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Mark Hume: Alienation shows on electoral map

Alliance takes the west

(Vancouver) - The alienation the West feels from Ottawa was coloured on the electoral map last night, when Canadian Alliance found its strength limited almost entirely to seats in Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

In 1997 the West embraced Preston Manning, under the Reform banner. This time there was a different leader, with a different party name and a slightly more centrist platform -- but things were essentially unchanged, with Alliance back in opposition and shut out of the East except for a few seats.

Alliance swept through B.C. and Alberta, with its force ebbing as it moved across the prairies. But if Alliance saw itself as a rising political tide, then Ontario's western border once again proved to be the dike that stemmed the flood.

"It's still the party of the West, the party of Western protest. There's no breakthrough. I think the high water mark has been hit," said Patrick Smith, a political science professor at Simon Fraser University. Mr. Smith said the results point to trouble for the Alliance.

"The interesting question is: What will happen after this? There's not a lot of growth room left for Alliance in the West," he said. "Where do they go from here?"

Terry Morley, a political science professor at the University of Victoria, says the election illustrates clearly how divided the West is from the rest of Canada.

"Interestingly enough, people in the West support the Alliance for the same reason they have supported the NDP in the past. Because they feel the government represents Central Canada, and the interests of the West aren't considered.

"The same thing happened in '93 and '97 -- but this may be even more of a regionalization. We are a very divided country," he said. He said results do seem to isolate the Alliance in the West, but the other parties are just as trapped on their own political islands.

"What you have here is the continuing feeling of Western alienation," said Mike Geoghegan, a political consultant in Victoria.

"For the past several generations Prime Ministers have come from Quebec, with a few exceptions, and the West has repeatedly seen its concerns take a back seat to the interests of Ontario and Quebec.

"The West has experienced significant growth, has become an economic powerhouse, and yet that hasn't affected the balance of power in Ottawa. That's frustrating for Westerners, and it makes it very difficult for anyone out here to vote Liberal."

But there were pockets of support. Mr. Geoghegan said that's because Western voters were attracted to the Alliance fiscal program, but remained nervous about the party's social agenda. That leaves an opening for the Liberals to gain ground in the next election.

"A fiscally responsible government with socially liberal policies is what Western voters are looking for," he said. "A leader, like Paul Martin, who could promise that and who was willing to reach out to the West could make considerable gains for the Liberals in the West."

That's next time. For now the political landscape is set -- and it shows a fault line separating the West from Ontario.