

# Far-right Alberta premier announces anti-immigrant referendum

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Evoking the fascist anti-immigrant demagoguery of the Trump administration, Alberta's far-right Premier Danielle Smith has announced that the province will hold a referendum next fall that is aimed at whipping up animosity to immigrants and providing "popular" sanction for stripping them of rights.

In a transparent ploy to blame immigrants for the deterioration of the province's social services, Smith's United Conservative Party (UCP) government advanced this referendum at the same time as it declared that Canada's richest province must make major spending cuts due to its rising budget deficit.

"Alberta taxpayers can no longer be asked to continue to subsidize the entire country through equalization and federal transfers, permit the federal government to flood our borders with new arrivals, and then give free access to our most-generous-in-the-country social programs to anyone who moves here," Smith fulminated as she announced the referendum in a televised address. She blamed "disastrous" federal immigration policies for creating an "unprecedented strain" on healthcare, education and other social services in the province.

Smith's referendum questions scapegoat some of the most vulnerable sections of the immigrant population, including those seeking asylum, international students and workers who haven't been granted permanent residency. They also propose that immigrants' access to provincial public services be restricted—or entirely cut off.

One question proposes to restrict eligibility for healthcare, education and other social services to "only Canadian citizens, permanent residents and individuals with an Alberta-approved immigration status." Another proposes to bar all immigrants with a non-permanent status from accessing any provincially funded social support programs for at least a year after they first move to Alberta.

In a move reminiscent of Canada's notoriously racist "head tax" on Chinese immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the referendum proposes to charge all non-permanent residents and their families fees in order to access public healthcare or education. Evoking Trump's lurid and false claims of immigrant voters "stealing" the 2020 election, another question proposes a law requiring that voters in Alberta's provincial elections provide "proof of citizenship, such as a passport, birth certificate, or citizenship card," in addition to the identification already required.

The referendum appeals to far-right political forces who see Alberta as "exploited" within Canada's federal state, including those that advocate the province's separation from Canada and are courting the fascist Trump to support their cause. It proposes several measures to challenge the authority of Canada's federal government, including increased provincial control over immigration. If the proponents of Albertan "independence" gather the requisite number of signatures, a question on the province's separation from Canada will also be included on the referendum ballot. To facilitate this, Smith, who claims to stand for "a sovereign Alberta in a united Canada," has dramatically cut the number of signatures needed for

citizen-initiated referendum questions.

Smith's leveraging of Alberta separatism to pressure Ottawa and strengthen the position of Alberta's capitalist elite is part of a deepening crisis of the Canadian federal state that is fundamentally rooted in world capitalist breakdown. Fascist US President Donald Trump has threatened to crash Canada's economy with tariffs and annex the country as the 51st state. This is part of his administration's "Greater North America" policy, aimed at laying the economic and geostrategic basis for Washington to wage war on China and other rivals.

For now, the dominant sections of the Canadian ruling class want to retain their federal state, because it grants them first rights to the ruthless exploitation of the working class across the northern tier of the continent. However, Smith, backed by sections of Alberta's energy sector, has sought to conclude separate economic arrangements with Trump that would exempt Alberta energy exports from tariffs in exchange for the province ensuring a "reliable" supply of oil and critical minerals necessary to power the US war machine. A similar process is underway in Quebec with the revival of the separatist Parti Quebecois ahead of provincial elections later this year. As the capitalist crisis deepens, the centrifugal forces tearing apart Canadian capitalism along regional lines will produce reactionary conflicts over resources and territories that will be used to split the working class and could culminate in bloody violence, unless the working class is unified in opposition to all factions of the ruling class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

## Scapegoating immigrants for the damage to public services caused by pro-corporate austerity

By escalating their noxious anti-immigrant campaign, Smith and the far-right UCP are seeking to blame some of the most vulnerable sections of the population for the deterioration of the province's healthcare and education systems. The real source of the crisis in public services is the decades-long austerity drive imposed by all governments to pay for military rearmament and the enrichment of the super-rich financial oligarchy.

With the government forecasting a \$9.4 billion provincial deficit—a gap largely due to a fall in revenue from sales of oil and natural gas due to lower than expected oil prices—Smith was at pains to rule out "tax hikes" and "deep" cuts to public services. The government's proposed budgets for healthcare and education, after years in which spending on these critical public services failed to keep up with inflation and the province's record population growth, will do nothing to address the systemic problems they face.

For example, between 2014 and 2023 (the latest year for which data is available) Alberta's per capita expenditure on the hospital system

declined by 4 percent when adjusted for inflation. Earlier this year, physicians at hospitals across the province called for the declaration of a state of emergency due to overcrowding and dangerously long wait times in emergency rooms. When a 44-year-old man died at an Edmonton hospital late last year, having waited nearly eight hours to see a doctor about chest pain, doctors began compiling a list of similar cases in which patients in emergency rooms died or experienced serious crises after waiting too long to be evaluated. The list included six more ER deaths that could have been prevented, had the patients seen a doctor sooner.

Similarly, the UCP government has for years systematically starved the education system of the funds necessary to keep pace with the province's population growth and the impact of inflation on teachers' earnings. From 2019 to 2024, enrolment grew by almost 89,000 students while the number of teachers stagnated, increasing the average class size and the number of students with special education needs in each class. Over the same period, teachers' wages increased by only 3.8 percent, as prices exploded.

Faced with this devastating deterioration of their working conditions and livelihoods, 50,000 teachers in Alberta launched a three-week strike last fall to fight for increased education staffing and funding. Danielle Smith and the UCP government, in a massive assault on workers' rights, outlawed the teachers' strike with back-to-work legislation, invoking the anti-democratic "notwithstanding" clause to impose a concessions-laden, four-year contract that teachers had already overwhelmingly rejected. The "notwithstanding clause" allows governments to trample on democratic rights ostensibly guaranteed to Canadians in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms without fear of a legal challenge. It has become a routine mechanism for governments across the country to implement right-wing, anti-worker laws.

With their cynical attempts to blame refugees, international students, and other non-permanent residents for the crisis conditions of Alberta's vital public services, Smith and the UCP seek to conceal their fundamental role behind a cloud of racist anti-immigrant filth. From 2021 to 2025, Alberta's population grew by almost 600,000 people, the fastest growth rate of any province in Canada. Alongside an increase in workers immigrating from outside Canada, with both permanent and non-permanent status, this growth was also driven by inter-provincial migration—workers moving to Alberta from inside Canada. By refusing to adequately fund the healthcare and education systems as the province experienced the fastest population growth in the country, Smith and the UCP government imposed massive real cuts to spending on public services.

This population growth, moreover, was not simply the product of "out of control federal immigration policy," as Smith attempts to claim. In 2022, under Smith's predecessor, UCP Premier Jason Kenny, Alberta launched a large-scale advertising campaign across Canada called "Alberta is Calling" to attract migrants to the province. The campaign, meant to alleviate labour shortages in healthcare and certain skilled trades, offered workers who relocated to Alberta a \$5,000 tax credit if they qualified. Shortly thereafter, Alberta became the province with the highest gains from inter-provincial migration in Canada.

Smith and the UCP were utterly unwilling to increase government spending on public services, housing and infrastructure to accommodate this population influx, when doing so would impinge upon the profits of Alberta's oil barons and corporate interests. With the province maintaining Canada's lowest corporate and high-income personal tax rates, Alberta's public finances are highly dependent upon revenues from royalties from the sales of oil and natural gas.

## **Canada's ruling elite foments anti-immigrant sentiment**

Despite their reliance on increased immigration levels in recent years to maintain economic growth—filling labour shortages in the workforce, expanding consumer spending, maintaining high demand for housing that drove growth in the real estate, construction and finance industries—Canada's ruling elite has cultivated anti-immigrant political sentiment as a means of dividing the working class. Once a feature largely of the far-right fringe of the Conservative Party, Quebec nationalist ethno-chauvinists and outright fascists, anti-immigrant rhetoric has been adopted across an ever-wider swathe of the political establishment, as the problems caused by rampant social inequality and decades of government austerity have become harder to ignore.

At the federal level, the Liberal Party governments of Justin Trudeau and Mark Carney have fully adopted the argument that immigration—not government austerity and the profit motives of real estate developers and landlords—is the cause of the crisis of public services, infrastructure and the housing market. Beginning with Trudeau and continuing under Carney, the Liberals have drastically slashed the targeted number of immigrants allowed into Canada, in particular restricting the number of temporary work and study permits issued. These restrictions on immigration have already led to the first annual decrease in population since Confederation in 1867: from January 1, 2025 to January 1, 2026, Canada's population decreased by 102,000 people, led by a large net outflow of non-permanent residents.

In late March, the Carney government passed its landmark immigration reform legislation, formerly Bill C-12, which contained numerous measures restricting the rights of refugees who seek asylum in Canada. Under the new law, the federal government has given itself the power to cancel en masse entire categories of immigration documents, including work permits and student visas, if it deems it to be in the "public interest."

Under the new law, any asylum claims made more than one year after a person first enters Canada, or more than 14 days after a person enters Canada from the US, will not be allowed to have a full hearing before the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) to determine the validity of their claim. These asylum claimants would only be offered a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRRA)—conducted not by an independent board but by a federal immigration official, and not subject to appeal. These measures apply retroactively, and are designed to put thousands of asylum claimants on a fast-track to deportation. Liberal Immigration Minister Metlege Diab has claimed that these measures will help the department tackle "fraud" and "misuse" of the asylum system.

Federal immigration authorities would also be empowered to share personal information, including sensitive data on an individual's status and identity, with other federal and provincial departments, to ensure that any immigrants marked for deportation would be immediately cut off from public support and public services. This personal information, through the same powers, could also be shared with foreign countries like the US, threatening the safety of migrants and refugees in Canada or their country of origin if they are forced to return.

The Carney government designed these new immigration powers to work hand-in-glove with the Trump administration, as it uses the forces organized under ICE and the Department of Homeland Security to conduct mass deportations, terrorize working class neighbourhoods, and establish the foundations of a dictatorial regime. Individuals who claim asylum in Canada less than 14 days after entering Canada will continue to be deported directly to the US under Trump, under the terms of the so-called "Safe Third Country Agreement."

These new measures attacking the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers are adopted almost wholesale from the poisonous anti-immigrant rhetoric of the Conservative Party. Under Pierre Poilievre, who embraced the far-right "Freedom Convoy" that occupied Ottawa to protest public health measures against COVID-19 and who openly met with exponents of the fascist "great replacement theory," the Conservatives have made

scapegoating of immigrants a central part of their party's platform, pushing the Carney government to go even further in its anti-immigrant measures.

In February, Poilievre released a heavily promoted video on social media decrying the “deluxe supplementary healthcare” offered to asylum seekers, many fleeing devastating wars and crushing poverty, under the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP). He claimed that asylum seekers received “preferential treatment,” and demanded that they receive only “life saving emergency care.” In rhetoric cribbed from the fascists in the Trump administration, Poilievre demanded the “complete deportation” of any asylum seeker convicted of crimes in Canada, screeching: “Enough is enough! We can't allow foreign criminals to take advantage of our system.”

The Carney government has already announced massive cuts to the IFHP. Almost a quarter billion dollars will be cut from the program, and asylum seekers and refugees will be forced to foot massively increased copays before they can access dental care and prescription drugs. Those who cannot afford to do so will be forced to delay simple preventative treatments, leading to the risk of more serious problems and potential emergency care in the future. The new immigration powers adopted by the government, according to Minister Diab, will “also ensure that we reduce the asylum numbers by curbing the number of people that are coming and claiming fraudulently.” Perhaps imagining the cost savings on refugee healthcare after this campaign of mass deportations, she added, “I'm looking very much forward to implementing the immigration provisions that are in that bill.”

Provincial governments of every stripe have embraced the anti-immigrant politics platformed by the Canadian ruling elite, from NDP Premier of BC David Eby, linking high youth unemployment to the temporary foreign worker program and international students, to the far-right demagoguery of Danielle Smith in Alberta. In Québec, the entire political establishment from the right-wing nationalist CAQ to the pro-independence PQ has embraced a poisonous anti-immigrant agenda, adopting anti-democratic laws targeting Muslims and other religious minorities in the name of “laïcité” or “secularism.” They have also promoted a Québécois version of the “great replacement theory,” according to which immigrants threaten the very survival of the French language and the Québécois nation.

The xenophobic provocations of the Smith government in Alberta, and the increasing adoption of anti-immigrant legislation federally and across Canada, are a stark warning—attacks on the rights of immigrant workers are an attack on the working class as a whole. As workers around the world have seen, in the US with the embrace of the fascist Trump by the ruling class and in Europe with the rise of openly neo-fascist political parties like the National Rally in France and the Alternative for Germany, the spread of anti-immigrant ideology is central to politically re-legitimizing the far right and building up the repressive powers of the state. The anti-democratic laws and powers aimed against migrants today will be used to crack down on the entire working class tomorrow.

As the federal government lavishes tens of billions of dollars on the military and billions more to subsidize investment in resource extraction, pipelines and other infrastructure to benefit Canadian capital, it is ludicrous to claim that the relative pittance spent on healthcare and social services for some of the most vulnerable parts of the population is an undue burden. The ruling class promotes this reactionary ideology to divide the working class, to find a scapegoat for the devastation caused by years of austerity and ever-deepening social inequality, and to prevent workers from mounting a unified challenge to the root cause of these problems—the domination of society by an oligarchy of billionaires.

Only a mass independent political movement of the working class, cutting across national borders and uniting workers in Canada—immigrant and non-immigrant alike—with their class brothers and sisters in the US,

Mexico and abroad, will be powerful enough to defeat the capitalist elite's agenda of austerity, repression and war.



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