

Alberta's hard-right UCP government stokes regionalist divisions with anti-“equalization” referendum

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Alberta's hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government is holding a referendum today with the aim of providing an air of popular legitimacy to its push for the abolition of “equalization.” A constitutionally-entrenched federal government program, equalization provides additional funding to “poorer provinces” with the stated aim of ensuring “reasonably comparable levels of public services at reasonably comparable levels of taxation” across Canada.

Today's referendum is a reactionary stunt, without legal force. It is aimed at stoking regional divisions and emboldening right and far-right “Alberta First” forces so as to divert mounting popular anger over the growing social crisis within the province; intensify the decades-long assault of all factions of the Canadian ruling class on public services; and strengthen the hand of Alberta's capitalist elite in its drive for greater autonomy and a bigger say in the formulation of national policy, especially in respect to energy and climate change.

The referendum has been timed to coincide with the province's quadrennial municipal elections. The question posed to voters is, “Should Section 36(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982—Parliament and the Government of Canada's commitment to the principle of making equalization payments—be removed from the Constitution?”

Equalization was introduced by Canada's ruling elite during the 1950s, under conditions in which it was seeking to consolidate national economic development, within the framework of the post-Second World War Bretton Woods financial system, and fashion a new Canadian nationalism so to reinforce its political-ideological hold over a militant working class, newly organized into mass industrial unions. By the time equalization was written into Canada's Constitution Act in 1982, the ruling elite had already set about dismantling the limited reforms it had extended under conditions of the post-war boom and an upsurge of working class struggle, especially in the decade between 1964 and 1974.

A further turning point was reached in the second half of the 1990s. The federal Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin made massive cuts to the transfers Ottawa makes to the provinces to help pay for health care and other public services, as part of the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history, then implemented massive corporate, personal income and capital gains taxes, to massively redistribute wealth in favor of the rich and super-rich. Meanwhile, the Liberals' biggest ostensible political rivals, the pro-independence Parti Québécois (PQ) government of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry and the Mike Harris-led Ontario Progressive Conservative government, similarly implemented massive social spending and tax cuts.

Since then, equalization has effectively enforced “equalized” capitalist austerity across every region of the country. Nevertheless, Alberta's economic and political elite have denounced the program with ever greater vehemence, calling it “unfair” to Alberta—long Canada's

wealthiest province because of its massive oil reserves—and decrying it as “socialism.”

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney has used attacks on equalization over the past four years to whip up western regionalism and appeal to the UCP's far-right base. The proposal for a referendum to end equalization was aggressively promoted by Brian Jean, the head of the far-right Wildrose Party, which fused with the Progressive Conservatives in 2017 to form the UCP. Jean lost out to Kenney in the inaugural UCP leadership contest, but Kenney fully embraced Jean's position on equalization.

The UCP's referendum strategy has suffered a damaging blow due to the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a direct outcome of the UCP's reckless rush to scrap virtually all public health measures starting July 1. Kenney announced the referendum in June with the hope that a large majority would strengthen his government's hand in pressing the federal Liberal government and the other provinces for concessions on a long list of demands.

However, discussion of the issues involved in the non-binding vote have largely been sidelined by the wave of COVID infections, including among school-age children, the overwhelming of hospitals across the province, and the consequent denial of care to patients deemed least likely to survive. It has also proven politically inconvenient for Kenney and his hard-right supporters to rail against the supposed federal overreach into Alberta's affairs under conditions where the presence of health care personnel from other provinces in the province's overstretched hospitals is helping prevent an even worse disaster.

Since replacing the province's trade union-backed, pro-austerity New Democratic Party government in 2019, Kenney's UCP has made the stoking of Alberta and western regionalism, and even outright Alberta separatism, one of its top priorities. Soon after taking the reins of office, Kenney established the “Fair Deal” for Alberta panel consisting of business executives, academics, and political allies to conduct a public consultation on Alberta's “grievances” and make proposals for asserting “Alberta's interests” and forcing constitutional change. The list of proposals that emerged from this process included the creation of an Alberta provincial police force and an Alberta pension plan, and taking control of the collection of federal taxes within the province. The proposals echoed the calls for greater autonomy for the province contained in the infamous “Firewall Letter” issued following the 2000 election by seven prominent Albertan neo-conservatives, including future Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

The debate triggered by the “fair deal” panel helped create the political framework for the emergence of even more aggressive “Alberta First” forces. Underscoring the widespread support within the federal Conservative Party for western regionalism and even outright separatism, four Tory members of parliament in early 2020 signed the “Buffalo

Declaration.” It denounced Ottawa for treating Alberta like a “colony,” asserted the province has a “distinct culture,” and threatened Alberta and neighbouring Saskatchewan could secede and form a separate state if their “equality” in Canada is not recognized.

A large conference in Calgary convened by the Alberta Proud organization in January 2020 that received extensive media coverage was addressed by right-wing media personalities and business executives, including the Donald Trump acolyte Conrad Black. In his keynote address at the event, Black railed against the “persecution” of Alberta’s energy sector and demanded the province be given greater autonomy.

The fact that such regionalist and even outright separatist proposals have won support within a faction of the ruling elite testifies to the deepening crisis of Canadian capitalism. The globalization of production over the past four decades has intensified the inter-capitalist struggle for markets, resources and profits; exacerbated great-power and inter-imperialist rivalries; and fuelled centrifugal antagonisms within long-established capitalist nation-states, as regionally-based factions of the bourgeoisie seek to form their own direct relations with international finance capital. Movements motivated by this perspective are invariably reactionary, seeking to exploit regional, ethnic, religious, cultural, or linguistic differences to advance a strategy to benefit a faction of the corporate elite. Many of them rail, as do the Alberta “First” regionalist and separatists, against “their” taxes being used to support “poorer” regions. European examples include the Scottish, Flemish, Catalan and northern Italian separatist movements.

In the case of Alberta, the push for more regional autonomy or outright separatism is motivated by the most mercenary interests. Big oil and its political backers claim that their drive to access export markets for Alberta’s bitumen (tar-sands oil) has been blocked by tone-deaf federal governments who cater to traditional elites in Ontario and Quebec, and use “Alberta’s” tax dollars to fund social programs in the poorer parts of eastern Canada. They calculate more autonomy and power for Alberta will enable it to further slash its already lax business regulations and business tax rates, which are already the lowest in Canada, so as to attract investors and ratchet up the exploitation of the working class. Proponents of this strategy seek to cover up their big-business agenda with virulent anti-Quebec chauvinism that attracts the most backward elements, including openly fascist forces.

Despite the western regionalists’ antipathy towards eastern Canada, especially Quebec, Kenney has boasted that his political strategy is based on the “Quebec playbook.” This is a cynical reference to the campaign mounted by a faction of the Quebec elite beginning in the early 1960s to wrest more powers for the provincial government and use it to strengthen the position of French-Canadian/Québécois capital. In rallying popular support for this program, the Quebec nationalists exploited grievances over discrimination against the Québécois and public services that were markedly inferior than those in Ontario. In the 1960s and 1970s the most aggressive Quebec nationalists, those who founded or were in the orbit of the PQ, presented their program as a “left-wing,” even “socialist,” endeavour. In fact, with the support of the trade union bureaucracy, the PQ and Quebec nationalism were used to disorient, isolate and derail a massive upsurge of the Quebec working class.

Over the past four decades, the true class interests advanced by the Quebec nationalist and sovereignist movement have become ever clearer, as it has turned to the explicit promotion of an ethnically and linguistically exclusivist program that shares much in common with the far right. The current Coalition Avenir Quebec government is notorious for stoking chauvinism and xenophobia, denouncing Muslims and other religious minorities as a threat to “Quebec values.”

One need not make any concession to Kenney’s thoroughly reactionary politics to acknowledge that his invocation of the “Quebec playbook” reveals that, while they take different forms, the regionalist and separatist

programs advanced by competing factions of the Canadian bourgeoisie share the same reactionary political content. That is, the striving for increased wealth and power for a tiny privileged elite, and the inciting of divisions among working people in order to prevent the emergence of a unified mass movement of the working class, in opposition to austerity and ever deepening economic insecurity and social inequality. As the global capitalist crisis deepens, driving ever broader layers of workers into struggle, the promotion of regionalist and separatist tendencies, and the far-right forces who support them, is seen by the ruling elite as essential to thwarting working class opposition.

Working people in Alberta must decisively reject Kenney’s reactionary “Alberta First” regionalist agenda. But voting “No” in today’s equalization referendum, does not and should not imply any support for the federal government and its equalization program. Nor for those forces, including the New Democrats, who oppose Kenney from the standpoint of defending “national unity” and upholding the federal state and Canadian nationalist ideology—that is the principal political and ideological instruments through which Canadian capital exercises its domination over the working class.

Critical public services such as health and education should not be funded on a shoestring budget under a formula designed to uphold the interests of corporate Canada. The Trudeau Liberal government picked up from where the Conservative Harper left off on social spending, imposing below-inflation increases on health transfers to the provinces while vastly expanding the Canadian military’s budget to purchase the most modern weapons of war and destruction.

The working class should oppose Kenney and his far-right followers, and their factional opponents in the federal government, with their own methods and program: through the class struggle and a socialist perspective. Only the working class, unified across all regional, ethnic, linguistic and other artificially-imposed divisions, can wage a struggle to reorganize social-economic life so the vast wealth produced by working people, but currently concentrated in a few hands at the pinnacle of society, can be deployed to meet urgent social needs, not further swell corporate profit.



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