THE CHALLENGE OF SEPARATISM IN A GLOBAL ERA

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Category: Opinions

By Prof. Alan Whitehorn, Kingston ON, 12 March 2026

Prominent Canadian pollster David Coletto recently wrote a timely piece on *Substack* (davidcoletto.substack.com) entitled "Alberta independence is a minority idea, but the politics around it are already shifting". The account offered an interesting analysis of the political landscape in the Western Canadian province of Alberta. It provided some thoughtful breakdowns of attitudes related to sovereignty and independence. The two concepts are related and overlap, but are not synonymous. Both are highly germane in a federal system, such as Canada, where sovereignty and power are divided between federal and provincial levels of government. Divided sovereignty attempts to combine elements of unity and diversity, centralism and decentralism, while fostering individual and collective freedoms amidst two levels of governance and laws. The hope is that greater diversity and decentralism will not come at the expense of overall political and social integration. Too often in history federal political regimes have fractured and/or fought civil wars. Peaceful governance within a federal system is a challenge and is among the reasons so many states in the world are unitary, rather than federal.

The current debate about Alberta separatism reminds me of comparable, past discussions about Quebec's place within Canada, particularly during the 1980 and 1995 referenda campaigns. The federal Liberal party in urban Quebec areas captured much of the pro-federalism vote. The Parti Quebecois and Bloc Quebecois claimed the separatist support. Over time, the aboriginal sovereignty issue became increasingly salient and added to the complexity of discussion and debate. While Alberta First Nations are firmly opposed to Alberta separatism; thus far, the aboriginal sovereignty issue has not been mentioned or analyzed sufficiently in the current general analysis of separatism in Alberta politics.

Missing in virtually all current discussion is the important fact that Alberta was once indigenous lands and subsequently, under the spread of colonialism, became a federally-regulated North-West territory, before becoming a province in 1905 by a vote of the Canadian Parliament. It would be wise to recognize that the history of past sovereignty is a complex matter and the future may also be complicated in a global economy.

In the 1990s, the Yugoslav federation broke up violently amidst civil war and much ethnic conflict. The forced ethnic displacements/migrations and mass killings of different peoples constituted another tragic chapter in the long, conflict-filled history of the Balkans. Yet, after all that enormous suffering and destruction; somewhat significantly, one of the first things the now-independent, small states did was to try to join the European Union, another federal-like structure. To date, just two former Yugoslav regions are fully members. Most are still at the candidate level in the complex negotiation process. The EU is a much bigger continental entity than the former Yugoslavia and more confederal than federal. Yet, the desire to join a larger political entity so soon after independence and to do so, along with other former-Yugoslav republics, says something about the

economic and perhaps political viability of small states in a global setting. To separate and be completely independent does not seem a viable, long-term option. The enduring and fundamental question seems to be: 'To what larger political entity is a sovereign region to join?' In the cautionary message of the old children's story: 'Humpty Dumpty can break, but then we need to try to put him back together again.'

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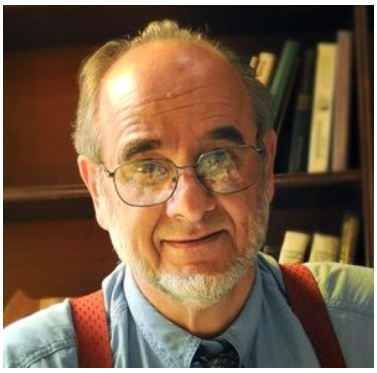
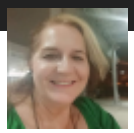


Alan Whitehorn is an emeritus professor at the Royal Military College of Canada and was the first holder of the JS Woodsworth Chair in Humanities at Simon Fraser University. As an academic, he writes on the topics of genocide, human rights, political parties and elections. As an award-winning poet, he explores the issue of genocide and its impact on Armenian-Canadian identity. Amongst his published books are: *Poems from the Diaspora: An Armenian Odyssey/Poesie dalla Diaspora: un'odissea armena; Reflections on Vladimir Putin & Russia's Foreign & Military Policy: Exploring Motivations, Factors & Explanations; The Armenian Genocide: The Essential Reference Guide; Just Poems: Reflections on the Armenian Genocide; The Armenian Genocide: Resisting the Inertia of Indifference* (co-author)*; Party Politics in Canada*, 8th edition (co-editor); *Political Activists: The NDP in Convention* (co-author); and *Canadian Socialism: Essays on the CCF-NDP.*

Comments



Alan Whitehorn – 2026-03-21 17:51:07
Dear Nurnisa, Many thanks for your in depth and thoughtful comments to my article on the twin pulls of separatism and integration (alienation vs community) in complex contemporary political settings. Comparison with the suffering and political subjugation of indigenous populations by state-imposed colonial rule is certainly germane, with too many historical and even contemporary examples. The challenge of reconciling pluralism and unity in a democratic fashion remains an important issue confronting the world. In the meantime, conflict seems to be prevalent. Alan



Nurnisa Erismis – 2026-03-19 14:49:20

Dear Professor Whitehorn, Your article invites a careful and layered reflection on the question of separatism in today's world. What remains with me after reading is not only the clarity of your analytical framework, but also the way in which the text quietly unsettles some of our taken-for-granted assumptions. Your discussion suggests that separatism is not a phenomenon that weakens under the pressures of globalization, but rather one that is reshaped within it. Your reference to the post-Yugoslav space is particularly meaningful in this regard: separation appears not as a rupture, but as a search for a new form of belonging within broader political and economic structures. In this context, sovereignty seems less like an absolute condition and more like a continuously negotiated relationship. At the same time, your brief yet important reference to Indigenous peoples in the context of Alberta adds a deeper temporal layer to the discussion. This reminder shows that contemporary political claims often rest upon earlier processes of dispossession. From this perspective, separatism can be understood not only as a future-oriented political project, but also as a phenomenon shaped by memory, loss, and unresolved questions of justice. Although not addressed directly in your article, it is difficult not to see how your discussion resonates with certain contemporary issues. In this regard, one is reminded of ongoing debates concerning the democratic rights of the Kurdish people. Such questions are often framed narrowly in terms of territorial integrity or security. Yet, as your analysis also suggests, they may be more meaningfully understood when approached through the lenses of identity, historical experience, and the search for political recognition. Seen from this perspective, demands for autonomy, cultural rights, or democratic participation do not necessarily stand in opposition to broader political structures. On the contrary, they may be read as efforts to renegotiate belonging within those structures. This, in turn, directly reflects the tensions between scale, sovereignty, and integration that your article so carefully brings into focus. When considered alongside your work on genocide and human rights, this approach gains further depth. It reminds us that the fragmentation of political structures cannot be understood solely as an institutional matter, but must also be approached through the enduring imprints of historical violence and collective trauma. For this reason, your article does more than outline the challenges of separatism in a global era. It also points toward a broader perspective—one that invites us to think political analysis together with memory, history, and ethical responsibility. Thank you for this valuable article Kind regards,



Gerry Caplan – 2026-03-16 14:27:30

Alan you remain astonishing. Bravo old friend. As ever Gerry