

Inseparable: Alberta's Referendum and the Continuity of Treaty Relationality in the Prairies

by Gina Starblanket and James Rowe

ON OCT 19TH, 2026, the Government of Alberta will hold a referendum to decide a range of questions surrounding the province's place in Canadian confederation. All these questions emerge from longstanding grievances about perceived federal interference and overreach into its affairs. Aimed at greater provincial autonomy and a stronger mandate relative to the federal government, the first nine questions concern matters of immigration, provincial residency rules, voter identification, and constitutional powers and jurisdiction. A tenth question asks voters whether they want Alberta to remain a province of Canada, or whether there is adequate support for the Government of Alberta to strike a referendum on provincial separation from Canada. The question was added to the ballot after an Alberta court ruled that citizen-led petitions for provincial separation breached constitutional law. Specifically, the court ruled in favour of First Nations who argued that the separatist petitions violated Treaty relationships, pointing to the duty to consult as an unfulfilled legal requirement.

Treaty First Nations have actively worked to challenge and raise awareness surrounding the referendum through a range of educational and awareness-building initiatives. Their efforts aren't limited to Alberta separatism, but critique all ten questions by way of contrast with the spirit and intent of the Numbered Treaties. The Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations, for instance, writes "These questions do not reflect the spirit of Treaty No. 6, which is about partnership, shared responsibility, and respect for all people within Alberta." This approach is grounded in the continuity of the Numbered Treaties as foundational governance frameworks in the lands claimed by Alberta, representing an important application of relational treaty frameworks in practice today.

Relational treaty practice represents an extension of Indigenous peoples' longstanding traditions of entering into political arrangements of mutuality and sharing across difference.

It functions as a critique of the ongoing operations of the settler colonial project and the racialized, gendered and capitalist logics that continue to animate it. As Alberta separatism makes clear, settler colonialism has many shared characteristics, but it also takes shape differently across time and space, adapting to localized geographies and political contexts.

Theorizing Settler Colonialism in "Native" Alberta

The Alberta separatist movement, for instance, relies heavily on notions of cultural and regional difference as the grounds for its claims. Asserting a distinct identity and way of life for Albertans legitimates its drive for greater power and jurisdiction externally by framing separatism as a need to protect Alberta's culture and interests relative to the Canadian majority. Separatists ground their distinctiveness in Alberta's location in a uniquely resource-rich geography and its purported experience of exploitation by and for the rest of Canada. The characterization of Albertans as colonized by Ottawa and/or by immigration enabled by Ottawa represents an appropriation and inversion of the language of colonialism. Repurposing the colonizer/colonized binary through a distinctly Albertan nativism not only lets separatists distinguish Alberta as somehow unique but also gives primacy to the interests of the "true Albertan," a normatively white, hard-working, often rural subject who is alienated from other Canadians and its governing elites.

If Alberta can assume a nativist identity, it enables the argument that the province is being colonized by immigrants, obfuscating Alberta’s own status as a colonizing government and diverting attention from the subordination and dispossession of actual Indigenous peoples from their homelands. The drive towards Albertan nativism can be understood as a form of “contested colonialism,” a concept that describes the appropriation and inversion of the language of colonialism to sub-national movements seeking more autonomy within a settler colonial state.¹

The assumed primacy of the Albertan way of life relative to other ways of life has an established history in the form of settler colonialism and other nation-building projects legitimized through racist ideas surrounding the superiority of white civilization, development, and notions of progress. Albertan nativism is also a racialized argument; it represents an adaptation of “great replacement theory,” a far-right, white nationalist theory founded on the claim that white or Western power and authority is gradually being diminished by the increased presence of racialized, migrant populations.²

Industry and Immigration

The Alberta government’s targeting of recent immigrants is a classic scapegoat strategy designed to keep regular citizens at each other’s throats and divert pressure away from governing and economic elites who are thriving while the rest of us struggle under the weight of rising costs and poor governance. With oil prices sky-high thanks to Donald Trump’s war of choice with Iran, Alberta’s oil and gas industry is making windfall profits.

While recent oil gains are erasing government deficits, they are a reminder of how poorly Alberta’s energy wealth has been managed by successive governments, including Danielle Smith’s UCP.

Instead of stewarding Alberta’s abundant oil wealth to ensure more easeful lives for Albertans and plant the seeds for needed energy transition – like Norway has been doing with its oil revenues – conservative governments in Alberta have lowered royalties and taxes for companies to prioritize their profits (most of which head south of the

border since Alberta’s biggest oil companies are majority owned by US shareholders). Instead of acknowledging years of mismanaged wealth, it is much easier to blame strained and underfunded healthcare and education systems on new immigrants, and the federal government that sets immigration policy. In other words, mismanaged oil wealth becomes part of the rationale behind the argument that Alberta is being colonized.

For separatists, the remedy to perceived powerlessness vis-à-vis Ottawa is to strengthen provincial power and jurisdiction over economic affairs, including resource development, which, again, they view as hindered by federal government interference and, by association, interference from Indigenous peoples, to whom they argue only the federal government is responsible. When they do engage treaties, Alberta separatists tend to focus only on the written text and reproduce a transactional understanding that freezes them in the past. This approach denies Indigenous peoples’ understanding of the numbered treaties as a conditional, reciprocal sharing of land with newcomers and as an active, living relationship intended to protect Indigenous ways of life from the impacts of settlement.

Where are all the Treaty People?

Separatists generally disregard Indigenous peoples’ status as autonomous political actors and as partners in the treaty relationship, positioning treaties as historical events with little contemporary significance aside from representing barriers to the realization of Alberta’s economic potential. Such arguments also heavily rely on racist ideas about the supremacy of Western knowledge in order to actively deny Indigenous knowledge of treaties and to dismiss Indigenous peoples’ capacity to hold and transmit this knowledge intergenerationally. This is how they justify betrayal of the very treaty relationship that allowed them to make their homes in Canada in the first place.

Reinforcing this Albertan cultural difference and positioning Albertan interests at the top of a hierarchical order enables a sense of supremacy over other peoples and over the living earth. This is why many of the referendum questions include measures aimed at the hardening of boundaries and exclusion of new immigrants to justify greater provincial authority over, and entitlement to, local lands, resources, and services. This approach doesn’t aim to

transform the structures of colonialism and exploitation that Alberta nativists claim to suffer from; it ultimately doubles down on and re-situates the province as colonizer. Contrast this approach with that of Treaty First Nations, who, instead of advancing their own status and self-interests are modelling truly relational modes of being grounded in the spirit and intent of treaty. For example, The Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations has recently noted that “everyone in Treaty No. 6 is a Treaty person regardless of their ethnicity, race, or origin. Treaty is about shared responsibility and making sure people have access to what they need to live well on this land.”

The numbered treaties, which play a foundational role in Canadian confederation (and without which Alberta would not exist), are relationship frameworks intended for co-existence and mutual flourishing across political and cultural difference.

This follows from a longstanding appreciation of diversity in our relations with other humans and with the living earth. Inter-Indigenous treaties remind us that cultural sameness or uniformity is not a prerequisite for a mutually beneficial political relation. Indigenous peoples have long and established histories of entering into diplomatic relations with other Indigenous peoples across vast cultural, linguistic, and geographic distances, and brought these orientations across to our interrelations with settlers. Here, human difference is seen as a gift, not a danger, much like the unique contributions that varieties of plants, animals, and elements make to the inner workings of Creation. Encounters with cultural difference allow us to diversify our knowledge and skills, as we each bring unique contributions to the interconnected whole that comprises a good life.

The Future of Alberta

Treaty is grounded in an ethic of relationality. But it’s important to clarify that such an ethic doesn’t translate exclusively to a practice of non-interference. As treaty histories demonstrate, Indigenous peoples have long and established traditions of protecting their homelands from incursion and exploitation, in addition to policy efforts focused on the erasure or assimilation of Indigenous culture. In the face of this all, Indigenous nations in Alberta have been at the forefront of legal and policy

responses to federal or provincial plans, with treaty figuring centrally in the Indian Association of Alberta’s Red Paper, activism surrounding repatriation of the Constitution, interventions in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, interprovincial coalitions with other Treaty First Nations, and the advancement of strategic legal and political efforts surrounding resource exploitation and the denial of gender-affirming health care in the province.

Considering this, it is safe to say that Treaty First Nations will outlast separatism, as they have outlasted other predatory and divisive forces over time. Treaty emerges from Indigenous relationality with Creation, and forms the foundation of a distinct legal and political status that precedes and transcends provincial boundaries. Indigenous nations will continue to draw on relational treaty frameworks to fulfill their obligations to local lands and waters, and to teach other living beings in treaty regions how to live in a place of care and reciprocity for those we share our lives with, despite and against ongoing interference by settlers, governments, and industry.

As Albertans consider and ultimately vote on these questions of identity, power, and difference in the upcoming referendum, Indigenous people – in their lands – will continue to demonstrate and model effective relationality. Whichever way the referendum goes, settler colonialism will continue to be a feature of life in Alberta. But Indigenous challenges to it will also endure. The future of Alberta is not separatism; it is treaty.

CITATION

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Endnotes

1. For more on contested colonialism, see Jerald Sabin, "Contested Colonialism: Responsible Government and Political Development in Yukon," *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* 47, no. 2 (June 2014): 375. For an analysis of its application to the Alberta context, see Matthew Wildcat and Corey Snelgrove in Duane Bratt, Richard Sutherland, and Lisa Young, eds. *Red State: Danielle Smith and the Transformation of Alberta*. University of Calgary Press, forthcoming.
2. For a historical account of this tendency, see Sarah Bracke, "The Subject of Population 'Replacement' Anxieties and the Spectre of Coloniality," *Patterns of Prejudice*, September 7, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2026.2646408>.