

Have You Heard about Wexit?

Have you heard of Wexit? The Buffalo Declaration? The Maverick Party? Or the Buffalo Party? If you live in Alberta or Saskatchewan, chances are better that you've heard these terms than if you live in Ontario or Quebec. And therein lies the problem, say some commentators.

Wexit refers to the movement for western separation from Canada. It obviously echoes Brexit, the movement for Britain's exit from the European Union, which took effect in January of 2020. In the aftermath of the 2019 Canadian election, in which the Liberal Party formed a government despite winning only 15 of 104 seats in the provinces west of Ontario, with no seats in either Alberta or Saskatchewan, Wexit political parties were created in Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia. At roughly the same time as these parties were created, a handful of Conservative Party MPs issued a document entitled the Buffalo Declaration. It begins by stating that, "Our federation has reached a crossroads at which Canada must decide to move forward in equality and respect, or people in our region will look at independence from Confederation as the solution."<https://southpeacenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Buffero-Declaration.pdf> In June of 2020 the Wexit Party of Saskatchewan changed its name to the Buffalo Party. What began life as the Wexit Party of Alberta become the Maverick Party in September of 2020.

All of this has to do with a sense of grievance in Western Canada, a sense that is particularly strong in Alberta and Saskatchewan. The region's grievances have roots that date from more than a century ago. Commenting on Alberta and Saskatchewan's acquisition of provincial status in 1905, the Buffalo Declaration states, "The Eastern political and business

class never intended for Alberta to be equal in Confederation. They intended for us to be a colony, providing wealth and raw resources without having an equal share in prosperity and power." Over the years the sense of not being an equal participant in Confederation has been fueled by federal government policies, including the National Energy Program in the early 1980s and other federal policies, including fiscal transfers between provinces that Albertans in particular believe to have been unfair, and most recently pipeline and carbon tax policies that energy-producing western provinces view as hostile to the basis of their prosperity.

As this is being recorded, the Buffalo Party of Saskatchewan is in the thick of a provincial election campaign, with its candidates running in 14 of the province's 61 ridings. The Maverick Party in Alberta has plans to run candidates in all 104 federal ridings in the western provinces in the next national election, targeting mainly those ridings that the Conservative Party won by large margins in 2019. It also plans to present candidates in the next Alberta election.

Now it may be that neither of these parties will do very well and it could be that a couple of a few years after their creation they will have disappeared from the scene. But what is less likely to have disappeared from the scene is the stronger sense of resentment and injustice felt by citizens in western Canada than elsewhere in the country, their sense that Canada west of Ontario is largely ignored by Ottawa.

This sentiment has long been stronger in Alberta than in the other western provinces. But from time to time it has been significant in all four provinces as may be seen in the figure at p.26 of 2019 Environics study, a link to which is found in the text for this podcast.(

<https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/confederation-of->

[tomorrow-2019-survey---report-1/confederation-of-tomorrow-survey-2019---report-1-pulling-together-or-drifting-apart---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=9abc2e3e_2](https://www.westernstandardonline.com/2020/05/barry-cooper-challenges-for-western-independence/)) At a minimum, this sentiment amounts to the feeling that the Canadian political deck is stacked in favor of Ontario and Quebec and against the interests and preferences of the West. At the extreme, some see separation from Canada as the best option, or at least an acceptable one.

If you are a student at the University of Calgary or the University of Saskatchewan, you probably already know all this. But in Canada east of the Manitoba-Ontario border, coverage of western grievances and sympathy toward them drops off sharply. This, at least, is what some westerners argue, including the University of Calgary's Barry Cooper. Speaking of what he calls the "Laurentian media"--the media system based in and focused on the issues and perspectives that matter most in Ontario and Quebec--Cooper writes, "The Laurentian journalistic consensus is something like this: Alberta and Saskatchewan have only themselves to blame for whatever adverse policies Laurentian Canada imposes on them because they were stupid enough not to vote Liberal."(
<https://www.westernstandardonline.com/2020/05/barry-cooper-challenges-for-western-independence/>)

Well, it is certainly true that although people in western Canada get some of their news about this country from the Globe and Mail, the National Post and the major television networks, as do Canadians living in more easterly provinces, the news and public affairs universe of Canada's regions is not identical from coast to coast. *The Western Standard*, an online newspaper with a pronounced sympathy for western grievances and in which Professor

Cooper's comments about what he alleges to be the anti-western biases of the Laurentian media appear, is relied on by many in the West for news about their province and the country. Indeed, according to page view data from the autumn of 2020, this online newspaper appears to be more popular in the western provinces than any other news source with the exception of the Vancouver Sun and the Calgary Herald. The author of this study acknowledges that data showing page views for the CBC and other national broadcasters was not available. (

<https://www.westernstandardonline.com/2020/10/western-standard-is-3-in-the-west/>)

Westerners are also more likely than Canadians elsewhere to be cued to think about and to be provided with more sympathetic analyses of their region's grievances by evidence in the public square. This ranges from the pro-Wexit signs and billboards that popped up in Alberta and Saskatchewan in 2019 and 2020, the statements of politicians, and the conversation on regional radio talk shows and social media.

Alberta has been, and with good reason, thought of as the epicenter of this sentiment of resentment. A survey carried out by Abacus Data one month after the 2019 election found that while 60 percent of Canadians agreed that Alberta is treated fairly in relationship to the rest of the country, only 25 percent of Albertans agreed. (<https://abacusdata.ca/alberta-wexit-separation-poll-abacus-data/>) Sympathy for Alberta was strongest in Saskatchewan, where only 35 percent of respondents agreed that Alberta is treated fairly, and lowest in Quebec and Atlantic Canada, where about three-quarters of respondents believed that Alberta is treated fairly. Asked how they would feel if Alberta eventually separated from Canada, one-third of Canadians said that they would be happy or at least okay with this. Albertans were not much

more enthusiastic, 18 percent saying that they'd be happy and another 18 percent saying that this would be okay. The greatest fans of Alberta leaving turned out to be Quebecers, 55 percent of whom said that they would be happy (11%) or okay with this decision (44%). Indeed, 63 percent of Quebecers said that their own standard of living would be better off if Alberta were to separate, higher than in any other province and compared to 48 percent nationally.

Wexit, whether this were to involve Alberta or a larger swath of western Canada, is unlikely to happen anytime soon, if ever. Indeed, any comparisons of separatist sentiment in Alberta and other parts of western Canada, on the one hand, and in Quebec on the other are facile and misleading. A more tempered assessment of where things stand and of how they might evolve is offered by University of Calgary professor Jack Mintz. Allow me to quote from Mintz at some length:

"Regional conflict is not new in Canada, or in other federations. These conflicts can arise over "taste" (i.e., cultural and historical issues) or "claim" (economic resources). Conflict of taste is due to differences among regions with respect to laws and the role of government. Conflict of claim arises from rich regions transferring resources to support other parts of the country. Conflict of claim is most difficult to manage when a small, rich region is expected to support a large, poor region, because it takes large per-capita transfers from the small region to make any meaningful impact on the incomes of those in a more populated region."

As an aside, let me add that according to at least one estimate, Alberta has made a net fiscal transfer to the rest of Canada, money that pays for equalization payments to less affluent provinces, among other things, of \$611 billion since 1961.(

<https://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/morton-its-time-for-albertas-revolutionary-boston-tea-party-moment>) Mintz goes on to say,

It's not solely because equalization isn't serving the West well. Nor is it solely because of TransCanada's decision to cancel Energy East in the face of regulatory overload. But it does arise from a sense that the federal government's professed support for resource provinces is hollow.

And finally,

Today, Western Canada is nowhere close to (separation). However, if Ottawa's public policy keeps... hurting Western opportunities, this country's regional conflicts of claim will bring consequences difficult to predict. (<https://www.policyschool.ca/news/canadas-catalonia-careful-ottawa-western-alienation-beginning-rear-head/>)

So here's a question. Are those Albertans and other western Canadians who believe that their region is short-changed and that independence from Canada should at least be on the table as an option wrong? Why?