” simply comical. The most-sensible policies of the Harper

government have been premised upon the fact that s. 92 of the *BNA Act*, now the *Constitution Act, 1982*, has not been repealed. “The provinces have responsibilities,” the Harperites said, and directed their words especially toward Quebec. “So, here is some money—for medical programs, for example—now you decide how to spend it.”

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The comedy continued as Laurentian journalists responded by complaining of Harper’s indifference to Quebec. But the rest of us asked, “What is wrong with indifference?” Quebec is surely indifferent, not to say hostile, to him and to us. And as David Bercuson and I wrote several years ago in *Deconfederation: Canada without Quebec*, that province is both ungrateful for what it receives and such a burden on the rest of the country—think again of transfer payments and supply management—that financially we would be far better off without it. At least Canadian foreign aid to an independent Quebec would be a rational response because it would be a means of advancing Canada’s national interest rather than weakening it the way transfer payments do.

In light of the noisy demonstrations by Idle No More and their elders, Canadians might be forgiven for thinking that the place of Natives in the country continues to matter. Bricker and Ibbitson argue convincingly that with Natives relying on the courts, another big shift has been acknowledged: Indians have lost the political struggle. They, too, have become a minor problem. The argument is similar to the one that dealt with the diminishing Quebec problem.

Many Aboriginal leaders think they can preserve their culture by limiting contact with Canadian society and by eternally grieving through the courts. “They are making a terrible mistake,” said Bricker and Ibbitson. Indeed, they are delusional. By rejecting property rights, for example, the chiefs are simply condemning their people to poverty and ensuring they alone retain a highly corrupt control over their subjects. But these very acts are bringing the Aboriginal problems back into the political arena and out of the hands of the courts.

Consider the fundamental fact that the Aboriginal population is around 400,000 people—about two years’ worth of immigrants. More to the point, because new immigrants are coming from the other side of the Pacific, “[t]hey bear none of the Europeans’ sense of responsibility for their colonial ancestors.” To be more blunt: They have no sense of guilt for what Europeans are said to have done to Aboriginal people and, since so much of Laurentian Indian policy is premised upon guilt, after the big shift, Laurentian policy is likely to be changed, whatever the courts may say. For what it may be worth, I expect that Bricker and Ibbitson exaggerate the responsibility or guilt felt by the descendants of European settlers. But they are unquestionably correct to wonder why Asian immigrants should feel any responsibility or guilt.

3. Critical Reflections

Notwithstanding the fact that they are to be praised for at least having recognized their own parochialism, Bricker and Ibbitson still cling to some elite Laurentian attitudes. This is perhaps not surprising since they fit the mould so well. For example, they still embrace the story that western settlement created “a much better-ordered society than its Wild West counterpart to the south.” If that were true, where did all the guilt that allegedly fuels Aboriginal policy come from? Perhaps if they knew more Alberta history and relied less on the Mountie myth, they would avoid such clichés.

Likewise, they embraced the notion that Canadian multiculturalism amounted to a self-conscious rejection of the U.S. melting pot alternative. Leaving aside whether the melting pot actually is responsible for whatever cultural homogeneity the Americans enjoy, I can clearly recall that multiculturalism began as a protest by descendants of western settlers to the Laurentian parochialism embodied in the bilingualism and biculturalism model of the 1960s; it was given a big boost when Pierre Trudeau went after the Italian vote in Toronto.

As far as the West is concerned, the authors see that the moral panic over global warming is just an aspect of the Laurentian political assault on Alberta and Saskatchewan in general and on oil sands in particular. They do, however, confess their faith in the (pseudo) science supporting computer models of anthropogenic global warming. And, with an almost Freudian slip, they state that no one will ever again be able to govern without “accounting for the West,” because “there are too many of them, and they have too much money to be pushed aside.” The operative words: “too many of them” (emphasis added).

As a final observation, the authors provide a good diagnosis of a political problem, but they have not provided an account of why it came about. That is, we would like to know why the Laurentian elite is so myopic. Bricker and Ibbitson have left us only a clue. The premise of the great shift, which to the Laurentians is so heretical: “The Canadian nation? There is no such thing, and never was.”

There is obviously this political thing that used to be called the Dominion of Canada but now is just called Canada. So what do Bricker and Ibbitson mean? First, they mean that Canada is not a nation the way France or Germany, at least in 1867, were nations. There was no pretense of ethnic homogeneity then, and there is certainly none now. However, nations are not so much biological entities anyway, not even during an era when racist notions were popular. Rather, they are spiritual entities, political bodies that understand themselves more or less in the same way. To simplify, nations share the same myths. As F.W.J. von Schelling once said, “Nations do not make myths. Myths make nations.”

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And there is the rub. Canadians have never shared the same myth. Not in the past, however far back you wish to go, and not today either.

This consideration raises an obvious follow-on question: What, in this context, is a political myth? A short but serviceable answer was provided by a great literary critic, Northrop Frye. History, he once observed, deals with what happened; myth is about what happens all the time. Myths provide large narrative contexts into which specific historical accounts can be nestled. Bricker and Ibbitson have already shared several elements of the Laurentian political myth by their descriptions of the disturbances created by the big shift. To recap: Canada is fragile and besieged, especially from the south; maintaining the integrity of the old provinces of Upper and Lower Canada is the purpose of the country; Canada is morally superior to other countries, especially the United States. Frye also provided a name for this way of looking at the country: the “garrison mentality.” Garrisons are beleaguered and closely knit communities. As Margaret Atwood, one of Frye’s most gifted Laurentian students, said, the central symbol of garrison life is survival. If you share in this mentality, then national unity, and thus the continued predominance of the Laurentian elite, is indeed the purpose of the country.

There is, however, another rather less fulsome way of characterizing the garrison mentality. To simplify but not distort: It is a loser’s political myth, and it perfectly expresses the broad historical context of Laurentian Canada. New France was lost to the Brits. Upper Canada was settled by the losers of the American Revolution. Leaving aside the distinctive myths of the Maritimes, Newfoundland and British Columbia, the prairie West has never been a transplanted Ontario garrison. This is what the Laurentian elite cannot fathom. We have our own myths that grew organically from the experience of frontier life far beyond the walls of the garrison.

The Laurentian elite is understandably loath to reflect on its own loser’s myths. It clings, instead, to the garrison and its morality with such tenacity that doubters are turned into traitors. That is why the elite considers Harper and all his benign works illegitimate. That is why it is still passive-aggressive and anti-American, which the Laurentian elite expresses in terms of its moral superiority. That is why the myopia of the Laurentian elite, which used to set the tone for the whole country, has become a joke. The great shift is all that Bricker and Ibbitson say it is. But it is also a shift into a new realm of mythical plurality. Canadians are not Laurentians today because they never were. Only the Laurentian elite has not noticed what the rest of us have been living for generations. Bricker and Ibbitson have done their fellow Laurentian Canadians the great service of pointing this out to them.

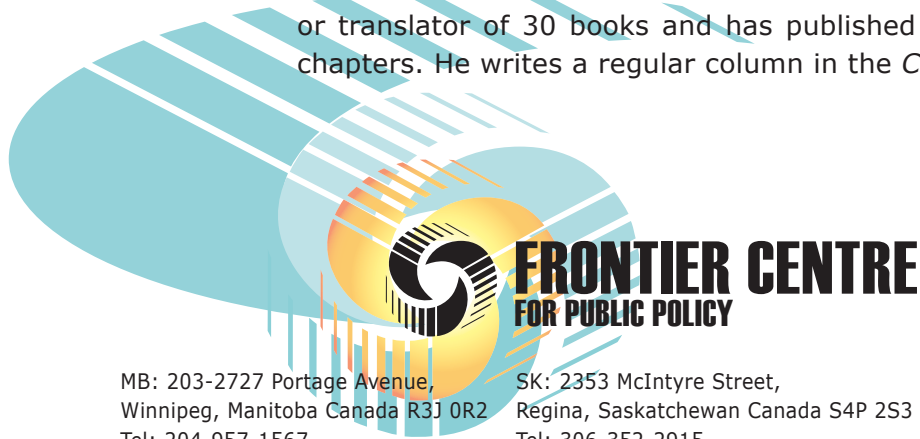


“We have our own myths that grew organically from the experience of frontier life far beyond the walls of the garrison.”

About the author



Barry Cooper, a fourth generation Albertan, was educated at Shawnigan Lake School, the University of British Columbia and Duke University. He taught at Bishop's University, McGill, and York University before coming to the University of Calgary in 1981 where he has since taught classical and contemporary western political philosophy. Cooper's other area of continuing interest has been Canadian politics and public policy. Here he has brought the insights of political philosophers to bear on contemporary issues, including the place of technology and the media in Canada, the on-going debate over the constitutional status of Quebec, and the status of Canadian defence and security. He is the author, editor, or translator of 30 books and has published over 150 papers and book chapters. He writes a regular column in the *Calgary Herald*.



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Date of First Issue: April 2013.

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ISSN 1491-78

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