Calls for western separation or so-called "Wexit" are at an all-time high. A third of Albertans now think they would be better off outside of Canada. The unrest is largely due to lack of progress on building pipelines to get Alberta's oil and gas to market. And while Albertans are some of the richest people in Canada, after years of economic downturn they are not happy with the subsidy they have to pay to the rest of Canada in equalization payments. Residents say their needs are being ignored by Ottawa. They spoke with their votes in the last federal election, shutting out the Liberals. So how is a minority Liberal government going to respond to this growing uprising? Canada can't afford to lose the West, with its natural reserves. And the province’s premier, Jason Kenney, seems to be leading Alberta towards more autonomy. Could it herald a whole new landscape for Canada?

Related Content on curio.ca

- News in Review, October 2019 – Alberta’s Energy Future: Pipelines vs. Renewables
- News in Review, April 2009 – The Future of the Oil Sands
- News in Review, December 1990 – Western Alienation
BEFORE VIEWING

1. Have you ever heard of the Brexit movement? If you have, what is it? If you haven’t, go online and find out what it is.

2. Have you ever heard of the Wexit movement? What similarities and differences exist between the Brexit movement and the Wexit movement? Is Wexit a suitable name for the movement emerging from Alberta and Saskatchewan?

Wexit: How the West was Lost

1. “Wexit” is the name given to the movement seeking to have the western Canadian provinces (namely Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and British Columbia) separate from Canada.  
   ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE

2. To demonstrate his concern regarding the state of the West, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has signed on former Liberal cabinet minister (and Albertan) Anne McLellan to advise him on western affairs.  ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE

3. Overall, Albertans are tired of talk – they want action. Building pipelines would show that the federal government is taking their concerns seriously.  ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE

4. Who said, “If the frustration and the alienation in Alberta continues to mount, it will pose a serious challenge to national unity”?  
   a. ❑ Scott Moe                     c. ❑ Justin Trudeau
   b. ❑ Jason Kenney               d. ❑ Andrew Scheer
5. Western Canada has been at odds with the federal government in Ottawa before, most notably:
   a. ❑ When Peter Lougheed was the Alberta premier, between 1971 and 1985.
   b. ❑ In the 1990s, when the Reform Party and Canadian Alliance formed to promote Western regional interests.
   c. ❑ Both (a) and (b).

6. In an effort to make Alberta’s concerns a little clearer, Premier Jason Kenney put together a panel to demonstrate to Ottawa his province’s willingness to become more autonomous. The panel is called:
   b. ❑ The Pipeline Panel       d. ❑ The Fair Deal Panel.

7. The high-powered panel is looking to do things like collect federal taxes, set up a provincial police force and start a provincial pension plan that is separate from the Canada Pension Plan.
   ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE

8. The “golden goose” that Premier Kenney refers to is the equalization payment plan that sees some provinces make payments to subsidise other, less affluent provinces.
   ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE
9. Equalization strives to make richer provinces richer.  
   ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE

10. Alberta Premier Jason Kenney got his provincial counterparts to help him to compel Prime Minister Trudeau to revisit the little-known and little-used Fiscal Stabilization Program, a program designed to help provinces deal with economic slumps.  
    ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE

11. Prime Minister Trudeau has appointed ________________ with the task of helping to mediate Western feeling of alienation.
    a. ❑ Bill Morneau  
    b. ❑ Jason Kenney  
    c. ❑ Chrystia Freeland  
    d. ❑ Scott Moe
TALK PROMPTS
TALK PROMPT #1

Consider pausing the video and giving students the opportunity to talk to an elbow partner for a few minutes or use these questions as part of a class discussion.

Pause the video at the end of the second story, in which CBC’s Erin Collins talks with Alberta residents in coffee shops – @ 08:51

1. Why are some people in Alberta and Saskatchewan threatening to separate from Canada? What are their main grievances?

2. What historical evidence exists that demonstrates that this isn’t the first time the West has felt taken advantage of by eastern Canada?

3. Do you agree with Kevin Cheney’s suggestion that the idea of Western separation is driven by fear? What could western Canadians fear? What experiences have they lived through?
TALK PROMPT #2

Play the video through to the end – @ 08:52 to 16:27

1. What is the Fair Deal Panel? What are they trying to accomplish? What are some of their ideas?

2. Why are Albertans upset about the federal government’s equalization payment plan?

3. Pay close attention to Peter Armstrong’s report on equalization (@ 11:44 to 13:28):
   a. Are Albertans right to be upset with the structure of the plan?
   b. Are they getting ripped off by the federal government and the rest of Canada? Be specific in your answer.

4. What message did the premiers send to Justin Trudeau at the First Ministers’ conference that followed the federal election?
Unfortunately, the Western separatist movement is not a new development in Canada. Consult this primer on the issue by Melanie Woods in the Huffington Post:

www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/what-is-wexit-western-separation_ca_5db2317ae4b0b9ba5c48e1dd

Which issues cause Western Canada to feel that Ottawa isn’t taking them seriously?

Western Alienation, a News in Review video from December 1990, looks at the history of discontent in Alberta over their relationship with Ottawa:

It's insulting to us that we have to subsidize provinces that choose not to develop their own resources.

– Alberta Premier Jason Kenney

We're going to make Alberta great again – and that's when we cut ourselves off from the leech that is eastern Canada.

– Peter Downing, Leader, Wexit Canada

I think it would take a big miracle for the West to want to stay in...the miracle of Trudeau and other parties dropping some of the issues that have garnered them votes, like environmental issues and so on...

– Guay Robinson, Alberta resident
THE STORY

The message

Their message to Justin Trudeau’s Liberals was clear:

Stop taking the West for granted!

They delivered their message in the 2019 election by voting in a full complement of Conservative candidates from the Western Manitoba border to the Rocky Mountains. Alberta and Saskatchewan emerged as a sea of blue. All

Trudeau and the Liberals could do was lick their wounds and hope that their next mandate – a minority government with no Western representation – would give them enough time to help alleviate the concerns of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Real discontentment

And by all accounts, their discontentment is real and justifiable. Prior to the election,
the so-called Wexit movement was born. A variation on the term Brexit, which describes the efforts of Great Britain to leave the European Union, Wexit stands for “Western exit.” Wexit expresses the desire by some people in Alberta and Saskatchewan to separate from Canada and become their own nation. In fact, the Wexit Alberta party, led by former RCMP officer Peter Downing, has become the voice of the cause.

Downing has come under some scrutiny as a leader due to his right-wing stance on many issues and his combativeness in interviews that challenge his political positions. In fact, Downing and Wexit Alberta, while getting a lot of media attention, are considered the extreme voice of Alberta’s discontent – albeit one that needs to be taken seriously.

**Pragmatic persuasion**

Meanwhile, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney has taken a more pragmatic approach to showing Ottawa that the citizens of his province are not happy. His goal is to persuade the Trudeau government – as assertively as possible – to start to give Alberta its due. The oil and gas sector has certainly brought a great deal of wealth to Western Canada and, by extension, the rest of the country. Kenney is arguing that, while the carbon economy is on the way out, it’s not about to disappear in a day or two. There needs to be
a transition to clean energy and there is still a place for oil and gas (Alberta staples!) in a nation that is 30 years away from becoming carbon neutral. Kenney and his ally Premier Scott Moe in Saskatchewan argue that carbon taxes and green policies that are more suited to Eastern Canada don’t work in the West because the economy is structured around fossil fuels. You can’t simply throw an economy away and replace it with a new one.

You need a proper and fair transition.

**Fair Deal**

To demonstrate how serious Alberta is about getting Ottawa on side when it comes to treating his province fairly, Kenney has put together something called the Fair Deal Panel. This group of influential Albertans is in the process of investigating and recommending policies that will strengthen the position of the province in the Canadian federation. Some of the ideas being floated are an independent Alberta pension
plan (separate from the Canada Pension Plan) and a provincial police force (as opposed to the RCMP).

**Hands full**

For his part, Prime Minister Trudeau has reached out to the West. He appointed former Liberal cabinet minister Anne McLellan as his special advisor on Western affairs. He has also made Chrystia Freeland his deputy prime minister with the specific task of dealing with issues causing unrest in the West. Trudeau and Freeland will have their hands full. From Western separatists to an overall push for more provincial sovereignty, the Liberals are facing a major challenge to national unity in their second term in office.

**TO CONSIDER**

1. What was the message that Western Canadians delivered to Justin Trudeau after the election in the fall of 2019?
2. What were Westerners upset about?
3. Why do the Liberals need to take Western concerns seriously?
4. What actions are people in the West taking to assert their independence and push for more power?
5. What is Trudeau doing to try to calm the mood in Western Canada?
ACTIVITY #1: Understanding Equalization

Money in
The federal government collects about $330 billion in taxes each year. Almost 50 per cent of this revenue is generated from personal income tax. The rest is made up of other forms of taxation – corporate tax, GST, non-resident tax, E.I. premiums – while about nine per cent of revenue comes from non-tax streams.

Money out
Once this money is collected, the federal government gives a lot of the money back to the provinces, with equalization payments playing a key role in making sure everyone is operating at the same fiscal level. The federal government figures out how much to give back using a mathematical formula that takes into account provincial natural resource revenues, income tax and property tax. Provinces that are doing well in these areas are considered “have”
provinces, while those that are struggling are considered “have not” provinces. Equalization is a way to balance the playing field by trying to ensure the same basic standard of services from one province to the next. For example, a “have not” province might need federal money to bolster their healthcare, education or welfare system.

**It’s in the Constitution!**
The Constitution Act of 1982 states:

“Parliament and the Government of Canada are committed to the principle of making equalization payments to ensure that provincial governments have sufficient revenues to provide reasonably comparable levels of public services and reasonably comparable levels of taxation.”

Alberta has long complained that the equalization formula is not working in their favour. You can see in the chart on the following page that, in 2018-2019, the province didn’t receive any form of equalization (something that has been going on since 1957). The reason for this has more to do with the fact that Alberta has traditionally been a “have” province. In other words, the Alberta economy (even today, when it is struggling) tends to outperform the “have not” provinces. Albertans simply make more money and pay more taxes than people living in Nova Scotia.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Equalization Payment (in millions of dollars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saskatchewan</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitoba</td>
<td>$2,037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>$963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>$11,732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Brunswick</td>
<td>$1,874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nova Scotia</td>
<td>$1,933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Edward Island</td>
<td>$419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newfoundland and Labrador</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reflection**

Use the information in this table and conduct some independent research on equalization payments.

- Do you think Canada needs to use an equalization system to maintain a level playing field across the country?
- Would abandoning the system encourage “have not” provinces to work harder to improve their economic situation or cause them to spiral into an impoverished situation?
ACTIVITY #2: A Fair Deal

Review the following ideas from the Fair Deal Panel and answer the questions on page 22.

The Fair Deal Panel is listening to Albertans and their ideas for Alberta’s future.

Specific areas being explored include*:

● Establishing a provincial revenue agency to collect provincial taxes directly by ending the Canada-Alberta Tax Collection Agreement, while joining Quebec in seeking an agreement to collect federal taxes within the province.

● Creating an Alberta Pension Plan by withdrawing from the Canada Pension Plan.

● Establishing a provincial police force by ending the Alberta Police Service Agreement with the Government of Canada.

● Emulating Quebec’s practice of playing a larger role in international relations, in part by seeking Alberta representation in treaty negotiations that affect Alberta’s interests.
● Emulating Quebec’s legal requirement that public bodies, including municipalities and school boards, obtain the approval of the provincial government before they can enter into agreements with the federal government.
● Using the existing provincial power to appoint the Chief Firearms Officer for Alberta.
● Opting out of federal cost-share programs with full compensation, such as the federal government’s proposed pharmacare program.
● Seeking an exchange of tax points for federal cash transfers under the Canada Health and Social Transfer.
● Establishing a formalized provincial constitution.

Questions
1. Why do you think there are so many references to Quebec in the Fair Deal Plan?
2. Which ideas do you think are most likely to succeed?
3. Which ideas do you think are most likely to fail?
4. What can you infer from what you’ve read about the Fair Deal Plan? Explain the reasons why you think so many Albertans are upset with the federal government.

ACTIVITY #3: Wexit Alberta’s Plan

Take a look at Wexit Alberta’s sovereignty plan and answer the questions that follow.

Alberta Sovereignty: We will ensure that Alberta remains sovereign, and [in] no way subordinate to the Government of Canada, British Crown, or the United Nations by:

- Universal Declaration of Independence from Canada and secession from the British Commonwealth; Establishment of an Alberta Constitution to be citizen ratified via direct referendum; Delivery of all essential national government services;

- Withdraw from United Nations agreements that erode Alberta Sovereignty, including but not limited to the UN Compact on Migration, the Paris Climate Accord, and Agenda 2030.

- Enhance economic, military, and geo-political cooperation with the United States of America.

Head of state to be an elected President of Alberta with an appointed cabinet. Establishment of an elected senate.

Establish a functional defence force.

Establish an Alberta National Police and Provincial Sheriff Program. Abolish the RCMP.

Adoption of an Alberta National Currency, backed by resources, and balanced by citizen debt nationalization and student loan forgiveness.

Seek and negotiate the terms of confederation with like-minded sovereign jurisdictions ONLY if given a mandate by citizens of Alberta via referendum.

Direct Democracy/Referendum for proposed legislation not included in election platform; Punitive sanctions for breaking election promises.

Return the power of legislation to elected officials. Judges determine constitutionality before law is passed.

Questions
2. Which ideas seem reasonable in the platform?
3. Which ideas seem unreasonable in the platform?
4. Compare the ideas of Wexit Alberta with the ideas of the Fair Deal Panel. Which approach do you think is most likely to succeed? Why?
SOURCES


VIDEO REVIEW – WHILE VIEWING (ANSWER KEY)

1. **False.** “Wexit” is the name given to the movement seeking to have some western Canadian provinces (namely Alberta and Saskatchewan) separate from Canada.

2. **True.** To demonstrate his concern regarding the state of the West, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has signed on former Liberal cabinet minister (and Albertan) Anne McLellan to advise him on western affairs.

3. **True.** Overall, Albertans are tired of talk – they want action. Building pipelines would show that the federal government is taking their concerns seriously.

4. Who said, “If the frustration and the alienation in Alberta continues to mount, it will pose a serious challenge to national unity.”?
   - b. Jason Kenney

5. Western Canada has been at odds with the federal government in Ottawa before, most notably: 
   - c. Both (a) and (b)
6. In an effort to make Alberta’s concerns a little clearer, Premier Jason Kenney put together a panel to demonstrate to Ottawa his province’s willingness to become more autonomous. The panel is called:
   d. The Fair Deal Panel

7. True. The high-powered panel is looking to do things like collect federal taxes, set up a provincial police force and start a provincial pension plan that is separate from the Canada Pension Plan.

8. True. The “golden goose” that Premier Kenney refers to is the equalization payment plan that sees some provinces make payments to subsidise other, less affluent provinces.


10. True. Alberta Premier Jason Kenney got his provincial counterparts to help him to compel Prime Minister Trudeau to revisit the little-known and little-used Fiscal Stabilization Program, a program designed to help provinces deal with economic slumps.

11. Prime Minister Trudeau has appointed ________________ with the task of helping to mediate Western feeling of alienation.
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