INTRODUCTION

Questions of Unity: Secession, Clarity and Canada's Future

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This special edition of Canadian Issues examines the state of national unity at a moment when Canada is once again confronted by old questions in new forms.

The essays gathered here do not treat national unity as an abstract ideal or a settled achievement. Rather, they approach it as a living and contested condition, shaped by constitutional uncertainty, regional alienation, economic interdependence, Indigenous rights, shifting geopolitical pressures, and the challenge of sustaining a shared sense of belonging across a diverse federation. Taken together, the contributions serve to remind us that the unity question in Canada can no longer be understood through a single lens. Quebec sovereignty remains central to the story, but it now exists alongside renewed western separatism, debates over energy and economic nation-building, and a broader uncertainty about whether Canadians still possess a common vocabulary for discussing the risks and consequences of political rupture.

The timing of this special edition gives these questions particular urgency. With a Quebec election in early October in which the prospect of a renewed referendum mandate may become a defining issue, and with Alberta holding a referendum later that month on whether to hold an eventual referendum on separation, the unity debate is no longer hypothetical or remote. It is entering the electoral and institutional arenas in ways that could test the resilience of Canadian federalism in real time. These developments make it essential to examine not only the arguments advanced by separatist movements, but also the assumptions, grievances, risks, and practical consequences that lie beneath them. This issue of Canadian Issues therefore arrives at a moment when Canadians may soon be asked, directly or indirectly, to confront the meaning of national unity, the limits of regional discontent, and the conditions under which the federation can continue to command allegiance across the country.

The opening essay by André Lecours and Daniel Béland situates the possibility of a third Quebec referendum within a political environment that is both familiar and profoundly changed. The authors begin from the renewed prominence of independence in Quebec politics, linked to the rise of the Parti Québécois in the polls and its commitment to hold a referendum if it wins a majority government. Yet their central contribution is to show that

any future referendum would unfold under conditions very different from those of 1995. The Clarity Act and Quebec's Bill 99 have created competing legal and political understandings of who controls the referendum process and what level of support would be sufficient to trigger negotiations. At the same time, the place of Indigenous peoples, the ideological divisions within Quebec's sovereignist movement, the erosion of North American free-trade assumptions, the emergence of an aggressive American posture toward Canada, and the disruptive role of social media all complicate any simple return to the politics of the last referendum. Their essay establishes one of the central themes of the collection: separation is not merely a question of political will, but a process embedded in law, legitimacy, power, territory, economics, and international context.

Loleen Berdahl and Lisa Young then shift the focus westward, arguing that western separatism can no longer be dismissed as a marginal or symbolic expression of discontent. Their essay traces the long history of western alienation while emphasizing the more recent transformation of separatist sentiment in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Whereas Quebec separatism has traditionally been rooted in nationalism, language, and identity, western separatism is presented as arising from a different mix of grievances: resentment toward federal environmental policy, hostility to Ottawa, distrust of central Canadian power, and a populist worldview that divides society between virtuous provincial "people" and hostile external or elite forces. Their analysis of survey data shows that separatists are especially likely to view the federal government, Quebec, Ontario, environmentalists, immigrants, the United Nations, Indigenous communities, and scientists as enemies of the people, while seeing oil companies and farmers more favourably. This portrait connects western separatism not only to regional grievance, but also to contemporary right-wing populism and extractive politics. The essay thereby broadens the unity debate from a Quebec-centred constitutional question to a wider crisis of trust, identity, and grievance within the federation.

The contribution by Rupak Chattopadhyay offers a different but complementary perspective by returning to the economic foundations of Confederation itself. His essay argues that federations are not sustained by sentiment alone; they endure when they deliver shared prosperity, integrated markets, and mutual dependence. By recalling Confederation as an economic project built around railways, east-west trade, infrastructure, and national development, the essay places today's unity challenges within a longer historical pattern. For Chattopadhyay, energy infrastructure can play in the twenty-first century a role similar to that played by railways in the nineteenth: creating material links among regions, generating employment, strengthening fiscal capacity, and giving Canadians a renewed sense of shared purpose. Yet this vision is not nostalgic. It recognizes that modern nation-building must be cooperative, regionally sensitive, environmentally responsible, and grounded in Indigenous participation and ownership. In this sense, the essay connects national unity to the practical work of building corridors, grids, pipelines, export terminals, carbon-capture networks, and other forms of infrastructure that can transform regional diversity from a source of division into a source of collective strength.

My essay returns to Quebec separation by placing the question in the broader context of public opinion, process, and purpose. It argues that contemporary Quebecers and other Canadians recognize, to varying degrees, that separation would not be a simple unilateral act, but a complex process involving a clear question, a clear result, negotiations, constitutional constraints, and multiple actors. Yet the essay also shows that there remains deep ambiguity about how such a process would unfold and who would benefit from it. Sovereignty continues to have

its strongest appeal in relation to language and identity, particularly the protection of French in Quebec, but there is far less confidence that independence would produce economic benefits, international influence, or greater social harmony. The essay also points to the uneven perception of sovereignty's benefits, noting that many Quebecers do not believe English-speaking Quebecers or members of ethnic minorities would be better off in an independent Quebec. By linking these findings to the rise of Alberta separatism, the essay reinforces a key recurring theme that Canada faces more than one challenge to unity and the assumptions that shaped earlier debates may no longer be adequate to describe the scale or complexity of the risks.

The final essay, by Stéphane Dion, offers the most direct normative argument in defence of Canadian unity. Dion insists that Canada can and should be improved, but warns against presenting reforms as concessions necessary to appease separatists. To do so, he argues, is to accept the separatist premise that Canada is somehow inherently defective and must constantly prove its right to exist. His essay cautions that responding to threats of separation through special concessions can produce a destructive cycle: separatists interpret each concession as a step toward more autonomy, other regions resent preferential treatment, and the country as a whole comes to be seen as a site of endless bargaining rather than a shared democratic achievement. Dion's central claim is that secession must be described honestly as an extreme, difficult, uncertain, and deeply consequential rupture. It is not a routine policy option or a bargaining tactic, but a transformation that would affect citizenship, territory, rights, Indigenous peoples, minorities, and the future of democratic coexistence. His contribution closes the collection by insisting that the defence of unity requires not panic, appeasement, or denial, but clarity, confidence, and a renewed willingness to present Canada as a political community worth sustaining.

Across these essays, several common themes emerge. The first is the importance of clarity. Whether the subject is Quebec sovereignty, Alberta separatism, or the broader possibility of regional rupture, the contributors stress that Canadians must confront the practical, legal, territorial, economic, and social consequences of secession rather than allowing them to remain vague or romanticized. The second is the relationship between grievance and belonging. In Quebec, grievances are tied to language, identity, and self-determination; in the West, they are linked to alienation, energy, populism, and resentment toward federal authority. Yet in both cases, the essays show how political movements can transform dissatisfaction into claims against the legitimacy of the federation itself. The third theme is economic interdependence. Chattopadhyay's emphasis on energy-led nation-building, Berdahl and Young's analysis of western resentment, and Dion's warning against concessionary politics all point to the same underlying reality: Canada's unity depends not only on constitutional arrangements, but on whether citizens and regions believe they benefit from belonging to a shared national project.

A fourth theme is the changing international context. The United States appears throughout the collection not simply as Canada's neighbour, but as a destabilizing external force whose posture can reshape internal unity debates. The decline of free-trade assumptions, the possibility of foreign interference, and the prospect that American actors could exploit Canadian fragmentation give contemporary separatist politics a new geopolitical significance. A fifth theme is the centrality of Indigenous peoples and minority communities. Several essays make clear that any discussion of secession that ignores Indigenous rights, territorial claims, English-speaking Quebecers, ethnic minorities, or regional minorities is incomplete. National unity is not only a negotiation among governments or majorities; it also involves the rights and futures of communities that may be profoundly affected by decisions made in their name.

Ultimately, this special edition presents Canadian unity as both durable and vulnerable. It is durable because Canada remains a successful, democratic, prosperous, and deeply interconnected federation. It is vulnerable because the assumptions that sustain unity cannot be taken for granted. The essays do not offer a single prescription, nor do they reduce the challenge to one region, one grievance, or one constitutional dispute. Instead, they invite readers to see national unity as a multidimensional task: one that requires legal clarity, economic imagination, respect for regional diversity, meaningful inclusion of Indigenous peoples and minorities, resistance to foreign interference, and a confident articulation of the value of Canada itself. In doing so, the collection asks not only how Canada can prevent separation, but how it can renew the bonds of common purpose that make separation less imaginable in the first place.