

Liberals ready to try anything to regain power in the West



By
Peter
Desbarats

VANCOUVER — Since they wrested power from the Diefenbaker government a decade ago, and particularly since they chose Pierre Trudeau as leader in 1968, Liberals have been singularly unsuccessful in dealing with a growing spirit of discontent in western Canada.

This feeling was so strong by last October that it almost cancelled out the Trudeau government's obvious success since 1970 in reducing tensions between Quebec and the rest of the nation. As the situation in Quebec improved from Ottawa's point of view, western Canadians seemed to feel further removed from a meaningful role in federal affairs except as critics whose ballots filled the opposition benches in the House of Commons.

Almost anything

After last October's election, the imbalance in Liberal support was so glaring that the party was ready to do almost anything to redress it. So the Liberals have decided to gamble on a process that appears to be the political equivalent of power generation by controlled nuclear fission.

Like the forces released by atomic division, the regional forces which continually threaten to blow Canada apart can also be sources of immense political power. If they can be controlled and combined, they can be generators of national pride and development.

Used in another way, they can provide the power to maintain small political groupings on the national scene for considerable periods of time. In the West, this has been demonstrated by Social Credit and, to a lesser extent, the New Democratic Party, unhampered by the restrictions of power in Ottawa.

Now the Liberals, impelled by necessity, have decided to see whether it is possible to utilize the discontent in western Canada to power their return to a majority in Ottawa.

The "reactor" for this experiment will be the regional conference that the party will hold in Vancouver from June 22 to 24.

New start

If the process works, the conference will produce the beginning of the new national policy that the prime minister already has described as its main objective.

These western Liberal policies will then form the background of Trudeau's own approach to the four western premiers at the July conference in Vancouver on western economic opportunities.

That is the scenario if everything goes without a hitch. But the potential for trouble is enormous. The number and sequence of the inter-reactions in



IZZY ASPER
Competitor for influence

this process are as complex as those in an atomic pile, and far less predictable.

There is, to begin with, the difficult business of integrating distinctive British Columbia concerns in a conference dominated by prairie delegates. This isn't a new problem but it could become more apparent in the Vancouver setting of this year's conference.

There will probably be a sharp increase in the competition for influence and prominence at the convention between the four cabinet ministers from the west and the four provincial party leaders. This will be even more apparent if Asper of Manitoba still has a provincial election ahead of him when the conference meets in June.

Up to PM

Trudeau's meeting with the four leaders in Regina last December has not only given them a greater sense of coherence, as a group capable of



GORDON GIBSON
Top talent working full-time

voicing western Canadian interests within the party, but an increased awareness of their role in relation to the national party which could cause friction with federal ministers.

Even if the conference goes smoothly, its success will still depend on the response that it evokes from the prime minister.

A conference that moves too far ahead of Trudeau in stating western requirements will defeat its own purpose. Its resolutions could then be used against the prime minister by the Conservative and NDP premiers at the July meeting.

The potential for trouble at the June conference is so evident that the decision to hold it is a revealing indication of just how desperate the Liberals are about western Canada.

The organizers already are taking steps to reduce some of the risks. It has already been decided that the number of delegates will be limited to several hundred. The participation of non-voting observers and alternate delegates will be strictly controlled.

At the first meeting of the five-member organizing committee in Regina, there was discussion on a draft of conference objectives which would limit the conference to resolutions specifically related to western Canada, and primarily to economic questions. There would be room in the conference for general discussion of the future of western Canada but the resolutions of the conference would have a fairly specific focus.

Full-time organizer

The importance that Ottawa attaches to the conference is indicated by the appointment of Gordon Gibson as organizing chairman. Gibson's western credentials are impeccable but a good part of his political education was gained as one of the original members of the prime minister's office after 1968.

Gibson left the PMO to contest Vancouver South against one of the Conservatives' ablest candidates, John Fraser. Apart from a weekly newspaper column in Vancouver, he is now devoting all his time to organizing the Vancouver conference — the first time that a western Liberal conference has been assisted by this kind of talent on a full-time basis.

The importance that Trudeau already has given the Vancouver conference, in public speeches and private talks with various party officials, has generated some excitement among western Liberals. But there is also a great deal of barely concealed skepticism. Western Liberal conferences have been churning out resolutions every two years since 1966 without much noticeable effect on Ottawa, according to some party members.

A longtime Liberal in Alberta recalled asking one of the western ministers recently about the fate of resolutions passed in previous conferences.

"When I have a policy I want to push, I look through the resolutions to see if I can find one that fits," he said.

"If I can't, they go back into the bottom drawer."