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Nothing beats Alberta separatists for pure sideshow appeal. In a political culture that often takes itself too seriously, the regular emergence of some new group promising to take the province on a course to independence offers much-needed comic relief.

The latest such manifestation to rent a hall and sign up a couple of dozen like-thinkers is the Separation Party of Alberta. Along with independence, its major policy plank is to take the money we send to Ottawa and buy nuclear submarines. Perhaps we would use the subs to patrol the North Saskatchewan River, keeping our newly constituted Republic of Alberta free from border-jumpers from Saskatchewan. Or maybe we would station them off the West Coast to secure a saltwater port. There doesn't seem to be much point in trying to find out. Like so many other Western separatist movements that have come and gone over the years like a recurring case of indigestion, this one will soon pass.

That is one of the inherent contradictions about the Alberta political psyche. Despite our tough talk about asserting our independence—even our premier made some pretty strong separatist musings earlier this year—the best we can come up with is a submarine-pitching fringe organization offering us a ride to nowhere. The fact is, even at our angriest most of us see no advantage to living in a landlocked splinter nation with an economy the size of Denmark's. A survey done this spring by the Canada West Foundation (CWF) shows that Albertans are more magnanimous than we are given credit for. The poll found that only about 25 per cent of Albertans

believe the province would be better off economically if it were an independent state. The number hasn't changed since the CWF conducted its last survey in 2001—despite all the anti-Ottawa rhetoric coming from the Klein government in the interim. Of the 25 per cent who view independence as an option, the CWF defines only 8 to 10 per cent as hard-core separatists. I'd guess that about as many



Albertans believe Elvis is still alive. “Most Albertans are looking at the separatist option only as a means of expressing their regional frustration,” explains CWF president Roger Gibbins, who is also a political scientist at the University of Calgary.

And even this more moderate feeling of alienation is not as common as our provincial leaders would have everyone believe. Only 55 per cent of Albertans polled in the 2001 survey said Ottawa has too much power. And when asked a slightly rephrased question in this year's survey, 60 per cent of Albertans said they thought the provinces should have more power—a surprisingly low number, considering the amount of complaining about fed-

eral overlords we've heard from our provincial government in the last couple of years. By and large we're committed federalists. While we don't always get everything we want—and who does?—and while we sometimes feel unloved and unwanted—and who doesn't?—we're not ready to take drastic steps to extricate ourselves from the rest of the country.

But that doesn't keep Ralph Klein's Conservatives from snuggling up to the minority separatist fringe when it suits their purposes—like when they want to create a diversion from more pressing issues, such as education and health care funding. Alberta premiers going back to William Aberhart have used this kind of regional warfare to boost their popularity ratings, but Klein has institutionalized it by turning regionally divisive programs—like the firearms registry, the Canadian Wheat Board and the Kyoto Protocol—into them-against-us calls to arms.

It's easy to whip up visceral anger over a \$1-billion cost overrun on the firearms registry, or to make folk heroes of jailed Wheat Board protesters (curiously, that type of romanticized civil disobedience doesn't extend to striking nurses or provincial workers), but to turn it into evidence of federal repression worthy of Alberta separation is a bit much, even for Premier Klein. For better or worse, Alberta was shaped by national institutions and national policies on transportation, agriculture and, until the mid-1980s, energy. Although the province is moving toward a more independent economic course, our political future still lies with the rest of Canada. We're stuck with each other, nuclear submarines or not.

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