Stuck in the Middle with You: Is the Trudeau Government Really Representative of a Central Canadian “Laurentian Elite?”

Toujours au centre du Canada : le gouvernement Trudeau est-il le représentant d'une « élite laurentienne »

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Stuck in the Middle with You: Is the Trudeau Government Really Representative of a Central Canadian “Laurentian Elite?”

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In the aftermath of the 2019 election, the re-election of Justin Trudeau’s Liberals brought out a significant amount of regional tension, in particular in the West. Trudeau, it was claimed, and those in the Liberal Party more generally, represented a central Canadian “Laurentian elite,” which did not care about Western Canadian or other regional interests. This article takes stock of this claim. To do so, it will examine the history of the “Laurentian elite” concept to clarify the idea. It argues that indeed, the Trudeau Liberals have governed as classic representatives of the “Laurentian consensus” on what is “good” for Canada, a consensus that reflects a broader philosophy on how to govern the state. This philosophy focuses on protecting key central Canadian economic interests (for example, dairy farmers and manufacturers like SNC Lavalin or Bombardier), while also supporting free trade in other sectors less important to the central Canadian economy (such as defending oil exports through the new NAFTA agreement). Other examples of Trudeau’s commitment to the Laurentian consensus include a more cooperative federalism (such as in immigration and labour market policy), more money for social programs (the Canada Child Benefit, CPP enhancement, and possible Pharmacare), expanding individual rights and liberties (cannabis legalization, opposition to Quebec’s Bill 21), and the promotion of official language communities. The paper will conclude with a brief contrast with the policies of Trudeau’s predecessor Stephen Harper, to find that while the prior Conservative government did not pursue a Laurentian agenda *per se*, Prime Minister Stephen Harper himself must nevertheless be seen as closely aligned with the “consensus” as well.

Suite à l’élection de 2019, la victoire des Libéraux de Justin Trudeau a révélé des tensions régionales significatives, en particulier dans l’Ouest. Elles venaient du sentiment que Trudeau, et le Parti libéral en général, représentait le point de vue d’une élite « laurentienne » basée au centre du Canada, qui se souciait peu des intérêts de l’ouest du Canada et des autres régions. Cet article entend examiner cette affirmation. Pour ce faire, il présentera l’histoire du concept d’élite « laurentienne » pour le clarifier, montrant qu’en effet, les Libéraux de Trudeau ont gouverné comme des représentants classiques du « consensus laurentien » sur ce qui est bon pour le Canada, consensus qui reflète une philosophie plus large du gouvernement de l’État. Cette philosophie donne la priorité à la protection d’intérêts économiques clés du centre du Canada (comme le secteur laitier et les groupes industriels comme SNC-Lavalin et Bombardier), tout en soutenant le libre échange dans d’autres domaines moins importants pour l’économie du centre du Canada (par exemple, la défense des exportations pétrolières via la nouvelle version de l’ALENA). D’autres exemples de l’adhésion de Trudeau au consensus laurentien incluent un fédéralisme plus coopératif (par exemple, pour l’immigration et la politique du marché du travail), plus d’argent pour les programmes sociaux (création de l’Allocation canadienne pour enfants, augmentation de la Pension de retraite du RPC, et peut-être Pharmacare), un élargissement des droits et libertés individuels (légalisation du cannabis, opposition à la Loi 21 du Québec), et la promotion des communautés de langues officielles. L’article conclura par une brève comparaison avec les politiques menées par le prédécesseur de Trudeau pour montrer que, bien que le gouvernement conservateur précédent n’ait pas adhéré à un programme laurentien en soi, le Premier ministre Stephen Harper n’a pas véritablement remis en cause le consensus.

In the aftermath of the 2019 election which saw the Liberal Party returned to power with a minority government, there followed an explosion of

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regional tension between the largely Conservative voting Alberta and much of the rest of the country. The argument was that the Liberals' agenda had consistently disadvantaged the West, which at the time was already hurting from lower oil prices and the obstacles around building pipeline projects to get the province's natural resources to foreign and domestic markets. Alberta was not alone in this, there was evidence in other provinces of anger at, and alienation from, the centre, which felt that the Liberal policies, such as the carbon tax, were in line with a long history of neglect from Central Canadians who took advantage of outlying regions and when in power tended to govern with the interests of Central Canada in mind. The situation got so bad there were some, admittedly fringe groups, who argued that the time had come for the western provinces to examine their options of getting out of Canada altogether - a phenomenon that came to be known as "Wexit," in a nod to the interminable "Brexit" negotiations for getting the United Kingdom out of the European Union.

This paper assesses the truth of this claim. To what extent are the Liberals representative of a "Laurentian Consensus" operating out of Central Canada? More broadly, what is the meaning of that term? Conceptually, the paper defines the "Laurentian Consensus" as being that area of historically overlapping political agreement between the federal Liberals and Conservatives over how best to govern the country and its institutions, which for electoral reasons has required them to place the interests of Ontario and Quebec at the centre of their agenda. It is not an ideology *per se*; as its name suggests, it is a *zone of consensus* among Canada's political elites that cuts across party lines and broadly reflects the interests of Central Canada. The paper distinguishes the Laurentian Consensus from two alternatives, an "alternative-conservative" and an "alternative-left," which captures the positions of parties and individuals not identified with the Laurentian Consensus. Methodologically, the paper conducts an exploratory case study of the concept of the Laurentian Consensus to identify a set of policy positions that are indicators of it in Canadian politics. The paper then compares those positions with those adopted by the Liberal government between 2015-2019, to assess whether or not their platform can be characterized as reflective of the Laurentian Consensus. It broadly finds that it does. In the final section of the paper, this piece examines the policies of the Conservative government that preceded Trudeau, and argues that although the government of Stephen Harper was far less of a Laurentian than its successor, it nevertheless did little to damage traditional "Laurentian" priorities. For sources, the paper draws on the secondary literature, government press releases, media accounts and other publicly available material.

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The origin and meaning of the “Laurentian Consensus”

The Laurentian Consensus takes its name from the mountain range in Quebec that is a popular place to live and vacation for the upper classes of Montreal and Ottawa. It is a reference to the fact that Central Canada, or Ontario and Quebec, have historically formed the political and population centre of an otherwise very big and regionally divided country. The idea has its origins in the work of the historian Donald Creighton, who proposed thinking about the Saint Lawrence as a geographic unit to study the development of early Canadian politics and society in his book *The Commercial Empire of the Saint Lawrence* (CREIGHTON 1937; MCKILLOP 2015). The idea was further developed through the years by those interested in political economy who argued that much of Canada’s political development has been the story of Central Canadian exploitation of the hinterland for its own ends. In this it is reminiscent of the “staples theory” of Canadian development by the likes of Harold Innes, W.A. Mackintosh and others (INNIS and MACIVER 1930; INNIS, SKILLING, and MACPHERSON 1933; MACKINTOSH 1924). In terms of policies, it manifests itself in an economic agenda that benefits Ontario and Quebec at the expense of the rest of the country, the commitment to nation-building social programs such as Old Age Security, the Canada Pension Plan, and Medicare, and a sense of cultural dualism about the country with the resulting commitment to bilingualism in official institutions. It is also broadly sympathetic to asymmetrical federalism and an embrace of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as a driver of rights discourses and political narratives. However, the consensus is as much about the “who” as the “what,” with real political power over national problems being decided disproportionately by elites in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, and Quebec City.

To a very real degree the Laurentian Consensus brings with it a certain class overtone. As has long been accepted in Canada, the governing classes in Canada have historically shared common familial, educational and ethnic backgrounds to the exclusion of others. While never using the term “Laurentian Consensus,” the best mid-20th century study of the social composition of the group most associated with it was John Porter’s *The Vertical Mosaic*, who identified two “charter groups” – English/British and French – the leaders of which defined what was in the national interest (PORTER 2015, 60). They tended to be much better educated than the public, more likely to have attended private schools and be university educated, and to have trained for and worked in white collar jobs. For Porter, this meant that the conception of the interests they were representing was more conservative and narrower than that of the general public (PORTER 2015, 391). Most political leaders were from the middle to upper

classes in Canada and tended to represent their interests (PORTER 2015, 398). This pattern tended to hold true across different cabinets and into major state institutions, like the courts and more broadly the civil service. It also characterized the economic elite, which also disproportionately attended private schools, held university degrees, and was notable for the role family connections played in their success (PORTER 2015, 280-85).

Those who live beyond this Ontario-Quebec corridor (especially in the West) are thought to have interests that are substantially different from those at the centre, and who have suffered as a result. Central Canada has sought tariff protection for industries that are important to it (manufacturing) at the expense of Western farmers who wanted cheaper imports from America on things like farm equipment (MINTZ 2019, 14-16). Even so, some industries were protected (e.g. dairy) while others receive no protection (textiles). The banking system, unlike that in the United States, is an oligopoly and concentrated in Toronto and Montreal, giving rise to charges that the banks were taking Western deposits and investing them disproportionately in Central Canada. Other issues, such as the “Crow rate” that the railroads charged for grain going over the mountains was seen as too high and generous to railroad interests as well by Western farmers (DYCK, COCHRANE, and BLIDOOK 2017, 53-5). But the most egregious examples have been over resource management, especially when the government of Pierre Elliot Trudeau introduced the National Energy Program in response to the energy shocks of the 1970s. This policy taxed the oil industry which is disproportionately concentrated in Alberta on the belief that the benefits of the oil wealth should be shared more equally in the country. Utterly reviled in the West, it harkened back to the past when Ottawa held back mineral rights in the prairies for their own benefit when they were admitted as provinces, and did not transfer these until 1930 (MOCHORUK 2012, 3; BALLEM 2008, 12). It led to an enormous backlash against Central Canada most memorably captured in the bumper stickers of many Albertans which read “let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark” (e.g. JANIGAN 2012).

This idea of the Laurentian identity gained steam alongside this growth in regional tensions in the last decades of the 20th century, especially in the Canadian political science literature connected to political culture. Here it drew on broader cultural narratives and debates, in particular in studies of Canadian literature and identity. Northrop Frye, for example, suggested Canada had a “garrison mentality” rooted in the early defense of a vast country by early settlers who lived fundamentally along an east-west axis shaped by the St. Lawrence (COOPER 2002, 94-97). In doing so he was criticized by other literary scholars for his “Laurentian” outlook that ignored Western or Maritime conceptions of Canada (COOPER 2002, 96). In 1994, David Cameron wrote in *Post-Modern*

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Ontario and the Laurentian Thesis about the rise in a provincial identity in Ontario, separate from that of Central Canada (or Canada more generally) caused by the economic struggles that the province was facing in the middle years of that decade (CAMERON 1994). By 2002 Barry Cooper argued in *Regionalism, Political Culture and Canadian Political Myths* that “Laurentian” could capture a certain view of the country held by those in the old colony of Canada, but not elsewhere. Drawing on Frye’s view, the Laurentian “garrison” identity was not familiar to Westerners or Easterners, and mostly drew on the Loyalist experience in Ontario. But it could very easily square with the “*survivance*” philosophy in neighbouring Quebec. Both were rooted in the struggle for survival, be it for Loyalists, the French language, or a mutual fear of American invasion (COOPER 2002, 96; see also COOPER 2009).

The “Laurentian Consensus” idea has had something of a resurgence over the last decade, in particular during the last years of the Stephen Harper government. However, this time, academics and journalists began to argue that the “Consensus” was falling apart, replaced by the views of new power elites in the West and in Ontario. This was rooted in the perception that more recent demographic and political realities had worked against Central Canada to the benefit of the West. Quebec’s self-imposed isolation in the country, the red-hot Alberta economy, and the population shifts west meant that Central Canada was being replaced as a power centre. In 2013, the pollster Daryl Bricker and journalist John Ibbitson wrote a book entitled *The Big Shift*, in which they argued that we have begun a new phase in Canadian politics, in which “Old Canada” – urban Ontario and Quebec – was giving way to “New Canada,” by which they meant an ascendant and growing West linked with, (and this was their twist,) suburban Ontario (BRICKER and IBBITSON 2013, 32). Crediting David Cameron with coining the actual term “Laurentian Consensus,” Ibbitson proposed in a long article following the election of 2011 that this shift marked the end of the political constellation that had dominated the country up until that point (IBBITSON 2011). Specifically, Ibbitson felt that the rise of the Western provinces – in terms of their economic power and demographic weight, combined with new national trade patterns that were more oriented towards Asia and the United States – was having the effect of unseating the traditional powerbrokers in Central Canada who had previously dominated national thinking on Canadian issues.

This would manifest itself in a rejection of the traditional “Laurentian” concerns, or at least recasting the issues in ways more favorable to the West. Bilingualism would decline in line with Quebec’s power, the country would Americanize in ways previously unthinkable, there would be an end to neutrality and peacekeeping in international affairs in favour of a more aggressive posture.

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There would be an embrace of the colonial past, and national standards and programs would disintegrate (BRICKER 2013, 279-80). Social issues would focus on more Conservative themes, like crime, rather than Liberal ones like national unity, social programs, or the environment (BRICKER 2013, 42-44). Presumably, one would also expect a growing desire to reform central institutions along preferred Western lines, such as a “Triple E Senate,” and to deny special status to Quebec, or any other province.

There is an element of “old wine in new bottles” in this argument, and the idea of an ascendant West, or at least a disintegrating Central Canada, has been fashionable in academia for a while. In *Post-Modern Ontario and the Laurentian Thesis* Cameron argued that Central Canada had ended because Ontario was no longer willing to play ball on a regional basis, and was now looking after its own interests (CAMERON 1994). The North American Free Trade Agreement had ended its pan-national vision, the National Policy and the tariffs that were erected to protect it had disappeared, and it was to the U.S. more than anywhere that the province now looked for its prosperity (CAMERON 1994, 128–29). Similar arguments about Quebec’s disengagement from Canada after the Quiet Revolution are basic to Canadian studies. Still, the idea of the “Western eclipse” of Central Canada picked up adherents as the Harper years went on. Christopher Dunn, for example, argued in 2011 that to really understand the country one had to talk about “Old Canada” (East of the Ottawa River) and “New Canada” (West of it) (DUNN 2011). And there does seem to be some evidence that this is true. Defined that way, “Old Canada” has less demographic weight than the West, suggesting a more conservative future for the country (Dunn 2011, 220–23). He argued that while there was considerable Atlantic regionalism, Quebec remained distant and estranged. He then outlined a series of steps the “New East” could do to make itself stronger, including building wider and deeper interprovincial agreements across a large number of sectors. Failure to do so would lead to stagnation of the East in the face of powerful “New Canada” to the west.

The election of the Trudeau Liberals in 2015 put a stop to much of that talk. After nearly a decade in power, the Harper government was defeated by a Liberal coalition that was very conventional by historical standards. The Liberals were elected with 184 seats to the Conservative party’s 99, which was a stunningly strong comeback from a party that had been third at the start of the election. More importantly however was *where* the seats were coming from and the composition of the Parliament. Geographically the Liberals won a seat in every province and territory, but they were heavily concentrated in Ontario (80 seats out of 121) and Quebec (40 seats out of 78). They won every seat in Atlantic Canada, and they won every seat in Toronto. The latter was a major upset, where

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the Liberals defeated major NDP candidates like Andrew Cash and Olivia Chow, a stunning blow to the NDP which was thought to be best placed to win that election under the leadership of Thomas Mulcair. The Bloc Québécois (BQ) had a disastrous night, with its vote share falling under 20% in Quebec (GLOBAL NEWS 2015) The Liberals took more than half of the seats and the BQ was bested by both the Conservatives and the NDP. That the BQ was losing to the son of Pierre Trudeau was lost on nobody.

Moreover, the sense was that the Trudeau Liberals “won” the election, rather than the Conservatives lost it. The refusal to promise to balance the budget and instead to run “small” \$10 billion deficits to pay for a new infrastructure program took the opposition off-guard (Leblanc 2015). An energized and tight campaign gave the impression that the country was ready for something new. The Conservatives, for their part, held their own but were clearly back to their Western stronghold and the 905 region outside of Toronto. Taken together, it challenged the idea that a “New West” that was rising. If anything, with a Liberal majority based on a solidly urban, English/French, Ontario-Quebec base, and a Conservative party rooted in rural Ontario and the West, alongside a rump NDP and disappearing Bloc, there was nothing unusual historically about Parliament’s configuration. Given that it was the son of a former Prime Minister leading it, nearly everyone could see the humor on election night in columnist Andrew Coyne’s quip “welcome to the 1980s” (CBC NEWS 2015).

The “Laurentian Parliament” of 2015-2019 did not engender obvious squeals of regional tension at the beginning. To a degree, as with any government, there was a level of exhaustion with the Conservatives by the end of their mandate, and even people in the West could appreciate that perhaps there was a change needed at the top of that party. However, that had all ended by the end of the Trudeau government’s first mandate in an explosion of regional rage in 2019, when the Liberals were returned with an admittedly reduced minority government but with claims that this time, the government had showed contempt for the West and that it had ignored its concerns – as it always traditionally had. What had the Liberal government done between 2015 and 2019 to lead to such a terrific display of regional tension?

What counts as the “Laurentian Consensus?”

Most accounts of the “Laurentian Consensus” tend to be rather vague, focusing on a series of centre-left and progressive political and economic positions that reflect the politics of Ontario and Quebec. But this is to undersell it to a degree. It is more than simply progressive politics by another name; the

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Laurentian Consensus is really an attitudinal position towards Canadian political and institutional arrangements inside of a progressive matrix. Put differently, it does not make sense to speak of the Laurentian Consensus existing in any other country, as one might when thinking about being a classical liberal or conservative. The Laurentian Consensus only makes sense when talking about Canadian politics.

Thus, to be considered a “Laurentian” is not the same thing as a political philosophy or an ideology. Rather, as its name suggests, it represents a *zone of consensus* among the political elites who are traditionally charged with governing the country. To that extent it crosses party lines and ideologies. A “Laurentian” Liberal and “Laurentian” Conservative would hold different political ideologies on many topics, but they would both be “Laurentian” if they shared a common commitment to a subset of Canadian-specific programs and issues, such as support for national bilingualism, protectionism for key central Canadian industries, a broad indifference to the British legacy in Canada, and a policy of engaged but peaceful multilateralism in international affairs. Table 1 offers a number of political and policy prescriptions that demonstrates how the Laurentian elite is distinguishable from other political orientations in Canadian politics. It is defined by a blend of communitarian ideals, nationalism, and national unity. Historically it was best practiced by the old line, “brokerage parties” of the 20th century, namely the Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties. Both of these parties were the products of similar forces, arose in the same territorial context, and faced similar challenges. They have historically been studied as arising out of the forces of the liberalism and Toryism that existed in Pre-Confederation Canada and developed into the formations we see today. Nelson Wiseman has tracked this development in *Partisan Odysseys*, from a period of the Liberal-Conservative “Coalition Party” of the 1840-60s to the “Consolidated Party” of the Liberals and Conservatives of the 1870s-90s (WISEMAN 2020, 12-19). While they differed on many points of course, the conditions of their development meant there was also a lot of overlap in their positions. Given the overwhelming dominance of these two parties and of the Liberal Party in particular over Canada’s politics over much of the latter half of the 20th century, the Laurentian Consensus became a shorthand for deciding what was really in the mainstream of Canadian politics. Thus, it was not just the Liberal Party who was identified with it, it was very much a set of beliefs that were bedrock to the Progressive Conservative politics of John Diefenbaker, Robert Stanfield, Joe Clarke, and Brian Mulroney – arguably running right back to John A. Macdonald. Provincial leaders were easily identified with it as well. Bill Davis and John Robarts of Ontario were clearly a part of it, as was Robert Bourassa in Quebec. Even in the

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West one can find those more or less associated with its policies - Peter Lougheed was about as “Laurentian” as one could find when it came to national politics.

But it did not embrace everyone. Against those in the middle, one could find those this paper calls the “alternative-left” of the CCF-NDP, the more socialist-oriented and progressive side of politics as articulated by J.S. Woodsworth, Tommy Douglas, Ed Broadbent and Jack Layton; and beginning really in the 1980s, the more conservative populist leaders of the “alternative-conservatives” like Preston Manning, Stockwell Day, and Stephen Harper. These latter leaders could trace their intellectual lineage further back at the provincial level to some of the smaller parties such as the Social Credit parties of “Bible” Bill Aberhart or even some of the United Farmers parties that were common in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. These parties were more than just “left” or “right” but again took a political position on Canadian institutions and issues that were unique to the country – the role of social programs, provincial rights, the monarchy, and national unity. They were not part of the Laurentian Consensus and tended to come from country’s outer regions. Of these, the rise of the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance and the modern Conservative Party which it consolidated around it (the “New Right,” to borrow David Laycock’s term), was by far the most important given its electoral success (LAYCOCK 2002, 11). Exemplified by Stephen Harper, it took a more neoliberal view of the country and its institutions but fundamentally arose from regional problems and alienation (LAYCOCK 2002, 11). Ideologically it was more enamoured with popular democracy, more skeptical of individual rights guarantees, and while remaining pro-multicultural and pro-immigration it sought to focus on its economic rather than cultural value. It was less interested in the rights of the Charter which it saw as empowering certain minorities over the interests of the wider political community, and was more comfortable with the British legacy and its history rooted in militarism and imperialism. Importantly, it rejected the old Tory acceptance of an interventionalist state in favour of a more market-oriented approach, one that started under Mulroney and mirrored the global trend of the 1980s (LAYCOCK 2002, 12). Nevertheless, it was more than anything driven by a belief that the Central Canadian elites had neglected the problems of the West and wanted it corrected by changes to institutions like the Senate.

These forces of regional exclusion also existed on the left, expressed mostly through the NDP. The NDP had arisen first as the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in the 1930s on the prairies but it has never managed to achieve power at the federal level. It has remained rooted in the left-wing, class-based politics of solidarity that had always made up the core of its beliefs (LAYCOCK 2015, 112-115). It continues to be economically interventionist,

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suspicious of British colonialism and American leadership, positive towards immigration and multiculturalism, and interested in an expanded menu of rights that would include economic and social guarantees. This latter point was demonstrated by the NDP's support for the 1992 Charlottetown Accord and its proposed Social Charter, a position they came to regret in the face of Reform's successful campaign against Accord as yet another, Central Canadian and pro-Quebec deal (e.g. LAYCOCK 2002, 15). Reform would build on that success to achieve much better electoral success in the 1993 federal elections than that of the NDP.

The Laurentian Consensus has mutated to a degree over time to meet modern realities, such as a growing embrace of global free trade with key exceptions for the dairy industry or for cultural protections. But it is still rooted in protecting the interests of politically dominant Central Canada, its elites, and its view of how to govern the country. This is what makes it a source of regional tension for those beyond Ontario and Quebec and serves as an effective attack line against the wealthy, Quebec-based Justin Trudeau. The rest of the paper is dedicated to examining whether or not there is any force in these attacks, and whether Trudeau did govern more or less in line with the Laurentian Consensus. On examination, Trudeau did to some degree, and to an extent to the detriment to the West.

The Laurentian Consensus by Issue

Table 1 – The Laurentian Consensus by Issue

	Laurentian (central Canadian Liberal PC)	Alternative- Conservative (Reform, “blue” tory)	Alternative-Left (NDP)
Monarchy	Indifferent	Pro-monarchy	Anti-monarchy
Human rights	Individualistic	Statutory, communitarian, more oriented towards negative liberties	Charter focused, communitarian, in favour of both positive and negative rights
Charter	Charter champion	Charter skeptical	Charter critical; more substantive and positive rights desirable

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Tariffs and trade	Some tariffs to support manufacturing/farming industries, tolerant to supportive of some internal trade barriers, generally pro-free trade	Uniformly pro-free trade	Skeptical of free trade
Federalism	Supportive of cooperative federalism, shared cost programs desirable where possible, bias towards federal power	Provincial rights oriented, “open” federalism, watertight compartments	Supportive of national programs and standards, ambivalent on provincial powers
Official languages	Supportive of national state bilingualism; mandatory bilingualism for major state positions	Skeptical of state bilingualism	Supportive of national state bilingualism; mandatory bilingualism for major state positions
Multiculturalism	Pro-multiculturalism	Skeptical of identity politics	Pro-multiculturalism
Immigration	Pro-immigration	Pro-immigration	Pro-immigration
Environment	Strong environmental regulation	Weak regulation	Strong environmental regulation
Indigenous-Settler Relations	Rights-based approach evolving though litigation, growing acceptance of a “nation-to-nation”	Skeptical of Indigenous rights and identity politics, championing formal equality	Expansive view of Indigenous rights, nation-to-nation relationship,

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	relationship, narrative of reconciliation	among all Canadians	narrative of reconciliation
Foreign Policy	Multilateralism, Atlanticism, peacekeeping/Fac ilitator role for Canada, neutral on Middle East and other conflicts	Pro-military, supportive of American hegemony, broadly pro-Israel.	Skeptical of American hegemony and foreign conflicts, broadly pro- Palestinian.

Environment

Interestingly, the environment is arguably the *least* connected priority to the original “Laurentian Consensus.” As environmental scholar Andrea Olive has pointed out Canadians have not historically been environmentalists, given that the country was founded on extractive industries (OLIVE 2019, 83). To the degree that there is a Laurentian Consensus on environmental issues, it is that the economic benefits should be shared nationally, as evidenced by the NEP and the extent to which Ottawa retained control over subsurface rights in the prairies up to 1930. The environment should be protected, and environmentalism supported, with the understanding that it would not fundamentally prevent the development of the country’s natural resources (see for example MCNEIL, 2014: 175-77 on how Harper differed in this regard by not just rolling back environmental regulations but also delegitimizing environmental groups rather than seeking an accommodation with them.) Beyond this, the environment plays into foreign policy, and the belief that Canada should position itself as a supporter of multilateral institutions, be constructive in solving global problems, and is otherwise engaged on international issues. The concern with the environment is clearly something that reflects the concerns of Central Canada, and urban dwellers, far more than it does the people who live in the oil patch and depend on fossil fuels for their prosperity.

Still, the environment is the file most associated with the Trudeau’s government’s attack on the West. Here, the insistence of the government to introduce a “carbon tax” was seen in the West as a direct attack on the region’s economy. The carbon tax is a two-part scheme made up of a cap-and-trade system on the one hand and a price on carbon emissions on the other (DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE 2018). Provinces had to either meet climate change with their own scheme or would have the plan

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imposed on them. The tax was immediately challenged by the premiers of Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Ontario as being unconstitutional excesses of jurisdiction (arguments courts have generally rejected). It did not help that this period was also the time when the global oil market crashed, causing enormous and widespread hardship in the province before the advent of the pandemic, which had already exacerbated the underlying trends. The regional implications of the carbon tax, as well as the government signing up to the Paris Agreement, were obvious to everyone. Since the oil industry is overwhelmingly focused in the West, the feeling was that people in Ontario and Quebec could support such policies without dealing with any of the fallout. The fact that Trudeau did other things to support the oil workers, such as buying the Trans Mountain Pipeline for \$4.5 billion and support the expansion of the Keystone Pipeline into the United States did absolutely nothing for his image (HARRIS 2018). For most in the West, and Conservatives generally, the carbon tax and the sense that Trudeau gave that fossil fuels were something that had to be phased out once again brought up images of the National Energy Program and a government at the service of those at the centre.

Human Rights

A concern with human rights and openness to “Charter politics” is a distinguishing feature of the Laurentian Consensus. Both the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives have been studied as representing a “regime” in Canada when it comes to judicial politics, which includes the judiciary itself. The lack of politicization of appointments to the Supreme Court of Canada is seen as evidence of this, as is the fact that generally courts defer to the government in power and resist striking down legislation (MACFARLANE 2018: 5, 8; see also COOPER 2009, 26 for regime theory applied to Canada’s governing elites). The Charter and a progressive stance on criminal justice issues has also been presented as a distinguishing feature of Canada, especially *vis-à-vis* the United States, for decades. One can see it well before the advent of the Charter in 1982 in the earlier *Bill of Rights* introduced by John Diefenbaker in 1960, the decriminalization of abortion and homosexuality by the Liberals in the 1960s, and the end of the death penalty in the 1970s – all taken with questionable political support but seen as the “right” thing to do by political leaders. Pierre Trudeau’s push to move the country to a system of constitutional supremacy was representative of the Laurentian elite’s emerging preference for justiciable rights guarantees, constitutionally given to individuals and safeguarded by independent courts against the community. As the country moved away from the British connection and became more skeptical of majority regulation of minority rights, there was a willingness by politicians to push for constitutional change. Identity politics began to play a

much larger role, and some have argued there are “Charter groups” who have disproportionately benefited from the judicialization of politics and social policy (a classic articulation of the point can be found in KNOPFF and MORTON 2000). Very famously Trudeau announced that he was a feminist and would have a gender balanced cabinet “because it’s 2015” (DITCHBURN 2015). This focus on gender issues, multiculturalism, as well as official language policy was a running theme through Trudeau’s first term and consistent with the Charter politics of the Laurentian elite.

Another important demonstration of the Liberals’ belief in a private sphere for individuals, free from government interference, was the decision to legalize cannabis. This put them at odds with the Conservatives under both Harper and Andrew Scheer, both of whom presented themselves as “tough on crime” leaders and eager to promote a “law and order” agenda. The initiative was something that the Trudeau Liberals had promised during the election and it had clear echoes to Trudeau’s father’s decriminalization of other crimes during the 1960s. As a policy, changing the laws to permit the recreational use of cannabis fell very much in line with a broader, philosophical commitment to limited state intervention when it came to personal choices. Even so, unlike earlier waves of liberalization Trudeau was arguably following public opinion on this file rather than leading it when it came to marijuana (ARMSTRONG 2015). There had been moves to decriminalize cannabis as far back as the government of Jean Chrétien, and would likely have come earlier had Paul Martin been elected in 2006.

Nevertheless, the government’s overall orientation towards protecting rights extended to many other policy files. Another important example can be found in the political football that is the Court Challenges Program (CCP) and the Liberals’ decision to resurrect it. The CCP was created in 1978 and ran through 2006, before it was cancelled by the Harper government (DEPARTMENT OF HERITAGE 2017). The objective of the program was to financially support groups who wanted to litigate national test cases to “clarify and assert certain constitutional and quasi-constitutional official language rights and human rights in Canada” (DEPARTMENT OF HERITAGE 2017). Philosophically, it was very much a product of the approach that Pierre Trudeau took to the constitution, the leading figure behind the Charter and a major proponent of language rights. The CCP was in line with that thinking, and the belief that given how expensive it is to actually litigate complex legal questions, the law is best developed through active engagement with the Charter, and that there was a legitimate role for the government in pushing the development of the national rights discourse.

Stephen Harper cancelled the program almost as soon as he came to office. But this made sense, given the Conservative skepticism of human rights

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and of the role of the courts in resolving social questions they view as best left to the legislature. There was no reason why the state should be spending money to test its own laws, which have only been passed because they reflected the will of the community and were always assumed to be constitutional anyway. The loss of the CCP sent ripples in the legal community but it was in keeping with Harper's attitude towards the program. In 2017, and as part of a broader focus on the rights of minorities, the CCP was resurrected by the Liberals (DEPARTMENT OF HERITAGE 2020). Administered out of the University of Ottawa, the program now provides money in the low six figures to litigate cases that are selected by a panel of experts (COURT CHALLENGES PROGRAM 2020). Tellingly, and importantly, the focus remains split between two streams of rights with language rights treated differently than human rights generally.

Indeed, official bilingualism remained a focus for the Liberals, and is a classic tenant of the Laurentian Consensus (COOPER 2009, 69). A review of the *Official Languages Act* (OLA) was announced in March 2019 to coincide with the 50th anniversary of its enactment in 1969 (DEPARTMENT OF HERITAGE 2019). The review was aimed at responding to widespread criticism of the act as having fallen out of date, suffering from ineffective enforcement and a need for modernization, such as mandating that civil servants provide “active offers” to citizens in the language of their choice (e.g. BOILEAU 2018). At the moment the process is still ongoing. The Trudeau government has also insisted that members of the Supreme Court be bilingual, and a series of broader proposals were brought out to consider bilingualism at other levels (HUDON 2017) which was a major break from Stephen Harper (GAGNON 2011).

Indigenous Reconciliation

Trudeau entered office promising “reconciliation” with Canada's Indigenous peoples and to strive to overcome long histories of colonialism and racism. Indigenous issues alone cannot be said to have ever been part of the Laurentian Consensus, except perhaps by their exclusion. Indigenous Canadians have never historically had access to the class structures that undergird the Laurentian elite and the history of colonialism left major settler-Indigenous issues unaddressed. Even today, there is hardly any agreement on what “reconciliation” means between any of the federal parties or even among many Indigenous groups themselves. Still, one can make out an emerging “Laurentian” take. To the extent that the Consensus touches the country's relationship with Indigenous Canadians, it is by dovetailing into the dialogue into the constitutional rights gained since 1982 and the wider discourse on identity politics. In this, it is fundamentally rights based, developing largely through long-term litigation, with a growing acceptance

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of a nation- to-nation relationship (e.g. CAIRNS 1995). In the Trudeauian conception of both father and son (and as articulated in the courts) Indigenous peoples have a *sui generis* standing in the eyes of the Constitution and broader Canadian political society. This can be set off against those who are skeptical of Indigenous rights as separate from those of other Canadians (e.g. FLANAGAN 2001) or those on the left who take a more expansive view Indigenous rights and are more doubtful about the possibilities of using European institutions like the courts to effect true decolonization (e.g. MCCROSSON 2018).

In the name of pursuing “reconciliation” with Canada’s Indigenous peoples, Justin Trudeau ordered an inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and made promises towards the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (SMART 2019). While promising more collaboration when it came to land claims, this view was again one of identity politics: the reinforcing of the claims by rights-seeking groups protected by the Constitution, who navigate their identities inside a Canadian framework. The Conservatives for their part are far less interested in this kind of politics, seeing identity as more of a private matter, if anything, and the support of Canadian citizenship as the only significant objective of the state. To be fair, there has been the accusation that Trudeau’s policy of reconciliation is superficial and directed less at Indigenous people and far more at the urban, lefty core voters who keep him in office – something that he continues to struggle with.

Foreign Policy

The Laurentian Consensus has long been associated with a commitment to globalism and multilateralism, and a desire to “punch above its weight” in foreign affairs. This normally involves an effort to engage widely with the world as a constructive presence and demurring when asked to take sides in otherwise intractable conflicts, such as those in the Middle East (e.g. EDWARDS 2018: 379). The country has been a champion of liberal internationalism and multilateralism, which serves to channel Great Power politics (GECELOVSKY 2020, 250; NOSSAL 2013, 30). Traditionally Canadians worked quietly and behind the scenes in difficult situations, striving to keep channels open between antagonistic states and working as a facilitator – a role that was played down in the Harper era (PARIS 2014, 275).

This approach was broadly adopted by the Trudeau government, especially following the election of U.S. President Donald Trump. Whereas after 2016 the American government took a markedly different path from what it had pursued in previous decades with its “America First” approach, Canada continued

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to insist on the value of multilateralism, international organizations, and cooperation. These values were highlighted throughout the renegotiation of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and were also on display with the decision to sign the Trans-Pacific Partnership. This was a change from the previous Conservative government which had been much more willing to see the world in moral terms and was less interested in continuing the comparatively anodyne role Canada had played as an international mediator (e.g. SMITH 2012).

National Vision

Stephen Harper was much more interested in playing up the old British, communitarian connection to the Empire than what one finds among the nation building Laurentian elite. This was particularly visible in the celebrations that he undertook around the War of 1812, the celebration of the monarchy, as well as resurrecting components of Canada's old martial and military history both symbolically and with a more muscular foreign policy (BOILY 2016, 117-25, SMITH 2012, 22-23). There were other symbolic gestures as well, including a controversial proposal to erect a statue of “Mother Canada” based on the sculpture of Vimy Ridge that had to be shelved, and indeed the monument to the victims of communism that caused considerable controversy in Harper's last year in office (for a discussion of the latter monument see BOILY 2016, 124). This view of Canada would be much more recognizable in the mid-20th century which was vaguely ambivalent about the British Empire and the legacy of colonialism. But it was a more authentic vision of the country as it was originally founded in 1867.

The modern Laurentian elite have been much more interested in the state building process and the creation of national symbols that play down the British connection to show that the country is now independent (BOILY 2006, 119, for a wider discussion see IGARTUA 2006). The Charter was part of that, but so was the flag, the provincial flags (all adopted officially between 1948 and 1980) and other cultural touchstones, such as the anthem and a national broadcaster with Canadian content rules. The Trudeau government jettisoned much of Harper's vision as being antiquated and sought to return to a modern Canada that was apologetic for the past history of racism, ambivalent about the monarchy, and rooted in a multilateral global order that constrained Great Powers rather than celebrated their bellicose histories.

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Federalism and social policy

Any Canadian politician at the federal level will at some point have to confront the realities of Canada's federal system and how to relate to the provinces on social policy. Historically the Laurentian Consensus was broadly in favour of interventionist government, something that carried across all three major parties (BANTING and MYLES, 2013 6-7; JENSON 2013, 47-50). This reflected the crosscutting territorial and regional basis that most parties rely on for support, and the absence of class voting compared to other countries. Thus, there was usually relatively little difference between the parties on the welfare state (JOHNSTON 2013, 188). In the mid 20th century, the two major parties shared an interest in the nation-building aspects of social policy. This took the form of shared-cost, national programs such as Old Age Security, universal healthcare, the Canada Pension Plan, and other forms of redistributive politics. The financial pressures that these brought meant that the affordability of some programs did come under scrutiny as the world entered the 1980s and 1990s. But while there was generally an acceptance that new shared-cost programs might not be on the table, a commitment to those that had been created, and to national standards, has been a hallmark for the Laurentian Consensus. Any province that wanted to go its own way found that there was usually little political appetite for this and it put at risk money that might come from the federal government.

Here the Trudeau government has still been in keeping with the "big government" philosophy of the Laurentian Consensus since 2015. First of course was the creation and funding of the Canada Infrastructure Bank, which the Liberals promised to set up and fund by running \$10 billion deficits during the election campaign (LEBLANC 2015). Furthermore, bending to pressure from fellow Liberal Kathleen Wynne, former Premier of Ontario, the federal government agreed to a significant enhancement of the Canada Pension Plan. It was expanded to replace one-third rather than one-quarter of average earnings (under a higher ceiling as well), and also upped the contribution rules for employees and employers, among other things (EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CANADA 2017). But the *pièce de résistance* on social policy came in the Canada Child Benefit, a program that gave thousands of dollars to eligible parents in need (DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE 2018). The program was credited with doing a lot to reduce child poverty in Canada (STATISTICS CANADA 2019). Still, the government did not meet all of its objectives - there was no movement on a national pharmacare program, for example.

Despite all this, there has been agreement around the need to respect provincial jurisdiction, and in this regard both Trudeau and Harper largely converged around a common approach to the management of the federation.

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Harper came to power refusing to launch any large programs in provincial jurisdictions, with health care and infrastructure being the exception, and also refused to get involved in provincial politics. This was known as “open federalism,” the idea being that there were discrete jurisdictions and it was up to each province to run the show as they saw fit (FOX 2007; DUNN 2008). This approach differed markedly from earlier eras of both Liberal and Conservative policies during the “mega constitutional era” of the 1980s and 1990s (see generally RUSSELL 2004). The “open federalism” approach generally proved effective in terms of ensuring stability, although there were those who were surprised by the level of disengagement. As part of Harper’s extreme aversion to doing anything with the provinces he consistently and continually refused to attend First Ministers Meetings or hold any summits that he thought would make him look bad.

The Liberals under Justin Trudeau were not so unequivocal in this regard. Trudeau resurrected the First Ministers Meetings, this time with expanded Indigenous participation, and spoke broadly about the importance of national standards and programs. On at least one front he did cause some consternation about federal meddling in the provincial sphere with the Canada Infrastructure Bank, to the point that the Province of Quebec passed a motion urging the federal government to respect provincial jurisdiction when setting it up (CURRY 2017). The Bank has proved to be something of a disaster for the Liberals, and has faced considerable scrutiny since it was created (e.g. WILLIS 2020). But overall, the approach the Liberals took was more in keeping with the Harper approach to managing the federation than people would think – offering limited opportunities for confrontation with the provinces (with the exception of the environment) and steering clear of issues that might allow the provinces to make Ottawa look bad.

Economy and Trade

One area where the Trudeau Liberals took a surprisingly Laurentian outlook was in trade policy during the renegotiation of NAFTA. This was nowhere more apparent than in the protections that were given to the dairy industry. Historically, the Laurentian Consensus rested on a trade policy that coddled Central Canadian industries, in particular manufacturing, at the expense of the West (MINTZ 2019, 14-16). This approach is most associated with the National Policy of Sir John A Macdonald, although it ran through both Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments from the late 1870s to roughly the 1950s. While the National Policy and the protection for manufacturing is long gone, the Trudeau government took an aggressive stance protecting Canada’s supply management system that is politically important to Ontario and Quebec.

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While economists do not doubt that there are far more economic benefits that could come from liberalizing the sector than by protecting it, it is still considered politically toxic to try to dismantle it (see FINDLAY 2012, 20-21 for the different political calculations, see also TREIBILCOCK 2014 for the challenges of liberalization). Supply management eventually became one of the major roadblocks to a new NAFTA, even though maintaining it made no sense economically, and the price of keeping it would pale against the broader national interest of reaching an agreement. Still, Trudeau's position ensured he gained the support of both the Ontario and Quebec premiers and arguably his Central Canadian voting base.

Finally, the Liberals revealed a preference for at least some restrictions on internal free trade in their reaction to the Supreme Court case of *R v. Comeau* 2018 SCC 15 that would support local provincial interests. In that case, a man was charged with violations of the *Importation of Intoxicating Liquors Act* and several provincial statutes in New Brunswick for going over the border into Quebec to take advantage of lower liquor charges. The Court ultimately sided with the provinces by taking a very narrow reading of section 121 in the *Constitution Act, 1867* that provided that the articles of manufacture of any one province shall be "admitted free" into each of the other provinces. It was an option for Ottawa to have tried to push to reduce interprovincial trade barriers more aggressively, but instead Ottawa deferred to the provincial elites and business interests and ensured that there would be no widespread dismantling of internal barriers. There was some progress in the signing of the Canada Free Trade Agreement, but it had so many exceptions to it that it was widely viewed as an ineffective document and not a serious step in opening up the Canadian internal market.

How "Western" was Stephen Harper, really?

Still, a comment should be made, now that he has left office, about whether or not Harper was really as antagonistic to "Laurentian Consensus" as some think. While it is no secret that his adopted province of Alberta was his spiritual home, there is not much to suggest that in substance his government was genuinely Western to the *detriment* of Central Canada, however much he disagreed with many of the tenets of the Laurentian Consensus.

True, on the environment he was decidedly pro-Albertan, although whether that was at odds with Central Canada is debatable. And he was decidedly different in foreign policy, adopting a moralistic and muscular stance that eschewed the traditional Canadian role of facilitator and mediator and becoming markedly more pro-Israel towards the Middle East (GECELOVSKY 2020, 249).

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But his promotion of a Western perspective never led him to truly ignore the priorities of the Laurentian Consensus. The attack was more on the margins – reminiscent of an “art of the possible” approach. While he did cancel the Court Challenges Program, the importance of this in the constitutional evolution in Canada is probably minimal. On the Constitution and Canada’s political institutions, he never made any serious proposals on Senate reform *à la* the Meech Lake or Charlottetown Accords. On the Senate, he merely advanced a reference question to the Supreme Court, asking whether he had the authority to unilaterally change the Senate and, upon finding that he could not do so, he dropped the subject rather than take on the provinces. He did not seriously challenge the selection process or composition of the Supreme Court. An initial policy to subject nominated Supreme Court justices to a parliamentary hearing did occur with Marshall Rothstein, but it was so limited in scope that it was subsequently dropped. The effort to appoint the Quebecer Marc Nadon to the Court from the Federal Court of Appeal led to a challenge on eligibility in which the Supreme Court defended its own enabling legislation to the point of essentially elevating it to constitutional status. Ironically, Harper left office after having entrenched the current institutional arrangements even more deeply than when he took power.

On social policy, he did not dismantle the health care system or threaten its viability as a publicly funded entity. He was ultimately the Prime Minister who ended the same-sex marriage debate in Canada by getting the Conservatives to abandon it as an issue. Abortion was not touched in any way. On matters with the provinces, he mostly refused to meet with them at all, resorting to his “open federalism” approach and leaving them alone (NORQUAY 2012). He also remained broadly pro-immigration and pro-multiculturalism, which was a noticeable difference from other right-wing leaders around the world, even if he did try to focus more on the benefits of economic migration rather than cultural diversity (LAYCOCK and WELDON 2020, 75-6). Like Trudeau, he would not sacrifice supply management during trade negotiations, as demonstrated during those over the Trans-Pacific Partnership (FINDLAY 2012 2-3). More substantively, he defended Quebec’s right to a level of asymmetry that was unthinkable to the Reform Party of which he was once a member. He granted Quebec special status in UNESCO that no other province has on the basis of a document that recognized the asymmetrical basis of Canadian federalism (CANADA AND QUEBEC 2006; QUEBEC 2006). He recognized Quebec as a nation within a “united Canada,” a twist on distinct society that cost him his Intergovernmental Affairs Minister, Michael Chong. And he was happy to work with former Quebec Premier Jean Charest on the idea of fixing a “fiscal imbalance” that his own officials thought did not exist.

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Why? It is important to keep in mind that his power rested as much on his Ontario seats as they did on Alberta. When he lost office his Ontario caucus was almost as large as that of all four Western provinces combined. And this is something that the defenders of the decline of the Laurentian Consensus will point to, suggesting an Ontario-Western axis is now ascendant (BRICKER 2013, 30). But when one looks at many of Harper's smaller policies, such as ending the long gun registry, making the long-form census voluntary, or loosening environmental protections, it makes more sense to cast him as "neoliberal," or perhaps playing to an "urban versus rural" divide, rather than that of "Western Canada" versus "Eastern Canada." His efforts to recast the Canadian identity as fundamentally militaristic, monarchical and British were throwbacks to an era that is unlikely to see a resurgence in popularity and could be quite cosmetic in nature. For example, the reassertion of "Royal" in the name of the Air Force comes to mind, as does the decision, since reversed, to have military uniforms appear more historically British. But on most of the bigger issues on which the Laurentian Consensus rests and which he criticized as a Reform Party member, namely the value of social programs, the composition of national institutions, or asymmetrical federalism when it comes to Quebec in Canada, his reforms were either moderate, of limited scope, or were issues he refused to touch at all.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the 2019 election, the re-election of Justin Trudeau's Liberals brought out a significant amount of regional tension, in particular in the West. Trudeau, it was claimed, and those in the Liberal Party more generally, represented a central Canadian "Laurentian elite," which did not care about Western or other regional interests. This article takes stock of this claim. To do so, it undertook an exploratory case study of the "Laurentian Consensus" concept and offered some clarity to the idea, which has seen a resurgence lately. It argues that indeed, the Trudeau Liberals have governed as classical representatives of the "Laurentian Consensus" on what is "good" for Canada – not just in the interests of their voters but with a distinct philosophy about how to govern the state. This philosophy focuses on economically protecting key central Canadian economic interests (for example supply management, being open to regulating non-renewable resources) while also supporting free trade in other sectors less important to the central Canadian economy (as is done through the new NAFTA agreement). But it also emphasizes cooperative federalism, promotion of official language communities, and individual rights. In doing so, it has imposed costs on some parts of the country more heavily than others. When the Trudeau Liberals were returned to office in 2019, it was met with a howl of regional protest in the West. Broadly, the West, and Alberta in particular, felt that the election was once again a demonstration of Central Canada refusing to care for them and governing

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in its own interests. Policies on the environment, pipelines, equalization, and others were all pointed to as examples of this style of governing and it triggered a renewed interest in Western alienation and to a much lesser degree, separatism.

Even so, as this discussion has shown, Stephen Harper knew the limits of trying to escape the Laurentian Consensus. At its base, it embodies the values that are in the interests of the political elites of the largest provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Even for someone who identified as a conservative Westerner (and a socially conservative Westerner at that), Harper could not stray too far away from the values at the Consensus' heart and realistically hope to remain competitive in Ontario and Quebec. Further work is warranted to uncover what the Laurentian Consensus represents in Canadian political culture, and specifically how it is connected to winning political power in Canada. Regardless, given its connection to the most powerful region in the country and its elites, it continues to have an enduring appeal as a descriptor for the values of Canada's governing class. For those who do not live in Ontario or Quebec, however, it is also a powerful symbol of regional alienation and institutional exclusion.

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