

Never a Final Word: a History of Change in the Four Jurisdictions of the Red River Basin

Presented to the Legislators Forum

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The University of Manitoba now opens its public events by recognizing the indigenous peoples' first occupancy of this land: we are meeting on the territory ceded in Treaty One in 1871 (the first western treaty in Canada); This territory is said to be the homeland of the Métis peoples and the traditional land of the Ojibwa people.

Intro

It's an honour to be invited to speak to you. Having some experience as an observer of elected life, I respect what you do and believe your work is indispensable to a healthy community life. Its welfare becomes a daily preoccupation. And that means, in particular, you learn to identify change and devise strategies for coming to terms with it. The cross-border context of that process is my concern today.

The organizers have selected three topics for special attention, Trade, Water, Energy – which you will address in detail in the various sessions. Each is central to our relationship. My assignment is to look at their broader setting.

In preparing for this session, I looked at a number of presidential speeches in Canada that might give me some guidance about American views of our relationship. The speech that struck me most forcibly was by President Eisenhower. His theme was a sensible one: "Change is the law of life and of relations between nations. When two great peoples such as ours, energetic and optimistic, live side by side in all the diversity that freedom offers, change is rapid and brings in its wake problems, sometimes frictions." He added: "By mutual respect, understanding and with good will we can find acceptable solutions to any problems which exist or may arise between us." - *President Eisenhower, Address to the members of the Canadian Houses of Parliament, July 9, 1958*

With this advice in mind, I would like to talk to you about our international relations:

- i) first, by means of a brief history of our trans-border relationship;
- ii) second, by suggesting some ways in which our systems of government, though similar, are very different;
- iii) third, by outlining two key differences, in party system and political culture, that might affect our cross-border relationship.

i) a history of a 'friendship'

You, the legislators at this meeting, belong to four different governments – seven different chambers -- situated at the intermediate level in a federal system. And you have so much in common. President John F. Kennedy's speech in Ottawa is an eloquent statement of this reality: "Je me sens vraiment entre amis. (I feel that I am truly among friends.)....Geography has made us neighbors. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners. And necessity has made us allies. Those whom nature hath so joined together, let no man put asunder." And then Kennedy quoted a Canadian Prime Minister, probably Arthur Meighen (the only Manitoban ever to be Prime

Minister) speaking bluntly about Americans: "... 'They may not be angels but they are at least our friends.'* (* *Origin uncertain; may be Prime Minister Arthur Meighen but also may not*)

That's a sensible way to approach these three days: we're friends: we get along as neighbours, economic partners, military allies; we may not always be happy about the others' actions; but if we can maintain a steady friendship, our lives as Americans and Canadians will be not just easier but more satisfying and productive.

I was surprised when I started to research this assignment by the degree to which our shared history concerns indigenous peoples – Mandan, Assiniboine, Cree, Sioux/Dakota, and Ojibwa/Chippewa. For some thousands of years these people were neighbours – but spoke different languages and belonged to quite different cultures. They had no definitive boundaries, just various resource zones through which bands moved purposefully, seeking economic advantage, social connections, and reliable diplomatic deals, whether for attack or defence. They were not nomads, as used to be thought, but harvesters and allies, competitors and adversaries.

With the arrival of Europeans in the 1670s, distinct fur trade empires developed: the Hudson's Bay to the north, the French and the Americans and eventually the American Fur Company and its successors to the south. As before, there were no clear borders – just waterways that carried people and goods to and from easterly ports. After the Revolution, or War of Independence, the rivers and lakes linking Lake Superior and Lake of the Woods became a boundary and, in 1818, an agreement between Britain and the United States declared that the 49th parallel would be the border from Lake of the Woods westward to the Rocky Mountains.

This understanding became a little shaky in the 1850s and 1860s as settlers poured into Minnesota and Dakota Territory, and some far-seeing, ambitious St. Paul merchants dreamed of an agricultural region extending northward to at least 54 degrees and encompassing all of what they called "Central British America." "Six Ohios" could be built there, the Minnesota legislators said in a wonderful 1862 Memorial to Congress.

Canada, meaning the eastern provinces, united in 1867. It then took control of the entire northwestern quarter of the continent during the next two fifteen years, absorbing not just Manitoba (1870) but the North-West Territory (1870), British Columbia (1871), and, as a gift from Britain, all its Arctic claims. Only Alaska, purchased from the Russians in 1867, was not part of this unparalleled transfer of real estate.

For the next half-century and more, this part of the continent seemed relatively uniform. True, there were two big cities, Winnipeg and St Paul-Minneapolis, rather than one. But the vast rural districts of the two North-Wests were quite alike: each had tens of thousands of farms committed to exporting grain, each was built by an ethnically-mixed population dominated by immigrants from northern Europe -- Britain, Germany, Scandinavia, Russia, Austria-Hungary -- as well as former residents of eastern North America. Many of the easterners actually switched nationalities, some going from Canada to midwestern American states, some from the US to northwest Canada.

There were a few wealthy entrepreneurs in the region, men who made it big in flour mills, grain elevators, finance, and especially in railways. These were the tycoons who raced to the next business deal in private cars attached to whatever fast train was

heading east, west, or south. Ironically, the team that built the key rail empires actually straddled the border. The Canadian Pacific and the Great Northern were led by Scots-Canadian George Stephen in Montreal and former Canadian James J. Hill in St. Paul. They parted company briefly but eventually shared control of the two key northern plains transcontinentals, building two of the largest private fortunes on the continent in the process. It is emblematic of the different outlooks in the two countries that Hill stayed in St. Paul; First Baron Mount Stephen, as he became, returned to Britain and traveled in the circle of no lesser figure than the King himself.

Between the 1880s and the 1940s legislators in the four assemblies saw the world in similar terms, despite the international boundary. Public schools, public universities, publicly-sponsored agricultural research, local governments dealing with similar tasks in local infrastructure -- even politics seemed similar, though the organizations were different: farm protest movements upset inherited party lines, labour unions joined them and developed new parties, and the drought and international trade crisis of the 1930s hit both prairie Canada and the Midwest very hard. When Manitoba's premier feared that his farm districts needed to up their game at the close of the Second World War, he appointed a blue ribbon commission to investigate rural leadership training and adult education. Where did they go for examples? To the adjacent American states, which were seen as models of the best practices.

But there were some key differences, usually due to national decisions about international relationships. The United States fought battles in the Caribbean, central America and the Philippines, building its own trade empire at a moment when the great powers were dividing up access to the world's resources. A handful of Canadians had money in Jamaica, Brazil, and Chile, but there was no government involvement on the scale of the Americans.

Canada entered the First World War in 1914 as an intensely British ally -- first among the Empire's allies, many Canadians would have said. The United States entered in 1917 for its own reasons, not out of a tie with Britain. Their engagement lasted 18 months. Canada fought as a principal for 51 months within a British Empire-based vision of its alliances, and endured much greater losses as a proportion of its population.

The Second World War marked a crucial shift in Canadians' view of the world. Only then did they truly acknowledge the overriding importance of their North American location, the decline of the British connection and, as of 1945, the dangers of a Soviet nuclear arsenal delivered by bombers and missiles. In the standoff between Russia and the West in the Cold War, Canada chose sides, made the United States its closest ally, and entered an integrated air force command (NORAD). That alliance has never ended.

There have been foreign policy disagreements since -- Vietnam and Iraq being the biggest -- but they have been overridden by what we shared, notably the Free Trade Agreement of 1988 (which became NAFTA with the entry of Mexico on 1 Jan 1994) and the Afghan intervention since 2001.

Americans often assume that Canadians live exactly like them. But Canadians sometimes are prickly about such assumptions. One popular author wrote in the 1950s,

“While Americans are benevolently ignorant about Canada, most Canadians seem malevolently informed about the United States.” [Merrill Denison in Saturday Review 7 June 1952] [or Saturday night?] In so many ways it’s true, especially in everyday culture. We have delighted in and consumed greedily your magazines (starting in the 1910s), Hollywood movies (starting in the 1920s), your radio broadcasts (the 1930s), your pop music hit parades (the 1940s), your television broadcasts (from the 1950s), your baseball and boxing and football and basketball leagues, your fashion and celebrities and yes, your political campaigns and your shopping centres (and their lower prices until, perhaps, the shift in the dollar’s value in the last week).

But it is important for Americans to know that Canada has also pushed back against this tidal wave, passing laws or taking other measures to protect magazines, movies, radio, music, television, and even our professional football league. This is another factor, like the wars, in shaping Canadians’ thinking: given the power of American peoples’ communications with each other, some Canadians felt they had to intervene in free markets to preserve areas for exclusively Canadian conversation about Canadian subjects. In a catch-phrase of one of the campaigns, many thought they had only two choices, “The state [meaning government intervention] or the United States.”

In sum, a short history of two nations tells us that we are friends, allies and trading partners, that we once swooned over Elvis and now listen to Taylor Swift, share a great deal of the output of popular culture, and that in certain crucial moments of our nationhood, notably war, but also in the changes wrought by the new media, we belonged to different – if parallel --universes.

One oft-repeated image depicts what it’s like to live in a modestly-sized country of 35 million beside a giant of 315 million. Then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau said that Canada’s living next to the United States is like a mouse in bed with an elephant: no matter how friendly they are, the little one is affected by every twitch and grunt, let alone friendly nuzzling.

ii) systems of government:

Now – let us turn from general historical context to politics, the specific systems of government that you have to accommodate when dealing with your neighbour. Eisenhower said it well: “Our forms of government -- though both cast in the democratic pattern -- are greatly different. Indeed, sometimes it appears that many of our misunderstandings spring from an imperfect knowledge on the part of both of us of the dissimilarities in our forms of government.” [Eisenhower to Cdn Parliament, 9 July 1958]

Because we can’t assume we’ll always see things in the same light, we have to work to understand how the other side is managing its affairs. And Eisenhower was right, I think: difference is the key. Both countries have federal systems, yes, but a state is not like a province. Both have parties that lean leftward and rightward, yes, but the Republican party is not the same as the Canadian Conservative party, nor is the Democratic party the same as Canada’s New Democratic Party or the Liberal party. President equals Prime Minister? no. Premier equals Governor? no. The circumstance of legislator is identical? no. At least, that’s my guess.

Canada’s federal system was designed consciously to be the opposite of the American model. It was intended to be much more centralized than the United States

and the national government was intended to be by far the dominant power. Provinces were supposed to have the power only of a municipal-type government, and to be much weaker than the US states.

In fact, our two countries have moved in opposite directions: Washington has become much more powerful as a spending and legislative authority, relative to the states; Ottawa has lost power in relation to the provincial governments. Indeed, today, the view that Manitoba, and all the other provinces, are co-equal with Ottawa, each supreme in their defined spheres, is more or less accepted. So provinces have greater responsibilities than states, greater (proportionally-speaking) revenues, and more powers. [This month, a Quebec group has even challenged Ottawa's unilateral right to represent Canada in passing new rules regarding the succession to the British throne.]

Provinces also have some big spending obligations. They fund the health care and social service systems, with some supplementary federal dollars, to be sure. But, within a few broad guidelines established by Ottawa, the province allocates over 40% of its total budget to the provision of doctors, nurses, hospitals, and social services. The province runs and pays for almost all of the school and university system, at a cost of over 20% of the provincial budget. The province runs and pays for the lower courts, the physical infrastructure such as highways, the laws and taxes concerning the environment, resources, and mining. Manitoba's budget, to govern 1 ¼ million people, is about \$15 billion. This is a big responsibility – thus the extensive civil service in health and education and social welfare and the more than 17,000 provincial government employees. [I should note, perhaps, that there are 173,000 employees in the various parts of the public sector in Manitoba – in the federal, provincial, local, medical, educational, and so on workforces.]

Another American-Canadian difference concerns the parliamentary and congressional systems: the usual image is that, in Canada, the Premiers and Prime Ministers have untrammelled power that turns your Governors and President green with envy. This is not quite accurate. The Canadian system is based on cabinet government, cabinet committees, powerful party caucuses (the committee on which all the party's elected members sit), and strong party discipline. It starts with the Premier who is the first individual in the political system, and his key staffers. The Premier has the final word in Cabinet and, by recent custom, he has become the province's chief negotiator in international dialogues. But, as one experienced observer has written, the power of Cabinet members and of caucus members in this system should not be underestimated: these 15-20 people in the Cabinet debate and agree, as a group, on major decisions, though the Premier alone decides when a consensus should be declared. Cabinet members have to defend their views in caucus, usually before decisions are made. There, again, debate can be intense. Then there are the Deputy Ministers who are the civil servants in charge of the departments of government, each with a hierarchy of administrators and regulators that you are all familiar with, and whose job is to "speak truth to power."

It is difficult to place the Opposition leader and Opposition members in the sketch I've created. The leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition has a great deal of power. He is number two in the Manitoba government because the press and public

focus on him as the embodiment of an alternative. The elected House members are the shadow Cabinet and the alternative government. Depending on the election cycle, and currents of popular opinion, the Opposition leader chooses issues for special focus. He draws lines between the government and his own group, he builds coalitions of interest groups and citizens on many issues. My impression is that Manitoba's Opposition members function in ways similar to the legislators in state minority parties.

Where do state senators and house members sit in relation to their Canadian counterparts? My impression, though it's no more than that, is that American legislators are freer from party discipline. I suspect that you are more exposed to local lobbying. I am told that you are more able as individuals to wring concessions from leadership. And it is often said that you are more preoccupied by the pressures of re-election campaigns. The men and women from Manitoba with whom you are meeting lead the difficult lives of public figures, just as you do, but their problems as legislators, though based on big government departments, cover a narrower range than yours. Americans' sphere of independent action and responsibility is greater.

In sum: the parliamentary system of government is not identical to the congressional system. The province is not synonymous with the state. And the cabinet, the caucus and the party shape a Canadian legislator's life differently than do party and office in the United States.

iii Conjecture about differences in political culture

Canadians and Americans sometimes make different assumptions about what should be done about particular changes, and sometimes differ over what kinds of institutions should lead an adaptation. This is partly to do with the party system, and partly with the attitudes to government in the two countries.

Party system first: there have been alternative parties in every American election (a fact not generally noted in Canada). These include noteworthy parties in North Dakota and Minnesota, (the Farmer-Labour in Minnesota, and the Non-Partisan League in ND) as you know far better than I. In the national presidential contests, there have been strong challenges: in 1968, Governor George Wallace won 13% of the popular vote; in 1992, Ross Perot won 19%; and in 2000, though Ralph Nader won just under 3%, some say his campaign affected the outcome. But, despite these exceptions, I'm guessing that you American legislators would emphasize that the country, and your region of the country, work within two-party systems. After all is said and done, two parties have survived. They absorb challengers, they dominate the fundraising and the media attention, they select and deselect candidates. The occasional presence of third-party opponents has never really undermined that two-sided system.

Canada and Manitoba have functioned with multi-party systems for a century. The longest-governing party in Manitoba, measured since parties began [1882], is the Conservative party – nearly 50 of those 130 years. It has faced moments of internal dispute similar to the tea-party crisis of recent years in the US. Like the Republicans faced with the rise of the Tea Party, Manitoba Conservatives held their provincial party together against serious challenges in the 1990s (they held power at the time which helped them immeasurably). The revolt split the Conservatives in three national elections and they lost all three. They then patched the divide and won the next three.

The local Conservatives are now the Official Opposition party with 18 seats of 57 in Winnipeg. As the national government, they have 164 seats of the 308 (155 is a majority). Conservatives hold 11 of the 14 Manitoba seats in the House of Commons.

The Liberals are weak at the present time. Yet a version of the Liberal party governed Manitoba for over thirty years. For most of the 20th century the Liberals were described as the “natural governing party” in Ottawa, having formed the federal government for 80 of the 110 years between 1896 and 2006. They now hold one seat in the provincial Legislature and one of the Manitoba seat in the House of Commons in Ottawa.

In the 1930s, faced with the Depression, yet another socialist party formed in Canada – one in a long line over the previous 40 years. It has slowly evolved into a self-described social democratic movement. Its original strength in farm communities and among trade unions has waxed and waned over the past 75 years. The New Democratic Party now holds 37 of 57 seats in the provincial assembly (an unusually large majority, given how close elections have been for decades) and has been in power since 1999. The NDP also have 100 seats in Ottawa (Official Opposition). Two of these MPs are from Manitoba. [Manitoba’s federal representation: Conservatives 11; New Democrats 2; Liberals 1]

Manitoba’s government is in the middle of a term – its fourth term. By the time of the next election, the Opposition will have been the alternative, the government in waiting, for 16 years. One Manitoba administration, through a series of coalitions between 1922 and 1958, managed to last for 36 unbroken years and three different premiers. So Manitobans can be quite cautious in their response to change. The province’s recent adoption of fixed election dates -- the last in 2011, the next in October 2015 – changes the story a little. Now, in both countries, the election cycle matters a great deal. And responses to change, when they come, will be shaped in part by the timing of that cycle.

I will just mention here two other phenomena in the party system: first, the unusual characteristics of Quebec politics (nearly one-fourth of the country’s population), where there have been different third and fourth parties, often nationalist and sometimes sovereigntist (or separatist), in the last hundred years. The present provincial government in Quebec is dedicated to taking the province out of Confederation and making it a distinct nation-state. And, second, the Green Party, which now has one member in the federal House and one in the new British Columbia assembly – both representing the same comfortable district in the city of Victoria.

So, unlike the United States, Canada does not have a two-party system. Not that alternative ideas aren’t present in the United States – for they are, expressed in a manner so perceptive and forceful sometimes that sympathetic Canadians can only respond with admiration. The difference is that, in Canada, the ideas have been developed within a party’s organization, backed up by political campaigning and electoral support, and thus driving the media to adopt a party-based focus when it pursues what has become in both countries a horse-race style of political coverage.

A second major story about political culture concerns public opinion. There is a social democratic strain in Canada’s politics that has shaped a national conversation

different from the American one. Conservatives share it as much as do Liberals and New Democrats. Conservatives created Ontario Hydro, the CNR, CBC radio, the first version of the Canadian Wheat Board, and they established an investigating commission that recommended a national medical care plan. Liberals created Air Canada, CBC television, the legislation for the national medical care plan, national old-age pension system, a national investigation of the status of women, national supply management systems in eggs, poultry and dairy industries, national management (thru CWB) of prairie wheat and barley exports, national management of prairie rail freight rates, national graduate research fellowships in universities. The NDP can claim that they actually created a state-run medical care plan (in Saskatchewan, in 1961-2), and provincial government-run compulsory car insurance (in three provinces). I could add Manitoba Telephone System (Tories created it, and 90 years later they sold it), and MB Hydro (Liberals created it and the NDP have expanded it greatly).

In Manitoba, you will find that legislators, the press, and ordinary citizens typically emphasize the fierceness of partisan political struggles and assume, therefore, that a unbridgeable gulf separates left and right. In order to test the depth of these divisions, several years ago I interviewed a few leaders of these parties, most of them retired. I wanted to try out an argument made by an American historian who claimed that, despite the appearance of conflict, there was an underlying consensus in American politics and that practicing politicians emphasized compromise and conscious accommodation, despite their fighting words on the platform.

The Manitoba leaders' comments were interesting. They claimed that the province is less tolerant of extremes and more inclined to occupy the middle of the political spectrum than other Canadians. Why? The relatively small size of the provincial population, its stability (meaning that people were not inclined to move elsewhere) and its slow steady growth through the arrival of immigrants, who were integrated quickly into their own ethnic groups and then into the larger community. They painted a picture of stability.

But all these leaders, without exception, then said that Manitoba is more "centre-left" than any other province. Gary Filmon, a former Conservative Premier, for example, emphasized that his party was called "Progressive Conservative." The leaders also suggested that citizens participated actively in public debates. And one woman whom I interviewed (she wasn't a leader but she conducted political surveys for a party) emphasized the relative power of women in Manitoba public life, especially through the influence of public sector unions – Manitoba Government Employees' Union, the teachers' society, the nurses' union – and the impact this had on the direction of social policy, in particular.

In sum, the party systems differ and that is something that American legislators will have to understand when they try to move Canadians in a particular direction. And Manitoba's political culture offers considerable sympathy for government participation when policy choices are being made.

Conclusion

We share a region of the continent. We are not divided by the many historic loyalties and the proliferation of nation-states that complicate life in Europe or

Southeast Asia. Rather, we are united by a river valley, by a drainage system that flows toward Hudson Bay, by comparable prairie and forest environments, by manufacturing and the movement of goods, whether of buses or airplane components, and in such activities as shopping and tourism and hunting and sports and watching "Downton Abbey" on American Public Broadcasting. Because of these factors, we see global change from a comparable vantage point. But it is important to remember how different we are too.

I'm not suggesting that Americans should adopt Manitoba's reliance upon government, or that Canadians should seize upon the congressional system. Instead, this is a plea for understanding. As legislators, you can recognize that history has made us different. You can accept and deal with the differing roles of governments. But you need to know where power lies, how public attitudes can be shifted (if that is your purpose). With an understanding of the sensitivities and differences, we have to put our best efforts into carrying out Eisenhower's ideal as he expressed it to members of Canada's Houses of Parliament in 1958: "I assure you that it is our desire and intention to keep the doors of consultation always and fully open. There must never be a final word between friends."