

Alberta's Great CANundrum

Can we reconcile our past and future in order to move forward as a country?

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When asked why he is proud to be Canadian, Andres Rojas responds: “Pretty much the reason is my son Gabriel. Canada gave me (...) the chance of giving him the best possible future” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013). Andres, originally from Columbia, appeared with his brother Juan and son Gabriel as part of an initiative launched by the federal government for Canadian citizenship week in 2013. The series of testimonial videos served to demonstrate the diverse reasons new Canadians feel pride in their identity. For Juan Rojas, being Canadian is being part of a family: while “they don’t all share the same colour or (...) same belief(s), ... (they do share) ... the same principles and values like fairness, justice, democracy ” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013). The series is an admirable exhibition of what one may consider the classic qualities of being Canadian. The interviewees talk about acceptance, multiculturalism, opportunities, and even hockey. Be that as it may, the videos do not render the sentiment universal. For some, Canada can be a conundrum.

In her 2012 article, “What does it mean to be Canadian?” Lorraine Mallinder attacks the question of perceived unity. What can, she ponders, “an English speaker in Vancouver possibly have in common with a francophone 5,000 km away in Quebec City” (Mallinder, 2012). Her query certainly merits further exploration when taking into account that, according to Statistics Canada (2023), the country passed the 40 million mark back in June of 2023 in terms of population. People from more than 200 ethnic groups contribute to the country's makeup (Mallinder, 2012). Add to that the regional shifts in climate, population, and industry and the

Canadian ideal becomes a balancing act. Said feat of maneuvering is interwoven with provincial interest and skepticism; contempt for the measures taken by the federal government in order to maintain it has resulted in calls for alternative action. From potential pension relocation to the possibility of leaving Canada entirely, the province of Alberta is no stranger to narratives of separation. The perceived role of being the country's 'breadwinner' has sparked dissonance and debate among Albertans for years with no signs of stopping.

I put forth that the hyperfocus on the clash of static and dynamic views of what it is to be Canadian is what produces the narrative of separation. It is my belief that while still important, this sentiment overshadows major problems, thus causing problems in the balance of power between levels of government. In this essay I will examine the climate of separation, separatism, and their effects on the Canadian ideal, all the while taking into account repercussions on the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE). My paper is divided into four sections. Firstly, I will address the division of power between federal and provincial branches of government and the resulting evolution of historical consequences. Secondly, I will move on to current issues, and examine the arguments for and against secession as well as the opinions surrounding them. Next, I will discuss potential obstacles that would be encountered by the AUPE should these changes come to fruition. In the final section, I will revisit the question of what it means to a Canadian as well as put forth a couple of ideas that could possibly help the two entities move forward. It is my hope to be able to look at the issue objectively and understand why a solution has not yet been reached.

Before I move into the discussion, I must make a few important notes. First of all, the topic of separatism is vast, and I have selected a few examples I find to be the most pertinent. It is important to note that the discussion is not limited to those mentioned here. Secondly, in

regards to terminology, it is imperative to make a distinction between separation and separatism. Whereas separation refers to a spectrum in division and distribution (for example the jurisdiction in the Canadian constitution) separatism is a movement or ideology. Separatism, according to Richard Foot (2016), refers to the advocacy for separation or secession by a group or people from a larger political unit to which it belongs. The two are interrelated, but not interchangeable; an individual might advocate for more separation of power in their province yet not consider themselves separatist. Finally, in section three, in order to prevent repetition, I have chosen one example to explore in detail, but will mention multiple.

Section 1: The constitutional division of power - historical consequences and conflicts

When the British North America Act (later changed to the ‘Constitution Act’) of 1867 was signed, there was disagreement amid Canada’s founding fathers on how power should be divided due to their opposing views. John A. Macdonald, at the time Premier of the Province of Canada, pushed for a highly centralized government that held “unmistakable dominance” over the provinces (Foot, 2013). However, due to pushback from other members of the delegation, such as Ontario Premier Oliver Mowat, the powers were divided more evenly between the provincial and federal levels (Lindeman, 2016). While there have been certain alterations to the law over the years, the divisions remain largely the same.

Governmental responsibilities can be divided into four categories: “Powers of the Parliament of Canada,” “Exclusive power of Provincial legislatures,” “Concurrent/Shared Powers,” and “Residuary Powers” (Government of Canada, 2021). The federal government is in charge of matters of national interest, a twenty one item list that includes topics such as: public debt and property, unemployment insurance, currency, criminal law, and indigenous affairs to

name a few (Government of Canada, 2021). Provincial governments are tasked with twelve items, some among them being: education, prisons, hospitals, natural resources and property rights. Three items: old age pensions, immigration, and agriculture are shared between the two powers. Finally, according to The Constitution Acts, 1867 to 1982, s. 91, federal has the power “to make Laws for the Peace, Order and good Government of Canada, in relation to all Matters not coming within the Classes of Subjects by this Act assigned exclusively to the Legislatures of the Provinces.” In other words, federal power overrides provincial; in areas of uncertainty it is the level to take control. According to Beaudoin, “the courts have defined federal residuary power to include: the incorporation of businesses with federal objectives; aeronautics; radio; television; nuclear energy; the national capital; offshore mineral rights; official languages in the federal sphere; citizenship; foreign affairs; the control of drugs; and emergency powers in peace and war” over the years (Beaudoin, 2023). Occasionally, the federal government will cross over into territories seen as provincial.

Desire for freedom from Ottawa’s control is by no means new. Leaders of the fledgling nation of Canada were often at odds with one another. The courts in London habitually sided with provinces in the late 1800s. For example, in 1892 the province of Ontario went to London's Judicial Committee of the Privy Council about their rights over legislation of alcohol and the role of Lieutenant governors in the province. In *Hodge v. Queen* they were ruled to be in the right (Couturier, J. P., Johnston, W., & Ouellette, R., 2000). A coalition was later created between ministers from Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Manitoba in order to pressure the federal government into giving larger subsidies for provincial spending. (Couturier, J. P., Johnston, W., & Ouellette, R., 2000). While MacDonald’s government was reticent at first, they

eventually had to pull back on their centralist stance. Desires for greater provincial status continued to evolve as the country developed and remained relevant 100 years later.

One cannot discuss separatism without bringing up the province of Quebec. Quebec went through an economic and cultural renaissance in the 1960s, often referred to as *La Révolution tranquille* or ‘The quiet Revolution’ (Allan et al, n.d). According to Bercuson et al. ,during the late 1960s “the belief, shared by many Quebec intellectuals and labour leaders, ...(was that)... the economic difficulties of Quebec were caused by English Canadian domination of the confederation and could only be ended by altering—or terminating—the ties with other provinces and the central government” (Bercuson et al., n.d.). This surge of nationalism prompted many efforts to leave. Most famous were the referendums for separation in 1980 and in 1995. In the latter of the two the ‘no’ side won with only 50.58% percent (Bercuson et al., n.d.).

Does Alberta fit into this historical narrative of division? Most certainly. The question of power and Alberta dates back to the Great Depression. Following the stock market crash Canada, who made 33% of its revenue by exports, was hit hard by the knee jerk reaction of other countries in tightening regulations and tariffs. At the height of the depression in the winter of 1933, unemployment rose to around 33%. Mackenzie King’s Liberal government did little to quell the tide so the task was left to the provinces (Couturier, J. P., Johnston, W., & Ouellette, R. , 2000). Albertan William Aberhart believed that Clifford Douglas’ Social Credit model was the key to aiding the province, and used his christian radio to help spur the Alberta Social Credit Party to a 54% victory in 1932. It remained in power until 1971, but Douglas's doctrine was replaced by “conservative (free market) financial and social policies that even bankers could applaud” that favored the province and helped develop the attitude much of its population still holds today (Morley, 2006). Similar fires were stoked later with the introduction of the National

Energy Program in 1980, which would nationalize oil to make Canada competitive in the global market. Albertans saw it as a potential loss of revenue and an intrusion by the federal government into provincial jurisdiction (Alberta Online Encyclopedia, n.d.). Opposition from Alberta led to the creation of bumper stickers sporting the infamous slogan: “Let the eastern bastards freeze in the dark” (Alberta Online Encyclopedia, n.d.).

Conflict over the jurisdiction of governments is longstanding and originates from opposing views on the operation of the country motivated primarily by economic interest. Some viewed Canada as ideally wholly under one power. Others thought it should be defined by the power of smaller entities.

Section 2: Efforts of neo-separation in Alberta - who, what and why?

The turn of the century did little to quell the dialogue around separation and separatism as the government swung between United Conservative and New Democratic leadership into the 2010s. Contempt for Ottawa’s intervention during quarantine in the Covid-19 pandemic, the redistribution of wealth across the provinces, and other issues continue to spur initiatives today.

For instance, in June of 2020, Alberta’s Fair Deal panel came out with a comprehensive report illustrating the benefits of leaving Canada’s Pension Plan (CPP), “from reduced CPP taxes to potential lower costs.” (Benefits Canada, 2020). But, opinions were divided. Economics Professor Rafat Alam cited uncertainty about future economic stability and loss of national contributions to the pension pool as reasons to be wary (Benefits Canada, 2020). In October of 2021, a report on phasing out the RCMP and replacing them with an Alberta police force was concluded. Some were concerned with the lack of clarity in the report (French, 2021). Others, such as Kevin Lynch and Jim Mitchell of the *Calgary Herald* (2021), viewed the change as

positive. As stated in their article, the role of the RCMP currently encompasses “federal policing, provincial policing, municipal policing, rural policing and Indigenous policing.” With an APPS, the RCMP in Alberta would be more free to augment their specialized training and focus solely on matters of national interest (Lynch and Mitchell, 2021). A year later, in her bid for UCP leadership, Danielle Smith announced plans to implement a 300\$ Health Savings Account for Albertans to be used on services not covered by medicare. Many, such as NDP leader Rachel Notley viewed the move as an attempt to move further away from the public healthcare system “by ...(conditioning)... people into paying for health-care services” (Bellefontaine, 2022).

Perhaps the most controversial of the modern initiatives to come due to its very separatist implications is the *Alberta Sovereignty within a United Canada Act*. It received royal assent in December of 2022 and “defends Alberta’s interests by ...(providing a)... legal framework to push back on federal laws or policies that negatively impact the province.” The act is to be used when “Alberta’s legislative assembly debates and passes a motion that identifies a specific federal program or piece of legislation as unconstitutional or causing harm to Albertans” (Government of Alberta, 2023). Although in writing the act cannot be used to “defy Canada’s Constitution” nor “allow Alberta to separate from Canada,” Danielle Smith's attempt to reset the relationship with the Trudeau Government prompted massive backlash (Government of Alberta, 2023). Opposition members cited a lack of clarity of constitutional interpretation and broad powers given to the cabinet; they promised to remove it if voted to power at the next election. At the same time, indigenous leaders in Alberta called the move undemocratic and an infringement on their rights (Bennett, 2022). The severity of the effect it will have on new federal legislation remains to be seen.

So what reasons do people have for taking sides? Alberta's stance on separatism is a combination of past debates and current issues. Unlike movements in other provinces, identity and culture play a much less significant role. The economy is front and center, along with wrongdoings by previous governments. In *Canadian Conversations*' 2022 analysis, "The Spectre of Alberta Separatism," Wesley and Young observed that the top three reasons for wishing to separate were: to exit equalization, to set tax policy, and to set economic policy. It is no surprise that equalization payments, which have not given Alberta a payment since 1965 but costs each Albertan around 650\$ a year, are something of a sticking point with separatists (Canadian taxpayers federation, 2021). Fear of additional carbon taxes and attempts to phase out Alberta's fossil fuels industry stoke the movement as well. *Canadian Conversations* also found that Alberta separatism was more grounded in "party politics than nationalism" (Wesley & Young, 2022). So rather than a wholly pro-Alberta view, it takes aim at particular individuals. Robert Levison-King (2019) comments in "Wexit: Why some Albertans want to separate from Canada" that "antipathy has shifted (from Pierre Elliot Trudeau) towards his son, current PM Justin Trudeau (...) because of his father and his environmentalism." This is not to say that the movement doesn't acknowledge Alberta's diverging culture, but rather that it is hinged primarily on the economic implications of not having a "voice in Ottawa" (Levison-King, 2019).

The majority of the arguments I found regarding anti separatism are direct responses to the opinions for it. In *albertaviews* "Dialogue: Should Alberta Separate?" Lisa Young, Professor of Political science at the University of Calgary raises several concerns. Firstly, she touches on the matter of Indigenous peoples: Alberta separating would infringe on Numbered Treaties 6, 7 and 8. Indigenous peoples must be consulted in such pivotal decisions regarding the land. In addition to that, the existing legislation around their rights comes from the federal government

and would need to be renegotiated should Alberta secede. She then moves to the issue of infrastructure. According to Young, all of the services provided by the federal government would need to be recreated: “currency, central bank, foreign service, military, border and immigration control (...) membership in trade and other agreements would have to be negotiated, from a position of relative weakness.” (Northey & Young, 2020) She goes on to add that the “lure of a low-tax environment would not be enough to keep” major businesses in the province which would then cause the market to shrink further. (Northey & Young, 2020). In the bid to separate itself from Canadian dependency, Alberta might just sink itself further in. She concludes by touching on another pressing argument in the debate: the environment. While Young worries about Alberta’s primary asset ...(being more)... worthless with each passing day, concern from others arises around the potential damages of our current industry. The no side warns about the would-be country of Alberta backpedaling on climate initiatives in favour of the economy. While not all the arguments line up one to one, the general view is that the benefits of being tied to the other provinces through federal legislation vastly outweighs the losses incurred.

Among what populations are these opinions being expressed? While no ideology has automatic ties with a category such as age, race, or education, *Viewpoint Alberta’s* 2019 survey “Separatism in Alberta” shows patterns and groupings. Their base question “should Alberta separate from Canada and form an independent country” received 71% responses of no and 29% responses of yes. In breaking down those findings the survey found that men are more likely to be separatist than women, those who live rurally are most likely to be separatist than in urban settings, white individuals are more likely to be separatist, and the more post secondary education an individual has, the less likely they are to be separatist. Finally, according to *Viewpoint Alberta*, “there is a linear relationship between support for separatism and moving

right along the political spectrum. Whereas 11% of those on the far left and 16% of those on the center-left side support separatism, 36% of those on the center-right support separatism. This jumps to 68% for those identifying as far right” (Wesley & Buckley, 2022). These statistics might cause the reader to automatically assume that separatism is at the forefront of conservative ideology and believed to be the definite way forward. However, when polled about the possibility of Alberta separating, of those identified as separatists 30% responded it was “very unlikely to happen” and 39% responded it “could happen” (Wesley & Buckley, 2022). The majority considers it, at most, an unlikely possibility. This sentiment is echoed in the analysis of *The Conversation*, according to which “62 per cent (of separatists polled) retain a sense of attachment to Canada. Separatists are simply angrier and more pessimistic about the country’s future” (Wesley & Young 2020). Put another way, the problem is not primarily from the place of culture or nationalism. It again concerns the economy and a desire to be able to effect more change within Canada’s structure. Though, it is important to note that the reasons expressed in both surveys are not monolithic.

Section 3: Hypothetical applications - how could further separation have an effect on the AUPE?

As I previously discussed in section 1, jurisdiction in Canada can be assigned to a specific level of government or it can be shared between the two powers. Within the realm of concurrent powers, there are specifications for which power prevails in situations of contention. Unlike residuary powers, the matter does not always go to Ottawa. This becomes notable in the case of old age pensions, in which “provincial law prevails (...) under section 94A” (Beaudoin, 2023). Even if Alberta were not to separate, severing ties with the Canadian pension system is an

easier possibility than many other proposals and could have an effect on AUPE members and boards.

The CPP is a monthly taxable benefit that, if an individual is eligible, replaces part of their income. In order to qualify for the CPP, one must be at least 60 years old and have made at least one qualifying contribution to the CPP (Government of Canada, 2023). AUPE works in coordination with the Local Authorities Pension Plan (LLP) and the Public Service Pension Plan (PSPP) in order to help their members retire. If Alberta were to leave the CPP or take over the task of pension entirely, there would need to be a renegotiation of structure and coordination. Evidence of this can be seen in an FAQ the AUPE Pension Committee released in 2019, addressing bill 22. The bill in which “some public sector pension plans transitioned to a joint governance structure” cut AUPE positions such as representatives on the LAPP sponsor board (Government of Alberta, 2023). The FAQ explains how the AUPE no longer had the sole authority to appoint the people who “create the pension plans rules, create funding policies and set contribution rates” (Alberta Provincial Union of Employees, 2019). As expressed on their website, members of the union remain concerned about the government reaching more and more the AUPE’s area of pension coordination. If Alberta were to create an APP or take over pension, it is very likely that more change would come to the leadership of the pension committee. In addition, the FAQ talks about members typically having a combination of the three plans. If Alberta were to leave the CPP, the flow of funds into the replacement could potentially be lower and throw off the pre-established balances. (Pension Committee AUPE, 2019)

The separation of Alberta from Canada would not only affect pensions, but other areas as of AUPE concern well. For instance, the jurisdiction of work related benefits falls into the crossover of powers (Beaudoin, 2023). If the province were to leave the country, coordination

through AUPE might change, particularly through companies such as Sun Life which are Canadian in origin. If premier Smith's plan for a 300\$ health spending account were to be put in place in the future, it could also have an effect on the AUPE's coordination of benefits. The AUPE possesses committees that deal with anti-privatization and the environment. Both sectors would see a change in legislation and structure in the workplace. Returning to Lisa Young's arguments against separation, every government service would need to be restructured to fit the budget of the new 'country' on its own, so most workplaces would also see many changes wherein they would call on their unions to stand up for their rights. (Northey & Young, 2020)

Section 4: So who's Canadian now? Moving forward with splintered viewpoints

The idea of what it means to be Canadian is unsurprisingly not the same all across the country. It shifts in correlation to geographical location, age difference, country of origin, and a plethora of other reasons.

For example, in the paper "The Meaning of Being Canadian: A Comparison between Youth of Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Origins" Jennifer Wensha Lee and Yvonne M. Hébert found that Immigrant youth appear to be "particularly sensitive to the overall idea of becoming Canadian in terms of its status, complexity, and diversity, as revealed in their writing" (Hébert & Lee, 2006). A Tiwanese immigrant is quoted having said "To be a Canadian, I need to be open minded about others and willing to accept other cultures. I should have a world-class view (...). To be a Canadian, I have [to] be a well-rounded person." For others, to be Canadian means accepting the different labels existing within the label of Canadian. In *Settler Identity and colonialism in the 21st century*, the authors discuss the term settler and how it "voices relationships, structures, and processes in Canada today, to the histories of ... (indigenous

people)... on this land” (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015). There are many more perspectives. Some value ideals such as kindness and peace, whereas others see being Canadian through more physical manifestations like our healthcare system. Diverging views of the nation run deep and were espoused in the first three sections of my essay.

Canada exists with an odd paradox of ideals; it is a world in which we seek to embrace our differences without completely acknowledging that in order to fully do so, it is impossible to present the Canadian ideal as a monolith, which we are also perpetually doing. One could liken it to getting a number of people together for dinner but each of them being served a different sized slice of pie. I stated in my introduction that the overemphasis of what it means to be Canadian is what causes the inability to enact change. And, while currents of contempt for the culture exist within separatist movements, I found it largely to be strife over power sharing and economic struggles. The image of a culture clash is often pasted over top as the sole dominating reason for the narrative. While I do not suggest that we distance ourselves wholly from an image that draws us together, I believe we should be more aware of the subcategories that exist within and dig into their problems. Canada, after all, was not founded on glorious camaraderie and battles like our southern neighbors. It exists due to pragmatic agreement between ex-colonies when they realized they would not have the strength to go it alone after Britain cut ties. Questions of nationalism arose more in what would become Canada as ex colonies became provinces, but the economics still matter to this day. This is exemplified by equalization payments that are still being made today across the country. I believe that in order to move forward, Canadians need to wholly examine different ways in which one can be Canadian, particularly the sticking points. That way, we need not resort to separatism in order to hear each

other's grievances. For this reason, I do not believe that Alberta leaving the country will help either side in the long term. Rather, we need deep institutional change.

Given this problem is as old as the constitution itself, I can hardly solve it here, even after all my research. However, here are some ideas that might potentially alleviate conflict. Starting at the federal level with the most complex: would be a redrawing of provincial lines. However, it would not be to remove a province from the nation, but rather to split the province of Ontario in two in order to make the distribution of seats in the Ottawa House of Commons more equal. As Scott Stinson (2014) observes, the diverging opinions of citizens of northern Ontario and Toronto are erased due to the population density of the latter (Stinson, 2014). This has a profound effect on voting at the national level, in which the eastern block dominates seat control. Further divisions of the provinces might make room for more 'west friendly' voices at the federal level. Other models for splitting the provinces also exist. While this is arguably the least feasible option, I do believe this is a problem that needs to be tackled at both ends.

In regards to taking action on the provincial level, I have a couple of suggestions. First, as highlighted earlier, Alberta's economy is a pivotal point in the debate. If the economy were to diversify enough to take the hit; the potential 'phasing out' of the oilsands wouldn't be viewed as crippling the province. *Calgary Chambers of Commerce* for example, discusses investing in bioenergy innovation, technology, and the aerospace sector (Calgary Chambers of Commerce, 2023). A notable point is Calgary's role in the Alberta Hydrogen Roadmap, which aims to make Alberta "a global supplier of clean, low-cost hydrogen" that will be the "next great energy export that fuels jobs, investment and economic opportunity" for the province (Government of Alberta, 2021). The agreement seeks to take projects already underway in Alberta and achieve large-scale commercialization. Revamping the economy is something that will take decades, but if the

proper training is available to those who need it as new green innovations make the jump to larger markets, people may be less irritated about more federal policies in older sectors. And second, in regards to the gaps in the healthcare system, while federal interference into provincial jurisdiction is generally looked on poorly, in the case of the healthcare system, I believe it is necessary to enact change. Hagglng in court drags the process out, and if there's one thing everyone can agree on, they don't want to wait for these changes. On February 27th 2023, the Government of Canada announced "an agreement in principle for a shared plan that will invest \$24.18 billion in federal funding over 10 years in Alberta, including \$2.92 billion for a new bilateral agreement focusing on the shared health care priorities" (Government of Alberta, 2023). This funding could help Alberta sort out holes in the system. In addition, Institutional innovation can flow both ways. Lest we forget, it was Tommy Douglas, premier of Saskatchewan who put in place the bases that became the public health care system. Later, it was embraced on the federal level after the other provinces liked what they saw (De Bruin and Lovick, 2019). Of course, there are countless sectors that need addressing, regardless of the degree of separation that occurs, and these are just a sample.

In short, separatism and its relationship with the Canadian ideal is a complex matter. A narrative of separation is written into the nation's condition and it manifests itself in movements to this very day. To a degree, history and provincial identity play a role in the basis for the movement. In the case of Alberta, I believe that because economics and dissatisfaction with political groups is the root cause. We should not only look at differences of identity when trying to come to a solution. Instead, we should attack the problems at their source, while acknowledging that the Canadian monolith may lead us to oversimplify the matter. Instead, we

must embrace its contradiction. And as AUPE must do while defending the rights of individuals and groups simultaneously, see the joint repercussions of the part and of the whole.

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