

Renew the federation...

One Canada whose leaders adhere to the division of responsibilities framed in the Canadian Constitution.

This is the nation envisioned by the participants of the Calgary Congress— an assemblage of conservative-thinking policy experts and citizens from across the country for the purpose of reviewing ways of kick-starting federal political reform.

About 400 delegates attended the three day assembly in Calgary, with participants travelling from as far away as Nova Scotia to discuss ways of restraining federal spending power, reforming the Senate and restraining the courts.

While there was a distinct Albertan focus to the weekend gathering, Congress co-chair Danielle Smith stressed to delegates that the convention wasn't just about Alberta.

"What in the past has been bad for Alberta has been bad for every other province. What's good for Alberta is also good for the country."

Nearly two dozen speakers addressed delegates as part of the jam-packed agenda, addressing a variety of topics ranging from the negative effects of equalization on have-not provinces and judicial activism, to Canada's future prosperity and western independence.

Many of the presenters outlined the economic disparity that is emerging between the western provinces (British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan) and the rest of the country.

Jason Clemens of the Vancouver-based Fraser Institute said the fact Alberta was leading the nation in economic growth, employment, investment opportunity, and net migration was not solely the result of commodities.

He said the key to success was creating the right environment for economic growth, suggesting the rest of Canada look at things that are working out west— lower tax rates, reducing the size of government, balanced budgets and focusing spending.

Toronto-based fiscal advisor David MacKinnon, urged the predominantly Albertan audience to "give Ontario a break", asking Albertans to change their perceptions about the province.

MacKinnon believes Alberta and Ontario — as net payers into Confederation — have to work together to improve Canada's economic competitiveness and to unify the country.

"If 40 per cent of the citizens of Canada are living with a fiscal system that impedes their way to make their way in the world, there's no easy end to that road."

"That's a problem that's central to our continued health in economic terms as a country."

Brian Crowley of the Halifax-based Atlantic Institute for Market Studies said the thinking behind ideas like the federal equalization program and seasonal unemployment insurance is "mad, bad and dangerous", and have created a great disincentive for Atlantic Canadians to work.

"As long as people are convinced that the money is being used to promote worthwhile national initiatives such as fairness and equality then the spending will be unassailable."

The goal of the Calgary Congress: Kick-start substantial federal reforms

In addition to numerous academics and policy experts, a few of Alberta's political heavyweights dropped by to address the gathering.

Reform Party founder Preston Manning encouraged participants at the forum to "think big", and create a broader national movement.

"The west isn't this frail downtrodden region that can't do anything for itself anymore... and I think that requires some change in your strategy."

He urged the Congress to speak wisely and replace old slogans on their way to implementing a renewed national vision.

"(The west) is in a position to lead the country, and it should be positive and outgoing and present itself that way."

A rather uninhibited Premier Ralph Klein let delegates know his thoughts on the federal government at the assembly's keynote address on Saturday.



Premier Ralph Klein puts his finger on the causes of western alienation.

He told delegates to start making Canada better by restricting Ottawa's spending power in provincial areas of responsibility.

"We don't need to amend the Constitution, we just need to follow it."

Debate on draft resolutions began Sunday morning, ending at noon with a total of five resolutions and a statement being adopted by the delegates.

At the conference's conclusion, co-chair Link Byfield remarked that he believes the Congress will lay out the principles to make government accountable to the people of Canada.

"We have described a Canada in which responsibility once again matters more than entitlement; where people and regions are rewarded for success and not for failure; where power is limited; and legitimate authority and respect can be restored."

Byfield said the challenge now is to make sure the resolutions do not just become platitudes, and that complacency and ignorance are overcome to make sure they actually take shape.

"We need to get the politicians to propose, and then we can say as we did (with the Charlottetown Accord), no sorry it didn't quite cut it, or maybe we like it."

The Calgary Congress

BY JON KOCH
MVG Staff

Alluding to the myth of the Macedonian leader Alexander the Great— who when unable to untie the enormously complicated Gordian knot simply cut it in half — Calgary Congress co-chair Link Byfield said Sunday that western Canadians may be faced with a similar dilemma in the future.

"For many Albertans and westerners, Confederation is the Gordian knot, it's all turned in on itself, there's no starting point for reform."

Byfield was referring to a speech earlier in the day by Dr. Leon Craig, in which the University of Alberta professor emeritus made his case for Alberta independence.

Craig's speech cast doubts on whether the Congress would be able to bring about the kind of federal renewal they seek.

Talk of Alberta separation lingered throughout three-day assembly

conference in which speakers implored delegates not to build walls around the province, and to disregard separation as an option for Alberta.

In his lunch hour address to delegates on Saturday, former Reform Party leader Preston Manning asked delegates to speak not as "little westerners", but "big westerners".

"It's especially important that Alberta not allow itself to become isolated from the rest of Canada, or isolate itself by building barriers and eliminating strategic ties with the rest of Canada."

"Let us achieve greater independence from Ottawa but build stronger ties with the rest of Canada."

Alberta Premier Ralph Klein echoed Manning's sentiments in his keynote address, stating that Albertans' "occasional frustrations" are not with Canadians, but with Ottawa.

"I'm hoping to see ideas come out of this conference to make Canada better."

Toronto fiscal advisor David MacKinnon said that the fiscal problems facing the provinces were not a national unity issue.

"If we allow ourselves to see each other in terms of stereotypes and thoughtless kind-of expressions of rivalries, then that will stop us."

PC leadership candidate Ted Morton emphatically insisted to reporters that separatism was not an option he was interested in.

He reiterated his preference for reform, insisting that the Alberta Agenda— which Morton co-authored— offers an opportunity to rebalance federalism.

"(It) would capture the autonomy and self governance and the ability to control, our future within Confederation, rather than outside."

Morton's former Senator-elect counterpart Bert Brown, in the remarks following Craig's speech, came forward with an observation.

Brown, who has lobbied for the equal-elected-effective (EEE) Senate concept for 20 years, recalled messages he had plowed in his field near Kathryn, AB. in the '80s.

"Your speech takes me back to the first sign 'EEE Senate or Else'; I never knew what the or else was. Separatism in Alberta has always been around six per cent, and it's only through the last year or so it climbed over 30, so I think your speech was very *apropos*."

Byfield said after the conference that while there was separatist sentiment in the crowd, most people would rather see the country be fixed than broken.

However, the former publisher of Alberta and Western Report magazine admits the price of reform failing is severe.

"I hope (Craig's) wrong, but this much I will say — I will not live forever on hope. There will come a time, I don't know when, but if the federal knot is proven untangleable, it must be cut."

EEE Senate relegated to the back burner

Supporters of the triple-E (EEE) Senate agreed Sunday to put the concept on hold, for now.

Delegates to last weekend's Calgary Congress voted against an amendment to a motion which would have affirmed a commitment to a EEE Senate — one which is equal, elected and effective.

However, doubts about the wisdom of a Senate with equal provincial representation quickly arose during a Saturday morning session focusing on the negative effects of equalization on the Atlantic provinces.

Brian Crowley of the Halifax-based Atlantic Institute for Marketing Studies

expressed concern that there seemed to be "a disconnect between what I hear people want to achieve and what the practical consequences would be" when it came to an equal Senate.

"You'll forever be entrenched at 10 per cent in the Senate while recipient provinces will have a permanent majority; someone tell me where the logic is with this," Crowley asked the silenced crowd of about 400.

When asked whether a EEE Senate had any currency in Quebec — which presently holds 24 of 105 seats in the Upper House — Montreal lawyer Vincent Pouliot affirmed Crowley's sentiments.

"I can't see how Quebec would give up its Senators. I don't think it's equality that's the (issue) personally, what's important is that there's a number of representatives so that the province can represent their interests in the Senate," Pouliot said

Coming into Sunday's session delegates were presented with an amendment to the original Senate motion, adding the words "equal, elected and effective."

Delegates voted against this amendment, deciding that "the primary mandate of an elected Senate should be to represent and protect provincial interests, powers and responsibilities."

After the vote, Senator-elect Bert Brown — who has championed the EEE Senate for 23 years — was ok with the affirmation of an elected senate only.

He approved of what he characterized as "slow motion Senate Reform", and anticipates that within the next eight years, all Senate vacancies will be filled by elected Senators.

Once a majority of Senators have been elected, Brown says the provinces can revisit the EEE concept, focusing on a stand-alone election on senate equality.

"It's still a founding principle of our committee— equal, elected and effective."