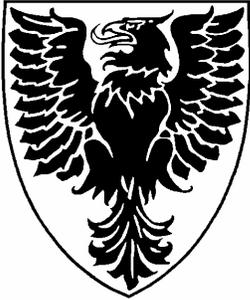


Liberal tentacles in Alliance country



Implications for rural women's leadership

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ABSTRACT:

This paper reports on a subset of results from a research project on rural women's leadership in Western Canada.¹ This project is the second stage of a larger program - the first stage was conducted in Atlantic Canada - that takes a new approach to understanding why relatively few rural women hold public office, by going directly to the source: qualified rural women who are active in community affairs but who, for the most part, are not running for elected office. In field work carried out 2002 - 03, I interviewed 107 rural women leaders throughout British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, about their experiences and perceptions of leadership, public life, and running for elected office. The field work process itself revealed important distinctions between government-funded policy networks in this region as compared to those in Atlantic Canada. Results are presented on how the policies and practices of the national Liberal-Party government have the effect of enabling or inhibiting women's leadership in the region.

1. Introduction

In their 1998 analysis of women's election to provincial legislatures, Richard Matland and Donley Studlar attributed a key role to rural ridings in holding back the overall rates of women's election in Canada. A series of court rulings has upheld the principle of "effective, not necessarily equal representation," and has thus entrenched the practice of over-representation of rural voters. So long as this practise continues, the political dynamics of rural Canada will continue to exercise disproportionate influence over electoral outcomes. In Canada, as elsewhere in the world, rural areas are distinguished by electing proportionally fewer women to public office than urban centres. Understanding the reasons for this distinction thus becomes central to the study of women's representation in Canada; rural Canada will have to play a key role in any significant future overall gains in women's election to public office.

For over a century, rural women have honed their leadership skills in voluntary women's organizations, and more recently they have become prominent in high-profile public-sector occupations, small-business groups, and agricultural organizations. There is a pool of qualified, talented rural women, but they are not finding their way to public office in the same proportion as urban women. Why not? This question comes under the spotlight just as recent provincial and national elections have brought the realization that the overall proportion of women elected in Canada has stalled near 20%, after twenty-five years of increases.

My current research program goes to qualified rural women and asks them that very question. It gathers together and interviews rural community leaders about their experiences and perceptions of leadership, public life, and running for elected office. These are the women who would form the pool of potential candidates, but most of whom, for a variety of reasons, are not running and not winning. The first stage of this research program investigated rural women's leadership in Atlantic Canada, by employing a focus-group format to interview 126 rural women community leaders in the four Atlantic provinces. One of the strongest common themes to emerge from the Atlantic study was participants' moral disapproval of, and aversion to, political life as they understood it in their local environment. Carbert (2003) presented results in which interviewees in all four Atlantic provinces expressed a distinct preference to remain above the

political fray. They described deeply entrenched networks of patron-client relations that are played out in the administration of regional economic development programs, and identified deterrents to their own electoral ambitions therein. That article related those deterrents to structural features of rural Atlantic Canada, and considered future prospects for the election of more women in that region.

This paper presents new results from the second stage of this research program: a parallel study of rural women's leadership in western Canada. In 2002 - 2003, I organized and conducted a series of 19 in-person focus-group discussions in the provinces of Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia, interviewing 107 rural women community leaders.² In several important respects, the Atlantic and Western regions represent almost polar extremes within Canada. In terms of representation, the Atlantic provinces include the lowest rates of women's election overall, while the western provinces include some of the highest rates. Partisanship figures prominently in this regional landscape as well. Whereas the dominant Liberal Party of Canada has enjoyed widespread support in Atlantic Canada, the opposite holds true in the west, where the Alliance Party has held the bulk of seats, especially in rural areas.³ Economically, the western provinces are more prosperous overall than the Atlantic provinces, and their populations less dependent on public-sector transfers. How do these profound differences play themselves out in rural women's perceptions of, and participation in electoral politics? Are there common "rural" characteristics that transcend regional and provincial distinctions, or do different characteristics altogether act as barriers to women's election in different rural areas?

One of the most surprising results to emerge from these discussions is the prominent role played by the national Liberal government in the leadership activities and ambitions of some of the most actively involved women among those interviewed. This impact seemed quite out of proportion to the standing of the Liberal Party in terms of membership and voting support in the region. This paper explores the implications for women's leadership from their own point of view. It begins by describing, in sections 2 and 3, the research process, in terms of how the meetings were arranged, and how they were conducted. Section 4 describes how the field-work process itself revealed important distinctions in the government-funded and government-facilitated policy

networks, as compared to those in Atlantic Canada. Section 5 reviews the federal electoral standings in the region at the time of the interviews, highlighting the Alliance Party hegemony that continued after the 2000 General Election, to provide the political context in which the interviewees carried out their public activities. Section 6 presents interviewee comments describing various ways in which national Liberal government policies and practices affected their leadership activities and ambitions. Finally, the results are summarized and interpreted in section 7.

2. Arranging the interviews

Focus-group interviews were conducted in selected rural areas across Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia.⁴ The meetings were arranged with the assistance of major government and non-government organizations. In each case, I contacted an official at the main office of a selected organization, to whom I described my project. After sorting out the parameters of my project, this official would refer me to local contact people who might be in a position to facilitate a meeting. A meeting was arranged when one of these contacts agreed to facilitate by doing two things: inviting six to eight women who, in their opinion, had demonstrated leadership experience and capacity; and selecting a venue. Meetings were particularly productive when they involved groups of friends and associates, who had already established some degree of intimacy and trust. An example in which such trust played an indispensable role was a frank discussion involving several participants re-hashing the term in municipal council served by one of them, and analysing why it had been so unsuccessful.

In an attempt to access the diversity of political life in these provinces, I tried to work with as many distinct types of organizations as possible, in an ethnographic approach intended to capture the unity of a single political / economic scene, spanning the municipal to the national levels of government and their interaction with public and private enterprises, with a range of diverse actors participating in the discussion. Both the Canadian Alliance Party and the Liberal Party of Canada helped me to get in touch with appropriate contacts. The summers of 2002 and 2003 caught both of these national parties at a time of transition. The Alliance Party had elected

a new leader Stephen Harper earlier in the spring who sought to unify the party, after a divisive leadership battle that saw the defeat of Stockwell Day and the expulsion and subsequent reinstatement of dissident caucus members. The western grassroots of the Liberal Party were engaged in a divisive effort to promote the leadership of former Finance Minister Paul Martin, in an effort to depose incumbent Prime Minister Chrétien. Nonetheless, both parties graciously assisted me. The Canadian Alliance Party arranged for me to hold four focus-group discussions facilitated by women active in their riding associations. The Liberal Party helped me to arrange two focus-group discussions that included former Liberal candidates. In Saskatchewan, three focus-group meetings were arranged through the governing provincial New Democratic Party. A few one-on-one meetings occurred with individual party activists.

I also worked with a number of other government and non-government organizations to build up a network of contacts regarding women's leadership. The resulting sequences of communications ultimately led to the convening of meetings, but it became impossible to identify each meeting as emerging from one facilitating source. One useful contact was the Rural Secretariat, the rubric under which the Government of Canada situates its programs relating to rural development. This is a recent initiative designed to foster horizontal linkages in the policymaking process to deal with the overall impact of policies that are designed and implemented on a sectoral basis in the line departments of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs, Industry Canada, and Natural Resources.⁵ In contrast to the line departments which are principally concerned with the production of goods and services on a sectoral basis, the Rural Secretariat is directed to the quality of rural life through such initiatives as the "Rural Lens" to assess policy, and ongoing efforts to develop a "Rural Partnership" between policymakers and the rural population. The Rural Secretariat referred me to several women working in community-economic development. Status of Women Canada had fewer links to rural areas, but the Vancouver office and the Edmonton office were able to direct me to particular individuals who initiated fruitful communications.

Among the non-government organizations that I contacted were two that work on the issue of women's election to public office: the Canadian Women's Voters Congress, based in

Vancouver, and Winning Women Coalition, based in Calgary. Of the two organizations, the Canadian Women's Voters Congress is the more institutionalised and runs an ongoing series of Campaign Schools. But, at that time, it did not have contacts with women beyond the suburban fringe of the greater Vancouver area. Partly because Calgary is a smaller urban centre (with less than a million population), the Winning Women Coalition was able to put me in touch with women outside the city.

3. Focus-group method

Some description of the focus-group method is in order. On arrival at the designated location, respondents sat down at a board-room table to a "place-setting" of documents to look over while waiting to begin. The place-setting consisted of an introductory letter, a consent form to be signed, an exercise card showing photographs of stereotypical gender images, a card of standard reasons stating why women might not choose to run for public office, and a card showing the historical progression in the proportion of women elected to national and provincial legislatures across Canada. The meeting was videotaped for later transcription to written text. Each focus-group discussion followed the same general format, but the content varied greatly from one group to another, according to the personal background of participants and the dynamics among them. In some cases, comments from earlier groups were turned back (anonymously) on subsequent groups for comment and criticism.

The focus-group format used here is particularly suitable when dealing with sophisticated and engaged respondents speaking directly about their own circumstances. Utilizing this technique allowed valuable insights to emerge that were not anticipated by the investigator, including those reported here. The interviewees proved to be exceptionally articulate and enthusiastic about the topic. On the whole, they were elite enough to be familiar with the details of local political life, yet most did not occupy such high positions of responsibility that they felt obliged to be reticent or unduly discreet. Over 40 hours of testimony from the focus-group discussions and individual interviews constitutes a rich source of information about rural women's leadership in the region. The quotes provided in subsequent sections of this paper compose a

small fraction of the data collected. They were selected on the bases of being relevant to the topic at hand, representative of the discussion from which they were extracted and of other similar discussions in other groups, while at the same time being articulate, concise, and self-contained. Great care was taken in this selection process, in an attempt to give the reader a clear sense of the discussions within the constraints of a scholarly format, while preserving the integrity of the discussions. In general, preference was given to the more sophisticated discussions in which participants were speaking on the basis of first-hand experience, than was given to comments that seemed to repeat general opinions which might have been expressed by anyone in the general population.

Participants in focus-groups typically discuss what they have in common, as opposed to each person's unique experience or point of view (Fern 2001, 114-15, 128). This basic tendency in human nature makes focus groups less useful for research projects which seek to know individual motives and autonomous decision-making processes. But this project was about what people had in common: "Focus groups can benefit from group interaction and the resultant social pressures from other group members any time the phenomenon under study is 'collective' in nature" (Fern 2001, 128). Civic engagement and political recruitment is a "collective" phenomenon. Fundamentally, the unit of analysis here is the local political system, and the focus-group participants were speaking about their experience of the system. To that extent, the tendency of participants in focus-groups to concentrate on shared information improves the quality of the results. What knowledge they share in common about the local political system is probably more reliable, accurate, and perhaps even more generalizable, than each person's individual opinion of how the system operates. In homogeneous and cohesive groups, such as those convened in this project, participants are typically more comfortable in disagreeing with each other, and moving the discussion past the repetition of platitudes, thus overcoming the bias of social desirability.

4. Rural Policy Communities – contrast with Atlantic Canada

The first set of observations arises from the process of doing research in the field, which I initiated by contacting a variety of government offices in Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan that are formally equivalent or analogous to those that I contacted in my earlier project in Atlantic Canada. Among the offices that I approached, a pattern emerged of a relatively urban-based policy community with less extensive reach into rural communities than in Atlantic Canada. From the point of view of carrying out the field work, my entry into the field was more difficult, with more telephone calls required to arrange a given number of focus groups in Alberta, BC, or Saskatchewan.⁶

Consider Status of Women Canada (SWC) as an example. The SWC field officer for Nova Scotia, whose unstaffed office is in Halifax, is responsible for overseeing and supporting the development projects funded in part or in whole by SWC in the province. Many of these projects are based outside Halifax, scattered throughout the province, and so she spends most of her time on the road travelling to visit the projects. As a result of this intensive interaction with many rural communities, she had direct and up-to-date contact with many of the women that I interviewed, even those that were recruited through independent channels. In comparison with the Nova Scotia case, although the SWC offices in Saskatchewan (based in Saskatoon), Alberta (Edmonton) and British Columbia (Vancouver) are larger (e.g. employing support staff), their field officers seemed to have fewer and less up-to-date contacts with rural women's organizations in their province. Furthermore, when I ultimately conducted interviews in rural areas arranged through independent channels, I found little if any overlap with SWC activities.

In carrying out my field work in Western Canada, it was striking that few of the rural women leaders working on development issues in different communities in the same part of the province worked with each other, or knew each other, or even knew "of" each other. This situation was very different from that in Atlantic Canada, where the research process became integrated into a cohesive network of personal and professional ties among people working on women and rural development broadly defined. Based on my experience, it appears that there is less of a cohesive network of women and development organizations in Western Canada as there is in Atlantic Canada.

We could most obviously relate this distinction to geographic scale and demographic characteristics. The West is much bigger in almost every regard than the Atlantic provinces. In terms of population alone, only the province of Nova Scotia approaches one million people, and the other Atlantic provinces are well below that number. The major urban centres of Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver are each on the scale of entire provinces in the Atlantic region. As well as being more populous and more urbanized, the West is geographically larger as well, with some areas where field work was done being more than a six-hour drive from a major city. In the East, the only locale that is isolated to the same extent is the western coast of Newfoundland. It makes sense, in a province with relatively fewer rural people spread over a larger area, that SWC activities would be more urban-oriented, and that it would be less practical or efficient for a single field worker to cover all of the rural areas.

But in this age of instant communication, geographical separation is scarcely a major impediment. The relative independence of organizations in Western Canada suggests the absence of a cohesive force, and the level of government involvement (beyond the provision of funds) is a key factor. Distinctions in the level of involvement were immediately evident in the venue and timing of the focus groups. In Atlantic Canada, 7 out of 14 focus-group meetings were held in government boardrooms during office hours. Professionally employed women attended these meetings on rural women's leadership as part of their work responsibilities, and the facilitator organizing the event was entitled to use a government (or government funded) boardroom for this purpose. In Western Canada, only 1 out of 19 focus groups fit this profile.

In Atlantic Canada, it became misleading to distinguish between discrete government and non-government organizations. A pattern emerged of key individuals who wear a number of hats in multiple organizations as they moved seamlessly from one funding opportunity to another. For example, the Women's CED-Network in Nova Scotia, which is funded by Industry Canada, is closely integrated with government and other government funded organizations. Some of its board members and field workers are also government employees, and some work with Coastal Communities Network or Women for Economic Equality. The Women's Enterprise Initiative in western Canada is also funded by Industry Canada, and appears to have a similar mandate and

client base as listed on its websites and annual reports. But the two are far from equivalent in practice. WEI is a Chamber of Commerce initiative, and does not appear to maintain close ties with government (beyond its financial contribution) or other government-funded organizations. We will see that this pattern is in keeping with the comments of the interviewees in Western Canada, who described a “hands-off” approach by local government offices and elected representatives toward the activities of development organizations that receive government funding, and interpreted this approach in terms of the partisan structure and ideological principles that prevail in that region.

5. Alliance country following the 2000 election

A brief review of partisan structure at the national level in western Canada provides context for the comments of interviewees. Historically the Liberal Party of Canada has attracted weak electoral support in the west, while often dominating in the rest of the country. The most recent national election in 2000 was no exception, as Liberal Party won a landslide victory nation-wide, even though it was trounced in the west by the Canadian Alliance Party (formerly the Reform Party). The Table below displays the distribution of votes by party and the voter turnout in the fifteen federal electoral districts where interviews were conducted, along with selected highly urban ridings for comparison.

Electoral district	Canadian Alliance	Liberal	Progressive Conservative	New Democrat	Voter turnout (%)
Crowfoot	70.6	6.2	14.2	3.0	66.2
Wild Rose	70.4	11.1	12.9	4.1	62.5
Macleod	70.0	9.4	13.8	6.7	62.8
Yellowhead	66.1	15.6	12.7	4.7	60.4
Peace River	65.6	15.5	12.0	7.0	55.1
Prince George – Peace River	69.7	15.5	6.1	4.7	56.7
Vancouver Island North	51.3	24.8	6.2	11.7	64.8
Cariboo – Chilcotin	59.6	20.3	8.8	9.0	60.5
Prince George – Bulkley Valley	58.3	23.4	7.0	5.8	59.3
Kootenay – Boundary – Okanagan	46.7	27.5	5.2	10.0	64.9
Skeena	42.7	29.1	3.2	20.1	59.7
Battlefords-Lloydminster	60.2	17.4	5.0	17.4	60.0
Prince Albert	45.6	20.1	12.1	20.1	64.1
Saskatoon-Rosetown-Biggar	41.7	11.3	5.7	41.4	55.6
Churchill River	32.6	41.8	3.2	21.8	59.5

<i>Edmonton Centre – East</i>	42.4	34.2	5.4	17.4	53.4
<i>Calgary Centre</i>	38.5	9.8	46.0	2.8	56.8
<i>Vancouver Centre</i>	26.1	42.3	11.8	12.0	60.5

The Alliance Party won in all but one of the ridings in which interviews were conducted. The exception is the northern district of Churchill River, Saskatchewan. Most of the election races were not close. In ten of the fifteen rural ridings shown above, the Canadian Alliance won not just a plurality, but an outright majority. And it wasn't far from winning a majority in Kootenay - Boundary – Okanagan in southern British Columbia with 46.7% of the vote, and in Prince Albert with 45.6%. The Canadian Alliance won a weaker, though still substantial, plurality in the northern district of Skeena, and barely carried the seat in Saskatoon-Rosetown-Biggar, which includes the eastern quadrant of the city of Saskatoon.

The relatively low voter turnout (far-right column in the Table above) is in keeping with other elections in recent years (and with the secular decline in voter turnout throughout the industrialized world), suggesting an absence of mobilizing issues in the west, and a complacency with the dominant regional party. The lowest three rows of the Table above show that the Alliance Party did not fare as well in the three highly “urban” electoral districts listed. In Edmonton Centre - East, it won with a modest (8%) plurality. In Calgary Centre, the Alliance candidate lost to Joe Clark, the Leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada by a modest (8.5%) plurality. And in Vancouver Centre, the incumbent Liberal candidate took the seat by a substantial (16.2%) margin. Clearly the Alliance Party enjoys widespread electoral success throughout the three provinces, with especially high support in the rural areas. Based on its polling numbers, Compas Inc. coined the phrase “Fortress Pacifica” to describe the Alliance’s bastion of support in the West (2000).

In addition to a rural / urban division on partisanship, there was a robust gender gap by which more men than women supported the Canadian Alliance. During the 2000 election campaign, Compas Inc reported that the Alliance party had support from 32% of males compared to 21% of females. They also found that the gender gap crossed all age groups, as successively older cohorts, both male and female, expressed greater support for Alliance. The gender gap held even within “Fortress Pacifica.” In B.C., the Alliance secured 51% of the male vote

compared to 36% of the female vote. The corresponding figures for Alberta were 66% and 54% (Compas Inc. 2000 14). Furthermore, the Alliance Party had potential to draw on new male voters as a plausible second choice, but not among women who were more likely to “not ever” vote Alliance. The pollsters thus wondered if there was any self-interested reason for the Alliance Party to address the gender gap as an electoral strategy. Looking at the numbers in 2000, the Alliance would have lost more (male support) than it might have gained by trying to appeal to women.

In most respects, the 2000 election merely consolidated electoral patterns in western Canada that had been established in earlier elections. Considering just how entrenched some of these Alliance members were in their local bastions, the election itself was probably one of the least interesting (and least likely to have an impact) events. The interviews go beyond electoral outcomes to try to understand important aspects of public life in the district as they play out within this entrenched partisan electoral structure. In the following section, participants describe their perceptions of women’s leadership in the context of the ongoing interface between the elected Member of Parliament, local Liberal-Party activists, and the Government of Canada.

6. Liberal Party tentacles

One surprising observation from this study is that despite the Liberal Party’s poor electoral showing in western Canada, the Liberal government appears to play a significant role in enabling women’s leadership capacity in that region, albeit in an indirect manner that circumvents the electoral institutions in general, and the local elected representative in particular. This impact seems to play out most effectively through the administration of national programs in three closely related policy areas: labour-force development, post-secondary education, and economic development.

As an illustration of this conjunction, consider a meeting that was held in the classroom of a private-sector firm whose business involves operating courses and counselling in labour-force development. The participants included the ownership and staff of this business, among other local women leaders. The primary “client” for this business is Human Resources Development

Canada (HRDC), a federal government department. HRDC purchases classroom spots and counselling for individuals who meet the designated eligibility requirements for job training under Employment Insurance regulations. This firm works closely with post-secondary community colleges in coordinating eligibility requirements, enrolments, and job placement in an overall effort to support the identified goals of the community for its economic development. The interviews revealed that the women who own and work at this firm occupy significant leadership roles in the community, in part through their professional activities. One participant had sat on the economic-development board for six years. Another had toured the region for several years conducting motivational and instructional forums for economic development. It is worth noting that these women looked the part as well; in terms of grooming and fashion, they would not be out of place among professional woman seen in downtown Vancouver or Calgary. Grooming may be a superficial indicator of leadership, but it often says something about one's own perception of prestige and status within the community.

One might have expected that these women, who administer substantial sums of federal government program funds, would have extensive dealings with the elected Member of Parliament (MP) in their riding. However, this is not the case with the current Member:

Speaker 1. We have extended many invitations for federal programs that we run, for [the MP] to come and look at what we do here to help employment and see the other great things we do, and he won't come. And he won't support what we are doing here, and he's basically said that.

Speaker 2. Everything used to go across [the previous MP's] desk, all the proposals from the area for federal funding etc. He used to have a look at it, ask questions, give feedback, give MP input. We heard that when [the Alliance MP] came in ... that he just said "No, I don't want to see it."

These comments show that the relationship between the federal government and these women leaders bypasses the MP's office, and that the MP colludes in this circumvention.

Such deliberate self-marginalization might seem to be a dubious strategy for an elected Member of Parliament, but this excerpt is not an isolated instance; similar comments arose at other groups as well, with regard to other MPs. In fact, such shunning of government programs may reasonably be related to Alliance Party principles. The Reform Party invented the term "Billion Dollar Boondoggle" in regard to a series of scandals in 1999 arising from a management audit of HRDC, and that Department has been anathema to the Party ever since. Indeed,

Calgary West Alliance MP Rob Anders famously refused to approve \$628,000 in job funding from HRDC in his own riding in 2000.⁷

Another notable example involves a post-secondary administrator who facilitated the local implementation of federal government initiatives of the Department of Industry. In carrying out these activities, she had developed professional ties with the Minister of this department. She was looking forward to a planned event in which the Minister would announce the project together with her. When asked about the role of the local MP in this initiative, she replied, “He just isn’t a player in that. He hasn’t got the capacity to really make any difference.” She went on to describe, with apparent relish, that the MP was not invited by the Government to the events scheduled during a previous visit of that Minister.

This same administrator also explained that she expected the upcoming event to help her realize her electoral ambitions at the municipal level:

LC. How does this play into your own ambitions?

Speaker. He will come back and make a funding announcement and I will be there with him to do that.

LC. So [your institution] has set you up very nicely for becoming involved in this?

Speaker. Yes.

Indeed, this woman was elected to city council in the municipal election a few months later.

In another location, a number of college instructors who formed part of a focus group wondered why their Alliance MP had never contacted them in regard to the college’s activities, to give a talk at the college, etc. They were not hostile to the MP, but were hoping to develop new networks and funding opportunities for the town, which was going through a rough time economically. Why wouldn’t the elected member and the dominant party in the region reach out to some of the best educated, professionally employed, and economically secure women in the constituency? Their professional work in post-secondary education had brought them into contact with HRDC labour-force development initiatives, and it seemed that this professional association had contributed to the “de-demonization” of the Liberal government among these women. In the absence of Alliance Party support, they expressed interest in considering an increased association with government programs, and even with the Liberal Party itself (none were Party members at the time). They expressed interest when told of the existence of the

Liberal Women's Commission, and wondered how it might promote their interests in reaching out to a wider circle, beyond their relatively isolated town.

At other meetings too, interviewees working in development described this same sort of gravitation toward Liberal partisanship in the vacuum left by Alliance disinterest in their professional goals for the community.⁸ One meeting included a woman employed by a Community Futures Corporation, as a programs manager who is responsible for HRDC self-employment workshops.⁹ She had also held municipal-level office with the Regional District, sat as a board member on a municipal commission, and enjoyed, as she put it, a "far-reaching profile." As a result, she was circumspect about her support for the Liberal Party. During the 2000 election campaign, she had written a letter to Stockwell Day, explaining why she opposed the Canadian Alliance for its antagonism to HRDC and regional development, and why, as a result, she would vote Liberal in order to defend her professional career.

My job depends on it. Bottom line – it is the philosophy of supporting the unemployed and supporting new businesses that is so incredibly important to the whole area. When you think about the number of businesses that are started through the self-employment program and all the spin-off jobs, it is such a successful program, and the Alliance could not support it. That was just one of the programs that would bite the dust.

This interviewee took Alliance criticism of HRDC very personally. She was not a Liberal-Party member at the time, but intended to become active in the Party a few years in the future. By all accounts very few people in the community knew just how firm her Liberal sympathies were:

Ironically, one of our best friends is running as a candidate for the Alliance Party. I am not an Alliance member, but he came to me and said, "Would you please support me?" So I bought a membership. I said, "You know, *John*, that when the federal election comes around, I will be voting Liberal." I'm not an Alliance person. The only reason I joined is because he such a good friend of ours. We'd like to see him be an MP, but when the federal election comes, I am a true Liberal.

Based on these events, others in the community would, quite justifiably, infer that this woman was a staunch Alliance supporter. After all she had publicly attended the nomination meeting in order to support her close friend to become an Alliance candidate. Apart from those she confided in, who would know how she really felt? Presumably, her Alliance-Party friend would never admit

that his nomination was supported by local Liberals. Is this woman representative of the bulk of people professionally employed within the programmatic orbit of the federal government? On the basis of all the interviews, it seems safe to assert that there is no perception among the general public that people so employed are Liberals.

Not surprisingly, this interviewee felt that her community was injured by its firm Alliance vote, and advocated the election of a Liberal MP. However, the wording that she used to describe the benefit seems significant:

We as a community would be better served in Ottawa if we had a Liberal serving us as part of government. If we had a Liberal representative, we would get more from Ottawa.

This quote seems to advocate the collective exercise of a calculated strategic vote in her district, which goes beyond her earlier personal expression of principled support for Liberal policies.

This same sort of calculation was encountered at other meetings as well. At one meeting, a woman with a longstanding funding relationship with Status of Women Canada had this to say:

We need to buy in, at some level, as females, to the fact that you'd better vote in the Party that's going to say: "Hey, you guys are going to get a bit of money because you voted the right way." We traditionally vote Reform which hasn't got a hope. We tick off our federal government and then we sit and wonder why they're not giving us anything. We make no sense.

It seems plausible that this interviewee's views evolved naturally through her experiences in obtaining SWC funding for her rural social-services project, following her partisan involvement as campaign manager for the defeated Liberal candidate in a previous election. This is not meant to imply that the project was unworthy, but rather that the networks established during the partisan activities likely helped bring serious consideration to this proposal, which might otherwise have been overlooked, among the many urban-based research-oriented projects that were more commonly funded in western Canada by Status of Women Canada.

Given these claims that a riding could "get more" from Ottawa by voting Liberal, it is interesting to look at the one riding in this study that elected a Liberal MP in the 2000 election - Churchill River, in northern Saskatchewan. Rick Laliberte was first elected in Churchill River as a New Democrat in 1997, and then crossed the floor for his successful re-election as a Liberal in

2000. There is some evidence that Churchill River did well by the federal government, especially Industry Canada, during Laliberte's tenure. In the summer of 2003, Laliberte was on the podium with Minister Allan Rock to announce the following:

- \$1 million to Métis-owned SaskNative Economic Development Corporation's loan fund.
- \$625 550 to the Saskatchewan Indian Equity Foundation and the SaskNative Economic Development Corporation.
- \$134 280 from Western Economic Diversification to work to define the Mid-Canada Research Institute, a virtual research institute that would focus on community-driven research initiatives throughout an east to west mid-Canada corridor.
- \$200 000 from Western Economic Diversification Canada to Pinehouse Business North Development Incorporated..¹⁰
- Industry Canada subsequently announced that organizations in Churchill River had been selected (by the arm's-length National Selection Committee) to implement high-capacity Internet connections in Northern Saskatchewan.¹¹

This district clearly had what some interviewees in other districts wished for. Did the corresponding people in Churchill River then appreciate Laliberte's efforts on the backbenches of the governing party? In spite of the benefits that came to Churchill River during Laliberte's tenure, including those listed above, interviewees in his district were not complimentary about his performance. Focus groups participants who had dealt with him professionally over the years openly queried his accomplishments. One respondent associated Laliberte exclusively with the least financially significant item on the list – the Mid-Canada Research Institute, which was established to plan a shared cross-provincial management of the river-basin drainage system in the western provinces. She said: "It's been his baby for a while. We can all have ideas and this is his one." Another respondent commended the Mid-Canada idea but voiced disappointment in other regards:

It's fine to have that kind of idea or vision, but the same time I want to see some results, or some actual programs that put bread and butter on the table or that give people jobs. I am really hard pressed to see any firm results that are because of what he has done.

This evaluation seems less than charitable, in light of the other, bigger-ticket, items on the list above that could be interpreted as funding "bread and butter" activities. Of these two interviewees, one was an education administrator and the other was an economic developer. As such, both would be expected to be familiar with these initiatives, and to be involved in spending the funds. Despite being "in the loop," they were reluctant to give Laliberte credit for these

Industry Canada initiatives. (They were more impressed by the community-service activities of the mining corporations operating in the area.) Instead they and other focus group participants dwelt on what they perceived as a dishonourable defection from the New Democrats to the Liberals several years earlier. It should be noted that only one interviewee at this meeting was an NDP member. It is difficult to determine from the interviews alone why community leaders would harbour an apparent bias against Laliberte.

Whatever the underlying basis for their negative assessment, these interviewees were, by all accounts, not alone in their opinion of Laliberte. Later in that same year, Laliberte came under criticism in the House for what the Alliance Party described as excessive travel expenses. Despite his apparently plausible excuse that his expenses were incurred for travel in his own remote and expansive riding, Laliberte's Liberal colleagues did not defend him vigorously. Evidently he was considered a potential liability in Ottawa. At home, too, the local riding association asked him not to seek re-nomination as a Liberal Party candidate in 2004. According to Laliberte, this request came partly because of the travel expenses and also because "there was concern about my lack of visibility in the communities," a phrase that echoes the interviewees cited above. Laliberte left the Party with what he described as a sour taste in his mouth; he had sacrificed a lot for the Party and was disappointed to be cast aside as a sitting MP, without even putting the question to the voters.¹²

If this is how the Liberal Party treats a colleague who currently holds one of the few Liberal seats in western Canada, how might it be expected to deal with "sacrificial lambs" in ridings that it has no plausible chance of winning? The present interviews included several defeated candidates in other ridings, all of which were carried by the Alliance Party by a wide margin. One meeting comprised several local Liberal Party insiders, including the defeated candidate from the previous election. In the excerpt below, they discuss their perception of a lack of support from the party:

Speaker 1. You know, they have a Liberal Women's Commission and I have heard from them once and I have been an active member of the Liberal Party for over 10 years. I've been president or in some executive position for probably eight of those years.

Candidate. I did get, last year, a couple of stock invitations to the Judy LaMarsh fundraiser / benefit. I actually emailed them about 3 weeks ago saying that I

would like to be involved and to let me know what's happening etc, but I haven't heard a thing.

Speaker 2. But we don't really count, right? We are a huge riding, one of the largest ridings in Canada, it's a vast thing. And we are a fairly well organized association. But other than that, you can't get Ministers to come here. We've had the ruling party for 9 years and we've had two Ministers here [in the District], and sometimes they put Ministers here and don't even tell us they're coming.

Candidate. That happened [recently]. The Minister came up to give an announcement about housing and we ran into him there.

Speaker 2. And there was not one Liberal present. [The candidate] wasn't present.

Candidate. And you want to make sure that I had a few ears hot after I got off the phone that day. ... I told them, "How can you do that?" We didn't have one single Liberal present, even at the press conference. It took me three phone calls to find out who should have told me and I called him and I said, "Don't you ever do that again. You know where we are, and you know what we do up here. You call and tell me when someone is coming."

It is all too easy for the Government to overlook the party stalwarts in a lost-cause riding. It is worth noting that this candidate was rather well connected locally. She arranged the focus-group meeting on a moment's notice, having just returned from a business trip, filling out the list of participants from the attendees of a Chamber of Commerce "mixer" that very afternoon. That she could pull together business women from the local Chamber of Commerce on such short notice, and so casually, speaks to her ability to network in the community. Despite her standing, this candidate is an example of what is often described as a "sacrificial lamb."¹³ Such candidates run to communicate a principled message, to do their duty to the Party, and to strengthen the competitive democratic process in a one-party dominant system. Evidently the Liberal Party did not value this service greatly in this riding.

This service can have a very real cost. One Liberal-Party candidate in a national election did indeed sacrifice herself for the party. She lost her private-sector job in a publicly traded province-wide company whose controlling shareholders were the original founder and his family members:

I lost my job because of the candidacy. I told my direct supervisor that I was thinking about doing this. I said that I won't be winning, but my name will be everywhere and how will the company feel about this. He said that he thought it would be good for business and that the owners encourage any endeavour that gets you out in the public eye. So we announced the candidacy, and the election was called. It was just a matter of a couple of days and I got a call from the next higher-up guy and he said, "You can't run." By this point it was too late; we had already announced. Then it escalated up one more, and finally [the founder and controlling shareholder] called and said, "I would never have hired you if I had

known you wanted to run for office, especially the Liberal Party. We can't have Liberals working here; it's bad for business."

Clearly partisanship came at a high price for this woman. She was fired, she lost the election, and she was forced to take the issue through legal channels. The story ended well for her, as she won a cash settlement with which she appeared to be satisfied, and she went on to another good job in the same area. But it was a rough confrontation that not all women would be prepared to ride through to the end.

Other defeated Liberal Party candidates appear to operate far beyond what is normally implied by the term "sacrificial lamb." Consider, for example, the record on which Arleene Thorpe ran as the Liberal candidate for Prince George - Peace River in 2004. On her personal website (<http://www.neonet.bc.ca/arleene-thorpe/>), Thorpe takes credit for the following, among other items:

- Worked with Minister David Anderson to secure the \$1.25 million from the Canada-BC Infrastructure Program for the water and sewer project for Dawson Creek
- Assisted the Mayors in the Prince George-Peace River region to access contacts within the Federal government
- Set up a meeting with Hon. Paul Martin Minister of Finance and the Mayor of Mackenzie to discuss the community's problem with the Northern Tax Allowance
- In the past four years have brought over \$200,000 to the riding for Rural Health Care and Children's Programs and community events and helped secure the \$1.25 million for Dawson Creek Infrastructure program.

Just who was running as the incumbent in this election campaign: Thorpe who was defeated in 2000 (and who arguably has little chance of winning in 2004), or Jay Hill, Member of Parliament since 1993? Apart from being the defeated Liberal candidate, she has no other credentials to support her claims. Her last employed position was as Community Support Worker at the Dawson Creek Society for Community Living; her appointments include the Mayor's Action Committee and the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Rural Health – none of which locate her at the institutional centre of power and influence. And yet she seems to be deeply involved in some important local affairs.

Is it plausible that a defeated candidate exercise more power, in some sense of the word, than the elected member? Some analysts might find something slightly unsavoury about power that does not reside in formal institutionalized office.¹⁴ Would a mayor admit to operating through

the defeated Liberal candidate in order to access infrastructure funds, or would a regional minister admit to taking counsel from a defeated candidate?

Plausibility is bolstered by considering the example of an interviewee who had become active in the Liberal Party some years earlier. She recalled the circumstances surrounding a local economic-development project that led her to oppose the elected Canadian Alliance Member of Parliament by running as a Liberal candidate in the previous election.

We've just had no help from our federal MP. In the two terms that he has served, not once has his office ever phoned to say "Mr. *Parliamentarian* is coming to town. Is there any issue that you wish to discuss?" I would have liked him to come out to see what is going on and to acknowledge that we have to expand our [facilities]. What is a million dollars to Ottawa to help us ensure that those [facilities] happen? It's an investment. So that is what I wanted our MP to do, but he said, "Our party doesn't believe in grants." I am really pissed off at this guy, but I decided to establish my own network - which I have [established] by running for office myself. If it would have happened that I was elected, I would have been a strong voice for the entire North.

It is what happened after her defeat that is especially interesting here. Immediately after the 2000 election, she expressed public regret that the newly elected Alliance member would accomplish so little for the district. The local newspaper editor criticized her comments, to the effect that she just wanted to put the district on the "Liberal gravy train." This experience had a chilling effect on the defeated candidate. She has learned to become discreet about her subsequent dealings with the federal government, and to avoid media attention by operating behind the scenes through a variety of government and industry boards. This does not mean that she has curtailed her community activities or her networking within the Liberal Party. In fact she has actually increased her involvement, and her efforts have met with considerable success. One should in general be sceptical about peoples' claims of their own influence. However, in this case there appears to be solid evidence backing up this interviewee; I have verified that she won a provincial-wide award for her public service, and that a major Canadian resource company honoured this woman, on its corporate website, for her contributions to resolving a major international diplomatic trade dispute. By giving up her earlier ambition to represent her district as a Liberal MP, this woman has increased the level of power that she exercises.

Does the Liberal Party of Canada open doors for rural women leaders in western Canada? The results presented here suggest that the answer may depend in part on how much

the woman in question is doing to advance the Liberal policy agenda. The shoddy treatment of the defeated candidate who was not invited when the Cabinet Minister came to town for a public presentation contrasts sharply with the earlier example of a post-secondary administrator, who had not run as a candidate for the Liberals, but nevertheless was scheduled to appear with a Minister on the podium to share in the glory of a new funding announcement. One obvious distinction is that the excluded candidate did not occupy a professional position administering large sums of federal government funds, and thus was not directly advancing the policy agenda of the government. Therefore, the Minister in question had little to gain by sharing the podium with the defeated candidate.

To the extent that a woman's activities facilitate national government programs in western Canada, the governing party appears to be willing to work with her to fill the vacuum left by Alliance MPs, who keep a principled distance from those programs. An affinity thus emerges between the Liberal agenda for labour-force / community-economic development and the qualification and interests of one subset of rural women leaders. Whether or not she runs for national office as a Liberal candidate seems less important to her empowerment. The interviewee who gave up her ambition to sit as a Liberal MP, only to increase her standing and impact within the community through her ongoing civic work, seems to have arrived at just this understanding.

7. Conclusion

This paper has presented new results from a project on rural women's leadership in Western Canada, which gathers together and interviews small groups of rural community leaders about their experiences and perceptions of leadership, public life, and running for elected office. In field work, carried out 2002 - 2003, I interviewed 107 rural women leaders throughout Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Alberta. Observations and excerpts from the group discussions have been presented on the role of the national Liberal Party of Canada in enabling or inhibiting women's leadership in this region. The findings can be summarized as follows:

- In carrying out the field work in Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia, a pattern emerged of a relatively urban-based policy community with less extensive reach into rural communities than in Atlantic Canada. The relevant policy networks seemed to feature substantially less overlap and interconnectivity, and less extensive ties to government.
- Despite the Liberal Party's poor electoral showing in western Canada, the Liberal government appears to play a significant role in enabling leadership capacity for some women in that region. This impact plays out most effectively through the administration of national programs in three policy areas: labour-force development, post-secondary education, and economic development. It seems to be restricted to women who work professionally in these policy areas. Their relationship with the federal government bypasses the local Alliance MP, which circumvention is facilitated by the Alliance Party's principled stand against federal government involvement in these policy areas.

So long as the Liberal Party holds its electoral dominance, there is likely to be a disjuncture between the electoral system and public policy in western Canada. Some Alliance politicians have constructed virtual fiefdoms,¹⁵ which will undoubtedly carry forward under the Conservative Party banner. From their point of view, they can afford to let Liberal sympathizers, including defeated candidates, professionals and volunteers, do what they see as the “pork-barrel” work in the District, while they concentrate on the House of Commons. Other less established MPs in the west would likely be better served by fending off potential rivals within their own party than by trying to woo the relatively small numbers of local Liberal sympathizers, including the women cited in this paper. From the point of view of the Liberal Party of Canada, there may be diminishing returns in stepping up efforts to win more seats in the region. To take and hold these seats might require enormous expenditures, or major policy shifts on trade issues or the gun registry, which might threaten their success in other regions. From a strictly rational calculus, it could make more sense to limit electoral efforts in western Canada, and cultivate local allies for their policy agenda, through the mechanism of the massive apparatus of the government of

Canada. The result seems to be a regional breakdown of the connection between the electoral system and public policy, as elections are fought and won in a public-policy vacuum.

Thus, whether or not the Liberal Party of Canada open doors for a rural woman leader in western Canada seems to depend in part on how much the woman in question is doing to advance the Liberal policy agenda. Some interviewees who support the Liberal Party and its policy agenda seem to have figured out that between local voter preference and Liberal Party indifference, running as a federal Liberal candidate is a poor strategy for empowerment. In effect they have chosen to “enter the fray” – i.e. participate in the economic development activities shunned by the Alliance politicians - and stay out of national electoral politics. This result contrasts with that found in Atlantic Canada, where many interviewees said that they could not stomach the way in which economic development funds were distributed in their communities, in that elected officials were perceived to take *too* active a role. Because of this they often chose to remain “above the fray.” It seems ironic that qualified women leaders in both regions make the same career choice - not to run for elected office – for precisely the opposite reasons. Both choices make sense because of the profound differences in the political landscapes in which these women are embedded.

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Endnotes

¹ This project is funded by a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

² M.A. student Andrea Olive organized and co-conducted four meetings in Saskatchewan.

³ In 2004, the Canadian Alliance merged with Progressive Conservative Party to form the Conservative Party of Canada. The discussion here refers to the party structure in 2002 and 2003, as participants knew it.

⁴ Where to draw the line between urban and rural? Statistics Canada sets its definition of "rural and small town" at less than 10 thousand people, but it also cautions that definitions are "arbitrary" and that "Rurality is itself an amorphous concept." Brian Biggs, Ray Bollman, and Michael McNames, *Working paper # 15, Trends and characteristics of rural and small-town Canada Working Paper # 15* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada Agriculture Division) 6, 15. To avoid these problems, Statistics Canada reports data in terms of categories of population centres graduated as < 10,000; < 30,000; 30,000 to 99,999; 100,000 to 499,000; and > 500,000. In general, it discusses data in terms of the distinctions between the categories that are meaningful and important. As a result, the <10,000 category is less often discussed than the < 30,000 category, because the important distinction is between people living in centres of < 30,000 and people in larger centres. In other regards, the relevant category is > 500,000 (a category which does not appear east of Montreal) compared to everyone else. Statistics Canada takes particular care to distinguish and exclude the "rural fringe" within commuting distance of major urban

centres. See the *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin* Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 21-006-X1E. The OECD Territorial Development Services distinguishes between “predominantly urban” (< 15% rural), “intermediate” (15 - 50% rural), and “predominantly rural” (> 50% rural). These categories lead to the division of Canada into three main areas: the corridor along United States border, with the main core being the Saint Lawrence Valley; the remote north including the territories and Labrador; and the residual “predominantly rural” regions that includes the fringe above the core urban corridor and all of the Atlantic provinces. The OECD identifies only Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal as “metropolitan centres” (*Territorial Reviews, Canada* 2002, 36, 48). The economic discussion of rurality in term of industrial structure is taken from Biggs, et al. cited above (4-6, 28-29, 39, 42) and the OECD cited above (47, 58-9). The present paper presents results from field work in communities with < 30,000 people.

⁵ An OECD report praised the Rural Secretariat thus: “horizontal co-ordination ... is the dominant organizational model in the private sector world wide, and is the goal of most governments. However, rarely is it as institutionalized and raised to such a high priority as it is in Canada, especially as it applies to rural issues. In comparison, the majority of provincial-level policies are very uneven in philosophy and sophistication” (OECD Territorial Reviews, Canada 2002, 178, 180).

⁶ The distinction cannot be related to my own personal network of contacts, because I had moved to Halifax from Saskatchewan relatively recently, and I had not carried out field work in Atlantic Canada, or other research about Atlantic Canada before taking on that study.

⁷ “Student jobs: a monstrous abuse,” *Alberta Views* 3:5, 2000, 17-18.

⁸ It is important to note that other interviewees in this study were associated with the Alliance Party. Their comments are not directly relevant to this paper, which focuses on interactions with the Liberal Party of Canada.

⁹ Community Futures Development Corporations are responsible for promoting community-economic development through rural entrepreneurship. They are nonprofit, civil-society organizations, but their venture capital and staff is provided by Industry Canada through its regional portfolio of Western Economic Diversification. Although many Community Futures Corporations are physically housed in Canada Business Service Centres, their mandate is to become financially self-supporting and eventually assimilate into the local community as volunteer organizations. Since 1995, Community Futures have arranged loans totalling over \$288 million to more than 12,000 business ventures. This is peanuts for Industry Canada. Community Futures is significant because, in these small towns, it is the only representative of the federal government apart from the Post Office.

¹⁰ Industry Canada press release. La Loche, Saskatchewan, July 17.
<http://www.ic.gc.ca/cmb/welcomeic.nsf/0/85256a220056c2a485256d6600643622?OpenDocument>

11 Industry Canada press release. Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, April 23, 2004
http://broadband.gc.ca/pub/media/news/meadow_lake042304.html.

12 Lee Kaiser, “Laliberte dumped by party on spending” *Meadow Lake Progress*, May 23, 2004
<http://www.meadowlakeprogress.com/story.php?id=98864>

¹³ The “sacrificial-lamb” hypothesis proposes that parties are more likely to nominate women as candidates for seats that they do not expect to win. In a quantitative analysis of women’s candidacy from 1975 to 1994, Donley Studlar and Richard Matland found some evidence, albeit limited, supporting the sacrificial-lamb hypothesis in the 1970s. However, they found no evidence for this practise after the early 1980s (1996, 291). Neither did Rejean Pelletier and

Manon Tremblay find evidence for the sacrificial-lamb hypothesis in Quebec, after taking political party into account (1992; see also Tremblay 1995). The hypothesis arose principally from the many women running as candidates for the New Democratic Party in ridings where the Party was not competitive; and also from the fact that incumbents, most of whom are men, have an advantage. When women run in open seats for a competitive party, they stand as fair a chance as men of being elected.

¹⁴ Robert Putnam addressed the contrast between “power-as-reputation” and “power-as-position” by considering the possibility there is an obscure, but all-powerful chestnut vendor in Lafayette Park to whom decisions are referred. Putnam argued that organizational imperatives would require that the chestnut vendor’s power be institutionalized; it would be extremely difficult if institutionally designated leaders did not also possess effective power to make and enforce decisions. Could these women be Putnam’s chestnut vendors? (*The comparative study of political elites* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976, 18).

¹⁵ These politicians are identified by highly positive constituency-level residuals, by which they attracted more votes than the ecological model for their party predicted they should (Munroe Eagles and R.K. Carty, “Small worlds and local strongholds in Canadian federal politics: Deviations from general patterns of party support in the 2000 election,” paper presented at Halifax, Canadian Political Science Association 2003, 7).