

Albertans avoid separation anxiety

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To Eileen Walker, there comes a time to leave the nest -- and Alberta's time is now.

"(Separation) is just like leaving home. It's scary -- but we'll handle her," says the Drumheller resident, and former member of the now-defunct Alberta Independence Party.

Some day -- Walker hopes -- the good folk of Wild Rose country, frustrated by decades of domination by central Canada, will finally shake off the fetters of federalism and forge a new future, in a free Republic of Alberta.

But to political scientist Doreen Barrie, Alberta separatists are like flying saucers -- many claim they exist, but where are all the little green men?

"People are mystified when (you) start talking about Alberta separatists, because nobody can . . . find anybody like that around them," says Barrie, who teaches at the University of Calgary. "If there is a separatist movement out there, I might call them 'USOs,' because they're 'Unidentified Separatist Organizations, as far as I'm concerned."

Alberta, in many ways, is the envy of the other provinces.

It has the lowest tax rate and the hottest economy. Unemployment sits around 5.5 per cent, compared to some parts of Newfoundland and the Maritimes, which annually see their jobless rates soar above 20 per cent.

Alberta's sizzling economy also claims many of the nation's best and brightest young people.

Forget about the brain drain to the south -- Statistics Canada shows that "Go West young man" is still the slogan of choice for job-seekers, with Alberta enjoying a net gain of about 119,420 people between 1996 to 2001.

That's the largest in-migration rate for any province since the 1981 census.

Even when it comes to music, Alberta is tops. Recently, three of the top five hot country singles on the Billboard charts were by artists from Wild Rose Country: Emerson Drive (Grande Prairie), Aaron Lines (Fort McMurray) and Terri Clark (Medicine Hat). And can anyone say Nickelback from Hanna?

Yet, despite their overwhelming prosperity, many Albertans are angry with their lot in confederation.

No one can deny the undercurrent of exasperation in Premier Ralph Klein's throne speech last week, when he again "warned" Ottawa to give Alberta its due, or risk "undermining" confederation.

"I'm saying listen to us, or you'll face the wrath of the people," Klein said following the throne speech.

And while Klein says he's against separation, he admits he's "scared" by the letters he receives from Albertans wishing to break away from Canada.

Next month, Alberta's Progressive Conservative party will put the separation issue on centre



(Separatists insist Alberta wants out, but majority just want respect from Ottawa)

stage, via a 90-minute discussion at its annual convention on the province's place in Canada.

Some say separation will never happen. But others aren't so sure.

Afloat on a sea of oil and gas revenues, could this land of mountains and plains, cowpokes and prairie oysters, obtain independence and sail toward prosperity, leaving the sinking ship that is federalist Canada behind?

IMAGINE A future in which border agents warily guard the Trans-Canada Highway east of Medicine Hat, on alert for illegal aliens from Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Federal meddling in Alberta's affairs is now a faded memory. Since the province broke away from Canada health care care, the military and national parks are now the sole jurisdiction of the new republic.

Taxes raised in Alberta now stay in Alberta. Gun control and the Kyoto protocol have been tossed into the dust bin of history.

To some, it would be a dream come true.

However, many political and economic experts warn against Alberta separation, saying it might ultimately lead to an even greater loss of sovereignty than now experienced under federalism.

With a Gross Domestic Product of more than \$142 billion, Alberta is no economic slouch. Its economy is about four times the size of Saskatchewan's but still dwarfed by Ontario's GDP of about \$400 billion.

On an international scale, Alberta's economy is modest, comparable with those of Portugal or Iran. But it pales beside the multitrillion-dollar economies of the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany.

Roger Gibbins, president of the Canada West Foundation, an Alberta-based think-tank, says the irony of separation is that a "free" republic of Alberta would likely find its economic future largely dictated by the U.S.

The U.S. is Alberta's largest market for oil and natural gas.

On its own, Alberta would lose the economic bargaining power that comes with being part of a federation of 10 provinces and three territories.

"An independent Alberta . . . would be so highly integrated into the American economy, our own freedom of action would be quite limited," Gibbins says.

"Our population of three million, in a North American sea (of millions of people) is too small. As a country, an independent Alberta would be prosperous. But I would find it a confining and likely claustrophobic society."

University of Calgary economist Patrick Coe says residents of the new republic would face a plethora of tough financial decisions. Foremost among them would be whether to adopt the U.S. or Canadian currencies, or create an Alberta dollar.

"If they don't take their own currency, then they're subject to the (fiscal) policies of Canada . . . or the U.S.," Coe says.

Even Alberta's massive energy resources could become a liability should oil and gas prices go into a long-term decline.

"Sure, we're doing quite well right now," he says, "but there are a lot of other things to think about. If we have just Alberta for a tax base, then . . . tax revenues would become much more volatile."

Other questions abound.

What would Alberta's share be of Canada's \$507 billion debt? Would separation lead to an ebbing of the tide of well-educated Canadians migrating to Alberta? And whose face would go

on the Alberta dollar? Ralph Klein? k.d. lang?

It's clear that separation would bring a mixture of both the good and the bad to Alberta.

On one hand, military experts say an independent Alberta likely wouldn't be able defend itself.

But it would have one heck of an Olympic hockey team.

Rob Huebert, an expert with the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary, says the separation of Alberta would send shockwaves of concern throughout the U.S.

Huebert says the new republic would face intense pressure from the Americans to join some sort of military protection pact.

"Their big question would be: 'Are the oil fields secure?' "

What of the Alberta National Armed Forces? Couldn't it protect the borders of this new nation? Probably not, Huebert says, because residents of the Republic of Alberta would likely balk at the cost of maintaining a viable military.

"Yes, (Albertans) support the military, but this is also the province most opposed to government spending," Huebert says.

"If you really wanted to have a military that means anything in Alberta, you would have to have substantially higher tax rates than you have now."

Alberta would likely fare better on the international hockey scene.

Team Alberta, as compiled by the Calgary Herald's hockey writers, could feature a fine contingent of Alberta-born superstars.

On the first line, you'd have Ryan Smyth (Banff) on left wing, Mike Comrie (Edmonton) at centre, and Jarome Iginla (St. Albert) on the right flank.

Alberta's top blue-liners would be Scott Niedermayer and Derek Morris (both from Edmonton), with Chris Osgood (Peace River) manning the pipes.

Meanwhile, coaching Alberta's Olympic squad would be Ken Hitchcock (Edmonton), assisted by the Sutter brothers Darryl and Brian (Viking).

At least one Canadian hockey insider, however, says separation would be a tragic mistake.

"When we put a national team together, it's like a United Nations of players from across Canada. It's what gives us our identity," says Johnny Miskey, vice-president of hockey operations for the Canadian Hockey Association.

"If (Alberta) were to leave us and form their own team . . . they'd have a pretty good team. But they would also have to think about losing their identity with the game that makes up what Canada is all about."

ALBERTA has a right to be frustrated with federalism, says Gibbins, the Canada West Foundation president. The province has always had a strong independent streak and for decades has felt on the outside of the corridors of federal power.

Separatist sentiment peaked in the 1980s, with the creation of the infamous National Energy Program. Since then, feelings of Western alienation have persisted, flaring with every federal-provincial battle over health care, Senate reform or gun control.

That frustration only grows when Albertans see millions of their tax dollars funnelled out of the province each year to "have-not" provinces via equalization payments.

Outside Alberta, however, talk of separation is largely greeted with a mixture of apathy and bewilderment.

"I don't think (the rest of Canada) take the threat very seriously," says Herman Bakvis, a

political scientist with Dalhousie University. Unlike Québec separation, he adds, "Canada greets this with a shrug."

Indeed, Bakvis says other provinces see Alberta "as the big-time winner in confederation," largely because of the "sweetheart" constitutional deal that permits Alberta to control its vast oil and gas resources.

"You talk to anybody outside Canada . . . and they're just flabbergasted at the arrangement (Alberta has) in owning its (oil and gas) revenues.

"No other (province, state or territory) in a federal arrangement has anything like that kind of sweetheart deal."

EFFORTS ARE already under way to patch Ottawa's frayed relationship with Alberta.

On Friday, federal Unity Minister Stephane Dion penned a letter to Alberta's premier, calling him a "committed Canadian," but also adding "nothing justifies succession -- or the threat of succession -- in Canada."

As for Klein, he insists he's merely the messenger for the simmering separatist movement in Alberta.

Alberta's separatists tried to form an official party in the last provincial election.

The Alberta Independence Party failed, however, to garner enough signatures of support to gain official party status, forcing its candidates to run as independents.

Eileen Walker, an AIP member, ran as an independent in Drumheller. She lost the election, but won a moral victory by notching about 800 votes.

"We gave it our best effort," she says.

Walker says she would support staying in confederation if the federal government devolved many of its powers to the provinces and finally listened to their concerns.

Certainly, the balance of power is shifting in Canada. The West is now the second most populated region in Canada, with about 30 per cent of the population. The West also makes up about one third of the nation's GDP.

Walker is sure Alberta could make it on its own. She's not as sure whether Albertans will ever make the plunge toward independence.

"The sentiment for separation is growing -- but whether people are willing to walk the talk is another matter," Walker says.

"But even your political scientists can't see into the future. We're all guessing, aren't we?"

"You just keep trying, right? You don't give up. Like any person that leaves their home to go out on their own, it will be a challenge. But that's what life is about," Walker says.

Also See: Could Alberta really secede? A11

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