

Copyright 2022. Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission. All Rights Reserved. The present document and its usage are protected under international copyright laws and conventions.

**Public** Certificate issued on April 25, 2024 to English Account NG C3 for personal and temporary display.  
news-20221107-TTAW-38c6ffd6-cfd2-4a3e-b69a-5dd07758c3a2

**Source name**

The Star (Toronto, ON) (web site)

**Source type**

Press • Online Press

**Periodicity**

Continuously

**Geographical coverage**

Regional

**Origin**

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Monday, November 7, 2022

The Star (Toronto, ON) (web site) • 1338 words

# Is Alberta the new Quebec? What Danielle Smith sees as the future of her province

Kieran Leavitt

**E**DMONTON—Alberta is trying to cosplay Quebec — and that could cost the province, say critics.

Premier Danielle Smith sees in Quebec everything she seems to want for her province.

More autonomy. More control of the federal money it gets. More political heft.

That's the case she lays out as she preps the province for her cornerstone Alberta Sovereignty Act, a piece of legislation experts warn could be unconstitutional, but that Smith sees as political leverage in a long-standing battle with the federal government.

She also wants Alberta to have more control over immigration, its own pension plan, and a police force, just like Quebec.

Quebec's level of autonomy gives it political sway over Ottawa and results in more leeway handed to it by the federal government when negotiating social-spending agreements, Smith suggests.

Experts, however, say that the way Smith uses Quebec as an example of how she plans to move forward in getting a fairer shake from Ottawa is not realistic.

Quebec gets a large amount of federal equalization money (Alberta gets none, but contributes a lot through income taxes), a fact that's stuck in Alberta's craw for years. Quebec gets child-care funding from Ottawa with no strings attached, while Alberta's deal comes with conditions. When the federal government used the Emergencies Act, Quebec passed a motion in the Quebec National Assembly saying it shouldn't be enforced there. Smith thought that was a good move — even if it was only symbolic.

Smith has said Quebec also has more control over agriculture and leeway from Ottawa when it comes to carbon-emitting industries such as aluminum or cement. Meanwhile, Alberta's premier has said Ottawa targets her province's energy industry with unfriendly policies.

"Quebec has demonstrated how the

Alberta Premier Danielle Smith speaks at a press conference after members were sworn into cabinet in Edmonton, on Oct. 24, 2022.

country ought to operate," she said on a podcast in October.

Enter Smith's Sovereignty Act. She has suggested that the act would let Alberta simply not enforce federal laws it doesn't agree with — a step that would take the province very close to separation. However, Smith says the piece of legislation, set to be her first bill, is her basically following Quebec's lead.

Of course, the story of Quebec separatism, as it is sometimes presented in Alberta, is one where the province threatened to secede from Canada and now commands a certain level of respect from Ottawa.

But University of Ottawa constitutional law professor Errol Mendes says Smith's is a dangerous populist message — not based in a real understanding of Quebec or the Constitution — that's plopping the country into a pot of water and slowly turning up the heat. He said

that what she's been saying about the Sovereignty Act is "actually not founded in any constitutional framework which allows you to do what you're saying you're going to do."

"I think we're in a very dangerous time," Mendes added. It's difficult for him because Smith is holding up of Quebec as a shining example of how to deal with Ottawa, while Premier François Legault's government engages in what Mendes calls "silent separation" through attacks on minorities, be they religious or non-French speaking.

Quebec's Bills 21 and 96, which ban public employees from wearing religious symbols and limit the use of English, are deeply troubling to Mendes. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms' notwithstanding clause — which lets some governments step over parts of the Charter — was used for both.

"It's extraordinarily worrying to somebody like me, who wants to see the country stay together," said Mendes. "Certainly, it should not be in any way, shape, or form a road map for Danielle Smith to take Alberta in."

Smith sees an opportunity to be taken more seriously if she takes on the federal government. Mendes said that the fight could cost Alberta an opportunity.

There have been signals from Ottawa, for instance, that the nation's gas industry could be developed further to help with the situation in Europe stemming from the war in Ukraine, he said. Alberta could pounce on that opportunity to expand its natural gas industry and also help offset the use of coal in parts of the world, contributing to the fight against climate change as well as its own fortunes, said Mendes.

"But the federal government and Alberta would have to be getting along," he said. "This simplistic sovereignty kick is not only damaging to the country but, in my view, is profoundly damaging to the province itself."

Constitutional law experts have said the Sovereignty Act, at least as previously described, is unconstitutional and could well be shot down in court. Smith, for her part, has welcomed such court battles.

The push for more autonomy, some critics say, is her way of playing a sovereignty card without the goal of actual secession from Canada. Smith also seems to hope her harder stance will encourage a more docile Ottawa around things like funding agreements.

Recently, she said the child-care funding agreements between provinces and the federal government were another example where Quebec got preferential treatment. The Liberals in Ottawa wanted \$10-per-day child care in the provinces, and in late 2021, the federal government and the Alberta government signed on to the deal (which would see the province get \$3.8 billion), making the province one of the last to agree.

Smith has taken issue with the agreement (signed under Jason Kenney), which aims to create 40,000 new not-for-profit child-care and early-learning spaces in Alberta. She said last week on Twitter that she would be "demanding" that Ottawa treat Alberta like Quebec by giving it "the same flexibility in funding & implementation of that agreement that Quebec receives." Alberta is home to many for-profit child-care spaces as well as not-for-profit ones, and Smith said the deal must include those.

"The current federal funding model under the agreement is deterring private investment in new child care spaces," she said, adding that it is "causing a space shortage likely to worsen considerably if the federal government refuses to recognize these concerns."

However, the reason Quebec received "no strings attached" funding from Ottawa is that Quebec essentially already has the type of child-care model the Liberals want all provinces to have. There are no conditions needed, says Daniel Beland, a political scientist at McGill University, when Quebec is the "explicit model" for the Liberals.

That said, while it isn't the full story, there's no doubt that Quebec has a bit more sway with the current Liberal government — the party is competitive there, he added. That isn't really the case in Alberta.

"Electoral calculus is certainly part of this," said Beland.

While a push for autonomy is held up at times in Alberta as something of a no-brainer, Beland said that it wasn't all rainbows and sunshine when Quebec threatened to separate.

Even without actually leaving the country, Quebec paid a price economically because of the uncertainty around the threat, he said. People left for cities like Toronto and Calgary. Major banks moved their headquarters out.

Businesses don't typically like that kind of political upheaval and critics, including some within Smith's party, have said her Sovereignty Act could scare off investors.

In Quebec, separatists wanted to create a

new country. But in Alberta, those pushing for more autonomy, and invoking Quebec as an example of how that's successful, aren't necessarily pushing for full-blown secession.

"They see it as something form of bargaining chip," said Beland — one that could cause the province, and the country, a slew of issues.

"The Sovereignty Act is actually going quite far," he said, and Smith is "creating something that is likely to be a Pandora's box constitutionally."

Kieran Leavitt is an Edmonton-based political reporter for the Toronto Star. Follow him on Twitter: @kieranleavitt

**This article appeared in The Star (Toronto, ON) (web site)**

<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/analysis/2022/11/07/is-alberta-the-new-quebec-what-danielle-smith-sees-a-s-the-future-of-her-province.html>