

PRAIRIE CONSERVATISM

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by Mike Robinson

Hardy fescue as a metaphor

While the wild rose is Alberta's official flower, its real identity is better served by the high fescue grass of the eastern slopes and prairies.

With roots that can reach down more than six feet, fescue is ideally suited to a landscape of unforgiving passions. Neither drought nor hail nor snow nor buffalo succeeded in uprooting its grassy kingdom.

Where nature failed to kill it, mechanization has almost done the job. Ploughs and introduced grass species have now reduced its Alberta range to less than 10 per cent of its pre-farm extent. But what remains, sticks. Perseveres. I think of it as a metaphor for prairies conservatism.

Ranchers understand fescue much more profoundly than farmers. A ranch, after all is only as good as its grass. Cows and grass have to live in symbiosis, too. Overgrazing kills the grass. No grass equals no cows. Good grass equals good cows. Sustain the fescue and you can sustain the ranch runs the logic.

If fescue grass voted, it would vote conservatively. Its roots evolved to conserve moisture; its high mane to trap moisture and to support an understory of plants whose livelihood underpinned all that happened above.

Out on the fescue prairie evolutionary change came slow. If it did not suit the fescue, it didn't suit the prairie.

When the plough began to bite the sod, speed and rogue seed ushered in disconnected change. Fertilizer and irrigation added unnatural energy. An odd form of complexity resulted. Farms abutted ranches. Roads were built to resources. Fescue roots tangled with drill stems, Kentucky blue grass, phosphorous, road gravel, and sprinklers. Somehow, on the political surface, this tangle became synonymous with the Conservative vote. But reduced to basics, the tangle above has been the undoing of the fescue.

A true conservative voter would conserve the indigenous grass as an icon of conservation. A true conservative voter would want to emulate the fescue's conservation of water, protection of allied species, and ground cover.

The successful rancher, as good as his grass, would do as much. Similarly, the Blackfoot buffalo stewards would act in support of the indigenous prairie grasses. So would all prairie people who desired a sustainable future. In fact, we could all determine what is

best for Alberta if we asked a simple question of any new development: "Will it be good for the fescue, too?"

Applying the "fescue test" would be a central role for municipal and provincial levels of government. It could also be the prairie litmus test for judging the quality of all decisions taken federally that had prairie impact.

Lest some think the fescue test be anti-development, just consider the rancher. Running cattle on the land is an introduced economic activity. Cattle are specifically bred to thrive on the Alberta prairie. Overgrazing is counterproductive, irrespective of whether it happens on crown or private land. And ranchers are icons of freedom. They just might be the archetypal sustainable capitalists. The best of them look forward to passing on their land to another generation. The worst of them are soon weeded out when greed overtakes grass. Successful ranchers have internalized the fescue test, and they factor in externalities faster than economists. In fact, successful ranchers build capital because they think like grass.

The fescue test can easily be applied to public policy tests in the municipal realm. For instance - should cities like Calgary densify their urban footprint? The answer is, yes - of course! With less than 10 per cent of its ancestral range left, how can any support be given to projects that further impair the fescue's survival? A good city can therefore only be as good as its regard for the grass.

How about a provincial fescue test? Should the Alberta government redirect surplus revenues into our pockets via "prosperity bonuses," or into the Heritage Fund for protection against a future economic drought? The grass advises retaining excess moisture for later use. That is what the sophisticated mane and deep roots are for. Far better to turn away from gratuitous consumption when you have a surfeit, and save for when you do not. The fescue would invest the bonuses to ensure their contribution to our provincial sustainability. In this way the grass roots would advise the mid-stem users to tell the grass tops that saving for a rainy day is a good idea.

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