

SOURCES OF WESTERN DISCONTENT

Unlike Québec, which generally wants as much independence from the federal government as possible, the western provinces have generally wanted their concerns to be part of the federal government's priorities. Many western Canadians believe that their needs are not adequately heard or addressed by the federal government. This feeling started shortly after Confederation with the federal government's heavy-handed approach in Red River in 1870. Another early issue was Prime Minister Macdonald's National Policy, which many westerners saw as favouring central Canadian business interests over western farmers' interests. The sense that western interests were being ignored by the federal government has occurred repeatedly since Confederation.



You learned about the National Policy and how it affected western farmers in Chapter 8.

ELECTORAL REALITIES

Canada's system of representation by population determines how many seats each province has in the House of Commons. Ontario and Québec have the bulk of the Canadian population so, in any election, federal political parties need significant support from at least one, if not both provinces. It was not unusual for federal parties to create policies that favoured Ontario and Québec because of their large populations. In the past half century, political parties have often formed majority governments with only a few or no seats west of Ontario. This lack of representation in the federal government often led to federal policies that caused western populations to feel alienated from the federal government.

In recent decades, the formation of regionally based political parties has significantly affected how different provinces and regions are represented in the federal government. In particular, the Bloc Québécois, a federal party focused on Québec sovereignty, and the Reform Party, which formed in 1987 as a western protest party, have expressed regional desires for better representation in the House of Commons. You will learn more about both these parties in Chapter 16.

E Examine Figure 14-23, which shows the result of the 2008 election. Which party has the most seats? Is its support evenly distributed across the country? How is support for the other parties distributed across the provinces and territories? How did regional voting patterns influence the outcome of the election?

Figure 14-23 Seats in the House of Commons, 2008 Election

Party	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	NB	NS	PE	NL	NU	NT	YT	Total
Conservative	22	27	13	9	51	10	6	3	1	—	1	—	—	143
Liberal	5	—	1	1	38	14	3	5	3	6	—	—	1	77
Bloc Québécois	—	—	—	—	—	49	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	49
New Democrat	9	1	—	4	17	1	1	2	—	1	—	1	—	37
Independent	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	2
Total Seats	36	28	14	14	106	75	10	11	4	7	1	1	1	308

Source: Elections Canada

RESOURCE ISSUES

When Québec, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia joined Confederation in 1867, each province received control over its natural resources. However, the agreements that created the western provinces did not include this power. The federal government retained control over Crown lands and natural resources in the West.

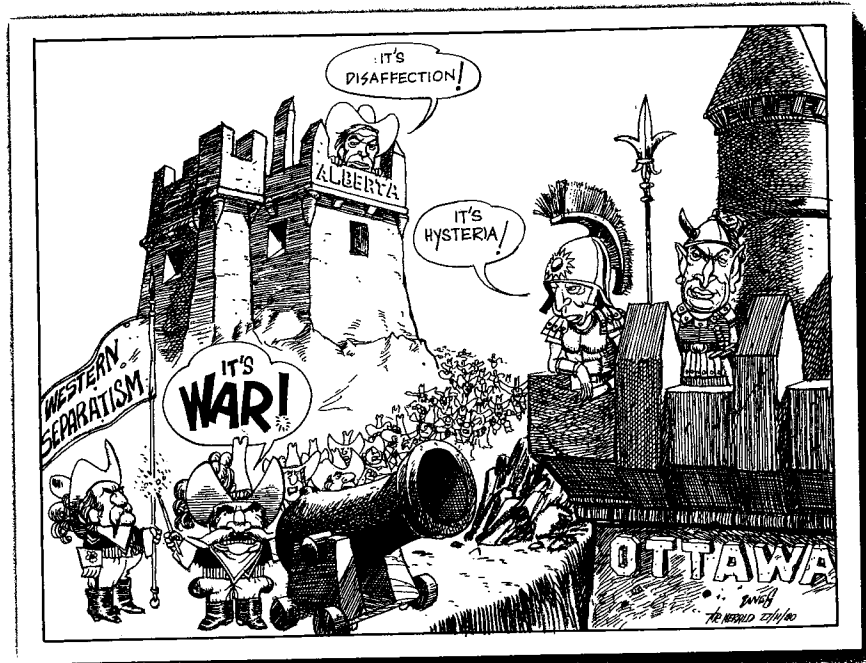


Figure 14-24 Many Albertans saw the NEP as just another example of the federal government taking advantage of the West. Some people followed Québec's lead by advocating the separation of the western provinces from the rest of Canada. Although political parties formed to pursue western separation, the idea never achieved widespread support. How does this cartoon by Tom Innes — from the *Calgary Herald* in November 1980 — represent the separatist movement and the federal government's response?

By the 1970s, Alberta, in particular, had a booming economy due to high world oil prices. In 1980, over concerns that too much of Canada's oil industry was owned by foreign (mainly American) companies and that Canadian consumers were too vulnerable to large price increases and supply disruptions caused by foreign countries, the federal government developed the National Energy Program (NEP). The NEP

- established new rules that transferred a significant portion of oil industry royalties from the provincial governments to the federal government
- greatly expanded the role of Petro-Canada (a federal government-owned oil company) in the Canadian oil industry
- gave the federal government 25 percent ownership of every new Arctic and offshore well
- established price controls for consumers

The program imposed a major redistribution of wealth from the Alberta government to the federal government and Canadian consumers. When world oil prices dropped within a year, however, many American companies stopped exploring and producing in Alberta. The economic boom in the province came to an abrupt end, and thousands of people lost their jobs, businesses, and homes. Resentment against Prime Minister Trudeau's Liberal government was strong and widespread. The NEP was ended by the Conservative government in 1984, although mistrust in Alberta for the Liberal Party and federal government has continued to the present.

THE CANADAIR CONTRACT

Another issue for the West involved a billion-dollar contract to maintain the government's CF-18 fighter jets. In 1986, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney decided, "in the national interest," to give the contract to Canadair in Montréal, even though the bid from Winnipeg's Bristol Aerospace was less expensive and judged by the federal government's own experts to be technically superior. The decision was made as the result of lobbying by Québec interests to create jobs in Montréal. As a result of the decision, 100 Manitobans lost jobs and the Canadian taxpayer had to fund millions of dollars in upgrades for the Montréal facility that won the contract.

DEBATES OVER THE CANADIAN WHEAT BOARD

For many farmers, a major source of discontent with the federal government concerns the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB). As you learned in Chapter 11, the CWB was formed in 1935 at the request of western farmers to help market their wheat and stabilize prices. At first, selling wheat through the CWB was voluntary, but in 1943, a new law made it mandatory for western farmers to sell their wheat to the CWB. The CWB's activities apply only to prairie farmers—those in most of British Columbia and east of Manitoba are free to market their own products. Marketing boards exist in these other areas, but participation is voluntary. Today the CWB operates as the "single desk" from which domestic and international buyers can purchase western wheat and barley.

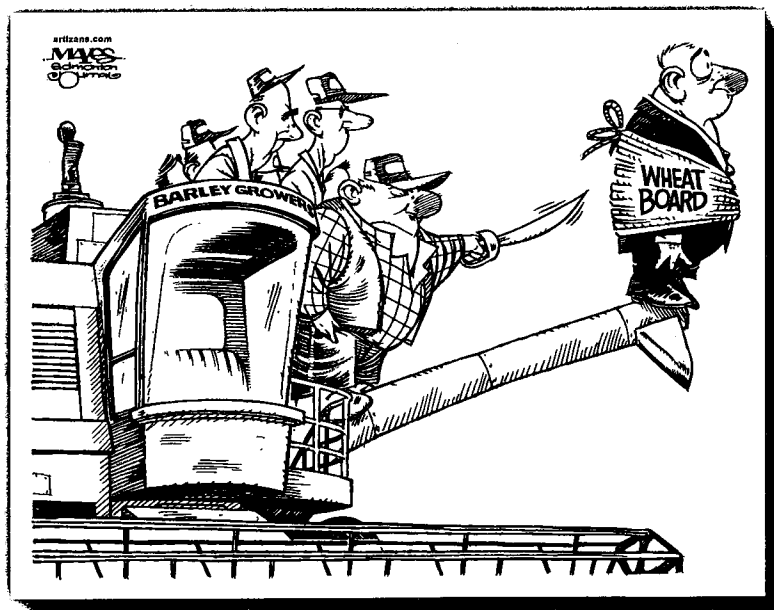
Many farmers today argue that technology such as the Internet has changed their industry and that they now can market and sell their own grains—often for better prices than those the CWB negotiates. Other farmers think they benefit from the CWB's monopoly and do not want the system to change. Still others think the CWB is worthwhile, but that participation in its program should be voluntary. For critics, the CWB is further evidence that the federal government interferes unnecessarily in the West's economy.

VOICES

Winnipeg has a good sense of what's right and wrong and we have long memories . . . nothing has changed. The basic political system still heavily favours the mass block of the eastern provinces.

— John Doole, President of the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce, on the Canadair contract controversy

Figure 14-25 This cartoon by Malcolm Mayes was published on March 31, 2007, just after a plebiscite of barley growers revealed that 62 percent wanted to end the CWB monopoly. Many farmers charged that the plebiscite was unfair and that the federal government was using it to undermine the CWB without addressing farmers' real concerns with grain marketing.



RECALL... REFLECT... RESPOND

1. In this section (pages 418 to 425), what changes took place in the Canadian government's treatment of Aboriginal peoples? What factors caused these changes? Include at least two causes from other chapters you have read.

2. What factors contributed to a sense, among some western Canadians, that the federal government does not act in their best interests? Do you think these concerns are valid? Give evidence for your answer.