

Alberta addresses separatist sentiment by studying measures that would give province more autonomy



Alberta Premier Jason Kenney, pictured in an October file photo, addressed Manning Conference attendees in Red Deer on Saturday. (Amber Bracken/The Canadian Press)

Alberta's premier is addressing western alienation by taking a page out of Quebec's handbook and looking at ways to give the province more autonomy.

Alberta will open offices in other provinces, introduce an act to give Albertans the power to petition for referendums and create a panel to look at giving the province further independence, like pulling out of the Federal-Provincial Tax Collection Agreement or establishing a provincial police force.

Premier Jason Kenney made the sweeping announcement Saturday during a keynote address to close the Manning Conference in Red Deer, Alta., an event held by the Manning Centre, a Calgary-based right-wing think-tank.

"Albertans have been working for Ottawa for too long. It's time for Ottawa to start working for us ... they must stop taking us for granted," Kenney said.

"They need to understand they're killing the golden goose. They have both fists wrapped around the throat of that goose."

Watch Jason Kenney's speech:

Reform Party founder Preston Manning will sit on the panel, along with Stephen Lougheed, son of late former premier Peter Lougheed, former MLA Donna Kennedy-Glans and three current MLAs, among others.

Kenney said he wants to acknowledge that some Western Canadians no longer feel at home in their own country, and suggested "Laurentian elites" have both benefited from Alberta's wealth and abandoned the province in its time of need.

"How perverse is it to blame the victim in a sense when we have been doing so much to share our wealth with the rest of the country?" he asked.

But he said separation is not the answer, even though he views Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's minority government as "a danger" to the federation.

"I am and always will be a Canadian patriot. I believe that in their heart of hearts the vast majority of Albertans are Canadian patriots," he said.

"My own view is I cannot conceive how we would be better off by cutting ourselves off and landlocking ourselves from the rest of the continent."

Instead, he said he will look at what he described as bold moves to bring some powers from federal to provincial jurisdiction.

Some measures [the new Fair Deal Panel](#) will study include:

- Establishing a provincial revenue agency by ending Alberta's Federal-Provincial Tax Collection Agreement.
- Withdrawing from the Canada Pension Plan and establishing a provincial plan.
- Ending the province's relationship with the RCMP and creating a provincial police force.
- Opting out of federal cost-sharing programs.
- Seeking an exchange of tax points for federal cash transfer.
- Establishing a formal provincial constitution.
- Appointing a Chief Firearms Office for the province.

"We must maintain leverage over the federal government over the next two years to ensure completed of the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion," Kenney said. "We must use wisdom to carefully stage each element of this fight for fairness."

Reform Party founder Preston Manning said that yearning for autonomy is one thing Quebec and the west have in common.

"Both want a more decentralized federation for somewhat different reasons. Quebec more for linguistic, cultural and social reasons, the west for economic reasons," he said.

The panel will consult with experts and hold town halls between Nov. 16 and Jan. 30, before completing a report to government by March 31, the release said. The panel's budget is set at \$650,000.

If the panel finds support for those measures, Kenney said, the next move would be to hold referendums before moving forward — but that provision was not mentioned in his mandate letter to the panellists.

Alberta will also be opening offices in Ottawa, Quebec and B.C. to "defend the province's interests."

Similarities to 'firewall letter'

Kenney's speech shared some similarities with the famous letter that kicked off the Alberta Agenda in 2001 and called for "firewalls" to be built around the province.

That open letter, signed by future prime minister Stephen Harper among others and addressed to then-premier Ralph Klein, also called for a provincial police force and withdrawal from the Canada Pension Plan.

"Klein rejected it. He refused to move forward on it. Kenney is throwing the full weight of the government behind it. That's the difference between 2001 and today," Mount Royal University political science professor Duane Bratt said.

"The similarity is it's both in the aftermath of the Conservatives losing an election. And so you wonder, would any of this come about if there was a Conservative government? If you're pursuing an autonomous strategy, which this is within Canada, it shouldn't be dependent on who is in Ottawa."

Bratt said the speech was the most significant one Kenney has made as premier.

Today's remarks by Premier Jason Kenney

are dangerous. - *Opposition Leader Rachel Notley*

Opposition Leader Rachel Notley suggested Kenney is putting Albertans' pensions at risk and stoking separatist sentiment.

"Today's remarks by Premier Jason Kenney are dangerous. He is intentionally stoking the fires of western alienation in order to advance his own political objectives. He did not campaign on any of these issues," Notley said in an emailed release.

"Instead of getting to work on the priorities of Albertans ... he is exploiting the real frustrations of everyday Albertans by sowing the seeds of separation with tired ideas from decades ago. Alberta is part of Canada, and Jason Kenney needs to accept that."

Trevor Tombe, an associate professor of economics at the University of Calgary, said measures like having Alberta set up its own tax collection agency don't solve any problems or achieve any particular objectives.

"Altogether, they are each proposing things that would substantially increase the size of the Alberta government and because of that higher level of government spending, potentially higher taxes in the province. So they don't represent particularly fiscal conservative initiatives," he said.

Kenney's letter to the panel outdating its mandate can be read below:

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With files from Joel Dryden, Terri Trembath and Helen Pike