

August 8, 2005

Instead of separating, Albertans should take away Ottawa's power of taxation

The August 22 edition of the Western Standard newsmagazine reports that 43% of Albertans think "western Canadians should begin to explore the idea of forming their own country." Across the West, the favorable response averaged 36%.

According to this poll, separatist opinion is as strong in Alberta as in Quebec.

The first question is, why?

That's easy. The country has been going backwards for decades, at great cost to Canadians and enormous cost to Albertans.

If the Reform Party program had been accepted by Ontarians in the 1990s, most of our present problems would either be alleviated or would not exist.

Unfortunately only 20% of Ontarians supported the Reform Party. So, having struck out federally, it's hardly surprising that almost half of Albertans want to "begin to explore" getting out of the Canadian federation.

But that leads to question two: are they serious?

I suspect that for most it's a fairly low priority, at least for now.

There's widespread apathy, which is often blamed on our prosperity. "People are just too darned comfortable," some say.

I think this is a red herring. Most revolutions occur in rising economies like ours, when a large and increasingly self-confident element of the popula-

tion takes a political risk to get more say in their own affairs.

I think the blame lies with poor provincial leadership. The current generation of western premiers show none of the federal vision and resolve of their 1980s predecessors--Ralph Klein standing as the prime example.

Impromptu Senate elections every six years are a sop, not an agenda for federal reform.

The third question about this poll is, "Even with better leadership, would most Albertans ever support separation?"

Not willingly, in my estimation. Albertans still would prefer to fix Canada than destroy it.

Ever since E.C. Manning's battle against federal medicare and biculturalism in the 1960s, Alberta's quarrel has been with Ottawa, not Canada.

This being so, Alberta's ultimate aim must remain to defeat the federal government, and with enough political resolve Albertans have a fairly simple way to do it. But it would require leadership of a caliber Albertans haven't seen in decades.

Ottawa relies on Alberta for about \$12 billion a year in fiscal surplus. So cut off the money.

Hold a provincial referendum on taking over federal tax collection.

If Albertans approved, the Legislature would simply pass a

law requiring all federal taxes to be paid after a set date to the provincial treasury.

I'm not saying this would be constitutional, any more than Trudeau's wellhead tax on oil and gas was. But as we've seen in Canada time and again, political will always trumps constitutional law.

There would be no need for new borders, new flag, new constitution, and a new country. Ottawa will get the money only if it introduces certain key reforms -- a Triple E Senate, etc.

It either institutes the reforms or it puts the whole province under martial law. Those are its choices.

Not having much of an army, I suspect Ottawa would cave.

The Western Standard poll shows that the political resolve for a hard line against Ottawa already exists among the people -- and not just in Alberta.

The political leadership, unfortunately, is sorely missing. One courageous Alberta premier could save the country.

- Link Byfield

Link Byfield is chairman of the Edmonton-based Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy, and an Alberta senator-elect.

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