



## Article

# Mounting Turbulence in Neoliberal Globalization: Political Economy, Populist Discourse, and Policy in Alberta, Canada

James Lawson

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2, Canada; lawsonj@uvic.ca

**Abstract:** For decades, the world's dominant ideological and policy framework, neoliberal globalization, increasingly faces important disrupters. Long backers of neoliberalism, conservative movements now face pressing, convergent policy challenges (climate emergency, COVID-19), which they increasingly deny through populism, rather than address through neoliberalism. Populism's unstable, often localist or xenophobic spatial imaginaries increasingly disrupt the neoliberal globalizing consensus of the 1990s and 2000s, and, thus, continental and international integration. As challenges mount, neoliberal globalization's chances of re-stabilization diminish. However, chance, strategy, and the collective determination and capacities of its opponents will also be essential to establish something new. This article is an interpretive work, linking these themes to the history and current debates of Alberta, Canada, and its unconventional fossil-fuel exports. Canada's leading fossil-fuel jurisdiction, Alberta, has stoutly favored free trade, continental integration, federal decentralization, and new export markets. Its United Conservative Party (UCP) government exhibits neo-nationalist or regionalist populism, opening tensions with the continental integration of its fossil fuel industries. Yet its populism targets the industry's enemies to accelerate industry's growth. Right-wing populism, marked by unstable spatial imaginaries, marks Alberta's history. Alberta exemplifies the current destabilization of neoliberal globalization through populism, with implications for fossil-fuel exports.



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## 1. Introduction

For over fifty years, the world has experienced a discrete political-economic period, often styled *neoliberal globalization*. The year 2022 may or may not approach the end of that period: serious analysts have anticipated its demise before, including during the financial crisis of 2007–2008 (Albo et al. 2010, pp. 105–29). However, the crises recently converging on North America in 2020–2022—COVID-19, partisan polarization, accelerated migration, heat domes, drought, flood, and wildfire—do suggest mounting instability, with neoliberal solutions seemingly absent or inadequate. Such problems are not confined to North America, nor are they a complete list (as the 2022 war in Ukraine illustrates).

If neoliberal globalization is not definitively dying, it is by now broadly recognizable (for example, Scholte 2005). Specific processes and technologies of *globalization*—in production, in non-state and transnational governance, and in electronic and computerized communications—are observable and widely accepted. The period's characteristic analyses, strategic interventions, and political promises also clearly center on specific pro-market, anti-state signs—that is, on *neoliberalism* (Harvey 2005; Tickell and Peck 2003; Engel 2007, pp. 213–16; but now see Duménil and Lévy 2013).

While “globalization” and “neoliberalism” now mean rather specific things, “globalization” and “liberalism” were nothing new in 1970 when the period began (compare Wallerstein 1974). What followed was (first) globalization of a certain sort, globalizing particular things and processes, by means of particular technologies and organizational

forms. It liberalized money capital flows, commodity production, and the means and agents of social reproduction. It depended on new electronic communication and numerically controlled assembly-line technologies. It “flexibilized” labor and re-privatized social reproduction. It shifted from organizational hierarchies towards horizontal governance. From cars to clothes, to financial institutions that constrain all work, local and state-level forces have ceded ground to global ones, but in a particular context and in particular ways (Duménil and Lévy 2004; Henderson et al. 2002; Ciccantell and Smith 2009; Bhattacharya 2017).

What also followed was (second) liberalism of a certain sort. It differed from its predecessors (while drawing on them—limited state intervention, free markets, alienable property rights, etc.). Its times also differed from the immediate postwar period, when its own core propositions developed. Neoliberalism took on novel forms, because it followed Keynesianism, state socialism, and post-colonial development strategies, and emerged under IMF and World Bank conditionality, government austerity programs, popular impatience with both regulated capital and state socialism, and anti-inflation interest-rate hikes (Aglietta 1979; Harvey 2005).

The present article begins with some general patterns of neoliberal globalization. It then relates these to the politics and policy of the province of Alberta, Canada. A pre-eminent but under-examined fossil-fuel-extracting jurisdiction in the Global North, Alberta is also a notable stronghold for neoliberal globalization in Canada. Canada’s economic and constitutional decentralization lends Alberta an exceptional degree of regulatory autonomy for a subnational unit, which makes study of it, separate from study of Canada as a whole, more plausible. The article’s purpose is an interpretive synthesis of historical patterns drawn mainly from scholarly works, activist research, and recent events. To make its case, the article concerns itself primarily with major provincial and some federal initiatives; the important political and sociological investigation of populist and conservative movements of the province in their own right is beyond its scope (e.g., Gunster et al. 2021).

Because of its current and potential role of securitized world fossil-fuel production in a climate-disrupted world, Alberta in our times is arguably a consequential canary in a consequential coal mine. However, above all, for this paper, Alberta’s repeated historical recourse to right-wing populism and regional sentiment complicates its commitment to neoliberal globalization. That complication places in high relief a basis of tensions in neoliberal globalization, not just in Alberta, but far beyond. The contradictory dynamics currently re-shaping Alberta, therefore, make it a case that bears watching, a place where these causal relations that complicate politics on the right in one respect can at least “be isolated from other potentially confounding factors” (see “pathway case” in Gerring 2007). For instance, the watershed periods in implementing and in (now, potentially) de-stabilizing neoliberal globalization have arguably stood out all the more clearly in Alberta, because Alberta party politics has been otherwise so reliably conservative.

## 2. Neoliberal Globalization: A Sketch of an Era and Its Crisis

Neoliberal globalization famously arose out of a crisis in postwar world order. Scholars have described and explained that crisis in various ways. In advanced industrialized countries, some detected a “crisis in Fordism”. By this was meant a crisis of productivity growth through semi-automated assembly-line manufacturing, tied to stabilized growth in aggregate demand. Both the technical basis of growth and its stabilization-in-growth had apparently been achieved under countercyclical spending and monetary policies, and through a regulated labor market that linked gains for wages to the era’s productivity gains (Aglietta 1979; Davis 1978).

Others detected a “crisis in the governability of democracies”, or a crisis of broadening democratic demands, to a point supposedly exceeding the managerial capacities of capitalism and its ruling elites (Crozier et al. 1975). Still others detected a “crisis in the Keynesian welfare state”: that is, in part, a crisis in public countercyclical fiscal and monetary policy, and in universal social entitlements (e.g., Jessop 1993). Finally, some emphasized a “crisis

in international institutions,” or “the decline of American hegemony”, notably expressed in the collapse of Bretton-Woods institutions and the floating of the US dollar (Cox 1987, pp. 273–308).<sup>1</sup>

What emerged from this crisis was, in the first place, a global re-ordering of production itself under a burgeoning globalized and de-nationalized financial sector (Duménil and Lévy 2004). New communications and computer technologies were crucial, allowing marketing, design, and production to interact in real time over great distances (Castells 1989). This interaction allowed the new era’s characteristic disaggregation and relocation of manufacturing work, taking advantage of profitable local regulatory, taxation, wage rates, and working conditions (Shaiken et al. 1986). A logistical revolution, also driven by the new communications technologies, facilitated transport of raw materials, intermediate, and final goods over long distances at minimal cost, with the possibility of “just-in-time” production minimizing the costly stockpiling of intermediate or final goods (Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). New trade agreements secured new rights for capital and for the circulation of these goods and financial services less restricted by states; individual countries increasingly competed to attract investment opportunities rather than to compensate for market failures (McBride 2005; Clarkson 1993).

The new globalization took years to stabilize structurally, ideologically, and institutionally. It faced opposition from major intellectuals and collective actors. However, these failed, either to defend the older order or to impose a new one. Some simply lost the battles that counted; some switched sides; still others domesticated their visions (e.g., Phillips 2014; Ferns 1987; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Evans and Schmidt 2012). Meanwhile, large-scale alternatives to the Western post-war order were re-forged as part of the emerging neoliberal globe (PR China’s radical pro-market reforms), or they gave way to more compatible successor states (the USSR and Yugoslavia) (Miliband and Panitch 1991; but see Panitch 1996). Electoral democracies shaken by worker and student protest waves curtailed popular political participation; their elites centralized power, supposedly saving democracy from itself (Crozier et al. 1975; Savoie 2008). Where governments or their populations resisted the emerging blueprint, the IMF, World Bank, and leading central banks achieved reform through stringent neoliberal and globalizing conditions on emergency loans for government debt. Much of that debt had become crippling, amidst prolonged high, inflation-fighting interest rates, which the bankers themselves had imposed (Harvey 2005, pp. 23–25).

As the lead theoretical tendency supporting this phase of globalization, neoliberalism proposes

that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (Harvey 2005, p. 2)

The neoliberal state facilitates market dominance, rather than passively accepting it, by means including stable money, security apparatuses to defend private property and markets, and administrative capacity to create the latter if necessary. Otherwise, neoliberals have portrayed state action as incapable of identifying and realizing social priorities any better than markets can, and as irretrievably vulnerable to “special interests” (Hayek 1960; Harvey 2005, p. 2). Indeed, to explain neoliberalism’s own policy-implementation setbacks, its “principal-agent” framework re-framed those setbacks as the product of state intervention and the empire-building of state-based experts: Keynesian and welfare-state technocrats were imposing particular policy *solutions*, to serve their own interests (Cook and Wood 1989), a “deep state” supposedly blocking elected neoliberal “principals”. The principals, by contrast, supposedly served a pro-market “silent majority”. Non-state, pro-market experts would set things straight.

As neoliberalism grew, contract-based competition and outsourcing were applied to the state itself. Principals could now outline broad policy goals, set performance targets, and leave the managers of competing public or private agencies to achieve the targets by means of their own choosing. This “new public management” appealed to the neoliberal

right (Thatcher was an earlier adopter), but above all to centrists attempting to salvage the state's policy-setting powers (Osborne and Gaebler 1992).

By the 1990s and 2000s, a multi-scalar neoliberal blueprint of globalizing reforms had emerged, which a broad international elite treated as unanswerable and irreversible. New outer limits for acceptable policy techniques and economic practice took shape in much of the West but also beyond (Fukuyama 1992; Gill 1991).

Now, however, neoliberal globalization faces new challenges, from pandemics, to mass migration, to mounting droughts, wildfires, and “storms of the century”. The serial, convergent, and thorny disruptions increasingly appear to exceed the capacity of neoliberal techniques. Neoliberalism repeatedly refused Keynesian technocratic solutions to the problems of the day. Neoliberal globalization still offers its account of state incapacity in the search for solutions, relative to markets. However, at its zenith, neoliberal globalization repeatedly offered a toolkit that undeniably conformed to its principles, and still achieved major (if controversial) responses to real problems. For instance, decades ago, many old-style neoliberals broadly recognized climate change as a problem, and (to their credit) some developed important market-based policy responses, such as carbon pricing (Taylor et al. 1999; Harrison 2019; but see Princen et al. 2015).

The new brand of right-wing populist “principals” today also inveigh against a “deep state”; as with neoliberals before, they likewise champion a supposed silent majority against the climate solutions of others. Today, however, right-wing challengers to both the left and to neoliberalism increasingly refuse the problems themselves (Sarat and Aftergut 2022). They commonly claim that experts and technocrats are fabricating (or at least greatly exaggerating) the problem, rather than pressing the wrong solutions.

This speaks to some of the most important fault-lines in contemporary right-wing politics. Right-wing parties of government understood themselves in the neoliberal 1980s to be the “realists” and the “parties of ideas”. Now, much right-wing populism rebels against “men of ideas” as such, neoliberals included, who are now styled as part of the hated elites, rather than their nemesis (Malm and Collective 2021; Brown 2019; cf. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, qtd in Glickman 2020). Multiple right-wing parties are now experiencing intense internal disputes or external challengers on these grounds. In Alberta, the sitting UCP government faces such problems with regard to both COVID-19 and climate change, rather than simply offering neoliberal solutions or (alternatively) inaction.

Other symptoms of trouble also dog neoliberal globalization. One is mounting reliance on domestic surveillance and militarized policing, often even at the cost of balanced budgets and liberal freedoms, once key to neoliberal self-understanding. The widening category of domestic “enemies of the state” arguably reflects a new weakness in the existing hegemonic modes of neoliberal problem solving and threat containment: as with all hegemonic breakdowns, persuasion and consent give way to coercion.<sup>2</sup>

This coercive turn is particularly notable in the protection of “critical infrastructure” (CI), both public and private (Dafnos 2013, pp. 65–67). Global North CI security policy dates back to the Second World War (Boyle and Dafnos 2019). However, the events of 11 September 2001, justified its acceleration against dedicated and violent extremists settling scores about far-off lands. This contributed to stigmatizing domestic citizens or residents of Muslim and West Asian descent, depriving many of their rights. As “9/11” faded in memory, however, such “critical infrastructure” policy turns increasingly against non-violent direct-action campaigners, including Indigenous and environmental actors confronting oil and gas installations (e.g., Crosby and Monaghan 2018).

In response to disruptive events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate-related disasters, and sudden waves of migration, as well as the 2007–2008 financial and housing crisis, recent governments have resorted to economic interventions and levels of non-military public spending that neoliberal and globalizing nostrums would have considered reckless and catastrophic. In several cases, this has happened almost without question. Borders vaunted for their openness (including the Canada/US border) have been tightly policed or closed. In “free-market” and “state-led” economies alike, places of business have

closed or been closely monitored, in the name of security and public-health restrictions (see [Albo et al. 2010](#); [Tombe 2020](#); [Ramraj 2021](#)).

A final indicator of disruption in neoliberal globalization is the widely observed general unsettling of cosmopolitan or globalizing identities, and the revival of exclusionary forms of nationalism, regionalism, and localism. That unsettling will be central to the remainder of this article, and is present in Alberta, a jurisdiction decidedly committed to international trade.

Populism from the right has been a particularly potent recent disrupter of the neoliberal era's elite consensus. Certainly, discussion of populism has revived in ways seldom seen since the rise of fascism in the 1920s ([Mouffe 2019](#); [Malm and Collective 2021](#); [Cunningham 2021](#)). As I use the term here, populism purports to speak for some notion of a "people", against some notion of an "elite" supposedly frustrating popular interests. Recent commentary has tended to equate populism with the political extreme right. However, as I use the term, populism as such is relatively open-ended, both in its social base and in its positioning. It may be genuinely democratic or undemocratic. It can range from openness to closure towards elites, and in its willingness to essentialize—that is, to reduce people, things, and situations to some supposedly unchanging inner essence, real or imagined (e.g., [Laclau 1977](#), pp. 143–98; [Laclau and Mouffe 1985](#); [Mouffe 2019](#)). The question, then, is how such particularities arise in any given populist tendency. Where populist movements announce themselves from the right, that fact itself deserves analytical and historical attention.

What future does this de-stabilization foretell? A final neoliberal crisis is not self-evident. In international intellectual spheres, some new trends may make for such change. Thomas Piketty and adherents of Modern Monetary Theory have recently contested neoliberal orthodoxy on inequality and balanced budgets, to surprisingly sympathetic hearings ([Piketty 2014](#); for a critical left assessment of MMT, see [Neale 2021](#), pp. 263–68). Such ideological developments are often indicators that instability may give rise to something substantially new.

However, as is common in a potential period of transition (e.g., [Brodie 1990](#), p. 73), nothing to date points with certainty to a more egalitarian successor to neoliberalism. Nor in this case are social and political movements particularly visible to achieve that task. The "essential workers" of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, briefly but widely lionized, are still harshly paid and managed in spring 2022 ([Triandafyllidou 2022](#); [Ramraj 2021](#)). A turn to deepened inequality and heightened coercion seems just as likely.

First, exceptional deficit financing is not a certain harbinger of neoliberalism's end: it also provided the backdrop for the structural adjustment programs and domestic austerity of the 1980s, and, thus, for the social policy rollbacks at the dawn of the neoliberal age. As interest rates and inflation rise early in 2022, massive post-pandemic debt seems set to play this role again. Furthermore, exploding debt levels have not (so far) triggered a search for major new revenue streams, even as a super-stratum of world capitalists sponsor billionaire space tourism on surging pandemic-era profits ([Levin 2021](#)). An alternative future of outright debt repudiation, steep, sustained, and progressive income taxes, or some other, more egalitarian path to balanced budgets would jeopardize neoliberalism's continued dominance much more decisively than mere debt, levelling economic and social power in a way that neoliberalism portrays as both heretical and counter-productive. The concrete signs of such alternatives are few. In sum, the enduring practical commitment to economic and social inequality amidst these convergent crises should give the careful analyst pause.

For all their incoherence, however, contemporary counter-tendencies to neoliberal globalization increasingly rival reinforcing tendencies. A mere course correction is now harder to imagine than it was half a decade before. As I have already hinted, one reason for that uncertainty is right-wing populism.



### 3. Neoliberal Globalization in the Context of Alberta, Canada

Recent developments in Alberta, Canada, provide a useful “natural experiment” in what right-wing populisms are doing to neoliberal globalization. Alberta is also reasonably important to understand in its own right. Several features set the province apart, and also put wider trends in high relief.

First, Alberta’s neoliberal globalization finds direct and exceptional expression in the governance and politics of fossil fuels. These are resources of potentially global importance, above all the massive reserves of oil-generating bitumen. Apart from the US, Alberta’s fossil fuel industry stands out in its reliance on private investment and corporate management (Laxer 2015, pp. 36–37). Since Premier Ralph Klein’s (1992–2006) stimulus measures and de-regulation, combined with his government’s sustained public-sector austerity, Alberta has also been an exceptionally facilitative jurisdiction for a Global North oil producer (Carter 2020; Finkel 2012).

The industry’s supporters, however, present it as an exceptionally ethical fossil-fuel producer by world standards, a claim both hotly defended, *and* contested as a red herring (for instance, Levant 2010; but see Carter 2020; Adkin 2016). A pre-2014 bitumen boom in Alberta, like prior conventional oil and gas booms, generated high income inequality and socio-environmental impacts (Shrivastava 2015, pp. 400–3), but also low taxes and wide-ranging and exceptional prosperity. The contrast with other major Canadian regional economies, stagnant or sharply de-industrializing (Dufour 2014, pp. 77–80), reinforced an intense white-collar and blue-collar support base for the province’s newly-sharpened neoliberal orthodoxy. The province revived as a magnet for internal and overseas migration.

Alberta’s abundant but volatile resource rents are also politically revealing. While international literatures highlight the dangers of resource-based rentier capitalism (e.g., Ross 1999, 2001; Karl 1997), Canadian nationalisms and regionalisms have often encouraged robust resource rent capture for economic, developmental (“province-building”), and social-justice benefits (e.g., Pratt 1984; Nelles 1974; Coleman 1984, pp. 120–27). Some of these nationalisms and regionalisms have operated as “new extractivisms” *avant la lettre* (Gudynas 2010; Veltmeyer and Petras 2014). However, center-right Alberta governments such as Peter Lougheed’s (1971–1985) and populist right governments such as William Aberhart’s (1935–1943) approximated “new extractivist” interventions, albeit by corporate means. The surprising election of Premier Rachel Notley’s left-of-center New Democratic Party (NDP) in 2015 initially promised decreases in carbon emissions, higher resource rents, and a gradual transition to renewables (Urquhart 2018, pp. 270–97; Taft 2017, pp. 179–85). However, under heavy industry and popular pressure, Notley abandoned rent reform and increasingly stressed defense of the province’s oil and gas industry against environmental critics and Canadian consumer regions.

An intermittent war of words has simmered over applying the term, “petro-state,” to Alberta (Adkin 2016, pp. 561–99; Leach 2013; Nikiforuk 2013). If “petro-state” does apply, careful analysis suggests it must be adapted significantly from its Global South origins; many serious scholars conclude that it does not fit the case (Karl 1997; Ross 2001; compare Kellogg 2015). However, indisputably, fossil fuels dominate Alberta’s political self-conception, and Alberta’s politics also bear the imprint of struggles over resource rents (Urquhart 2018, pp. 175–98, 272–77; MacFadyen and Watkins 2014, pp. 289–347), a characteristic of “petro-politics” (Ross 2001; Adkin 2016). Certainly, if Alberta’s petroleum policies stands apart from (say) Venezuela’s, they also stand apart from Norway’s state-led interventionism. Both differences matter: Venezuela is often used as a locus classicus of the petro-state, while Norway commonly appears as a classic, Global North counter-model (Cumbers 2012; Karl 1997, pp. 213–21).

Second, Alberta’s fossil-fuel sector has distinctive technical and institutional features that merit examination beyond Canada’s borders:

- (a) By some measures, such as share of GDP and of merchandise trade (Adkin 2016, pp. 14–15; Karl 1997, p. 17), fossil fuels dominate Alberta’s economy (compare Carter 2020; Macdonald 2020). Though not unique to Alberta, resource dominance is rela-

tively uncommon in Global North producers. Conventional oil and gas have dominated and enriched Alberta's economy since the pioneering conventional oil strike at Leduc in 1947. However, those conventional deposits were limited, and provincial elites knew it (Pratt 1977, p. 133): they are now in decline.

- (b) However, in the 2000s, Alberta gained recognition as host to one of the world's premier commercially viable fossil-fuel reserves. This status rests almost entirely on the very heavy oil deposits of its bituminous sands ("tar sands," "oil sands", or here, simply "bitumen"). Although much Alberta bitumen remains commercially or practically inaccessible, a massive investment boom starting in 1996 quadrupled bitumen extractive capacity in just a decade (Urquhart 2018, pp. 90–93; compare other provinces' investment performance in McCormack and Workman 2015, pp. 31–36). Appropriate secondary upgrading technologies also became available for such very heavy petroleum resources—notably in the southern US. (See point (c) below.) This happened amidst historically high international oil prices and fears the world would soon reach a peak in oil supplies. In 2003, the US Energy Information Administration took the crucial step of reclassifying Alberta's bitumen as proven oil reserves (MacFadyen and Watkins 2014, p. 147).
- (c) Geologically and chemically, Alberta bitumen has few direct parallels, apart from Venezuela's Orinoco Basin and neighboring Trinidad and Tobago (Stainsby 2014). In scale, they are enormous; in their qualities, they are exceptionally difficult to extract and refine. For the same reasons, upgrading them to synthetic crude is exceptionally energy- and greenhouse gas-intensive, though prolonged investments have gone into cost containment and efficiencies. Climate-change activists have, thus, targeted Alberta bitumen as a global symbol of "extreme oil" (Pineault 2018), stressing the need for a rapid "green transition" to renewable energy and deep conservation measures. Because Alberta is also a high-wage producing region, its industry has, therefore, prospered most when world oil prices stay high (Urquhart 2018, p. 58, n. 6, 72–74).
- (d) For the reasons outlined in (c), upgrading facilities appropriate for Alberta bitumen are rare but large, relative to the upgrading facilities for conventional oil. They are also heavily American, clustered on the Gulf of Mexico near Venezuelan sources. This kind of facility is difficult to replicate competitively in Canada, and are rare in Asia, complicating hopes for export diversification.

A third reason to study Alberta for signs of instability in neoliberal globalization is the way the latter fared in Canadian resource debates. In the 1970s and 1980s, these debates included bitumen's potential contribution to Canadian economic nationalism in a federally led economic strategy (Richards and Pratt 1979; Urquhart 2018, pp. 64–95); more recent debates have centered on climate science and the need for a "green transition" to renewables and deep conservation measures. As the cross-border investment and infrastructural boom in Alberta bitumen has matured, peaceful but increasingly militant anti-pipeline direct actions, divestment campaigns, Indigenous land- and water-defense actions, and other opposition has risen against it. Beyond threatening individual projects, these campaigns threatened the massive investments in bitumen extraction capacity that had built up since the mid-1990s—and the local elite and popular oil-based aspirations that accompanied them (Black et al. 2014; Bowles and Veltmeyer 2014; Hoberg 2021).

The anti-bitumen campaigns were multi-scalar: they included operations at specific sites along future transportation corridors, but also generalized stigmatization of international investment in bitumen. These campaigns drew on domestic funding, but also on funders abroad, including US private foundations (Hoberg 2021, pp. 35–40; Alberta. Public Inquiry into Anti-Alberta Energy Campaigns 2021). The latter provoked intense pro-industry populist campaigns. Alberta and other Canadian officials increasingly characterized Canadian opposition to bitumen as the work of dangerous extremists and outsiders. The reaction rose in intensity during a sustained oil price collapse after 2014 (US Energy Information Administration. Independent Statistics and Analysis 2022), which bottomed out

during the COVID-19 pandemic. How much environmental and Indigenous campaigning fed that downturn is hotly contested.<sup>3</sup>

Of interest here is the anti- and counter-protest nationalism or Alberta regionalism that ensued. Ironically, perhaps, it arose precisely in defense of an industry that rests on deep continental and international integration, as well as important local capitalist clusters (Carroll and Huijzer 2018). The integration was accelerated by the intentional dismantlement of a federal National Energy Program (1980–1985), provincial and federal neoliberalization in the 1990s, and the implementation of continental free trade from 1988 to 1994 (MacFadyen and Watkins 2014, pp. 135–39), all major goals of Alberta-based energy interests. Below, however, we explore the geographically unstable identity claims of the anti-protest reaction.

A fourth reason to examine Alberta as instability mounts in right-wing parties and movements worldwide is that Alberta has arguably been Canada's most resolutely right-leaning province provincially, and yet its lead right-wing parties have recently shown surprising signs of instability. This reason turns out to be less paradoxical than it may appear, when the wider historical role of right-wing populism is considered, in relation to core principles and preconditions of neoliberal globalization. First, however, I will establish the case for Alberta's stable conservatism.

From the 1930s well into the 2010s, Alberta generated exceptionally stable and often lop-sidedly right-wing party government (Patten 2015), amidst Canada's general political centrism. It played out in and through a right-leaning "quasi-party" political system in which organized partisan opposition was often held to a handful of legislative seats (Macpherson 1962). Left- and right-of-center parties did not usually alternate in power in this period, nor did elections turn on centrist swing voters. Instead, grand-coalition governing parties of the right simply re-organized under a new premier or (less frequently) a new party label. No governing party has yet regained power after losing it: the United Farmers of Alberta, Social Credit, and the Progressive Conservatives all simply disappeared (Bratt 2022).

All this is highly consequential. Centrist and even seemingly left-of-center politics often play out through right-of-center governing parties, adopting to rather than challenging right-wing rhetoric. Average voter turn-out has been comparatively low. Interest groups generally lobby the governing party caucus, cabinet, and bureaucracy, rather than a multi-party parliamentary process. An exceptional "rotating door" pattern links the civil service, the governing party, and industry representatives. In 1967, Alberta pioneered ombudsman offices, for want of strong opposition parties (Stefanick 2015, p. 369). In 1993, the Alberta PCs standing policy committees of the government caucus, drawing government backbenchers directly into cabinet discussions, again to compensate for (and maintain) the opposition's limited capacities (Patten 2015, pp. 268–69).

In part, the province's electoral lop-sidedness reflects long-recognized representational distortions from the single-member plurality voting system, combined with uneven population distribution (Cairns 1968). More people do vote for non-conservative options, including in energy regulation, than the legislative results would suggest (Carter and Zalik 2016, pp. 59–61; Steve Patten 2015). However, the popular vote results still suggest an exceptionally stable right-wing preference.

Parties of the right repeatedly harness a populism specifically hostile to Eastern Canada. Alberta right-wing populisms have also often exhibited anti-market, interventionist, regionalist, and anti-cosmopolitan tendencies. This intermittent legacy illustrates why Alberta deserves broader attention during the recent disruptions of neoliberal globalization, notably due to right-wing populisms: Right-wing Alberta has been neither consistently *populist*, nor unambiguously *neoliberal*, but has been distinctively marked by both. The province's conservatism has kept this dyadic tension in the spotlight, and yet the poles of the tension are hardly obvious companions.

Shortly after the province acquired natural resource rights from the federal government, for example, the Social Credit party stormed into power in 1935, a right-wing, but em-



phatically populist party. From the 1940s to the 1960s, however, Social Credit governments abandoned many populist commitments, and made regulatory peace with continental oil firms. This period of stability partly prefigured the pro-business and anti-environmentalist neoliberalism of the 1990s and 2000s. However, it still included decidedly populist state intervention (for instance, in pro-rationing conventional oil plays (MacFadyen and Watkins 2014, pp. 271–85)), notably assisting the smaller local capitalists and owner-operators that had backed the party's ascent. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, all North American oil production was also highly regulated, maintaining a continental oil price well above the rapidly declining international one (MacFadyen and Watkins 2014, p. 43). This price-setting made Alberta oil production profitable. Similarly, Social Credit and later Progressive Conservative governments made substantial investments in public sector social, health, and education services, well beyond what most other Canadian provinces could afford at the time.

Only since the premiership of Ralph Klein (1992–2006) can we say that explicitly *neoliberal*, pro-market economic policy joined unabashedly *globalized* (or at least continental) free-market orientations of Alberta's politics in general, and petroleum politics in particular (Patten 2015, pp. 260–62; Urquhart 2018, pp. 14–27). The Klein government did not do this alone: it had federal Liberal energy and trade policy support (Urquhart 2018, pp. 64–95), as well as the single-price and energy-supply guarantees in two succeeding continental trade agreements (Pratt 2007). Federal Liberal determination to slash fiscal transfers to the provinces also accelerated abruptly in 1994, apparently under international banking pressure. However, “more than any other government in Canada,” the Klein government “approximated the ideological orientation of the administrations of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan” (Urquhart 2018, p. 94).

Fifth, however, as the national and continental context of the Klein reforms suggests, the shifting *spatial imaginary* of Alberta right-wing ideologies sits in an interesting, unstable relationship with Canadian nationalism, North American continentalism, and, thus, implicitly neoliberal globalization. Populism plays an important role in this. This is evident in the Klein government, the populist, Alberta-centric sentiments of which helped drive its reforms in clearly neoliberal—and continentalist—ways. Klein himself mirrored frankly regionalist tendencies in the province: as mayor of Calgary in the 1980s, he publicly linked recent migrants from elsewhere in Canada (“Eastern bums and creeps”) to petty crime and transience (Canadian Press 2013).

Much deeper anti-Eastern and anti-federal sentiments show up in the province in a variety of ways. At a constitutional level, for instance, Alberta governments have repeatedly formed an important, decentralizing counterpoint to centralizing Canadian nationalist tendencies. This spatial imaginary sometimes appears to endorse a (western-centered) *Canadian nationalism*, opposed to so-called “Eastern” or “Laurentian” elites (that is, mainly, elites from southern Ontario and Québec). This targets both the Canadian nationalism typical of Ontario, and the Québec nationalism typical primarily of that province's French-speaking majority. This alternative Canadian nationalism shows up variously in statements of the Lougheed Progressive Conservative government (1971–1985), in key figures of the federal Stephen Harper Conservative government (2006–2015), and in many official statements of the current UCP government.

Other Alberta right-wing spatial imaginaries, however, propose more radical decentralization and (though less often) outright independence. These options re-emerged in Alberta political life most recently as the so-called “Wexit” movement and shaped the work of the UCP in forging a single right-wing political coalition. Whether regionalist or separatist, such proposals waver between a specifically Albertan “nationalism” and one meant to embrace all of Western Canada. While both alternatives tap into real resentments across Western Canada, especially the three “Prairie provinces”, independence has so far remained a far less important option than in Québec, and far less in Saskatchewan and Manitoba than in Alberta (Angus Reid Institute 2018).

The spatial imaginaries of contemporary Alberta conservative movements in their populist moments are, thus, relatively unstable. This point is crucial in identifying how a neoliberal globalization consensus is becoming unstable in Alberta. Below, I will explore this instability in the policies of the current United Conservative Party government of Premier Jason Kenney (2019–) and the other, more radical right-wing tendencies in the province.

Finally, tensions over resource extraction and rents in Canada necessarily involve Indigenous peoples,<sup>4</sup> a challenge to all settler spatial imaginaries, including environmental ones. Indeed, some Indigenous thinkers and speakers express land-based politics in terms of non-Canadian sovereignties (or “counter-sovereignties” (Vimalassery 2014)) (Simpson 2021; Pasternak 2017). However, more generally, “First Nations” assert moral and legal authority over land-based decision-making, demand a share in resource wealth, and claim the authority to negotiate conditions on public land sales or major resource projects, or ultimately to say “no” to such projects. Because dedicated resource-transportation projects increasingly pass through other parts of the country, such land politics related to Alberta bitumen may or may not happen in Alberta (Awâsis 2014).

To varying degrees, settler governments typically claim that historic and modern treaties have extinguished those rights, and that they alone can claim sovereignty. Treaties, with their betrayals and complexities, cover all Alberta, including lands now leased to resource corporations. Framed as land- and water-defense, rather than as “protest”, Indigenous actions may overlap with environmentalist direct action, but differ from them. The Kenney and Harper governments both authorized enhanced policing and surveillance measures to curb Indigenous protest (Crosby and Monaghan 2018; Lambert 2022), but have also sought to draw Indigenous leadership into pro-industry coalitions.

In sum, UCP government and Alberta resource politics provide exceptionally rich (and richly exceptional) material to assess the mounting disruption of neoliberal globalization. Alberta’s peculiarities, and those of the bitumen-dominated petroleum industry, expose it to the relative economic volatility of world petroleum markets and to the anti-cosmopolitan tendencies of populism. All this makes neoliberal globalization insecure in this, one of neoliberal globalization’s strongest Canadian redoubts. Overall, then, Alberta politics serve as a rather peculiar but revealing case of the current troubling of neoliberal globalization.

#### 4. Mounting Identitarian Tensions in Alberta’s Neoliberal Globalization

That neoliberal globalization has seemed particularly secure in Alberta might seem unsurprising to casual observers. Whether or not their policy conformed to their rhetorical frameworks, Alberta government leaders have long declared private property, small government, and market-based governance to be sacrosanct, long predating the era of neoliberal globalization. In trade-liberalization and constitutional reforms of the 1980s, Alberta politicians assertively backed deregulation, continental trade ties, and barriers to federal energy policy (As its energy export markets shifted away from the American interior, federal passivity proved to be an obstacle to overcome).

Over the long-term, however, Alberta politics have been more consistently conservative than neoliberal or pro-globalization. Populism is part of that ambiguity. Only after the Klein reforms of the 1990s and early 2000s, did key features of neoliberal governing practice correspond closely and systematically to Alberta governments’ anti-state declarations. Small surprise, then, that as heir to this legacy, the current United Conservative Party (UCP) government offers a surprisingly ambivalent public face to neoliberal and globalizing principles.

Nationalism and internationalism have a complex, triangular relationship with neoliberal globalization. The Thatcher government and Reagan administration of the 1980s were explicitly nationalist constructs as well as neoliberal ones, as were many regimes in the Global South that neoliberalized under structural adjustment policies (SAPs). However, SAPs were implemented—and justified—in the name of “opening up” trade, against an American Cold War foreign policy that closely linked economic nationalism to communism,

all opposed to American capitalism (Clark-Jones 1987, pp. 10–16). Neoliberalism could also arrive in the Global South via the post-nationalist ethos of the EU (Girvan 2015, pp. 57–59).

“Opening up” has also been central to messaging in the broad Canadian conservative movement and in business circles on continental free trade, though in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, this was re-worked as security-conscious continental boundary drawing (Cameron 2007). In Canada, the neoliberalizing effects of continental trade agreements (CUFTA, NAFTA, and their recent successor, the USMCA) have often gained support from varied subnational and regional identities, notably in Québec and in Western Canada, since these agreements all limit federal economic power. Free trade with America initially meant an end to the Trudeau Liberal National Energy Program (NEP), an end to the regulation of cross-border energy flows and foreign investment in local resource extraction. However, free trade’s defenders on the neoliberal right often decried their opponents as petty, anti-American nationalists—that is, as Canadian nationalists.

More recently, attacks on industry critics variously describe them as outsiders to Alberta, to Western Canada, or to Canada—that is, attacks on industry critics as “foreigners” or as dupes of foreigners. This seems to be unexpected in the heart of the province hitherto associated with support for free trade and the untrammelled movement of goods and services across the Canada–US border.

One feature of UCP initiatives is an enthusiasm for economic interventionism that is surprising from a seemingly rock-solid constituency for neoliberalism. However, the wavering in its commitment to politically cosmopolitanism or anti-nationalism is also noteworthy, given Alberta’s heavy dependence—stoutly affirmed, pursued, and celebrated by the UCP and other conservative organizations—on interprovincial, continental, and trans-Pacific trade and investment. However, a deeper historical background demonstrates that the resentments now disrupting the Alberta neoliberal and free-trade consensus are hard to explain in the absence of such ties. In explaining this ambivalence in Alberta identities, part of the answer must lie in the protean character of populism.

To suggest Alberta populism is fluid is not theoretically surprising, but in some ways is counter-intuitive when reading the province’s history in isolation. In Alberta, since at least the 1930s, right populisms have consistently prevailed over left ones. Defending fossil fuels against federal intrusion has elicited consistently intense populist identities, framed in various ways. Antecedents date from prairie-based opposition to the first coherent Canadian economic regime, the 1879 “National Policy”, in which manufacturing tariffs, western settlement, and railway construction were first promulgated as a federal (Eastern-based) Conservative party platform (Brodie 1990, pp. 100–6, 112–17).

Albertan populist identities almost always stand against so-called “Laurentian” elites, whether proponents of central-Canadian or Québec nationalisms, and whether allied with or opposed to foreign actors. Racism and xenophobia are deep features in Alberta, as elsewhere in Canada. However, in recent years, fossil-fuel industries have so dominated populist conceptions of the “people of Alberta” that members of racialized communities, including recent migrants, have been relatively well received,<sup>5</sup> provided they welcome and contribute to that economy. Environmentalism or Indigenous sovereignty movements, by contrast, are more readily and openly styled as anti-Albertan. Regionalist and anti-foreign populist discourses are especially troublesome for the necessary preconditions of *laissez-faire* and economic globalization in such an economy, where the logic of raw material exports and heavy imports manufactures, and capital require interregional and international connections. The result is arguably a basic difficulty in stabilizing a solid spatial basis for popular identities. For this reason, Alberta populism under the current government and in the past receive particular attention here.

#### 4.1. The Kenney UCP Government and Alberta Identities in Crisis

At the time of writing, the UCP under Premier Kenney (2019–) is still a relatively new governing party. As with some previous governments that founded partisan dynasties, such as Social Credit premier William Aberhart (1935–1943) and Progressive Conservative

premier Peter Lougheed (1971–1985), Premier Jason Kenney swept to power with populist appeals during a world economic crisis.

More like Aberhart than like Lougheed, however, Kenney took power with a new Alberta conservative party amidst a severe economic downturn, rather than during a regional boom. (In some ways, this also parallels Ralph Klein’s experience in neoliberalizing the PC’s.) Kenney’s UCP is also least powerful in Alberta’s three largest cities, whereas Lougheed had notable urban strongholds (Richards and Pratt 1979, pp. 148–74). Lougheed’s social and economic policy preferences were relatively centrist, while Kenney’s lie further right. One final contextual element is new. The opposition party, the New Democratic Party, is left-of-center, after governing (miraculously) for a full term (Premier Rachel Notley, 2015–2019). The NDP has so far survived the return to opposition and has retained substantial and recently rising (heavily urban) support.

Kenney’s UCP came to power on a platform flush with populist policy initiatives. To unite the right against the Notley government—and against environmental criticism of fossil fuels—the dispirited center-right Progressive Conservatives had fused with the newer, more populist, more socially conservative, and more pro-industry Wildrose Party. The UCP, thus, internalized the neoliberal/populist tension in right-wing Alberta politics, but was also seeking to forestall more radical populist “Wexit” activity (Alberta-based western separatism) to its right, further consolidating the right-wing vote.<sup>6</sup>

Campaigning in 2019 was exceptionally angry. UCP crowds called for the NDP premier to be “locked up”, echoing anti-Clinton chants during the Trump presidential campaign. In the end, the UCP popular vote exceeded the 2015 combined votes of the Wildrose and PCs, and the overall popular turn-out rose. (Participation rates had recently been low.) The UCP took three-quarters of the legislature’s seats, though a substantial (mainly urban) New Democratic opposition survived. Voting patterns polarized between the major cities and other regions, with rural results running as high as 70% pro-UCP (Elections Alberta 2019; Keller 2019).

By 2022, however, the UCP had fallen heavily in the polls, and Kenney’s leadership came into question. His critics have emphasized a perceived pattern of populist but anti-democratic policy, starting with questions about his own leadership campaign and continuing with the suppression of dissent when in power (for example, Lambert 2022). The government’s COVID-19 public-health performance also took a toll.

Some UCP constituents undoubtedly felt the party had not been populist enough or had not been punitive enough towards its enemies. However, the policy needs arising from both the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change were maladapted for a party opposed to big government for neoliberal reasons and simultaneously opposed to knowledge-based white-collar professionals for populist reasons. Amidst the pandemic, the party imposed austerity on social, health, and educational services designed in a now-familiar neoliberal way to restore fiscal balance. The government also oscillated rapidly between public-health restrictions and a much less restrictive approach to vaccine mandates and masking in public places. In important and politically sensitive policy fields of this kind, it appeared to deviate from professional advice, and either used populist justifications or denied the deviation. At key periods in the COVID-19 pandemic, Alberta infection, hospitalization, and death rates were compared highly unfavorably to national and international figures (Markusoff 2021; Lambert 2022).

The following paragraphs turn from these policy-specific features of the UCP’s engagement with both neoliberalism and populism, to speak to the spatial instability in the populist identities embedded in current UCP policy. These focus particularly on the policy initiatives that seek to defend, restore, and expand Alberta’s dominant non-renewable resource sector, a sector nurtured and exceptionally rewarded by the era of neoliberal globalization.



#### 4.2. *Federal Prelude I: Defending the West, Remaking Canada*

If we sum up much of the Kenney government's populist measures, it might seem that its spatial imaginaries were channeled simply as "pro-Albertan" or "pro-Western". This was in many ways characteristic for the province, and certainly reflects repeated waves of hostility towards "Eastern elites" (Macpherson 1953; Pratt 1977). The present analysis of populist identities begins with the right-wing western-populist legacy of the federal Reform Party and its successor, the Canadian Alliance. Both combined a stricter neoliberalism and a stronger social conservatism than the Progressive Conservative Party, the roots of which pre-date Canadian Confederation in 1867. While these predecessor parties to the contemporary Conservatives competed for Parliamentary seats throughout Canada, the Reform Party was strongest in the interior of Western Canada and drew most of its core leadership from there. It campaigned on a Western Canadian identity, resentful of marginalization from federal politics. However, its most famous slogan was not separatist, but expressed an alternative nationalism: "The West wants in" (Patten 1996). This "anti-Laurentian" nationalism remains part of the UCP's self-presentation.

#### 4.3. *Federal Prelude II: Defending Alberta Bitumen as "Canadian Energy"*

The surprising targeting of American oil and gas interests in recent Alberta populist discourse as the puppet-masters of anti-fossil fuel environmental organizations reflected sustained frustration with impediments to pipeline construction into the USA. Those impediments had come during the Obama regime's ambivalent relationship with the American environmental movement and Indigenous land- and water-defenders, intermittently supporting their actions against the Keystone-XL pipeline linking Alberta bitumen to southern US refineries (Black et al. 2014, especially chps. 16 and 17). This pro-fossil fuel nationalism reflected the pro-oil policies of the federal Conservative government of the time, under Alberta-based Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006–2015) (Urquhart 2018, pp. 256–60).

Canadian industry representatives had begun to argue that US interior markets, depressed since the financial crisis of 2007–2008, over-supplied by new US unconventional sources, and subject to important logistical bottlenecks, could no longer serve as the pre-eminent demand centers for major Canadian resource exports (e.g., Holden 2013). Pipelines to the west or east coast would allegedly open Asian markets as complements to stagnant American demand, selling Alberta bitumen at a relative premium (Energy Policy Institute of Canada 2012, pp. 121–26).

For the first time since the industry's impassioned rejection of the federal Liberal NEP of 1980–1985, policymakers, therefore, began to join Alberta-based oil interests, together with pro-petroleum advocacy groups such Canada Action (2012+) and Canada's Energy Citizens, in calls for a coordinated Canada-wide energy strategy to move hydrocarbons east and west to non-American markets. This was explicitly framed as a sign of cross-country Canadian pride and patriotism and linked to plans for an east-west pipeline project, Energy East (Canada. Council of the Federation 2015; compare Bloomberg 2001; Gray-Donald 2018; Pineault and Murray 2016).<sup>7</sup> The 2018 publicity campaign of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CBC News 2018; Gray-Donald 2018) very much waved the Canadian rather than the Alberta flag this way, and emphasized cross-country rather than provincial benefits of a robust fossil-fuel sector. This put it at odds with the "green transition" policies of the still-new federal Trudeau Liberals, but also implicitly with Albertan subnationalism. These claims on the national interest mark an end to the neoliberal mode of supporting the industry, namely the industry's opposition to federal economic activism in the sector. It also ended an emphasis since the end of the NEP in 1985 on developing pipeline corridors running more or less directly across the Alberta–US border.

Among other things, this vision of Canadian energy strategy would re-orient petroleum markets by facilitating pipeline construction through neighboring provinces, thus supplying both domestic and foreign markets. It would also depend on deterring protest and land-defense movements opposed to this construction. The federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper also implemented such security policies during its majority of

2011–2015. The federal level, for instance, first saw a conservative government re-direct the legal category of “critical infrastructure” as a security matter, towards quelling environmental protest and Indigenous land- and water-defense. Well before the Kenney government, the Harper government (of which Kenney was then a cabinet minister) established a multi-agency Calgary-based center under RCMP leadership to surveil organizations and movements that might pose a security risk to “critical infrastructure” (RCMP 2014). The Center explicitly targeted Indigenous and environmental campaigns and reported on its surveillance both to government to industry representatives at events sponsored by the latter, including reports on non-criminal protest activities. Just as the Allan Inquiry mandate would later name environmental and Indigenous groups as “anti-Alberta energy”, this Center described the organizations they surveilled as part of an “anti-Canadian Petroleum” movement, which according to RCMP reports to industry included “peaceful activists, militants and violent extremists”.

However, this alternative Canadian nationalism was not restricted to the federal Harper Conservatives. Four years after the Harper government’s defeat, on 7 June 2019, the Kenney government also launched a \$30-million private corporation called the *Canadian Energy Center*. Often nicknamed the “war room”, the Center was to disseminate rapid counter-communications rebutting public allegations critical of the oil and gas sector and alleged to be untrue or one-sided. Critics complained about the private organization of the war room, which shielded it from routine public-sector scrutiny. They also questioned the appropriateness and expense of government funding to intervene in civil-societal debates, as well as mocking some of its targets, including an animated feature film for children (CBC News 2021). The Alberta government, thus, framed criticism of the industry as an attack on Albertans and a threat to their jobs. However, the Center itself framed the problem in terms of a *Canada-wide* tradition of the long-distance supply of resources essential to modern life.

#### 4.4. *Defending Alberta: The Allan Inquiry, Critical Infrastructure, and Restricting Protest*

The mandate of the Public Inquiry into Anti-Alberta Energy Campaigns (the “Allan Inquiry”) appears to set populist anti-elitism against some of the key preconditions of neoliberal globalization (See [Alberta. Public Inquiry into Anti-Alberta Energy Campaigns 2021](#)). The new government funded the \$3.5 million public inquiry to investigate campaigns of Canadian-based environmental organizations whose recent lobbying and direct-action campaigns had targeted Western Canadian energy export expansion, and which had advocated a transition to renewable energy. Again, the UCP had repeatedly dismissed these critics as “foreign-funded”—that is, American-funded—special interests spreading “false news”.

These claims originated from industry and civil society, but particularly from the online citizen-researcher, Vivian Krause, a resident of neighboring British Columbia (e.g., [Krause 2012](#); to see how some critics assess Krause and her work, see the Wiki-style entry [SourceWatch 2018](#)). The implication of the charge was that these organizations opposed “Alberta energy” at the behest of *American* energy interests that stood behind *American* private foundations. Krause had emphasized funding for anti-fossil-fuel organizations in Canada that originated from private foundations with American oil connections, including the Pew and Rockefeller Foundations. In the public claims that grew up around Krause’s research, the supposed ulterior aim of this funding is not to force a green transition, but to shut down Canadian production: these American foundations were allegedly manipulating their funding decisions to consolidate American oil interests over Canadian ones in continental energy supply chains.

The Allan Inquiry walked a rocky trail towards its final report, including lawsuits, multiple delays, and internal re-organizations. Reproached multiple times by environmental NGOS for the party and industry ties of its membership and its commissioner, for allegedly opaque procedures, for its initial choice of initial witnesses, and for its interim report ([Ecojustice Canada Society v Alberta 2021](#); [Heidenreich 2021](#)), the Allan Inquiry finally reported in July 2021, but government released the report only in October ([French](#)

2021b). The text downplayed several of its initial sources and relied heavily on a report from Deloitte Forensic. As demanded, it detailed foreign funding of industry critics from 2003 to 2019.

Critics argued that the Report showed little evidence of funding on a scale that would clearly sway NGO policy, and no evidence of US oil interests manipulating private foundations oil executives had founded. It did, however, as they noted, provide evidence that funding that targeted Alberta bitumen was a small portion of total US environmental funding in Canada (Russell and Rusnell 2021). They pointed to the overall scale of the campaigns, and also to major American and other foreign investment in the industry itself (French 2021a). The report itself underscored that the Inquiry had discovered nothing illegal, and that the industry critics studied had been within their rights. It also stated that although “anti-Alberta energy” appeared as a phrase in its title and mandate, it was not alleging that critics were anti-Albertan (Alberta. Public Inquiry into Anti-Alberta Energy Campaigns 2021).

However, the Minister of Energy, Sonia Savage, Premier Kenney, and other government sources emphasized that the report’s findings largely confirmed their allegations, and denounced the campaigns for costing Albertans jobs (Alberta.ca 2021). In February 2022, six environmental organizations filed suit against Premier Kenney and the government itself for alleging after the report’s release that it had found evidence of misinformation (French 2022). While environmental critics had successfully pressed the Allan Inquiry to report on figures of pro-industry non-profit campaigns, small in comparison to anti-industry NGOs, the Inquiry did not investigate or report on for-profit interventions by the industry itself, including foreign interests.

As the debate over “foreign funding” of environmental campaigns revealed, the factual basis of populist discourses is worth exploring, beneath the popular/elite conflict they present to the public. Here, simple cross-border support was certainly present. So, too, in fact, was an American competitive threat to Alberta bitumen. Industry analysts have recognized the potential for competition between Canadian bitumen and American shale oil (notably the Bakken field on the Canada/US border) for potential investment and for secondary upgrading since at least the 1960s (Chastko 2004, pp. 120–24, 172), decades before actual investment booms in either resource. Because of the more restrictive regulatory environment in the 1960s, conventional oil majors and smaller players pressured regulators for protection from these major unconventional oil plays. Conventional producers bought up and held bitumen extraction rights at a very early stage. However, they also vied for first-entrant advantages later when reliable conventional sources (foreign and domestic) could no longer meet continental demand, and these two great unconventional reserves were finally tapped. That coincided with the permissive and market-driven regulatory environment of the mid-1990s neoliberal reforms of the Klein governments and continental protections for resource capital embedded in new trade agreements. The more widely contested aspect of the populist case against anti-fossil fuel organizing is, therefore, the link made between such American petroleum interests and Canadian-based environmental groups through private foundations.

Here, however, the emphasis is less on such claims, or even the right to dissent and criticize the industry. Instead, the emphasis lies with what the government claims achieved politically, relative to populist identities and neoliberal globalization. Defending fossil fuel production might seem to align well with economic globalism and neoliberal energy policy. However, American fossil-fuel corporations, with which Alberta bitumen and other fossil-fuel interests are deeply integrated, are identified as the “foreign” interests manipulating protest. The point is all the more noteworthy since Alberta industry (and Alberta elected officials) had fought hard for continental integration since the federal NEP in the 1980s (see below).

In short, by 2020–2021, Canada-wide identities were not at the motivating center of the Allan Inquiry. With a much-hated federal Liberal government back in power, albeit one like Notley’s earnestly attempting to present a supportive and nuanced image to Albertans,

Alberta government messaging repeatedly asserted that the UCP was defending Albertans themselves and “Alberta Energy”, as much as it was defending a Canada-wide bitumen, oil, and gas sector, or even free markets. The Allan Inquiry’s mandate, therefore, built in a specifically populist frame just as much as the Canada-wide appeals, but now with a specific conception of both “the people” (Albertans, as champions of oil and gas) and the American oil-backed environmentalists supposedly oppressing them.

The Allan Inquiry was not the only indicator of the UCP’s right-wing pro-petroleum populism. In Bill 1, *The Critical Infrastructure Defense Act* (17 June 2020), the UCP government also sharply restricted the legal venues and tactics available to anti-industry demonstrations (Alberta 2022). The bill broadened police powers to block anti-industry protest, in the name of protecting private “critical infrastructure” (CI). When it passed, the law banned protest on, entering, obstruction of, or interference with the construction of CI. It defined CI broadly, including highways as defined by Alberta law, pipelines, refineries, utilities, dams, and railways. Cabinet was specifically empowered to name specific CI where police could arrest or fine protesters (see for instance, Lambert 2022).

#### 4.5. *Defending Alberta: Firewalls, Fair Deals, and Ending Equalization*

Alberta-centered populism was not restricted to energy policy and policing. Early in its mandate, the UCP government also formed a “Fair Deal Panel” to investigate enhancing provincial jurisdiction under the current constitution. This has been a sustained preoccupation of Western Canadian populism. It dates at least to a 2001 open letter from several widely recognized neoliberal personalities, including future Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, calling for a jurisdictional “firewall” between Alberta and the rest of Canada.

The Fair Deal panel put some of these very initiatives on the table, including a separate Alberta public pension plan and a fully autonomous provincial income tax. The Fair Deal panel also investigated support for the idea of a separate provincial police force. (Most Canadian provinces contract with the RCMP for these services.) Given the broadened powers of cabinet to trigger police action against protesters on critical infrastructure under Bill 1, critics raised concerns about the potential for politicizing police actions (Lambert 2022).

The Panel reported in May 2020 that few of these initiatives had gained solid popular support. However, it also reported that anti-Ottawa resentments were widely held and often intense, and that Albertans were experiencing significant economic hardships (Alberta Fair Deal Panel 2020). The Panel did find support for removing from the Canadian constitution the principle of fiscal equalization for under-resourced provinces.<sup>8</sup> A non-binding referendum on this reform passed during municipal elections on October 18, 2021, with just over 61% of the vote. However, the initiative had just under 39% turnout (Elections Alberta 2021), and few believed that the amendment would gain sufficient support elsewhere in Canada.<sup>9</sup>

As residents of a relatively high-income jurisdiction, many Albertans view equalization as a de facto subsidy they pay other provinces, or even misconstrue it as a direct province-to-province payment. (In fact, it is a direct payment from federal revenues, though the geographic distribution of taxable wealth in the country does draw proportionately more revenue from Alberta.) This initiative reflects a specifically Alberta-oriented populism, because two other Western Canadian provinces have usually figured as “have-not” (receiving) jurisdictions.

#### 4.6. *Neoliberalism, Nationalism, Natural Resource Exports*

This section has spoken to the current populist tone of the Alberta right in government, but also to a certain rudderlessness in its collective spatial self-identity. Sometimes framed as Canadian patriotism, sometimes as Western Canadian alienation, sometimes as Alberta exceptionalism, Alberta’s populist reaction to anti-bitumen campaigns can sit uncomfortably with the neoliberal globalism that Alberta leadership has more or less promulgated since the 1990s, and with the recent cross-country needs of the industry itself.



This unmooring of identity has parallels elsewhere. It also has precedents in Alberta itself. The angry denunciation of anti-oil interests as “foreign-funded” (for instance) in a jurisdiction deeply integrated with foreign capital is neither unique nor novel. However, this revived unsettledness of Alberta’s right-wing ideological terrain suggests a period of wider political crisis may be opening, and speaks to the specific role of populist resentments in nurturing these tensions up (e.g., [Brodie 1990](#), pp. 135–49). Next, we turn to consider how the patina of commonsense built up around neoliberal globalization in the first place, and also why this went somewhat against type for the province’s politics over the long term. Neoliberalism found fertile soil in Alberta conservatism, but because of populism and relative prosperity, it reached its height in Alberta somewhat late in the era of neoliberal globalization.

### 5. Neoliberalism in Alberta: Bedrock or Overburden?

A signature image of Alberta’s bituminous sands operations, polemicized by environmentalists and lionized by industry, is its strip-mining extraction process. (Deeper deposits are tapped by different means.) To access shallower deposits, the earth covering them has to be removed first. This layer is called the overburden. If geological bedrock might stand metaphorically for something foundational, overburden signals the opposite: a layer that conceals another, more significant one. Which metaphor best applies here?

The UCP’s restrictions on speech and on environmental direct action, as well as attacks on the perceived unfairness of Canadian Confederation, have arisen in the name of a populist identity allegedly under attack from elite outsiders. That identity is variously described as Albertan, Western Canadian, or Canadian. These identities are not fully interchangeable, and their co-existence in right-wing politics complicate right-wing or pro-industry coalition-building. None is easily reconciled with neoliberal globalization’s self-proclaimed interest in a cosmopolitan defense of free cross-border flows of investment capital, goods, populations, and services. Yet these identities are at least as deeply rooted as neoliberal globalization in Alberta’s longer history. That history is taken up here.

To take one example of late neoliberal patterns in Alberta’s conservative governance, only since 1979 has natural gas extraction operated in Alberta according to continental, competitive, pro-market principles. For decades, despite the geological and end-use links with conventional oil, natural gas production and distribution operated to serve mainly local consumer markets, under a heavily regulated monopoly ([MacFadyen and Watkins 2014](#), pp. 352–406; [Bregha 1981](#)).

Similarly, only since the end of the Lougheed era (1985) and the adoption of Canada–US comprehensive trade agreements (1988–1989+), have Alberta governments set aside their own interventions in oil markets. That transition was in part a determined effort to revive the industry from a long stagnation, but it was also part of a regionalist reaction to the much-hated federal National Energy Program (1980–1985): most Alberta elites were determined to prevent future federal interventions in an industry Albertans to be considered exclusively their own.

Again, conservative (and neoliberal) principles of low taxes and balanced budgets were relatively easy to maintain in Alberta’s decades of sustained fossil-fuel booms. The province could maintain these alongside relatively well-endowed health and education sectors; Alberta remains the only Canadian province not to charge provincial sales tax. Ralph Klein’s government (1992–2006) was a rare occasion in which balanced budgets and debt-free status had to be restored at significant domestic cost, in no small part because fossil-fuel revenues remained stagnant ([Foster 2012](#)). Government studies have also repeatedly suggested that recent governments have also left resource rents uncollected during both boom and bust. Indeed, despite several major discussions about royalty reform ([Urquhart 2018](#), pp. 175–97, 272–77), both government and industry have ultimately defended existing royalty rates, or even lowered them to revive the sector. That sector is commonly equated, not only with the core of the entire provincial economy, but with Alberta identity itself.

However, this determination to keep resource royalties low was not a stable ideological and political principle among provincial Progressive Conservatives. Indeed, raising royalties to plan for diversification and social services was initially a central plank in Peter Lougheed's election platform in the early 1970s, as well as those of Ed Stelmach and Alison Redwood. This divided the conservative movement politically, and eventually cost Stelmach and Redwood dearly. The Heritage Fund, the Lougheed government's prized sovereign wealth fund based on these revenues, was originally to fund economic diversification and to counteract economic downturns. Subsequent governments stemmed the growth rate and size of the Fund, as well as its active use in diversification; in order to keep provincial taxes low, it now is a small fraction of the size of its Saudi or Norwegian equivalents (Wilt 2017).

As later paragraphs suggest, tectonic shifts may be arising in Alberta's apparently bedrock commitments to neoliberal globalization. Indeed, in a longer-term view, this "bedrock" is more an active political fault-line or a shallow overburden in a much more deeply sedimented political history.

## 6. The Deep History of Alberta's Populist Regionalism

Alberta populism has long shaped the region's social structure and party politics—longer, even, than its conservatism. The explanations of this populism are diverse. First, in his study of subnational political cultures in Canada, Nelson Wiseman has stressed both resource histories and the special political culture of in-migration from the American Great Plains when Alberta was first established (Wiseman 2007, pp. 32–33, 211–36, 237–62). In this account, which owes much to Louis Hartz's fragment theory, the commitment of many elite founding families to the distinctive religious patterns of the American West—and their Biblically-centered, non-hierarchical church institutions—opened many households to syncretistic political messages and to the allure of populism. The religious radio broadcasts of preacher and later Social Credit Premier Bill Aberhart provided both of these during the Great Depression.

Initially, however, the left-leaning populist radicalism of socialist movements also prospered in Baptist and evangelical soil in Western Canada, including in Alberta (e.g., Mills 1991). Non-Protestant waves of migration from Eastern Europe, including Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Rite Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy, further complicate this picture (Wiseman 2007, pp. 32–33).

Party institutions provide a second major explanation. The populism of the wider prairie region converged with a relatively weak base for Canada's two major political parties, the Conservatives (later Progressive Conservatives) and the Liberals. Both parties had popular bases in the British colonies (later Canadian provinces) further east, and roots that long pre-dated heavy Prairie settlement. The Liberals did initially prevail in the region, because of their openness to provincial power and autonomy at the time (Smith 1981). However, that early success was short-lived. Regional parties were soon particularly vigorous on the Prairies. United Farmer governments displaced the Liberals in several provinces, including Alberta. After them came the Social Credit Party on the right and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) on the left in the 1930s. Even today, the region privileges provincial parties of the right (e.g., the UCP and the Saskatchewan Party) and distinctive provincial wings of the left-of-center New Democratic Party (successor to the CCF). The overwhelming federal ascendancy of the Progressive Conservative party in the region after Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's colossal PC majorities in 1957 (especially in Alberta) cemented that party's reputation as the new defender of provincial autonomy in English-speaking provinces.

However, the electoral power bases of the country arguably remain elsewhere: Ontario and Québec are each larger by population than all three Prairie Provinces combined<sup>10</sup>. With Stephen Harper's federal Conservative government as a notable exception, the capacity of Western regional leadership to attain and hold overarching power within these parties, and then over the country, remain low.

Provincial governing parties from the Prairies, perhaps especially from Alberta, have also consistently taken constitutional stances that resist centralizing tendencies in the federation. Prairie elites and ordinary voters have historically emphasized provincial autonomy, in part because of the region's peculiar institutional development, especially as this shaped resource-based development strategies.

This process, a third explanation for the decentralizing populisms of the region, began with direct federal control of these lands as the southern-most portion of the Northwest Territories. The latter was the new name in 1870 for all the lands transferred to Canada from the Hudson's Bay Company. Transferred without local consultations, the prairies erupted in the so-called Riel uprisings, and federal authority was restored only after the suppression of the first of these uprisings. Ottawa established a special frontier police force, the forerunner of the RCMP, in 1873.

In this process, large tracts of desirable public land went directly to the HBC as payment for the territories. Massive land grants also went to the Canadian Pacific Railway, the country's first continental railway, and long managed as the functional basis for Canadian economic unification. Typically, close to the rail line itself, these lands earned the two companies large unearned profits from speculative sales.

Even after the formation of the core of Manitoba in 1870, and of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905, the federal government retained natural resource powers that other provinces wielded under Section 92 of the Constitution Act of 1867. As settlers entered the region, federal resource powers conflicted with their developmental commitments (R. P. Gillis and Roach 1986). The federal government withheld these powers until the 1930 Natural Resource Transfer Acts, and even then retained control over uranium and (until the 1940s) bitumen.

Still other analysts point to distinct class configurations in the prairie settler societies that emerged there as additional explanations for Alberta's populist tendencies (The next several paragraphs draw heavily on Macpherson 1953; Lipset 1968). Much like Saskatchewan, Alberta was initially overwhelmingly populated by family-held farms, ranches, and small-town shops. This founding settlement pattern in both Alberta and neighboring Saskatchewan gave rise to a characteristic anti-elite populism that did not depend on worker-based socialism. That populism entailed a regional hostility towards other, more populated regions of Canada, which it portrayed either as exploiters or as parasites, as mediated by railway and tariff policy, federal resource control, and land profiteering. The tariff and freight-rate policies of the Canadian National Policy era (1879–1929), as well as monopolistic wheat pool pricing, all appeared to benefit outside interests. Tariffs made farming equipment expensive and hard to obtain, the freight rate system made the export of anything from the region but bulk agricultural and resource commodities expensive, and the sale of farmers' and ranchers' core products more profitable to middlemen than to themselves.

In this view of early Prairie history, this plurality of petty commodity producers and a petite bourgeoisie harbored ambivalent class interests. On the one hand, small-holder farmers and shopkeepers, faced with transportation and wholesaling monopolies, rapidly developed a shared sense of "little-guy" vulnerability to distant elites. This created an opening for some collective action, initially in producer and consumer cooperatives and subsequently in regional party politics. In neighboring Saskatchewan, and for a time, even in Alberta, these tendencies forged a now-defunct rural democratic socialism.

On the other hand, the deep commitment of this largely agrarian population to land ownership and, hence, private property rights, rooted in settler-colonial dispossession of local Indigenous nations, rapidly came into conflict with classically socialist, urban working-class themes. The radicalism of coal mining enclaves in Alberta, BC, and Saskatchewan, for instance, never easily allied with the provincial farming communities (Norton and Langford 2002).

What was not ambivalent in this economically rooted regional interest was its oppositional character. The much-hated freight costs and the tariff wall against manufactured

goods also protected and stimulated industrial development in southern Ontario and Québec, and indeed were foundational to financing settlement. The same could be said of the speculative land grants to dominant outside monopolies though they were obviously an affront to average farmers' interests.

In the eyes of much of the country, the sustained anomaly in Canadian federalism of federal resource control in the region (from 1905 to 1930) simply reflected lop-sided population distribution, and, therefore, lop-sided administrative capacities, as well as lopsided investments that foreign investors and the eastern provinces had made in infrastructure before most Euro-Canadian settlement had occurred. Those investments had made the Western interior a viable settlement area, and somehow they had to be paid for. All these policies, therefore, seemed to other political forces and regions in Canada to be not only in their own interests, but also justified (Brodie 1990, pp. 85–134).

For Western settlers, however, federal resource control meant that the infant forest industry on the eastern slopes of the Rockies was not generating provincial resource royalties and was not being priced to facilitate construction on the treeless prairies (Gillis 1992). It meant that the nationally important coal mines of southern Alberta and Saskatchewan<sup>11</sup>—and their industrial relations—were beyond provincial control, affecting both energy and transport needs for export-oriented farmers in a legendary cold zone. For those aware of the situation, this anomaly also meant that the vast bitumen deposits (already known in northern Alberta) were stalled. Development of that resource depended on the intermitency of national, Eastern, and even Imperial imperatives, rather than developed steadily in response to provincial ones. Strategic research at the University of Alberta, with Social Credit government support, was necessary to prove up those reserves in the early twentieth century (Chastko 2004).

All this, then, contributed to a deep and enduring intuitive link between locally controlled provincial self-government, the need for internal political unity against outside threats, and control over natural resources (Morton 1968). Because it was long sparsely populated, relative to the other, older provinces, the Prairie West grew up with little reason to hope that its interests would prevail in Ottawa.

As a secondary effect, this period of limited resource control in the early 20th century entrenched popular suspicion in the region towards any restoration of asymmetrical federalism.<sup>12</sup> When in the 1960s and 1970s, Québec political leaders re-oriented their own constitutional strategies, favoring maximal autonomy under the current division of powers, and accelerated decentralization in the future, prairie observers saw the re-imposition of the hated asymmetry of 1905–1930, and the threat of future independence as perhaps a negotiating strategy to wring more revenue and jurisdiction out of the rest of the federation. Québec elites, by contrasts, saw a justifiable distinction for the sole province to govern a discernible nation within the federation. This occurred against a background of political and economic transformation in Alberta, to which we now turn.

## 7. Alberta Party Politics and Resource-Based Populism after 1930

Deep in the Great Depression and drought, Aberhart's Social Credit came to provincial power when the population was still overwhelmingly rural and agrarian. As we have seen, the "Socreds" ousted the populist United Farmers, who had themselves in 1921 had ousted the provincial-rights Liberals. After the first Social Credit Premier William Aberhart (1935–1943), his deputy, Ernest Manning, assumed the reins of government for a quarter century (1943–1967), overseeing a relatively permissive environment for conventional oil extraction, beginning with the 1947 strike at Leduc.

The new oil and gas industry enriched, diversified, and urbanized the province, and pushed aside active exploration of bitumen. Eventually, however, the up-start Progressive Conservatives charged that Socred policy was wasting the resource, and subsidizing industry through untapped resource rents. The last Socred premier, Harry Strom, ceded power to the Progressive Conservative party in 1971, after a brief term. The PCs then ruled



Alberta uninterrupted under Peter Lougheed (1971–1985), Don Getty (1985–1992), Ralph Klein (1992–2006), Ed Stelmach (2006–2011), and Alison Redford (2011–2014).

How the PC dynasty began and then sustained itself is instructive. For Alberta's distinctive right-wing and populist tendencies and lop-sided governing coalitions continued, despite urbanization, and despite non-renewable resources replacing agriculture as the dominant industry. These continuities have preoccupied comparative research into subnational jurisdictions within Canada, built for a time on a Canada-wide scholarly fascination with "province-building" (cf. [Wilder and Howlett 2015–2016](#); but see also [Young et al. 1984](#)). As part of this analytical framework, many scholars in the 1970s and 1980s pointed to the rise of new professional urban middle classes, to explain the rise of the PCs and parallel developments in other provinces. Different from, but in parallel with, their social-democratic equivalents in Saskatchewan, these middle classes inherited but also transformed the resource-based regional populism (and economic interventionism) of their rural forbearers (e.g., [Richards and Pratt 1979](#)). Another comparator was the new middle-class left-nationalism of Québec's Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, and the role that hard- and soft-nationalists in that province assigned to a public electricity company, Hydro-Québec. The Lougheed PC government likewise began with an attempt to extract maximal resource rents from a vibrant oil and gas industry, and also to foster economic diversification ([Pratt 1977](#)). It also decried the federal government "diverting" resource revenues through federal taxation. A debate opened up about the constitutionality of this revenue grab. The oil and gas industry of the province, however strategically important to Canadian consumers amidst the 1970s OPEC embargo and later, the Iranian Revolution, was—in the eyes of virtually all Albertans—exclusively provincial, both constitutionally and morally ([Brownsey 2008](#), pp. 240–44). By 1982, something like this position was entrenched by the Constitution Act of 1982 as Section 92A of the Constitution Act of 1867.

Thus, the federal Trudeau Liberal fuel taxes, state-owned Petro-Canada, the Foreign Investment Review Agency, and later the much grander National Energy Program, were not read in Alberta as attempts to stimulate Canadian energy autonomy and public ownership in the name of national energy security. The Lougheed government instead oversaw two intense periods of anti-federal populism, one in the early to mid-1970s and the second from 1980 to 1984. At one point, it cut petroleum exports to neighboring provinces. A popular (and much publicized) bumper sticker read, "Let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark".

Lougheed had originally proposed public-private planning against an inevitable resource depletion; economic diversification through a sovereign wealth fund called the Heritage Fund and based on resource rent capture; continued robust public social services; and selective provincial support for potential successor industries and secondary processing ([Pratt 1977](#), p. 147+). After the confrontations with Ottawa more a darling of industry than its disciplinarian, however, Lougheed's image folded into a larger narrative in which fossil fuels were essential to Alberta's prosperity, and the provincial PCs were fundamental to its political defense.

A deep local recession followed the hated federal NEP and a sustained collapse in world oil prices. Alberta political discourse tended to blame that recession more on the former more than on the latter; few conservative voters openly blamed the original Lougheed strategy. Instead, most eyes were on the victory of federal Progressive Conservatives (PCs) in 1984, new constitutional and trade limits to federal powers (Section 92A from 1982 on and the Canada–US Free Trade Agreement (or CUFTA), 1988), and the dismantling of the NEP and foreign investment restrictions under the federal Mulroney PCs (1984–1993) ([Brownsey 2008](#), pp. 244–46; [Urquhart 2018](#), pp. 47–57).

At the provincial level, Premier Don Getty inherited from Lougheed both the oil slump and stagnant diversification projects. His government cut the growth of the Heritage Fund, limited diversification projects, and (with the federal PCs) deregulated and continentalized natural gas. He imposed austerity on the public sector, but broadly maintained key social policy programs at something like Lougheed's standards. Amidst mounting deficits, many voters came to read all this as weakness.

By contrast, his successor, Ralph Klein, implemented stern neoliberal austerity (alongside further energy deregulation); he eliminated deficits, and indeed provincial debt. Government tapped the Heritage Fund for current needs, and diversification measures virtually ceased. The negative public-sector and union impacts (Foster 2012) intensified without potential tax innovations (e.g., a provincial sales tax), without equalization payments, and without historic of resource royalties. By the mid-1990s, the federal Liberals determined to eliminate federal deficits, making unprecedented cuts to its cross-country support for core provincial social policies.

Instead, Klein cut resource rents and regulations to revive fossil fuels. These reforms, spending cuts, and federal support ultimately triggered massive investments in bitumen extraction capacity. Bitumen extraction shifted from two minor commercial operations (one essentially a public-private joint venture) to a globally recognized bonanza by the early 2000s. The initial emphasis on secondary processing fell away, in favor of market-driven continental integration.<sup>13</sup> Economic conditions turned around dramatically, and this neoliberal turn remained widely and intensely popular.

Klein had prided himself on understanding ordinary voters. After his premiership, however, Albertans increasingly found his party out of touch. From the right, that claim meant insufficient support for the energy sector from which prosperity had flowed. Not long after Klein's retirement, a maverick populist formation, the Wildrose Party, emerged with significant bitumen, oil, and gas backing. In part, it reacted against the new premier Ed Stelmach's openness to higher oil and gas royalties to restore key services. Despite exceptional fossil-fuel prices and revenues, Stelmach lasted just a single term.

Elected to replace Stelmach in 2012, Premier Alison Redford also resigned in 2014 before completing her term. Struggling to keep the PCs in power, Dave Hancock and then Jim Prentice served briefly as premiers through 2014 and part of 2015. Meanwhile, world oil prices collapsed again, and environmental activists and Indigenous land defenders increased pressure on the bitumen industry. Alberta's ground norm of a grand center-right coalition had fallen into crisis. With the moderate right discredited and the harder-right Wildrose surging forward, the Notley New Democrats shocked all (including their own supporters) by winning majority government in 2015.

Notley had promised to retain core public services and, once again, to revisit resource royalties. Her government attempted to enhance environmental and climate accountability about fossil-fuel extraction, and to foster economic and energy diversification. However, in government, it increasingly and loudly defended the centrality of fossil-fuels in the province, against increasingly radical environmental and Indigenous critique. Fossil fuels were presented as a precondition for all the planned transitions. When the Wildrose and Progressive Conservative Parties united forces against this policy direction, the delicate balance the government had maintained between support for change and support for fossil fuels could not sustain the pressure. Once again, with Jason Kenney's UCP, a grand coalition of the right swept into power in Alberta under adverse economic conditions. They offered grand and, in some cases, legally controversial measures to confront both Albertans' troubles and their enemies. The government's commitment to neoliberalism and to the globalism on which its economy rested was secondary to these measures.

### *Summary*

The present analysis has stressed the historical roots and development of the right-wing populism and market interventionism in Alberta's conservative governing parties, different from and largely hostile to Eastern-based Canadian institutions. Sometimes, as we have seen, Alberta regional sentiment takes the form of pro-industry Canadian patriotism that simply counters more interventionist, or more left-leaning variants elsewhere. For instance, some interpret the original initiatives of the Manning Social Credit government to develop the bitumen of Northern Alberta as an attempt to work around federally backed Eastern-based oil interests that were recognized as *fundamentally foreign-owned* (Chastko 2004). Foreign-owned Imperial Oil's hand was distinctively associated among Albertan

elites with federal hesitation in developing bitumen's potential. Before 1947 and the discovery of commercial-grade conventional oil, the potential flood of synthetic light crude from bitumen could make still-rural Alberta rich and build a domestically held, Alberta-based industry. However, crucially, it would also disrupt the protected continental crude pricing of the day. So, the Social Credit government turned to a Texas-based maverick oil company, Suncor, rather than to the Eastern-based American majors, when seeking investment capital for bitumen. What looked in Ottawa and the boardrooms of Montréal and Toronto like a regionalist, anti-Canadian stance more closely resembled an Alberta-centered Canadian nationalism (Chastko 2004).

With the current Alberta government's support for the campaign to link cross-country oil and gas infrastructure to *Canadian* identity, lifestyle, and interests, the government found itself on the side of the continental oil majors, in aid of a re-organization of an industry already integrated on a continental basis. CAPP linked itself to high-paying blue-collar jobs, revenues for national social programs, nation-wide supply chains, and the bulk of revenues for federal equalization payments. This approach gained energy with right-wing commentator Ezra Levant's *Ethical Oil* (Levant 2010). Levant presented a positive alter-Canadian narrative that Canadian oil and gas production is a far more ethical source of petroleum than most international ones, in labor conditions, financial probity, and environmental restrictions. Alberta populism can, therefore, reach out to wider interests in a pan-Canadian form, without falling victim to insurmountable internal objections.

Sometimes, however, Alberta populism finds expression in an "Alberta-First" provincialism or pan-Prairie regionalism. These identities can be almost as hostile to other parts of Canada as it is to other countries. Moreover, the territorial range these non-Canadian identities appear ambiguous. Just where "the West" ends and "Alberta" begins is not clear.

By contrast, most Alberta populism and party organizing does cohere with a broadly conservative center of gravity, especially in rural and small-town settings. Further, most identify bitumen, oil, and gas with the province's very identity. Defense of provincial resource jurisdiction is an obvious foundation for this identification. The recent deepening of long-standing continental and global ties of the industry itself introduces important tensions within it.

However, as the recent Notley NDP experience has shown, this identification of Albertans with bitumen, oil, and gas transcends the left-right divide, and exists even when the express goal is enhance resource rent extraction, to impose tighter environmental regulations, and ultimately to diversify the economy. Defending the bitumen, oil, and gas industry remains the same as "standing up for Alberta".

Kenney's UCP, by contrast, aims not to negotiate with environmental and Indigenous critics of industry, but to discredit and quieten them. The UCP anti-protest initiatives tap a widespread resentment against forces that many in fossil-fuel producing provinces blame for the deep regional recession and fiscal crisis. However, environmentalists are more uniformly targeted than Indigenous voices, since some Indigenous leaders and communities vocally support the industry as a job creator. Both the national industry, the federal government, and the province have encouraged and showcased such Indigenous positions as part of a pan-Canadian pro-petroleum patriotism.

Contemporary Alberta-based resentment is also directed at other parts of the country, where parties more attuned to interventionist climate-change reforms have their strongholds. As we have seen, this resource-based resentment is multi-layered. The NEP's support in major fossil-fuel consuming provinces is still in living memory, but the earlier constitutional anomaly of federal resource control must surely play a pre-figurative role.

All this is compatible with neoliberal globalism to the extent that the industry defended is a continentally integrated one, the province welcomes a wide range of migrants if they participate in and celebrate the fossil-fuel bonanza, and to the extent that the enemy is federal state intervention. When state intervention is framed as aiding the market and local entrepreneurs, however, and oriented to Alberta's defense rather than to its victimization, neoliberal nostrums and cosmopolitan nostrums often fall to one side.

The foundations of neoliberal globalism are, therefore, insecure, even in what is arguably its provincial heartland. As the wider federation absorbs the meaning of hard-right cross-Canada flag-waving protest, in the form of the yellow jacket protests, the pro-fossil-fuel *United We Roll* convoy, and the anti-vaccination-mandate truck-based convoys of 2022 (Dormer 2019; Barrett 2022; Hames 2019), the personal biographies of several key organizers in both “Canada United” and western separatist fringe groups illustrates the fluidity of the identities disrupting neoliberal globalization from the Canadian extreme right.

## 8. Conclusions

This article has reflected on mounting signs that the era of neoliberal globalization is breaking up. It proceeded at two levels. The first reviewed the gradual consolidation of a specific pattern of globalization, rooted in the re-organization of production and productive technologies, and the neoliberal and globalizing ideologies that built those changes into an enduring socio-economic complex. The second level was a review of recent instability in the distinctive party system of Canada’s premier neoliberal and free-trading province, Alberta. The article also examined the instability of the collective identities inspiring key populist policies of the current UCP provincial government.

To explain the puzzle of a province that deviates from the neoliberal and globalizing norms that it has so recently championed as foundational for its core fossil-fuel industries, I reviewed the actual insecurity of true *laissez-faire* and free-trade policies in Alberta’s successive, overwhelmingly conservative administrations. Populism rather than market-orientation has often provided the ideological glue that first bound successive governing parties together. In later phases of a party’s time in government, accommodations with markets and dominant industries came to the fore. This pattern broadly applies to Social Credit, to Lougheed’s Progressive Conservatives, to Klein’s neoliberal reorganization, and (potentially) to the current UCP.

While populism is famously protean, rather than consistently right-wing or pro-market, it needs a unifying conception of a “people”, and of a hostile elite that is holding them back. If, as in Alberta’s case, such elites appear as exploitative outsiders, such an ideological configuration will sit uncomfortably with the economic and political preconditions for neoliberal globalization. If such elites are (increasingly) technocratic experts announcing real threats, such as COVID-19 or accelerating climate-change, right-wing responses in Alberta have decreasingly relied on the core toolkit of neoliberal globalism, and more instead on blocking or denialist positions. If some of these problems have recently taken forms that fewer and fewer citizens can avoid in their personal lives, right-wing government in Alberta, like neoliberal globalization world-wide, seem increasingly insecure.

The intensity of populist anger and its specifically regional character in Alberta and in Canada more generally can fall out of international commentary about Canadian foreign and domestic climate-change policy. However, it helps to explain why successive federal governments, despite power bases in other, less conservative, and less resource-oriented regions, have neither contained nor reduced greenhouse gas emissions. Along with “deep state” arguments, it helps to explain why federal alternation between Conservatives and Liberals consistently fails to grapple seriously with climate change, even if it is inconsistent in its willingness to dispute, deter, and at the limit suppress environmental organizations and activists. This populist anger exposes the role of globalization of resource extraction in triggering rather than softening strong and deeply rooted resentments in a complex liberal-democratic federation. The foreign-funding allegation against environmental NGOs at the center of the mandate of the Allan Inquiry has been especially widely criticized. It also runs up against the historic ties of the country and the province to the foreign power named in the allegations—the neighboring United States of America—and the very heavy reliance of the oil and gas sector itself on foreign capital.

Neoliberal globalization is showing mounting signs of instability in the face of converging crises it seems decreasingly able to address as a multiscale mode of governance. However, as disruptive to neoliberal globalization as their convergence seems, these crises



are unlikely to close this period on their own. Chance, and the collective determination and strategic effectiveness of new social and political forces must meet these crises to generate a new era, if these crises are not to trigger a mere course correction.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For Cox, the specific term, “neoliberalism,” refers to the adaptations of classical liberalism under Keynes, Beveridge, and others, rather than the ideas of Hayek, Friedman, Thatcher, or Reagan that dominated the post-1970s world (Harvey 2005). The distinction between the two eras remains clear.
- <sup>2</sup> Of course, state coercion was present in the neoliberal toolkit from the start (Hall et al. 1978; Panitch and Swartz 1985). However, neoliberalism’s birth, too, was a period of flux and crisis. Between times, when neoliberalism enjoyed relative stability, coercion was also deployed, but perhaps less than in periods of instability. Arguably, however, its abandonment of the goal of substantive equality amongst citizens, and its narrowing of the domestic populations considered to be full citizens necessitated coercion more often than did its Keynesian predecessor.
- <sup>3</sup> At the time of writing (Spring 2022), a substantial price recovery has revived industry hopes, the COVID-19 pandemic has dominated wider public attention, and the war on Ukraine has renewed debate about Canada supplying Europe with fossil fuels. Opposition to the industry endures.
- <sup>4</sup> Various “First Nations” and Métis in Alberta. A third constitutional category of Indigenous peoples in Canada, the Inuit, have no homelands in territory Alberta claims.
- <sup>5</sup> Jason Kenney developed a reputation in his earlier career in federal conservative politics for outreach to racialized minorities across the country. The long-standing moderate mayor of Calgary, Naheed Nenshi (2010–2021), was a pioneer in municipal politics across Alberta, and indeed, North America. When interviewers have raised his South Asian and Muslim origins, however, he has underscored how they had (initially) raised little comment in local politics.
- <sup>6</sup> Like the UK House of Commons and the US House of Representatives, Canada’s House of Commons and provincial legislatures use single-member plurality voting systems.
- <sup>7</sup> This association has had considerable staying power: in 2018, a truck convoy with strong right-wing connections (*United We Roll*) crossed the country in the name of linking fossil-fuel exports to Canadian interests and identity (Gray-Donald 2018).
- <sup>8</sup> Modern equalization dates from a 1957 federal PC government initiative. It was entrenched constitutionally in 1982 (Perry 1989, pp. 336–40). The calculation formulae have grown complex and changed since then. Alberta’s exceptional resource revenues and massive de-industrialization in Ontario increasingly yielded unworkable outcomes.
- <sup>9</sup> Such amendments appear to require votes of 2/3 of all provincial legislatures, whose provinces represent 50% or more of the population, plus the support of both houses of the Canadian Parliament (Section 38.1 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982). Regulatory amendment of equalization, however, is regularly negotiated with the provincial governments.
- <sup>10</sup> Statscan, “Population Estimates, quarterly” Table: 17-10-0009-01 (formerly CANSIM 051-0005) Release date 2021-12-16. Available at <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710000901>, accessed on 16 January 2022.
- <sup>11</sup> Between Vancouver Island and Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the Crow’s Nest Pass between BC and Alberta and southern Saskatchewan were among the very few coal sources for Canada’s new rail lines. See for instance, (Selby 2012, pp. 47–54).
- <sup>12</sup> That is to say, a form of federalism in which the division of powers between the central government and the subnational unit governments (e.g., Canadian provinces) vary according to the subnational unit in question.
- <sup>13</sup> The largely political disruption of Venezuelan sources of very heavy oil similar to Alberta bitumen was an incentive to increase Alberta imports to the specialty refineries in the US Gulf region.

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