c. This volume as a whole is copyrighted by the editors on behalf of the British Columbia Political Studies Association. The copyright on the separate articles reproduced herein remains in and with the author or authors.

Editors:
Michael Howlett, Patrick J. Smith, Tracy Summerville

Assistant Editor:
Jonathan Kim

Heartland or Hinterland? British Columbia From the Inside Out

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data
Main Entry Under Title:

Heartland or Hinterland? British Columbia From the Inside Out
The 2005 British Columbia Political Studies Association Annual

Volume 11: 2005 Conference Proceedings

Editors:
Michael Howlett, Patrick J. Smith, Tracy Summerville

Assistant Editor:
Jonathan Kim

ISSN: 1480-1914

BCPSA Secretariat
@ Institute of Governance Studies
Simon Fraser University
8888 University Drive
Burnaby, British Columbia
Canada V5A 1S6

Printed and Bound in Canada

ABSTRACT:

As the regionalized party system becomes further entrenched, the hoary notion of election candidates as sacrificial lambs acquires new relevance. Given the distinct regional topography of Canadian partisanship, it should matter a great deal on whose behalf a candidate was defeated, and with which party that defeated candidate continues to be associated. This paper reports on interviews conducted with rural women leaders in Western Canada, about their experiences and perceptions of public life and running for elected office. One of the most surprising results to emerge 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 is out of proportion to the standing of the Liberal Party in terms of membership and voting support in the region.

Introduction

The 38th General Election in 2004 saw the regionalized party system that emerged in the 1993 (Carty, Cross, and Young 2000) become still further consolidated. The basic contours did not shift, even after unification on the right, with the merger between the Progressive Conservative Party (hitherto confined to its Atlantic rump) with the western based Reform / Alliance Party. The new Conservative Party dominated the West, the Bloc Quebecois dominated Quebec, the New Democratic Party failed to make a national breakthrough, and the Liberal Party took the bulk of seats in Ontario, the lower mainland in British Columbia, and Atlantic Canada. The regionalized party system also contains within itself, an urban – rural dimension, as the Liberal Party is the party of “New” urban, multicultural Canada with support in the major metropolitan centres across the regions, and the Conservative Party holds the rural periphery. Thus is Liberal Party dominance maintained and entrenched. Under these circumstances – when so few races are competitive three or even two party races – most candidates are, by definition, sacrificial lambs.

As the gruesome metaphor implies, parties offer up candidates as lambs for sacrifice at the polling booth at the sacred secular ritual of Election Day. These are the candidates who run to communicate a principled message, to do their duty to the Party, and to strengthen the competitive democratic process. Some of them would be appalled at the prospect of actually winning. Furthermore, the “lambs” are typically thought to be female. It has been difficult to shake the sacrificial-lamb hypothesis as an explanation for why fewer women than men have been elected to public office, even though there is limited empirical evidence to that effect. 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 when women first began to run in
significant numbers. However, they found no evidence for this practice 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 and incumbency into account (1992). Tremblay noted a trend for the parties to run female candidates against each other, which does not result in a greater overall number of seats for women, but gives rise to the impression of women as defeated candidates (2002b). At an intuitive-level, the sacrificial lamb hypothesis seems persuasive because incumbents, most of whom are men, have an advantage over challengers. There are more female challengers than there are female incumbents, which creates the impression of women as sacrificial lambs.

If anyone is a sacrificial lamb, it would be the women running as candidates (and their supporters) for the Liberal Party of Canada deep in the rural strongholds of Alliance country of western Canada. Given the prevailing animosity against Ottawa in these ridings, why would anyone want to risk being a social pariah by associating with the Liberal Party, let alone run as a candidate for the Party. Who are the candidates running for the “wrong” party; or to put it another way, the candidates who run for the right party in the “wrong” region?

This paper reports on a project that sought out women associated with the Liberal Party of Canada in selected rural electoral districts of western Canada, and asked them just that question. It reports on a subset of results arising from my current research program which gathers together and interviews rural community leaders about their experiences and perceptions of leadership, public life, and running for elected office. The first stage of this research program investigated rural women’s leadership in Atlantic Canada. One of the strongest common themes to emerge from the Atlantic study was participants’ moral disapproval of, and aversion to, political life. An earlier paper (Carbert [2003]) presented results in which interviewees in all four Atlantic provinces 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 research raised a new question: how does the same regional-economic development policy field operate in western Canada, with its entirely different partisan cast; and what are the implications for rural women’s leadership? Interviews with Liberal women contribute substantial insight as to how partisanship intersects with public policy at the grassroots, far away from Ottawa. These women turn the concept of sacrificial lamb upside down because what happens after election-day is more important than defeat itself. To be a defeated candidate for the governing party in a one-party dominant system is entirely different than what is implied by the concept. Some of these women are empowered by their defeat as they pursue strategies that bring them closer to being patronas than lambs.

This paper begins by describing, in section 2, the research process, in terms of how the meetings were arranged and conducted. Section 3 reviews the 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.2 Section 4 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 5.
2. Arranging and conducting the interviews

Interviews were conducted in selected rural areas across Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. A series of focus-group and individual 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.

In an attempt to access the diversity of political life in these provinces, I tried to work with distinct types of organizations. The summers of 2002 and 2003 caught both the Canadian Alliance and the Liberal Party of Canada 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. In Saskatchewan, meetings were arranged through the provincial New Democratic Party. I also worked with government organizations who had built up a network of contacts with rural women leaders. One useful contact was the Rural Secretariat, the rubric under which the Government of Canada situates its programs relating to rural development. Status of Women Canada had fewer links to rural areas, but did direct me to particular individuals who initiated fruitful communications.

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.

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: Civic engagement and political recruitment is a “collective” phenomenon. Even a candidate’s ostensibly individual decision to run depends, in large part, on the campaign team she assembles. 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 more comfortable in disagreeing with each other, and moving the discussion past the repetition of platitudes, thus overcoming the bias of social desirability. An example in which trust played an indispensable role was a frank discussion re-hashing the unsuccessful term in municipal council served by one of the women at the meeting.

3. Alliance country following the 2000 election

Historically the Liberal Party of Canada has attracted weak electoral support in the west, while dominating in the rest of the country. The 37th general 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). Table 1 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electoral district</th>
<th>Canadian Alliance</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Progressive Conservative</th>
<th>New Democrat</th>
<th>Voter turnout (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crowfoot</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>66.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild Rose</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macleod</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>62.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellowhead</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>60.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace River</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince George – Peace River</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver Island North</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>64.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cariboo – Chilcotin</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince George – Bulkley Valley</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kootenay – Boundary – Okanagan</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>64.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skeena</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>59.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battlefords- Lloydminster</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Albert</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>64.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saskatoon- Rosetown-Biggar</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churchill River</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>59.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton Centre – East</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 Table 1) is in keeping with other elections in recent years (and with the secular decline in voter turnout throughout the industrialized world). In the specific context of the rural west, it suggests an absence of mobilizing issues, and 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 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.

4. 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 counseling 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 counseling 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 women 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 disassociation 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 sign off on $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. One meeting included a woman employed by a Community Futures Corporation, as a programs manager who is responsible for HRDC self-employment workshops. 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 (SWC) said:

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 businesswomen 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 typically implied by “sacrificial lamb” because; evidently the Liberal Party did not value this service greatly in her 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 soundly defeated in 2000 and 2004), or Jay Hill, Member of Parliament since 1993? On the campaign trail, Thorpe was adamant about her accomplishments:

When I say to people that their MP is Jay Hill, they say “Jay who?” They said they have never heard of him. It makes me wonder in the 12 years [since he’s been elected] what Mr. Hill has done for this community. Let me have the opportunity to continue to do what I have been doing here for the last eight years.

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.

Another defeated candidate spoke to the absence of an effective Liberal Party Member of Parliament in the district. In her opinion, a Liberal representative would be able to interact more effectively with the bureaucracy, in terms of creating an awareness of how best to implement policy and programs in the district. At first, she denied that there were any expectations on her to become involved in securing federal government assistance because she “kept her head down,” but she went on report a certain role nonetheless:

People do come and talk to you about, mostly, looking for funding, or some project they’re thinking about. I try to steer them to somebody who knows - mostly aides to minister’s offices because they’re always very helpful, very useful. If your project is cruddy, you’re not going to get money…It takes a lot of time to do all that. It’s quite time consuming.

This candidate held a national-level appointment, but she regardless it less as a perquisite of partisanship than as a public service.

Sure, I have an appointment. No doubt about it, if you know someone, it certainly helps to get an appointment because, that’s politics. But there has to be a level of confidence. If you’re going to appoint somebody, and you want somebody to help you out, you’re going to want somebody that’s familiar to you, that you have a sense of what they do and how they do it. That Board was a huge amount of work. Some of these appointments really feed your ego, but I also strongly feel that a) it’s important to have women on all these things (and there aren’t that many), and b) that it’s important to have people from outside big cities. So from that point of view, I think it’s important to get involved. But you don’t get these things if you’re not willing to spend the time and energy to do that.

While her national-level appointment is prestigious; it counted for very little in her district. A small, local-level appointment would do far more, she said, to increase her chances of winning the nomination or the seat at the next election. Judging from the nature of the appointment, the Party was not keen to groom her for electoral success. Having an effective person on that board in Ottawa was more important than getting her elected next time. Are candidates more disposable than qualified appointees?

Is it plausible that a defeated candidate exercise more power, in some sense of the word, than the elected member? Plausibility is bolstered by considering the example of an interviewee who had became 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 mayor and council 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]. Excuse me, but we need […], and that is all federal. 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 ticked off at this guy, so 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.

What happened after her defeat is especially interesting. 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 herself 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 an 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 or elected office which involved 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.

To what extent are these observations gendered? To a large extent, they are not. All across Canada, the vast majority of candidates – across the partisan spectrum - know that their chances of winning are slim. Since most candidates are men, and most candidates are defeated, most defeated candidates are men. At least one man in the region campaigned in 2004, just like Arleene Thorpe, on his ability to bring funding to the district. Like Thorpe, he had been a defeated Liberal candidate in previous elections. And he too – like the woman cited directly above – campaigned whilst holding municipal office. The example of Rick Laliberte shows that even when an incumbent stands a chance of keeping the seat, men, too, fall out of favour with the party establishment. It is
extremely difficult to discern what role gender plays in any one candidacy; parties are rife with internal dissent and competition, and women could fall on the wrong side of any number of factions, including, for example, the leadership transition from Jean Chrétien to Paul Martin.

Nonetheless, a gendered element persists because women seem less likely to survive those internal party struggles to become candidates when the prospects of success are raised. In the spring of 2004, when Paul Martin’s leadership raised expectations of a Liberal Party breakthrough in the West, only one of the candidates from 2000 survived the leadership transition to become the candidate in the 2004 election – Arleene Thorpe running against Jay Hill. To be fair, electoral redistribution had a role, but the men running (in the place of previous women Liberal candidates) in 2004 were considered some of Liberal Party’s high(er) profile “stars” in the West, whose formal credentials were indeed impressive. These men were ultimately defeated at the ballot box, but the point is that they had been recruited as part of the wave of Paul-Martin euphoria that swept over the west upon his becoming Prime Minister. In the end, however difficult it is to disentangle the role that a candidate’s gender played a role in winning the nomination, it was by talking to rural women leader associated with the Liberal Party of Canada, both formally as candidates and informally as supporters, that this submerged aspect of public life rose to the surface.

5. 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. 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.

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.

Some analysts might find something unsavoury about power that does not reside in formal institutionalized office, but it is typical of Canadian politics. On the basis of his management experience at HRDC, David Good reports that the Minister’s Office has always “sounded out” on an informal basis the local Member’s support for specific projects in their riding (2003, 140). From his perspective in Ottawa, Good would consider it prudent management to sound out other reliable local sources when the local Member refuses to be so consulted. Informal power is the nature of party democracy in a parliamentary system. The party that holds the confidence of the House forms the government for all of Canada, and, thus, members of that party – whether elected or not – become integrated into the many-tentacled body that is government. In that regard, there would be no subterfuge involved for mayors to operate through defeated Liberal
candidates in order to access information about infrastructure funds, or, as we have seen, for mayors to be Liberals themselves. There is no shame for a regional minister to take counsel from a defeated candidate, whilst shunning the elected representative; such is the nature of party democracy.

So long as the Liberal Party holds its electoral dominance, there is a disjuncture between the electoral system and public policy in western Canada. Some Alliance politicians have constructed virtual fiefdoms, which have carried 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.

References


Endnotes

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

2 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.

3 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 present paper presents results from field work in communities with < 30,000 people.

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

5 The Rural Secretariat is 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. 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.

6 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.


8 Other interviewees 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. A separate paper will expand on the Alliance Party in regard to the policy areas discussed here.

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.


13 Gurbux Saini’s campaign website (http://www.gurbux.com/who.html) cites these items:
• Well-established contacts in Ottawa
• Credited by mayor of Williams Lake for delivering $2 million in federal funding for a much-needed storm sewer (while not an elected official!)

14 Miles Richardson (Liberal party candidate for Skeena-Bulkley Valley) left his position as Chief Commissioner of the B.C. Treaty Commission to enter federal politics. Chris Shade (Liberal candidate for Macleod) was Chief of the Blood Tribe and a representative to the Blackfoot Confederacy and Treaty 7 Tribal Council. In Peace River, the Liberal candidate was an established lawyer.

15 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).

16 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).