The Making of a Province

Securing provincial status for Saskatchewan had not been easy. When Canada acquired the western interior of British North America in 1870, the federal government intended to administer its vast, new empire as little better than a colony. Manitoba entered confederation in May 1870, mockingly dubbed the "postage-stamp" province because of its size, while the remainder of the region was designated the North-West Territories. It was a phenomenal parcel of land--seven times the original Canada of 1867--stretching from the forty-ninth parallel to the arctic coastline and from present-day northern Ontario and Quebec to the Alaska-Yukon boundary.
Canada expected the rich agricultural soil of the prairie parkland to be easily converted into farms for the millions of immigrants expected to pour into the region. The federal government consequently wanted to manage and direct the region's settlement and development to ensure that it became an integral part of the emerging transcontinental economy. To prevent any interference with federal plans, Ottawa kept control of all public lands and resources--even in the new province of Manitoba. The 1875 North-West Territories Act also provided for a resident lieutenant governor at the head of a small, appointed legislative council. The territorial government, based initially at Livingstone, then Battleford, and finally Regina, administered local affairs, but the real power rested with Ottawa and the federal Department of the Interior, which soon acquired a reputation, because of its apparent insensitivity to western concerns, as the department of indifference.
Ottawa's iron grip on the territories lessened in October 1897, when Ottawa conferred responsible government on the territories. A territorial premier would now run the affairs of the region on the advice of an executive council or cabinet selected from the ranks of the territorial assembly. Any feeling of independence, though, was tempered by the fact Ottawa continued to hold the purse strings and grudgingly dispensed money to the territories in the form of annual grants.

The first and only territorial leader was Frederick Haultain. English-born but raised in southern Ontario, Haultain had come west to practise law at Fort Macleod in 1884. First elected to the territorial assembly three years later, he quickly emerged as a dominant player, a kind of political gladiator renowned for his debating skills and stubborn sense of purpose. One contemporary likened him to a statesman, not a politician. Haultain would need these qualities in wresting greater control over western affairs from Ottawa, especially better financial arrangements. Faced with thousands of immigrants pouring into the southern prairie district in the late 1890s, the territorial government simply did not have enough money to meet the steadily growing service and infrastructure demands.

Premier Haultain's strategy for securing concessions from the federal government was to adopt a non-partisan approach. Although a Conservative in spirit, he believed that the region could deal most effectively with Ottawa and at the same time avoid alienating the federal party in power if it spoke with a single, territorial voice. Getting the seemingly distant federal government to listen, though, was difficult at the best of times, and territorial politicians soon concluded that the only way to solve their financial woes was to secure provincial status for the region. Money, not political maturity, spurred the drive for autonomy. In 1900, at the urging of Premier Haultain, the territorial assembly unanimously approved a resolution calling on the new Liberal government to consider terms for provincehood. The following year in Ottawa, Haultain met with his federal counterpart, Liberal leader Sir Wilfrid Laurier, to pursue the matter. In the end, though, the Laurier government turned down the request as premature. There was also no consensus in the territories over the number of provinces to be created.

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Haultain, for his part, equated size with influence and wanted to avoid the creation of smaller provinces with little clout. Instead, he steadfastly promoted the idea of one large western province, to be called, "Buffalo," from the international boundary to the fifty-seventh parallel. Several other possibilities were put forward. Manitoba Premier Rodmond Roblin suggested that his province's western boundary be extended to create two roughly equal provinces between Ontario and British Columbia. Saskatchewan Senator T.O. Davis proposed that northern and southern provinces, running east-west be established, with Battleford the capital of one and Regina the other. There were also a number of variations that reflected local identities, such as the desire of Calgary to be the capital of a new ranching province.

The Laurier government's procrastination to grant autonomy angered Haultain. He called a territorial election on the issue in 1902 and handily won. He also secured the public support of federal Conservative opposition leader, Robert Borden, who called for provincehood during a western speaking tour that same year. Two years later, Haultain returned the favour and actively campaigned for the Conservatives during the 1904 general election. These actions only stiffened the resolve of Prime Minister Laurier. They also turned the autonomy question into a party issue. Western Liberals continued to work with Haultain in the territorial legislature, but they were now leery of his motives and no longer trusted him.

What eventually ended the standoff over provincehood was the unparalleled success of the federal immigration policy. So many prospective settlers were heading West in the early twentieth century that the Laurier government could no longer, in good conscience, hold off autonomy for the region. In January 1905, the prime minister invited Haultain to Ottawa, where the territorial leader outlined his vision of one province with full constitutional powers. But when the legislation was introduced by Laurier in the House of Commons on February 21, the territorial leader's worst fears were realized. There was not one, but two, autonomy bills, creating two north-south provinces, Saskatchewan and Alberta. The legislation also gave the federal government continued control over western lands and resources. Even more controversial, though, were the educational clauses, which seemed to call for the restoration of separate school privileges dating back to 1875.

Publicly, the Laurier government insisted that one large western province would upset the balance of confederation and that two provinces would satisfy regional aspirations. The greater fear, though, was that one province would give Haultain a tremendous power base, especially given the current rate of western immigration. Somehow his influence had to be minimized. What better way than to cut his fiefdom in two?
Instead of recognizing regional peculiarities, the borders of the new provinces were totally arbitrary and reflected little understanding of the geography of the western interior. In fact, Saskatchewan became the only Canadian province with completely artificial boundaries--an upright rectangle with two sides that narrowed from south to north. The sixtieth parallel was chosen as the northern boundary because it was understood to be the northern limit of agriculture. In fact, the Laurier government had initially toyed with the idea of setting the boundary at the shores of the Arctic Ocean. The fourth meridian (110 degrees west longitude), the north-south dividing line, was selected to create two provinces of roughly equal size. This interprovincial boundary split the new community of Lloydminster in two.

The Laurier government was also proposing provincial status with a difference. Under the terms of the 1867 British North America Act, provinces exercised control over the public lands and resources within their boundaries. But this right was denied Manitoba in 1870, and it was denied Saskatchewan and Alberta in the autonomy bills. Ottawa justified the confiscation of this important source of provincial revenue on the grounds that the land was needed to promote immigration and settlement and that provincial control might jeopardize, if not complicate, this national endeavour. The federal government attempted to make up for the loss of revenue from lands and resources by awarding the new provinces generous subsidies based on population. Haultain, however, wanted no part of the compensation package and demanded the same rights as other provinces in Canada, even threatening to take the matter before the courts.

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The other contentious feature of the autonomy bills was the education clauses. The 1875 North-West Territories Act allowed the religious minority in any district to establish a separate school and support it through self-assessment. This system was formalized in 1884 with the establishment of a territorial Board of Education with distinct Roman Catholic and Protestant sections responsible for the supervision of their own schools. Then, in 1892, religious control of schools was discontinued in favour of a single, government-run Council of Public Instruction (replaced by a Department of Education in 1901). These modifications reflected a popular movement in the West toward secular education spearheaded by the largely Protestant population. But in the draft bills, the ambiguous phrase, "existing system," suggested that Laurier wanted to restore the old territorial dual school system.

The autonomy bills called for the entry of Saskatchewan and Alberta into Confederation on July 1, 1905, appropriately Canada's birthday. But the acrimony over the wording of the education clauses precipitated the longest debate in Canadian parliamentary history. Instead of a sense of accomplishment and spirit of celebration, the date of entry for the new provinces had to be postponed to September 1 because the bills did not receive royal assent until July 20, a full five months after they had been tabled. The controversy also deflected attention away from the fact that Saskatchewan and Alberta were not to become full partners in Confederation. They, along with neighbouring Manitoba, were treated differently--unequally.

Once the autonomy bills became law, the Liberal party turned its attention to securing power in Saskatchewan and displacing Haultain. This action was potentially risky, given the territorial premier's defining role in the struggle for autonomy. But Haultain's spirited opposition to the legislation had given Prime Minister Laurier ample reason to bypass him as premier or lieutenant governor. Instead, Saskatchewan Liberals chose Walter Scott, the owner of several local newspapers and federal MP for the region, as their new leader and possible future premier for the province. He was a logical choice for the job, best remembered today for his uncanny ability to read the mood of the province.

Even though the new province of Saskatchewan technically came into existence on Friday, September 1, 1905, the Regina celebrations had to be postponed until the following Monday, Labour Day, to enable the Governor General Earl Grey and Prime Minister Laurier to come from the ceremonies in neighbouring Alberta. The day's program began with a children's parade through the streets of downtown Regina, followed by a more formal procession by mounted Indians, local oldtimers, government officials, and floats and bands. Saskatchewan's first lieutenant-governor, Amédée-Emmanuel Forget, was then sworn in at a public ceremony at the exhibition grounds. The rest of the day was devoted to a civic luncheon at Regina's city hall, an afternoon sports program, and finally, an inaugural ball that evening.

Somewhat surprisingly, Haultain never spoke at the outdoor ceremony or the civic luncheon. He was never asked. Nor did anyone publicly recognize his distinguished territorial career, even though his role in securing provincehood for Saskatchewan and Alberta effectively made him a father of confederation. His shabby treatment that morning has been called the biggest political snub in western Canadian history. It made little difference, however, to the new province's future in 1905. It was up to Saskatchewan to find its way in the new century. It had to tie together the dispersed settlements, different peoples, and diverse regions into a separate political entity. It had to generate and promote a provincial consciousness. And it had to find its own distinctive voice. These challenges would not be easy. The new province was essentially an artificial creation; its boundaries had nothing to do with the west's geography, let alone its history. But if Saskatchewan had any advantage in 1905, it was confidence. The new province not only believed it had a great future, but more importantly it could control its own destiny.

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Bill Waiser
University of Saskatchewan

further reading

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