

“Paul Martin must possess superhuman powers. He’s going to need them out West.”



Judging from the hype surrounding his rise to the prime minister’s office, Paul Martin must possess superhuman powers. This is fortunate. He’s going to need them the next time he comes out West.

Despite his promise to address regional alienation, our new prime minister has said and done little about the so-called wedge issues, both real and imagined, that separate Westerners from the rest of the nation.

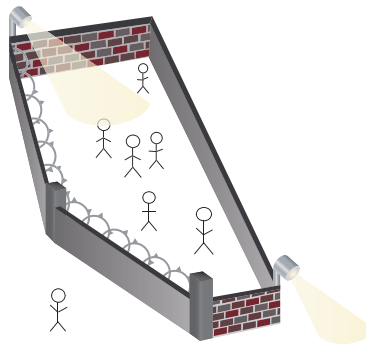
This poses a Herculean challenge. As a Quebec MP and leader of a political party not popular in the West, Martin will find it tough to get a handle on what can and should be done to make Westerners and Albertans feel part of the Canadian family—especially since we’re not really sure ourselves.

Much of what passes for regional irritants are more symptoms of conflicting ideologies and moral codes than a true portrait of Western alienation. Some Albertans will complain we still don’t know where the prime minister stands on regionally sensitive issues such as Senate reform, Western economic diversification, the Canadian Wheat Board and the Kyoto Accord. Some will lament his ambivalence on gun control and gay marriage, while others will argue those issues don’t define us as Westerners any more than Martin’s response to them will define him as prime minister.

One almost forgotten idea enjoying a comeback in Alberta Conservative political circles would have us erect a “firewall” around our province—a concrete barrier of sorts, built along our provincial boundaries, perhaps by grinding up the Rocky Mountains—to keep the robber barons from the East from raiding our bank accounts. Called the Alberta Agenda, it is a five-point plan conceived by former

Alliance leader Stephen Harper, senator-in-waiting Ted Morton and four other conservative ideologues exhorting Premier Ralph Klein to figuratively pick up his toys and go off in a corner to play on his own.

While I don’t mean to detract from the seriousness of regional discontent, the solutions the paper offers are petty and juvenile. Its proposals for an Alberta pension plan, income tax collection agency and police force to mirror Quebec’s seem like sibling jealousy and ignore studies dating back to the Don Getty era rejecting



such moves as costly and bureaucratically burdensome. Its call for Alberta to opt out of the federal health-care plan would cost us more than \$1-billion annually in forfeited transfer payments. Its plans for taking Ottawa to court to force Senate reform would be a costly legal battle with little hope of victory.

Curiously, the five points identified as priorities in the Alberta Agenda appear hardly to register in the minds of most Albertans. A fall survey by the Canada West Foundation found Albertans have better things to think about than having their own pension plan, income tax system or police force. Neither are they clamouring for an independent health care system. And while Westerners strongly endorse Senate reform, the CWF found there is recognition that an elected, regionally sensitive upper house is not “a silver bullet that by

itself will end Western discontent.”

One thing we Westerners do agree on is that the federal government is doing a poor job of representing our interests. But we see the answer in greater inclusion in the process, not in partitioning ourselves off from the rest of Canada. “The solution must be found in strengthening the West’s voice in national political life,” the CWF report said. “The West needs, and Canada needs the West to have, a renewed sense of belonging in the national community, and the path to this renewal leads through parliamentary institutions.”

Premier Klein at one time agreed that erecting a “firewall” around the province is no way to gain influence on national decisions. When the Alberta Agenda was published in the *National Post* three years ago as an open letter to the premier, Klein rejected its unsolicited advice as unhelpful and defeatist. But he appears to be having a change of heart, probably because a Western pseudo-separatist threat might give him more clout in dealing with the new prime minister. He set up a Conservative party committee, headed by Edmonton MLA and former Reform MP Ian McClelland, to spend the winter studying its implications.

The good news is the committee will not reveal its findings until July, long enough away that it will be easy to ignore. This would be for the best. In our efforts to define Western regional alienation for a new prime minister, we are already sending out enough conflicting messages without further confusing matters with a half-baked “firewall” strategy.

Martin will find addressing our regional gripes difficult enough, even for someone with his superhuman powers.

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