OPINION

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Canadians are rightly preoccupied with bullying by the Trump administration. But there is another, subtler threat to our sovereignty: the emergence of individuals who imagine themselves to be sovereigns.

This possibility was foreseen by libertarian thinkers James Dale Davidson and William Rees-Mogg. In their 1997 book *The Sovereign Individual,* they predicted the rise of individuals so wealthy and powerful that they could no longer be controlled by nation states. Governments, they claimed, would be compelled to become more like corporations and citizens more like customers.

In my book, I argue that Canadians need to take these ideas seriously, not because sovereign individuals will supersede the nation-state – today's billionaires depend heavily on contracts, tax cuts, subsidies and regulatory loopholes created by governments – but because they help us to understand three alarming trends. First, the rise of big tech firms with market capitalization exceeding the gross domestic product of most rich countries. Second, the structure of ownership within major corporations, giving individual CEOs extraordinary political influence. Third, the role of new technologies in how we govern ourselves, especially AI, the critical infrastructure of the new global economic and political systems.

Nobody has benefited more from these trends than Elon Musk, who recently (at least briefly) became the world's first trillionaire. Nobody better personifies the myth of the sovereign individual. Mr. Musk has used his almost unimaginable wealth to enhance his disproportionate political power.

After donating more than US$280-million to Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign and those of other Republicans, including millions of dollars in payouts to voters in swing states in an attempt to influence the election, Mr. Musk became an unelected, unvetted special employee of the U.S. government with access to the President despite massive conflicts of interest.

Through his role in the unironically named Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE, Italian for "duke," may have been an allusion to the cryptocurrency Mr. Musk has promoted, Dogecoin, but it also evoked Venetian oligarchs), Mr. Musk sought to neutralize federal investigations, capture regulatory agencies, reduce their personnel and capacities, and bring them under executive control.

Since Mr. Musk left DOGE, he has authorized his political action committees (PACs) to spend more than US$100-million to elect Republicans in this year's midterm elections. Under U.S. law, Super PACs can accept unlimited contributions, giving wealthy individuals inordinate influence over election outcomes.

Mr. Musk's corporations are structured according to a governance model that has made him an unaccountable ruler who holds all decision-making power and literally cannot be removed without voting against himself.

In politics, the word for this is despotism.

His control over global satellites (Starlink) and space launch capacity, with plans for orbital data centres (SpaceX), his ownership of a social-media platform (X, formerly Twitter), his investments in artificial intelligence (xAI's Grok) and his digitally networked vehicles (Tesla) confer enormous infrastructural power on Mr. Musk – including, for example, the ability to determine who gets connectivity in critical geographical locations, like war zones, or algorithmic gatekeeping through platform governance.

Before SpaceX's 2026 IPO, Nasdaq changed its rules in a way that benefited SpaceX by facilitating the company's rapid inclusion in the Nasdaq-100, effectively requiring passive funds tracking the index to acquire SpaceX stock.

The Securities and Exchange Commission, weakened by DOGE-imposed staff cuts and political interference, raised no public objection. One commissioner simply said investors don't have to buy shares of the stock if they don't want it.

Yet public-sector employees – the very workers Mr. Musk fired or disparaged – could find themselves involuntary SpaceX shareholders as pension funds invested on their behalf purchased the stock to track the index.

With both despotic and infrastructural power, Mr. Musk is the closest approximation to Mr. Davidson and Mr. Rees-Mogg's sovereign individual: Although he is deeply embedded in work with the U.S. government, he acts more like a sovereign ruler than a citizen subject. This exalted status is not only celebrated by the self-styled neo-reactionaries (the anti-democratic far-right, who use the acronym NRx) in Silicon Valley; they see it as a model for politics.

Citizens, they claim, should be formalized as customers, and political influence should be delegated to owners.

The claim that democracy is inherently corrupting because it drives the relentless expansion of the state is a recurring trope in NRx thought. It is a short step from such a view to the outright rejection of democracy. Curtis Yarvin – a computer programmer, blogger and investor known online by the moniker "Mencius Moldbug" – argues that "a state is a business which owns a country" and it should be managed by dividing its ownership into shares. Nick Land, a British academic and author of *The Dark Enlightenment*, concurs, adding that customers should have no voice but be free to exit. Mr. Yarvin and Mr. Land reject democracy, egalitarianism and modern liberalism.

The freedom to exit – to opt out of political arrangements that do not align with their needs and beliefs – is their pre-eminent political value.

Such thinking shapes anti-democratic sentiments among other tech billionaires as well. Peter Thiel – co-founder of PayPal, Palantir and Founders Fund; an early investor in Facebook; a supporter of Mr. Yarvin's ventures; and a key backer of Vice-President JD Vance's political career – is also an admirer of *The Sovereign Individual*.

He, too, celebrates the politics of exit. His preferred exit strategies have included investing in cyberspace, space exploration, sea-steading and buying property around the world, including New Zealand, as a hedge against civilizational collapse.

Mr. Thiel has said "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." The chief executive of Canadian corporation Shopify, Tobi Lütke, recently seemed to embrace a system of income-weighted voting.

The thinking of tech billionaires should matter to Canadians for at least three reasons.

First, multinational corporations have long been considered pillars of the liberal international economic order. Their commitment to the rules, norms and decision-making procedures of international regimes has contributed to keeping the global economy open.

Big Tech is different.

Tech's largest firms are powerful enough to bargain with states one-on-one and challenge their regulatory authority, even as they seek to provide the infrastructure states need for surveillance and control of populations. If the United States cannot effectively regulate its own technology industry, Canada is even less likely to do so: Witness Prime Minister Mark Carney's rapid retreat from a digital services tax under intense pressure from the U.S. government to submit to Big Tech's demands.

Conflict between Canada and the United States is, in part, a consequence of the rise of Big Tech.

Second, the antipathy toward Canada among NRx thinkers and adjacent corporate donors and politicians cannot be ignored.

Verbal attacks on Canada by Mr. Trump, Mr. Vance, billionaire Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick and multimillionaire Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, and their amplification in right-wing media, are not some bizarre and inexplicable idiosyncrasy.

Canada symbolizes what the far right most detests: an imperfect but functioning social-democratic state with egalitarian institutions and independent regulators; worse still, from their perspective, we are a thriving multicultural society.

Third, the political overreach of billionaires is not only a threat to democracy in the United States, it is also a threat to Canada's democracy. We are not immune from utopian and technocratic thinking. Young men especially, many of whom admire billionaires like Mr. Musk, are prone to embrace the ethos of technological quick-fixes, the escapism of space exploration and the apparently meritocratic values and implicit survival-of-the-fittest social Darwinism that underpins NRx thought. The rhetoric of freedom-as-exit and individual sovereignty can be detected in movements as diverse as the Freedom Convoy, Alberta separatism, the Freemen-on-the-Land movement and supporters of Romana Didulo, the self-proclaimed "Queen of Canada." We dismiss and ignore this angry and seemingly irrational rhetoric of alienation and derangement at our peril.

Faced with these challenges, Canadians can do several things.

We can invest in our own strategic and public infrastructure so that it cannot be weaponized against us. Not publicly subsidizing the infrastructure of our natural resource economy. Oil and gas is a major source of polarization in Canada, and doubling down on extractivism in a time of climate crisis is both bad policy and bad politics. Instead, we should be looking to industries that can build our own digital infrastructure, using tariffs against the United States to protect them and deploying this infrastructure to promote Canadian champions and enhance worker productivity and security. AI policy that protects our (digital) sovereignty, builds computing capacity, and does so in a way that uses the tools of competition, procurement and cultural policy, is essential to making Canada strong.

Inequality should be subject to democratically established limits on the extreme concentration of income and wealth. To be clear, the problem is not wealth but inequality, which corrupts institutions and weakens our collective capacity for self-government. One solution would be to use fiscal policy to establish a maximum ratio of CEO-to-worker compensation. In the 1980s, that ratio was 50:1; currently, it is almost 250:1.

More broadly, corporate power could be limited by discouraging financialization while promoting competition and good corporate governance.

Above all, we need to renew our democratic institutions and strengthen our identities as citizens. Freedom does not have to mean exit. It can mean building a society in which all citizens have a share in the decisions that affect us directly.

Sovereignty consists of everything that enables us as a political community to decide our own destiny. In democracies, it is vested in the people as citizens. In practice, this means upholding parliamentary supremacy and the rule of law. We can disagree about almost anything as long as we acknowledge our shared commitment to one another as members of a self-governing community, bound equally to abide by the laws we have authorized, indirectly, by voting for our representatives.

Any acceptance of the idea that our destiny is to be decided by others – such as the notion that we might become the 51st state of the United States – must be noxious to us. To protect our sovereignty, we must be united as citizens against any effort to weaken our ability to govern ourselves.

Our sovereignty is compatible with federalism and Indigenous self-determination. We can invent any system of self-government we like as long as it is we, the people, duly represented in Parliament, who agree to such arrangements and uphold them through legitimate political and constitutional processes.

The minority of Albertans who want independence are free to pursue it provided they respect our laws and institutions. As Canadians learned from two referendums on Quebec independence, however, there is no possibility of sovereignty for a subset of citizens within a sovereign nation. Should Alberta separate, it would hold no claim on Canada; nor would Canada have a claim on an independent Alberta; nor indeed would Alberta escape legal obligations to First Nations. By the same token, there are no sovereign citizens unless the rest of us become mere subjects. That is why advocates of individual sovereignty embrace authoritarianism: Sovereign individuals must perforce be hermits or despots.

To resist this, we must take care to exercise our role in democratic self-government. We can do so by voting and joining political associations; by telling stories that build cohesion, inclusion and civility; and by learning the civic capabilities to navigate our disagreements peaceably while preserving the diversity of interests, beliefs and values within our communities. In serving our communities, co-operating with our fellow citizens and willingly sacrificing for the common good, we can cultivate the character traits of humility, modesty and empathy – traits that are strengths, not weaknesses, in a democracy.

Right now, Mr. Trump may be the main threat to our sovereignty, but his presidency is symptomatic of a deeper, pre-existing malaise. The toxic mix of late-stage capitalism, with its mega-corporations and financialization, oligarchic tendencies in politics fuelled by big money, and the technocracy-inspired utopianism of NRx libertarians will remain long after Mr. Trump has departed the scene. But this dismal reality is also an opportunity: Every attack on Canada gives us the chance to show the world what a sovereign people can be and do.