

# JUST DESSERTS

A bickering nation stands by while economic opportunity melts away



ILLUSTRATION BY KATHY BONE

**B**Y NOW, EVERYONE HAS GROWN TIRED OF CANADA'S preoccupation with separation scenarios and distrust of politicians – not to mention criticism of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. And it's about time! The rest of the developed world is focused on interrelationships with neighboring countries for trade and prosperity. Few, if any, seem as content as Canada to stare at its political navel while prosperity passes by.

While Canada has been making every effort to economically and politically implode, many cultures in Europe have found prosperity in unity, and strength in numbers. Older countries with relatively small population bases prospered for years on their own – only to find greater economies of scale and larger markets by trading as a unified bloc. One result is the flagship European Economic Community, a common-market power that the United States and Japan are forced to respect.

While these countries have been building mature economic positions, what has Canada been doing? Acting like a teenager! Rebellious against adult economics, Canada has spent more time fighting over political compromise than addressing economic reality. Like adolescents, Canadians have many dysfunctional ideas, pressures and influences attempting to wrestle logic from our grasp. Unions seem oblivious to the matter as they threaten more strikes. Consumers are having a love affair with cross-border shopping – a "born-again" spending movement designed to bring Ontario, in particular, to its knees. Then there is the Reform Party in the West, the Bloc Québécois party in the East, and in the middle the NDP is determined to have its flirtation with economic deficits –



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even if it does make our strongest economic province less competitive internationally. This is not all we have going for us. The media seems determined to kick their own country in every way, every time they can. If the person on the street isn't already upset enough with our economic and political antics, the media will provide that extra little nudge.

If this doesn't convince you we should treat the unity question differently, remember that Canada negotiated a supposedly fair economic treaty with the United States – a nation of more than 10 times Canada's population. Does anyone think a separated Canada with fewer people will fare better in free-trade talks with Mexico – a country of more than 85 million people where labor is five cents a ton? Canada, as a separate economy, would then struggle not only for a piece of American prosperity, but also to protect manufacturing jobs from the sunny south – not great odds when you think about it.

Those wishing to convince the country such economic matters are insignificant to the pursuit of happiness through sovereignty are shallow in thought. They would have Canadians believe the struggle for national compromise became necessary because of a language issue, English against French. Not so. Quebec is a distinct society, whether agreed to or not. That is a matter of fact. The whole issue, instead, goes to power; who controls what in the Canadian economic and political system. Power in itself is not bad unless it is sought at the expense of the country's ability to prosper and compete with other nations. Confidence in Canada will be lost if we fail to be competitive. More importantly, we will lose confidence in ourselves, which will discourage consumer and business spending. Other countries will buy less from us. As our economy shrinks, there will be a decline in lifestyle. And if you think we have disunity now, wait until our lifestyle declines!

The only politician to state the obvious was Manitoba Premier Gary Filmon when

he said, "Political instability is the enemy of economic prosperity." If we continue to compete among ourselves, we will not prosper. We will have little energy left to compete with others. Division of efforts will cause economic losses in all areas of trade with other countries. Productivity will decline as it is wasted arguing among ourselves instead of producing goods and services more efficiently than others.

So what are we doing about this swamp of low political and economic morale? While all efforts seem directed toward breaking Canada into smaller population pieces, our political system has chosen to cover the swamp of low morale with a thick scum - a film designed by politicians to maximize or minimize their own desired political odor. The scum is an assortment of bodies, including the Spicer Commission, the Beaudoin-Edward Committee, the Bélanger-Campeau Commission, the Allaire Report and the Unity Committee. Some are focused on ways to make Canada whole, while others are dedicated to its destruction. The sheer number of commissions and committees suggests no one knows how or what is necessary. Whatever we must do, we seem determined to ensure everyone has the right to voice opinions. We expect to manage the country by committee with no one willing to lead. Consequently, no one knows what we believe in, what we stand for. We are excited only by apathy, which may permit disunity to continue. Not a healthy atmosphere in which to negotiate a better lifestyle with the rest of the world.

Our whole attitude from every direction suggests the analogy that somewhere during our country's childhood years, before growing to adolescence, it became an ice cream cone over which we all felt a need to fight. Even though we fight, no rights are to be jeopardized in the land of compromise. While politicians insist on majoring in compromise at Political U, the ice cream has begun to melt. Regardless of what politicians say, melted ice cream is not nearly as attractive, whether one is French, English, an easterner, a westerner, an aboriginal or anyone else trying to eke out a living in this country.

The sum of the parts will never equal the whole when it comes to international economic strength. We must find ways to cope with our differences by accepting the belief that prosperity is of primary importance to all Canadians. The committee-commission compromise approach is a nice luxury but not as effective a tool as unity to reach our dream of prosperity. But if politicians, media, business and consumers cannot strive for leadership harmony soon, the ice cream of prosperity will be melted. ■

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