



Alberta Premier Danielle Smith, centre, pictured at a first ministers' meeting on Jan. 29, 2026, in Ottawa. In order to survive as premier, Smith has to placate the aggressive separatists in the UCP, which controls the Alberta legislature thanks to its strong rural base (the party has no seats in the city of Edmonton), writes Douglas Roche. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Smith is coddling Alberta separatists, straddling the issue, stoking the fire

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Douglas Roche

Opinion



EDMONTON—Thomas Lukaszuk—the Polish refugee who came to Canada as a youth,

ran successfully for the Alberta Legislature, rising to the position of deputy premier at a time when Progressive Conservatives ruled the province, and latterly took it upon himself to organize a petition calling for Alberta to remain in Canada that has acquired more than 400,000 signatures—says Prime Minister Mark Carney's strategy to hold off the separatists is "strategically brilliant."

Carney and Alberta Premier Danielle Smith met in Ottawa on May 8 to move along their memorandum of understanding to lay out a pathway for an oil pipeline from Alberta to the West Coast. They met at a moment of high tension with a referendum on Alberta separation looming, court battles unfolding, private voter-data breached, and claims of foreign interference escalating.

Carney's strategy is to show Albertans that cooperative federalism works. Instead of making speeches as a Captain Canada rallying the five million Albertans on the benefits of staying in Confederation, the prime minister has teams of experts working out the technical details of a myriad of construction projects, chief of which is the possible new pipeline to British Columbia's tidewater.

Lukaszuk praised Carney's approach. "He is making it more difficult for Danielle [Smith] to be unreasonable," he told me in an interview. "He is showing that he is doing all he can to be fair. I

believe that Danielle would prefer if the prime minister was more confrontational. It would fit her narrative better."

In that comment, Lukaszuk hit the nub of the matter.

In order to survive as premier, Smith has to placate the aggressive separatists in the United Conservative Party (UCP), which controls the Alberta legislature thanks to its strong rural base (the party has no seats in the city of Edmonton). A Pollara poll from April had support for Alberta separatism at 27 per cent, the highest level recorded in five years of tracking. Though this is still a minority of all Albertans, a recent CBC News poll showed that 57 per cent of UCP members would vote for Alberta to separate from Canada. This means that Smith is dependent on separatists to remain leader. Anyone who doubts the power of the separatists in Alberta's governing party should examine the role separatists played in booting Jason Kenney from the premier's office in 2022.

Smith has literally changed Alberta laws to accommodate the Stay Free Alberta movement, which organized a petition with ambiguous wording: "Do you agree that the Province of Alberta should cease to be a part of Canada to become an independent state?" The separatist leaders say they collected more than 300,000 signatures, but when First Nations groups challenged

the petition in court, an Alberta judge quashed it on the grounds that it violated the Constitution Act. Smith was furious and said her government would appeal the decision. Separatist leaders will continue their fight.

Smith has stated she does not support Alberta separating from Canada, and that she favours a "sovereign Alberta within a united Canada." This appears to be straddling the issue. Her coddling of the separatists was further shown in the nine questions addressing immigration levels, amending the Constitution and judicial appointment she intends to put on the Oct. 19 referendum.

All of this is the background that propelled Lukaszuk to start the Forever Canadian movement. He wrote a clear question: "Do you agree that Alberta should remain within Canada?" Almost overnight, he had 6,500 canvassers fanning out across the province, and they collected 404,293 verified signatures. The petition was legally validated and now sits in a legislature committee. Smith hasn't said if she'll add Lukaszuk's question to the Oct. 19 referendum. Lukaszuk would rather the question be put directly to the members of the legislature in a standing vote. But that would clearly expose the UCP members who are separatists and no doubt split Smith's government.

So the issue of separatism is at present a quagmire in Alberta,

further complicated by a leak of the contact information of more than three million Alberta voters tied to the issue of American money shoring up the separatists. All this makes for sensational headlines and brutal politics.

There is no doubt that there are legitimate grievances against Ottawa within the province. These are traced back to Alberta's founding days when the number of Senators was locked in at six and can't be expanded, despite the province's mushrooming population. Then-prime minister Pierre Trudeau's National Energy Policy was despised by the Alberta oil industry. When Justin Trudeau became prime minister, his environmental policies equally chafed.

Lukaszuk acknowledges the legitimacy of some grievances, but feels these pale when put beside all the benefits Alberta receives by being part of Canada. He warns that the consequences of separatists' actions today are destabilizing Alberta's investment climate, and undermining Carney's efforts to broaden Canada's economic base.

"The Alberta separatists are doing the dirty work of [United States President] Donald Trump," Lukaszuk said.

Carney, the Albertan, needs Lukaszuk to succeed, and should give him public recognition. He would be the perfect mediator to deal with the ornery Smith.

Lukaszuk's family escaped from a Poland then under Communism, and found freedom in Alberta. He started a business and built a political career in Edmonton. Now he wants to give back. "I love Canada," he told me as he set off in his truck for another trip around his beloved province.

Douglas Roche is a former Alberta Member of Parliament and Senator who has lived in the province for 61 years.

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