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It's time for Albertans to get tough with Ottawa

I don't know Bob Foulkes and he doesn't know me. But for some reason he seems to think he does.

Foulkes wrote a piece in the Calgary Herald last week diagnosing me as basically paranoid.

He didn't name me specifically. He said it about the majority of Albertans (60% plus) who advocate greater use of provincial rights. All two million of us. He imagines we are motivated by "frustration, resentment, and fear."

Political debate in this country would go a whole lot better if everyone would stick to the issues and stop getting personal. I'm sure Bob's a well-motivated guy. He just happens to be wrong.

Foulkes rejects the idea of Alberta running its own provincial replacements to the Canada Pension Plan, the RCMP and federal collection of provincial taxes--three things Albertans have the constitutional right to do for themselves the way Quebec does. He says those of us who promote these things want to "isolate Alberta" and "turn our backs on Canada."

This is false. We don't.

Take the pension plan. Alberta has a unilateral right to opt into its own separate pension plan after three years' notice to the federal government. After negotiations with Ottawa, a seamless transition would occur. Pensioners would not even notice the difference.

But why do it, asks Foulkes. Because (a) Albertans would get the same benefits as they do from the CPP at significantly less cost, and (b) Alberta's departure would force CPP premiums up in the remaining provinces, creating a national furor.

Admittedly, an Alberta pension plan would be only slightly less of a rip-off to young Albertans than the Canada Pension Plan, which is a misconceived boondoggle. Alberta has been pointing this out for years. But creating an Alberta Pension Plan is the only lever Alberta has to force national pension reform. We have to be willing to use it.

In more adaptive nations, like Chile, citizens are now required to bank 10% of their personal income in private retirement funds. They choose between competing, regulated private plans, and the money remains in their estate, not the government's. Although anyone can still claim pension benefits from the government as an alternative, most people do better in the private system.

But here we bump up against the modern Canadian dilemma, much like we do with medicare, employment insurance, regional development and fiscal equalization. To start the CPP, Ottawa first invaded a provincial jurisdiction by making promises it couldn't possibly keep. To pay for it, the feds vigorously siphon billions

upon billions out of Ontario and Alberta.

So what should Albertans do?

Bob Foulkes says we should "continue our outspoken participation in the affairs of the nation [which] has enriched the federation."

This is pure malarkey. Alberta has less influence now in Ottawa than it did before the Reform Party showed up in Parliament chanting the West Wants In. The federal government is more corrupt, more centralized, more bereft of ideas, and more hostile.

The only "enrichment" the feds need or want from Alberta is the net \$12 billion they take out each year in taxes and don't send back in spending. They value our money, not our point of view.

People like Bob have to decide whether they want eastern Canada to like us or to respect us. If it's respect, we must start exercising our rights.

- Link Byfield

Link Byfield is chairman of the Edmonton-based Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy.

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