

Western Canadian anger is real and fair. The proposed remedies aren't

It doesn't make sense that Alberta has contributed so heavily in equalization and transfer payments to Quebec, when that province militates against pipelines to eastern Canada to eliminate oil imports.

by Conrad Black



In February, an interesting and somewhat radical paper signed by four Conservative Alberta MPs – Michelle Rempel Garner, Blake Richards, Glen Motz and Arnold Viersen – was circulated. It is a pastiche of profound grievances, reform proposals, imputations to eastern Canadians of discreditable attitudes

and motives, and some slightly bowdlerized historical reflections. The basic point is that Alberta (and Saskatchewan) have been poorly served by Confederation. The core of it states that the current treatment of Alberta and Saskatchewan is unjust and “unsustainable,” and that it doesn’t make sense that Alberta has contributed so heavily in equalization and transfer payments to Quebec, when that province militates against pipelines to eastern Canada to eliminate oil imports.

Confederations exist to gather together and treat equitably the ambitions of different jurisdictions, which retain considerable regional powers. It is the duty of the federal government to assure that each region has a proportionate interest in the country and to be sure that all regions always are satisfied that the Confederation works adequately for them. “Unsustainable” is the word used to warn that if things go on like this, Alberta will secede from Canada. Alberta is being exploited and mistreated and if matters are not redressed, Alberta would be justified in voting to secede. If it did so within the Supreme Court and Clarity Act criteria of a clear question and a decisive majority, the secession should then be recognized.



A supporter holds his Wexit hat while attending a rally for Wexit Alberta, a separatist group, in Calgary, in 2019. Todd Korol/Reuters

I agree entirely with Alberta Premier Jason Kenney’s position that Canada is such a good and successful country that he will not be a party to seceding, but the federal government has to revise the transfer payment system, stop tolerating frivolous and vexatious harassments of pipeline projects by Indigenous protesters or anyone else and drastically revise its energy policy, including the carbon tax (which was always just a lunge for more money absurdly disguised as saving the planet). Failing these changes, or a change of regime in Ottawa, Alberta will vote to secede eventually, and would be

justified. Premier Kenney and his government have commendably armed themselves with the instruments of authority available to them, including moving to set up a provincial police force and tax collection system. In making important pipeline investments he is continuing the distinguished Canadian tradition of public-private sector co-operation in projects of national interest that goes back to Jean Talon, and includes John A. Macdonald and the Canadian Pacific Railway, Clifford Sifton and mass immigration, and C.D. Howe and the Trans-Canada Pipeline and other ventures.

In their generally well-founded wrath, the authors take some liberties in current and historical mind-reading. They don't really try to square the circle between the theory that "Quebec is a province like the others" (Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent in 1955), with the fact that Canada was set up as a joint venture between two founding cultures and reciprocal cultural guarantees were made – there were only four original provinces and all of them except Nova Scotia had a large French or English minority. The provinces may be equal jurisdictions, but so are the rights of the English and the French equal and if that equality isn't respected, Quebec will secede. For many decades, Quebec showed a good deal more patience than Alberta has in asserting its rights. Equalization payments were devised by the St. Laurent government in 1955, as a method of extending federal government influence after Quebec's premier, Maurice Duplessis, imposed a provincial income tax and warned that if Ottawa did not credit that tax against federal tax (as direct taxes are a concurrent jurisdiction), he would invite the voters of Quebec to decide the issue. Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia were all generous providers of equalization payments in the national interest, and with other transfer payments, they undoubtedly assisted in the federalist victory in Quebec, (which should not be complacently regarded as permanent). These payments degenerated into vote-buying by trying to move resources to people and not the other way

round. Alberta should not be paying a cent of equalization now and the federal government's assault on the oil and gas industry, in the name of a futile effort to combat climate change, should entitle Alberta to receive equalization payments. Better would be new energy, taxing and revenue-sharing policies in Ottawa.



An inauguration ceremony is held in Edmonton to mark the newly formed province of Alberta in 1905. File Photo

The paper disputes the legitimacy of Canada's acquisition of the Northwest Territories (Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the present territories). This is rubbish; Canada bought and inherited the rights that the Hudson's Bay Company and the British government had exercised there. And there was no discreditable motive in Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier setting up Alberta and Saskatchewan as provinces in 1905, rather than making them one larger province (they could have merged at any time, and still can, but it would not change anything). Alberta could have asserted its rights like Quebec did, 65 years ago, and can do so now, with or without threatening to secede. The constant railing against "Laurentian Canada" is just an awkward Western effort to find a word that covers the Toronto corporate and financial community and the government in Ottawa (geographically and geologically, neither city qualifies as Laurentian). The paper is correct that native policy has been a disaster for centuries, but it is not clear whether the authors are more incensed by the colossal failure of native policy and by this federal government's truckling to the irresponsible native chiefs, or rather, is tempted to embrace the natives as their fellow victims of Ottawa.

The idea that "the rule of law" can seriously be interpreted as meaning the laws of the native organizations and not of Canada and its provinces is insurrection, not secession. The Indian Act should be scrapped, but Canada is a sovereign country and its writ runs and must be enforced throughout the land. If a jurisdiction wishes to secede it can under certain

rules, but it cannot impugn the right of non-natives to be here and to have set up the jurisdictions they have (including the province of Alberta). These people should know that they are playing with fire and sedition if they go along with the charlatans of Indigenous extremism, who have no more regard for the province of Alberta than for any other Canadian institution. They can't demand Alberta's rightful share of MPs and senators according to its population, and try to deny that to Ontario and Quebec. And they should stop bandying about the word "colonial"; no one in eastern Canada has ever thought of Alberta as a colony. The authors make many just claims, but Alberta isn't a culture, it's a region; it has been shabbily treated, but not because the Trudeaus or anyone else regard Albertans as "rednecks." There are parts of the report that imply that Alberta is the only section of the country that has had a lot of immigration. There are more people in the Greater Toronto Area who were born outside Canada than the entire population of Alberta, but that has nothing to do with the legitimate problems raised.



Alberta Premier Jason Kenney Ed Kaiser/Postmedia

I agree that the Senate (and the Supreme Court) should be reformed, but federalized, not exclusively appointed or elected within and by the provinces. The provinces don't and shouldn't have an exclusive right to resources: that too is a shared jurisdiction, but it should be shared equitably. And the claim that the National Energy Program of former prime minister Pierre Trudeau (an outrage) is still with us is false. The authors give no credit to former prime minister Brian Mulroney, though they acknowledge that going overboard for the Reform party was a mistake; and they whitewash former prime minister Stephen Harper. If he had made way for Jason Kenney in 2014, or at least run a plausible re-election campaign in 2015, we would not have these problems. The only reason the government wasn't thrown out last year was because the worthy Saskatchewaner Andrew Scheer was not an adequately

effective Opposition leader.

This paper is a powerful expression of real grievances and dangers, but not all of it has been thought through as well as such an important subject requires.

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