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Conservative leadership candidate Mark Norris has let the Alberta separatism genie out of its bottle

Mark Norris, campaigning to lead Alberta's Conservative government, told the Calgary Sun two weeks ago that if Ottawa tries another raid on Alberta like the NEP -- or Kyoto -- Albertans should separate.

No Alberta politician, except a few fringe party separatists, has ever said this before. Not even Norris's hard-line competitor Ted Morton.

So where were the banner headlines, the furious national denunciations? This man stands a fair chance of being Alberta's next premier.

In fact what Norris just stated publicly to the Sun has been mainstream thinking in Alberta for years, and everyone knows it.

The way it's usually said, especially after every federal election is, "We should do like Quebec and threaten separation."

Norris is well aware that most Albertans don't want to separate. But he also knows most don't want to rule it out, and that over 40% are leaning that way, even if not all of them are committed to it.

Politicians, of course, know that once a large and powerful idea like independence starts being discussed, it can turn their whole world upside down.

Hence their practice of shouting separatism down as unthinkable -- even though almost everyone is thinking about it.

But there's another reason mainstream politicians have avoided "doing like Quebec."

Quebec separatists know what they want. Half of them actually want to separate, and the rest want more money from "the English" (meaning those oilfields out west).

That's what they want. But what do Albertans want?

Most don't know.

Tiresome local liberals like Catherine Ford often say Albertans just like to bitch. But except for national government and the justice system, Albertans are famously unsympathetic to complainers. Need help? Get a job. Don't like your job? Find a better one. Got a problem? Fix it. Feeling marginalized? Suck it up. Don't complain. Deal with it yourself.

But most Albertans know there's something about Canada that just plain doesn't add up -- starting with the \$11,000 per family each year Ottawa siphons out of their economy.

Twenty years ago, Preston Manning started a political party to fix the federal system. Unfortunately, it didn't work.

We all learned that the problem with Canada goes deeper than politics. It's structural. It's constitutional.

In September, the Citizens Centre will host a big public assembly called the Calgary Congress at the Westin Hotel, to determine how

Canada should work, and how it can be fixed.

What exactly needs to be changed for all regions to reach their full potential?

Most sensible people realize that the federal government needs to be shrunk, and that the government of Alberta could play a key role in shrinking it.

The Congress will identify principles whereby Alberta, Ontario and Quebec could join forces to reduce federal powers, each for its own good reasons.

Experienced Alberta political leaders and thinkers will present new ideas to this Congress -- including Preston Manning, Ralph Klein, Ted Morton, Lorne Taylor, Bert Brown, and a lot of smart policy people from across Canada.

We're also working on getting hundreds of grassroots Canadians to come too.

If this approach works, good. If it doesn't, the separation that Norris has now enabled Albertans to discuss may follow.

To find out more about this assembly, go to www.CalgaryCongress.ca, or call our office at 866-666-6768.

- Link Byfield

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"Just Between Us" is a feature service of the Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy.