



On the Trail of Alberta Separatists

Champs of independence or chumps of power?

by Joe Obad

Since the fall of 2002, when Premier Ralph Klein began hinting at the threat of separatist rumblings in Alberta, my thoughts have repeatedly turned to the strange plot of Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov. The protagonist of 19th century Russian satirist Nicolai Gogol's classic novel *Dead Souls*, Chichikov is a lowly bureaucrat who hatches a scheme to become a bona fide gentleman by purchasing cheap land and "dead souls"—serfs who have died, but whose title remains registered on the books.

Klein's musings on the menace of separatists have the ring of a modern-day Gogolian ruse. "Alberta is not looking at [separation] at this time, but that's not to say that some people are not already doing so," the premier said. "There's been some talk. I get lots of cards and letters." Referring to the provincial energy industry's concerns over the Kyoto Accord, he ominously added, "I say to Ottawa, just don't push us. Be fair and understand the importance of this industry to Alberta and Canada."

Picking up where Klein left off, his Tory government's throne speech in February 2003 was ambivalent about the role of Albertans within Canada: "Albertans want to be full and equal partners in Canada, but true partnership is only possible when all parties are respected and valued for what they bring to the table. Alberta's ability to be a partner in Canada is compromised by the current federal government, which often does not listen to the people of this province." A month later at the Tories' annual general meeting in Red Deer, session upon session focused on how Alberta could reassert its authority virtually everywhere provincial and federal jurisdictions overlap. Delegates talked about creating a provincial police force like those of Ontario and Quebec, about collecting taxes directly like Quebec, even developing a provincial pension plan similar to the one in Quebec.

Frustration with Ottawa was gathered like tinder, seemingly waiting for a spark.

If that tinder were to catch fire, the session called "Strengthening Alberta's Place in Confederation" was certainly the place. Panellist Rob James, a director of the Airdrie-Rockyview PC association, spearheaded the "like Quebec" litany. James and other Tories had previously written a list of 12 proposals intended to help Klein resist Ottawa's "assault" on Western Canada. One of them was a referendum to separate. "The federal government has gone to great lengths to force me to now say I'm embarrassed and ashamed to be a Canadian," said James, referring to Canada's stance on the war in Iraq, the gun registry, the wheat board and Kyoto. James was echoed by delegates like Alan Clark of Edmonton, who called separatism the ultimate lever. "It's time we empower our premier with the tools he needs to finally get us in or get us out," said Clark.

With separation newly legitimized as an option by several in Alberta's ruling party, I set out down the highway to see how the province's separatist groups were faring. Could the kindling of separation that smouldered at the Tory convention, I wondered, catch flame?

ALBERTA SEPARATISTS, DESPITE ALL THE TALK, are not readily found. So I started with the Western Canada Concept (WCC) movement, arguably Alberta's oldest and best-known voice for separation. The party was founded in Calgary in 1980 by Doug Christie, a Victoria lawyer who's best known as the defender of Holocaust deniers Jim Keegstra and Ernst Zundel. (Former Blue Rodeo keyboard player Bob Wiseman wrote a song about Christie, in which the protagonist begs the lawyer to take his case and help "rewrite all of history's mistakes.") As a registered political party, the WCC succeeded in electing Gordon Kesler to the legislature in 1982. In the party's glory days, crowded halls of supporters hung on Christie and Kesler's every firebrand word.

It's hard to reconcile those images with what I saw at Red Deer's North Hill Inn on June 11, 2003, when I sat in a conference room with nine others waiting to hear the WCC's message for the new millennium. Usually Christie delivers the message, but he couldn't make it that night.

Robert and Gladys Kratchmer of Wainright were assisting Christie with his provincial tour, so Robert spoke. By turns folksy and incendiary, he catalogued the abuses heaped upon the province by Ottawa. "Mostly everyone that I talk to speaks English," he said about the imposition and cost of bilingualism. "Who the heck made this debt?" he waxed rhetorically, calling the GST a tax that would be unnecessary in an independent, debt-free Alberta. "It sure wasn't Alberta," Kratchmer continued, answering his own question. "It was these guys from the east: Chrétien, Trudeau, Mulroney." As for the "waste" of federal income tax and fuel taxes, Kratchmer said, "I drove the number one highway—it's rougher than it's ever been. They're taking [those taxes] and God knows what they're doing with [them]."

A banner reading "Western Canada Concept Will Free the West" was fixed to the wall with duct tape. The tape succumbed to the June heat and the message fell to the ground in a heap.



Robert Kratchmer speaks to WCC supporters.

In a rambling screed that lasted 20 minutes, Kratchmer went on to explain the WCC's short-term aims. No longer a political party, the WCC is now trying to establish a network of volunteers to collect the signatures of 10 per cent of eligible voters in the province to call for a referendum with this question: "Do you desire our province to cease to be a part of Canada and become an independent sovereign nation state?"

A man in his thirties then asked about the WCC's cultural agenda. A WCC document alludes to the favourable chances of separation because of the province's culturally "homogeneous population." Kratchmer tried to guide the discussion back to the petition, but the questioner persisted.

Kratchmer dismissed the document and eventually his voice hardened. “If you love central Canada so much, my friend,” he told the questioner, “I think you should maybe move back there.” The meeting quickly deteriorated.

WCC statements on culture are Eurocentric at best and certainly open to charges of xenophobia. Culture is addressed on the WCC website this way: “We believe in development and protection of a genuine national culture true to our existing European heritage and values. Multiculturalism has meant in the end cultural ghettoization, conflict and no culture at all.” This may go some way toward explaining the dismal attendance the Kratchmers also encountered at WCC meetings in Rocky Mountain House and Stettler, where only one person showed up.

“The federal government has gone to great lengths to force me to now say I’m embarrassed and ashamed to be a Canadian.”—Rob James



MARINI WILSON

A High River audience at an Alberta Residents League meeting applaud Ted Morton.

Driving back to Calgary, I thought the WCC’s fate might be read in their banner. At each presentation I attended, the Kratchmers used duct tape to fix a banner reading “Western Canada Concept Will Free the West” to the wall. At each presentation, however, the tape eventually succumbed to the June heat and the message fell to the ground in a heap.

IF THE DISCONTENT EXPRESSED AT THE TORY AGM didn’t inspire people to mobilize with the WCC, I wondered if other groups were having better luck. So I joined Bruce Hutton and the Separation Party of Alberta (SPA) at the Radisson Hotel in Calgary on June 21. The SPA is largely the brainchild of Hutton, a retired RCMP officer from Rocky

Mountain House and the party’s interim leader. The SPA’s frustrations are not very different from the WCC’s, but in Hutton at least the SPA has a relatively articulate spokesman.

Talking to an audience of 13, Hutton is honest about where separation’s chances sit. “A referendum on separation today would be defeated soundly,” he tells the crowd when discussing the WCC proposal. The SPA, Hutton continues, is a work in progress on the road to becoming an official party. As such, the party condemns Klein’s Tories, for failing to protect Alberta, almost as much as he attacks Ottawa.

Later, in private, Hutton is frank about the “disappointingly low” turnout during the SPA’s provincial tour. “A lot of people are taking a wait-and-see attitude,” he says. “They’ve been burned by the Confederation of Regions, by the WCC, by the Alberta Independence Party.” Hutton believes the SPA is different because it has moved beyond anger to resolve. The SPA claims that the only way to ensure economic diversity in Alberta’s future is separation. A triple-E Senate, according to Hutton, may solve problems of representation, but the flow of transfer payments to the east will rob Alberta of the finances it needs to diversify before the oil and gas run out.

Hutton believes there would be more Alberta separatists—now 16 per cent of the population, according to the Canada West Foundation—if people knew how much money the province was “losing” in transfer payments. Albertans have not suffered enough to take notice, Hutton argues. “My fear is that we won’t suffer enough until the oil and gas is gone, and then it’ll be too late,” he says. He adds that Albertans currently “have it too good to care,” which is why separation fell off the public radar after the PC convention, despite the lack of federal response to the mad cow crisis and the Supreme Court’s ruling on same-sex marriage.

It seems, then, that the tinder gathered at the PC convention never caught flame. Yet in the strange marriage of Ted Morton and the Alberta Residents League, a separatist root fire may be burning beneath what appears to be a simple agenda for reasserting Alberta’s interests.

PATRICK BEAUCHAMP, a 65-year-old Calgary oilman and entrepreneur, started the Alberta Residents League (ARL) in February 2002. Speaking from the ARL’s downtown Calgary office, he describes how he used his business skills to test public responses to various proposals. Beauchamp started the ARL with a website calling for Alberta to join the United States. At the time, the ARL described itself as “a non-profit society dedicated to having Alberta join the United States of America as the 51st State of the Union in exchange for plus or minus \$250,000 U.S. tax-free for every Alberta resident of voting age.” Beauchamp gave up when he realized that only 5 per cent of Albertans would support joining the U.S. this way. He switched the ARL’s mission—he saw Alberta as a flourishing independent country, keeping the billions of dollars it “loses” every year in transfer payments.

How to tell one separatist faction from another

In tolerating separatist rhetoric at the March 2003 Tory convention, Ralph Klein allowed a fringe movement to grab national headlines. The premier even had to deflect charges that he belonged to the separatist camp himself. But to call them a “camp” might be giving the province’s separatists too much credit. Far from a coherent movement, Alberta separatists are relatively anonymous and scattered.

The granddaddy of regional separatist groups is the 23-year-old Western Canada Concept (www.westcan.org). The WCC was one of the first organizations to use the word “separation” as a response to western Canadian grievances. The WCC wants the four western provinces and the territories to merge, citing “disproportional political representation,” transfer payments and “federal corruption” as motivation enough.

While its hatred for Pierre Trudeau was re-directed at Jean Chrétien, and the Kyoto Accord replaced the National Energy Program, the WCC doesn’t subscribe to the “Alberta Agenda” outlined in the infamous “firewall” letter sent to Klein in 2001 (see page 23). Under the heading “Cultural Reasons for Independence,” an online WCC proclamation states: “We are witnessing in Canada the planned genocide of European Christian culture. Where can we of European heritage go when our culture has been destroyed here?” This rhetoric, combined with the WCC’s desire to halt immigration to a “new” Alberta, renders them extreme even among extremists.

The Separation Party of Alberta (www.separationalberta.com) shares some ideological turf with the WCC, although they envision Alberta “going it alone,” without any regional partners. The party is brand new, having elected interim leader Bruce Hutton at their founding convention in Calgary in October 2003. The SPA wants to unite separatists under one umbrella organization and field candidates in the next provincial election.

The SPA trots out the same arguments for separation as the WCC and displays some of the

same extremist social policies; it advocates, for instance, “boot camps” for criminal offenders and a binding referendum on the reinstatement of capital punishment. The SPA wants to rid Albertans of “government waste,” and to bring “more transparency” to the judicial and legislative branches of government.

The most inchoate movement is One Ten West (www.oneten-west.org). The brainchild of Joe Hochhausen and Joe Pawley, “One Ten” refers to the longitude of the Alberta/Saskatchewan border; Hochhausen and Pawley envision B.C. and Alberta federating together. Their reasons for separation are similar to the WCC’s and SPA’s, albeit less developed and without a social or cultural component. But they do “applaud” former Ontario Premier Mike Harris’s suggestion that Maritimers are “welfare bums.”

As recently as 2002, the Alberta Residents League (www.albertaresidentsleague.com) advocated joining the U.S., but dropped this goal for a more conciliatory approach that includes the use of separation as a threat. The ARL mandate is built around the Alberta Agenda and remaining in a refederated Canada.

While the ARL does appeal to a large contingent of disaffected Albertans, its reasoning can be difficult to take seriously. “We got an elected dictatorship with sometimes hostile indifference to Western interests and values,” argues the ARL website. With such inflammatory language, the ARL isn’t likely to find many eager listeners in Ottawa, nor will it win many influential converts in Alberta.

According to the Canada West Foundation, 71 per cent of Albertans think provincial interests are poorly or very poorly represented at the federal level and 60 per cent believe provincial governments should have more power. But only 26 per cent strongly or somewhat agree that Alberta would be better off economically if it left Confederation.

—Evan Osenton



Western Canada Concept stamps, not legal tender, but used by members in the eighties.

University of Calgary Archives, Dr. F.C. Marshall fonds.



“That wasn’t saleable either,” Beauchamp tells me. “Most Albertans are great Canadians. The most Albertans want is ‘More Alberta, less Ottawa’—less interference in our everyday lives. Basically we should do what Quebec has done.”

Beauchamp describes how Alberta can reassert its authority, essentially the so-called “Alberta Agenda” as outlined by senator-elect Ted Morton and several other prominent Albertans in their now-famous “firewall” open letter to Ralph Klein back in 2001. There are five pillars to the Alberta Agenda: withdrawing from the Canada Pension Plan and creating an Alberta Pension Plan; collecting personal tax directly at the provincial level; creating an Alberta provincial police force to replace the RCMP by 2012; aggressively resuming responsibility for health

“If Ottawa tries to obstruct our right to the Alberta Agenda then a lot of people will get angry.”—Ted Morton



Ted Morton addresses the audience at an Alberta Residents League meeting in High River.

care policy at the provincial level; pushing Senate reform back onto the national agenda. For those who fear constitutional reform, one strong appeal of the “firewall” is that these changes can be pursued unilaterally, without the approval of the federal government.

The ARL has created a network of team leaders to organize town hall meetings across the province. At these sessions, the plan goes, the ARL will spread its message and gain the support necessary to have all municipal districts pass resolutions asking the Klein government to move ahead with the Alberta Agenda. Beauchamp even sees other provinces joining Alberta to compel Ottawa to re-federate Canada—in effect devolving powers to the provinces to stave off the threat of separation.

On June 24, 2003, sitting in the Highwood Memorial

Centre in High River, I had to give the ARL credit. Unlike the sad, empty rooms of the WCC and SPA, the Alberta Residents League drew 350 locals to hear Beauchamp and Morton, who led the crowd through their vision of how the Alberta Agenda could help the province. Morton is a political science professor at the University of Calgary, and his methodical delivery of the Alberta Agenda held the crowd’s attention for 40 minutes.

“If I had my way, I’d separate,” said Darryl Schuller, a 60-year-old businessman from High River, during a break. After noting the lack of support for separatism in Alberta, he turned pragmatic. “We gotta go with a system that’s doable and I think [the Alberta Agenda] is,” he said. Schuller seemed to catch the ARL’s momentum, enthusing “We gotta [get] everyone on side. We gotta get Klein on side or out [of office].”

During the question-and-answer session, one questioner was met with applause when he asked if Morton and the ARL were giving away Alberta’s ability to make a better deal with Ottawa by not including the possibility of separation from the outset. “With these four points done, we are just a referendum away from separation,” replied Beauchamp. The Alberta Agenda positions Alberta to leave the country quite easily, he argued, which would be powerful leverage against Ottawa.

“The problem with talking about separatism right off [is that] in terms of a political action plan, it’s a non-starter,” added Morton. “What is a starter is [the Alberta Agenda].” He continued vaguely about what would occur after the Alberta Agenda reaches fruition: “We’ll take it from there what happens next. Separatism will become an issue if Ottawa makes it an issue. If Ottawa tries to obstruct our right to the Alberta Agenda then a lot of people will get angry.”

OVERT SEPARATIST ORGANIZATIONS such as the Western Canada Concept and the Separation Party of Alberta may show little life, but like Nicolai Gogol’s dead souls, they can prove very useful. The Klein government denounces separation yet happily abided separatist smoke at the party’s annual general meeting, allowing Klein to position himself as the reasonable voice. For groups like the Alberta Residents League and political aspirants like Morton (who plans to run in the next provincial election), separation is useful because extremes adjust the middle. Still, Morton and the ARL might have a tough time selling their ideas—they’d be viewed as the fringe of the political spectrum were it not for the Kratchmers and Huttons at the margins.

Should we worry about separation? The ARL and Morton claim only to want a better deal for the province. Yet their refusal to denounce separation invites the question: Could their plans inadvertently lead to an ante for Alberta’s departure from the country? Would they then change their slogan to “More Alberta, Less Canada”? 🍀

Joe Obad was born and raised to be a separatist. His parents, however, were more concerned about Croatia separating from Yugoslavia. Obad lives and writes in Calgary.