

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
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It's high time that Ottawa got out of Ottawa

The federal government at its highest levels is just too centralized in Ottawa. This is true at both the political and bureaucratic levels.

It is often said that there are two worlds in Canada - Ottawa and the rest of the country. There is much truth to this allegation that is founded, in part, on the absence of effective information flows to and from the regions. And this is one reason why the federal government can be so insensitive to the importance of certain local issues. Take SARS for or example, the outbreak in Toronto gets an immediate response, but Mad Cow or U.S. lumber tariffs, or droughts in the West seem to be much lower priorities on the federal agenda. Any federal government must be a national government and that means being fully familiar with and responsive to the issues in all regions of our country – the West included.

In a modern information-based society there is really no need for ignorance of the regionally significant issues. The Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council Office should not be closeted in Ottawa. They should establish a presence in all regions of Canada. And regional Cabinet meetings should be a normal reality of modern Canadian government and not simply photo opportunities.

Until information can flow directly from all regions to the main decision making points in government, the politicians and bureaucrats in Ottawa will remain isolated from the people who elect and pay them to serve. Regional political representation through a Triple E Senate, for example, would further strengthen the information flow. How about putting a Triple E Senate out West?

But, improved information alone will not result in more effective and timely decisions. It must also be processed by individuals who understand the context for the information. This has been lacking, particularly with respect to Western Canada. There are just too few public servants in Ottawa who understand today's West. It is time for western Canadians to be able to participate at the highest levels of their government without having to learn French or to go to Ottawa. A coherent regionalization of the federal system could help this.

It is often argued that regionalization of the federal government can only really occur at an administrative level. That may be ok for collecting taxes, but not for setting policy. That's a central function. Well, I do not believe this to be true. If

you want to talk cod, you need to be in the Maritimes, and if you want to have good policy on energy or grains you better be out West. If you want to keep close to western issues don't expect to do it from Ottawa.

The federal government has experimented with decentralization, and for a little while there was an effort to make it work. But, other federal priorities took over and it was lost. I still believe Ottawa should consider regionalizing some of its highest level policy functions. This would dramatically improve the quality of federal information available and help the federal government start to become truly sensitive to the needs of its population and economy out West.

Indeed, why do national institutions always have to be based in central Canada anyway? The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) was started as a federal agency to help prairie farmers deal with and protect themselves against the drought of the 1930s and droughts in successive years. It did good work and the people of the West recognized its useful role. Drought proofing with shelterbelts, dams, dugouts, irrigation canals and other skills have transformed many areas of the Prairie, and the expertise has been used around the world. Yet, for the past thirty years Ottawa bureaucrats have consistently attempted to bring about its end.

Federal regionalization is possible. Just examine the federal system at all administrative, policy and regulatory levels and move those functions that relate to the West into the West.

Dr. Graham Parsons

Excerpted from a speech Dr. Graham Parsons recently delivered to the Western Economic Opportunities Conference in Calgary. An economist, Dr Parsons is President of the Organization for Western Economic Cooperation and sits on the Prairie Centre's Board of Academic Advisors. "Where Do We Go >From Here?" Is a feature service of the Prairie Centre Policy Institute.