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►► Quebec as a Model for Provincial Autonomy in Alberta and Beyond

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►► Introduction

In August 2023, the regionalist group [Alberta Proud](#) retweeted a Tweet (now called “X”) by Saskatchewan-born, Alberta-based billionaire Brett Wilson, which stated that “All Provinces in Canada should be able to have the same benefits as Quebec.” Far from being an isolated instance, this Tweet points to an increasingly noticed phenomenon: references to Quebec in the context of ongoing discussions of provincial autonomy, [which are especially prominent in Alberta. In a recent article published in the American Review of Canadian Studies \(ARCS\)](#), we discuss how Quebec has become a major topic in Alberta debates about how to expand the autonomy of the province and create a fairer deal for Alberta within Canada’s federal system (Béland and Lecours, 2023). Drawing on the article, this Policy Brief explores this phenomenon through a comparison between nationalism and regionalism and a brief discussion of the 2020 Alberta’s Fair Deal Panel which, [alongside the October 2021 equalization referendum](#), is a clear example of the constant references to Quebec in Alberta debates. As we

suggest, the distinction between nationalism and regionalism is essential for understanding the deeply-rooted political differences between Quebec and provinces like Alberta, for which Quebec has become a political and policy model on provincial autonomy.

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►► Why is Alberta turning to Québec?

Nationalism is a powerful political force in countries as different as Canada, Belgium, Spain and the UK. In federal states, nationalist movements typically work to augment the autonomy of their community, often with some degree of success. This behaviour sometimes serves as inspiration for other territorial movements in the country, even if these movements' claims are not made on behalf of a nation. This is the dynamic involving Alberta and Québec that is observable today in Canada.

Quebec governments have been, since the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, the political drivers of the federation. Spearheaded by a nationalist movement, these governments were (mostly) successful in increasing Quebec's autonomy, thereby creating a decentralist momentum for the federation in the process. Québécois nationalism meant that Quebec governments necessarily had to have autonomist claims; accepting the status quo of Canadian federalism was never a credible political stance, [a reality that continues to exist today despite the recent weakening of the independence option](#). Nationalism in Québec also produced two referendums on 'sovereignty' in 1980 and 1995, which made very real the threat to Canadian unity.

Alberta governments took notice of the post-Quiet Revolution behavior of Quebec, and, starting with the Peter Lougheed governments (1971-1985), Alberta was often the other province pushing for a more decentralized federation. Although devoid of the expression of a national identity, Alberta politics has long featured 'Western alienation,' which represents a deep historically-rooted structural force in the province that is currently nurtured by pipeline and climate change politics and policies, among many things. Not unlike Quebec, Alberta politicians have sought both a greater presence of the province in federal politics and more autonomy in the federation. In that sense, there has been significant strategic learning from Quebec by Alberta politicians for some time. Yet, such learning has become even more apparent in recent years, starting with public advocacy for increased autonomy by provincial political, intellectual, and civil society leaders.

►► Borrowing Policy Ideas from Québec?

It is not hard at all to find examples of political and policy discourse about Quebec in today's Alberta. A striking example of such discourse, which [we discuss in our ARCS article](#), is the report of the Fair Deal Panel, which was commissioned by the Kenney government and submitted in May 2020. This is how Premier Kenney explained the rationale for the Fair Deal Panel when he launched it the previous year: "Alberta has been by far the biggest contributing province to Canada in recent decades, and a huge engine for jobs and growth. But governments that have profited from our resources, hard work, and generosity now seem determined to pin us down and block us in. Albertans aren't asking for a special deal. We're just asking for a fair deal. And our government will do everything within our power to get it" (Kenney quoted in Government of Alberta, 2019). In this context, the panel undertook months of public consultations

to gauge Albertans' grievances about Alberta's place of Canada in the context of the unpopularity of the Trudeau government and some of its policies in the province.

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In the report of the Fair Deal Panel, Quebec is mentioned far more than any other provinces, as it is referred to as an example of provincial autonomy from which Alberta could draw inspiration. For instance, Québec is mentioned 56 times in the report. In contrast, Canada's most populous province, Ontario, is only mentioned 9 times. More specifically, throughout the report, Quebec is mentioned in direct relationship to concrete policy ideas discussed as potential ways to increase the autonomy of Alberta such as opting out of the Canada Pension Plan, the involvement of Alberta in negotiations over international agreements, opting out of federal cost-sharing federal programs with full compensation, the transfer of tax points from the federal government to Alberta, and the creation of a provincial policy force. For the nine members of the Fair Deal Panel, Quebec is clearly seen as a model of provincial autonomy that Alberta could emulate in a range of policy areas (Fair Deal Panel, 2020).

►► The Limits of Borrowing from Québec: Regionalism is not Nationalism

Political actors in one part of a country can draw lessons from political strategies and policies deployed elsewhere. In Canada, there is convincing evidence of political diffusion from Quebec to Alberta. This is something Alberta politicians are quite open about. As we just explained, they mention Quebec as a model on a regular basis when looking for leverage for increasing the autonomy of their province and its influence in the federation. Yet, nationalism (in Québec) and regionalism (in Alberta and the broader West) are different. Nationalism involves self-determination whereas regionalism does not.

[Simply put, a nationalist movement is likely to genuinely consider promoting secession if its objectives of autonomy are not minimally attained.](#) A regionalist movement does not consider independence as a real option because the state (national) identity is typically widely shared amongst the inhabitants of the region.¹

¹ Political actors seeking the independence of Alberta receive such weak support that one cannot speak of a strong secessionist movement in that province. Regionalism is the best concept to represent the relationship between Alberta and the rest of Canada.

Therefore, drawing lessons from a nationalist movement on how to leverage a territorial identity to boost autonomy and influence is likely to yield results falling short of expectations.

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The nation is socio-politically constructed over time, which means that regionalist movements can become nationalist movements with explicit references to nationhood and an emphasis on self-determination. While the idea of an Alberta ‘nation’ has not yet developed, some elements of political action in the province recall the behaviour of nationalist movements. For example, the *Alberta Sovereignty within a United Canada Act*, is reminiscent of PQ leader Pauline Marois’ 2008 ‘*gestes de souveraineté*’ (sovereignty acts), which never materialized. This being said, the failure of secessionist parties to make an electoral breakthrough in Alberta suggests that if Alberta is to morph into a political community that a majority of its members see as a nation, such process is only in its very early stages. The same remark applies to Saskatchewan, [a province Scott Moe recently labelled “a nation within a nation”](#). In this context, our discussion is relevant for people in Saskatchewan and in other provinces that seek to emulate Quebec to increase their autonomy within Canada’s federal system, understanding that every province, including those in the “West,” exhibit specific economic, historical, political, and sociological characteristics.



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Federalism and Equalization Policy in Canada, Political and Economic Dimensions (University of Toronto Press, 2017); and the author of *Nationalism, Secessionism, and Autonomy* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

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