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The Western Cape independence movement: motivations, justifications and critique

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Western Cape (WC) independence movement has garnered significant interest, both nationally and globally. This article focuses on the main proponents of independence and their motivations, arguments and tactics, highlighting the prominence of political and economic grievances as the driving forces of WC secessionism. It is also argued that the growth of far-right populism and conspiracy theories globally has provided the movement with a platform to advance its secessionist cause. Nonetheless, this article will emphasise that the route to an independent WC state is highly uncertain, lacking a firm basis in both national and international legal frameworks.

KEYWORDS

South Africa; Western Cape independence; secessionism; Great Replacement Theory; far right

Introduction

In recent years, the notion of Western Cape (WC) independence has rapidly moved from the fringes of debate to the mainstream of South African politics, forcing South African President Cyril Ramaphosa expressly to rule out the prospect of a referendum on the issue in December 2025 (Maqhina, 2025). Fuelled largely by frustrations with national governance and economic stagnation, various organisations and political parties, notably the Cape Independence Party and the more recently established Referendum Party (RP), advocate for WC separatism. Hitherto, these parties have had very limited electoral success (Feather, 2024). The Cape Independence Party holds just two of the 231 seats on Cape Town City Council, while the RP failed to secure a single seat in the 2024 general election. WC secessionism, nonetheless, remains a talking point for politicians and the public alike.

In line with Griffiths' (2016) claim that we are living in an 'age of secession', it is unsurprising that the clamour for WC separatism has garnered interest in both national and international media. Internationally, the movement's growth has coincided with the rise of the populist far right, and the increasing prominence of misinformation and conspiracy theories – once the preserve of fringe radical groups – within mainstream

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politics (Pirro & Taggart, 2023). The WC is no exception. The 'Great Replacement Theory' - the idea that the White majority in Europe and North America is under threat of being usurped by people of colour as the dominant ethnic group – has gained growing traction in recent years (Ekman, 2022). Arguably, South Africa is on the frontline of this conflict, with the myth of genocide against White farmers seen as clear evidence of this race-based plot to entrench Black global supremacy (Hinton, 2025). Indeed, in a visit to the White House in May 2025, Ramaphosa was lambasted by President Donald Trump for apparent attacks on the White community. More recently, Trump boycotted the G20 summit that took place in Johannesburg in November 2025, citing the 'widely discredited claims' that the South African government is persecuting the country's White minority (Rhoden Paul, 2025). While the White genocide myth, which Trump appears to believe, has been widely dismissed by most credible sources, it has, nonetheless, been subsumed in the secessionist discourse of the WC. As Trump has discarded most of the norms of international relations in his second administration – by kidnapping Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and threatening to annex Greenland from the United States' ally Denmark – it is not beyond the realms of possibility that he will further his interest in South African affairs, something the WC secessionist movement is keen to encourage.

The main objective of this article is to explore the growing prominence of the WC independence movement by examining the key organisations and individuals involved, the main arguments for and against independence, and the different practices used to advocate secessionism. To date, the WC independence movement has been subject to very little academic analysis (Van Staden. 2021, is the main exception). In examining the justifications, tactics and motivations of WC separatists, this paper thus seeks to broaden and deepen our understanding of the WC separatist movement. Drawing on contemporaneous speeches, interviews, news reports and party documents including electoral manifestos and press releases, we provide a thick description of the movement, highlighting its growing prominence and illuminating how both domestic factors and also shifts in the international zeitgeist in recent years have played key roles in the evolution of the independence movement.

As with all secessionist movements, there are clear political and economic factors underlying the WC independence movement's surge in popularity. The African National Congress (ANC) – which has been in government since 1994 - is seen by many to be riddled with corruption, to have grossly mismanaged the South African economy, to have allowed the country to be engulfed by very high levels of crime, and to have failed to meet even basic service delivery requirements such as a reliable supply of electricity and water. While anger against the ANC has seen voters look to other parties throughout the country, these are predominantly further to the political left than the ANC and more staunch advocates of redistributive African nationalism. In contrast, the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA), which advocates more capitalist-orientated solutions to South Africa's problems, and draws its support from South Africa's White, Indian and so-called Coloured minorities, has entrenched its power in the WC Provincial Legislature, in which it has held a majority since 2009. Advocates of WC independence contend that this stark difference in voting patterns, combined with the ANC's failures in national government, is a key reason the WC should secede.

However, what makes this movement distinct, and worthy of detailed analysis, is the underlying role far-right conspiracy theories have played in increasing its support. As this article demonstrates, many leading figures within the WC independence movement believe that the ANC-led government is actively moving Black South Africans to the WC to increase its electoral support, with the ultimate aim of removing the DA from the provincial government (CapeXit, 2019). Others within the movement contend that the murder of White farmers in South Africa is tantamount to a genocide despite no statistical evidence to support their claims (Capexit, 2023).

The contribution of this paper is two-fold. First, we shed light on this understudied movement. As already noted, despite considerable support for independence there have been very few academic analyses of the WC movement. Our findings thus contribute to enhancing academic understandings of WC secessionism as well as offering a basis for further research. Second, we contribute to the burgeoning literature on independence movements and secessionism. As others have pointed out, however, much of this literature is western dominated, often focused on the most prominent cases, such as Catalonia and Scotland (Bishop et al., 2022). In examining the case of WC independence, therefore, this article builds upon other recent research on secessionism in Africa (Ahmed, 2024; Hussein & Fessha, 2025; Thomas & Falola, 2020) and extends the scope of analysis beyond the Global North.

This article is structured as follows. First, it introduces the WC and offers a brief overview of its shifting demographics and their links with WC secessionism. We then identify the main groups campaigning for WC independence, before examining the tactics used to advance the secessionist cause. Next, we assess the impact the movement has had on established political parties in South Africa, before finally providing a critique of the movement.

The territorial politics of the WC

The negotiations that brought an end to apartheid in 1994 saw South Africa adopt a 'quasi-federal' system of government. The country is composed of nine provinces, each with its own legislature, executive council and premier. The WC, with a population of 7.4 million, is South Africa's third most populated province, with a distinctive ethnic and cultural makeup. It is the only province where Black South Africans do not constitute a majority, making up roughly 39% of the population. Indeed, no ethnic group makes up a majority in the WC, with the so-called Coloured community the largest in the province comprising 42% of the population, according to the latest census in 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2022).[1]

The White community accounts for 16% of the WC population. This is split between Afrikaners, who make up slightly more than half of this group, but also English-speaking South Africans, predominantly although not exclusively of British descent (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Indeed, the territory now known as the WC was seized by British forces in 1795, before the Cape Colony – as it was then called – was formally incorporated into the British Empire in 1814 (Giliomee, 2003). While the independence movement hitherto seems white-dominated, WC independence also garners considerable support among the Coloured community.

Most Black families have only lived in the WC for one or two generations owing to restrictions in freedom of movement on Black South Africans in place during the apartheid era. When the Dutch settlers first arrived in South Africa, the Black communities – themselves descendants of Bantu people who had migrated from Central Africa roughly 1,000 years earlier – did not reside in the area now referred to as the WC as the climate did not suit their agricultural practices (Laband, 2020). While some Black South Africans did move to the WC in subsequent years, the authorities tried to limit this. In particular, the National Party (NP) government, which introduced apartheid after its election victory in 1948, strengthened legislation known as influx controls that restricted the number of Black people who could move into 'White areas' for work (Western, 2001).

Concerns over a 'great replacement' of sorts taking place in the WC are at the forefront of independence advocates' urgency to break away from the rest of South Africa, with unease that Black migration into the province could ultimately see the vote share held by the pro-capitalist parties eroded, and with it the perceived threat to interests of the minority communities who vote for them (BizNewsTV, 2024). Indeed, the Black community constitutes the fastest growing ethnic group within the WC with its share of the population increasing by 7% between the 2011 and 2022 Census (Statistics South Africa, 2022).

In a number of speeches and media appearances, Phil Craig, the British-born co-founder of the Cape Independence Advocacy Group (CIAG), has raised concerns over the significant numbers of Black South Africans moving from other provinces and 'settling land illegally in the WC' and then voting for 'exactly what they have run away from', namely the ANC, in the province's elections (Spread Great Ideas, 2024). Peter Hammond and Des Palm, senior members of CapeXit – a non-profit organisation that campaigns for WC independence – have gone as far as accusing the ANC government of 'bussing' Black South Africans into the WC from other provinces with the aim of 'diluting' the vote of minority ethnic groups (CapeXit, 2019). Race, an issue that has dominated SA politics for centuries, is likewise a prominent feature of WC secessionism.

Advocates of WC independence past and present

Even before the end of apartheid there were signs of separatism in what now constitutes the WC. During the negotiations to end apartheid, the Free Cape Movement (FCM) was formed and campaigned alongside other groups calling for greater federal autonomy or even independence in various parts of South Africa as part of the Concerned Citizens Group (*The Citizen*, 1993). The FCM, however, appears to have been a marginal actor in this period, particularly in comparison with Zulu and Afrikaner nationalist movements led by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the *Volksfront* respectively. Indeed, despite failing to achieve independence in 1994, both Zulu and Afrikaner nationalism maintained a degree of prominence in the 'new' South Africa. The IFP, in particular, was a partner in the first Government of National Unity (GNU), which followed the end of apartheid and remained in government as a junior partner until 2004. While Afrikaner nationalism was confined to opposition, it still maintained a prominent place in South African society through various political parties that united to form the Freedom Front Plus (FF Plus) in 2003. Afrikaner separatists have also founded the Whites-only town of Orania in the Northern Cape (Cavanagh, 2013).

In contrast, the WC independence movement faded into even greater obscurity over the course of the 1990s and 2000s. The Cape Party, formed in 2007, and later restyled as the Cape Independence Party, was the first indication that there was a renewed appetite for an independent WC, despite being largely confined to the political margins. The party has contested several provincial and municipal elections in the WC but has never secured higher than 0.45% of the vote – although it does currently have two representatives on the Cape Town City Council. One of these representatives, party leader Jack Miller, is the son of one of the members of the FCM, which was part of the Concerned Citizens Group in 1993 (BizNewsTv, 2021a). Miller recently made headlines when he was ejected from a City of Cape Town Council sitting after he described South Africans who had moved to the WC from other provinces as 'economic migrants' (Charle, 2025).

Given its focus on WC independence, the Cape Independence Party can be predominantly seen as a single-issue party, although it also advocates right-wing libertarian policies including direct democracy based on the Swiss model (Cape Independence Party, 2025). It also promises to cut taxes in half and increase scrutiny of government spending with the aim of replicating Singapore's post-colonial success, which, in Miller's words 'took it from being a muddy island to one of the most prosperous countries in the world' (Cape Independence Party, 2025; Newzroom Afrika, 2020).

Another group advocating for independence is CapeXit, originally established as the Western Cape Action Forum in 2012. While this organisation has no political affiliation, it advances policy positions that it envisages for an independent WC. Some of these policies are from a right-wing libertarian stance – namely, the scrapping of all taxes to be replaced by a total economic activity levy (TEAL) tax of 1% on all transactions (CapeXit, 2022). CapeXit also advocates direct democracy in a similar vein to the Cape Independence Party (Palm, 2023). Despite this neoliberal position on taxation, CapeXit advocates some much more authoritarian policies, including the use of forced labour as punishment for criminal activity (CapeXit, 2019). CapeXit's founder Des Palm is also a proponent of the myth that the murder of White farmers in South Africa constitutes genocide (CapeXit, 2020).

CapeXit gained considerable support during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was partly due to the very strict lockdown implemented by the ANC government, which allowed only limited time outside the home for shopping and exercise and forced many businesses to temporarily cease operations. Both the Cape Independence Party and CapeXit contend that, in this context, people had more time to research political topics and were attracted to the notion of WC independence (Worldview, 2021; The Young Cape, 2020). Additionally, there were few grants available despite the government-imposed restrictions on working. This had a particularly detrimental impact on the self-employed or those working in the tourist industry and helped further support for the WC independence movement. There was also a growth in support for the WC independence movement in the aftermath of the civil unrest that engulfed parts of South Africa following former President Jacob Zuma's arrest in July 2021 (BizNewsTV, 2021b).

The CIAG was formed in 2020. Its co-founder and spokesperson Phil Craig is originally from the United Kingdom, although he is married to a South African and has two South African children who speak Afrikaans as their first language (Craig, 2025a). Prior to entering politics Craig worked in marketing (Ansara, 2021), which may explain CIAG's success in generating a considerable increase in media attention

for WC independence in recent years. Craig's political stance appears more centrist than that of Palm and Miller, and he advocates a 'social market economy' similar to that envisaged by the DA (Ansara, 2021). In fact, Craig praises many of the DA's social and economic policies, but he is highly critical of its position on WC independence and takes issue with WC Premier Alan Winde's assertion that he is 'a South African first' (Craig, 2023). In Craig's view, the provincial premier's priority should be to the people of the WC. There are striking similarities between Craig's attitude to the DA, and the attitude of Eurosceptic politicians in the UK to the Conservative Party prior to Britain's withdrawal from the European Union (EU). Craig has even stated that he hopes the CIAG can become a 'trojan horse' within the DA in its battle for WC independence in a similar vein to Eurosceptics within the British Conservative Party (Ansara, 2021; Worldview, 2021).

To further this cause, Craig founded the RP to take part in the 2024 South African elections. Subsequently, Craig appeared on the GB News programme 'Farage' and told the eponymous host and current Reform Party leader that he was 'absolutely delighted that you've led the way and given us the roadmap of how to deliver genuine democracy to the people of the Western Cape' (Farage, 2023). Despite hopes of achieving 100,000 votes in the general election, the RP polled just over 7,000 votes (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024).

Arguments for WC independence

Secessionist mobilisation in a given territory is typically characterised by competing claims for and against the establishment of a new state. Proponents of secession are generally fuelled by a sense of grievance against the host state (Pavkovic & Radan, 2007), with arguments in favour of independence typically constructed around various cultural, economic and political grievances (Bartkus, 1999). This is, for example, the case in Nigeria, where secessionist discourse has largely focused on wealth inequality, particularly the distribution of oil-generated revenue, as well as claims of marginalisation and fears of domination by one ethnic group over another (Babalola, 2018).

These arguments, nonetheless, are often employed alongside more positive rhetoric in which independence is instrumentalised as 'a means to creating a better future' for the withdrawing territory (Anderson et al., 2024, p. 124). Yet, as other scholars drawing on cases such as Eritrea and South Sudan caution, while 'secession and its associated dream of freedom might seem like a *panacea ex ante*', it may do little to address underlying grievances and can instead exacerbate and prolong conflict (Schomerus et al., 2019, p. 11). For advocates of independence in the WC, however, secession is broadly framed as a pathway to ending perceived corruption within national government structures, facilitating better management of the economy, and enhancing service delivery (Referendum Party, 2023).

One of the main arguments put forward by supporters of WC independence is that there is a distinct difference in the voting pattern of the province compared with the rest of South Africa (Newzroom Afrika, 2021; Spread Great Ideas, 2024). Unlike the rest of the country, where the ANC has dominated for much of the post-apartheid period, it was only the senior partner in the WC's provincial government for one term, from 2004 to 2009. Since that point, the DA has established itself as the dominant party in the province. While the DA has had some success in major urban areas elsewhere in South

Africa, the party has struggled to make inroads with the country's Black majority, making its chances of winning an outright majority nationally virtually impossible. The DA's chances of being the largest party in a coalition government are also very slim. While the ANC's vote has been falling nationally since 2004, dropping below 50% for the first time at the 2021 municipal elections, its votes largely went to the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF); a radical Marxist and Black nationalist party formed by disgruntled left-wing ANC supporters, which advocates land expropriation without compensation. The creation of another militant breakaway faction – uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), which also had a more militantly left-wing and Zulu nationalist position – has also drawn support from former ANC voters.

While the collapse in the ANC's support gave the DA the opportunity to enter government in June 2024, advocates of WC independence point to the GNU's very limited success in its first year in office as further evidence that the crime, corruption and economic problems facing South Africa cannot be solved within the current system (Craig, 2025b). The establishment of an independent WC state, therefore, is seen as the most viable solution to addressing these problems. The RP's 2024 manifesto, for example, dubbed South Africa a 'failed state', documenting problems such as unemployment, high murder rates, corruption and land invasions as the consequences of an inept central government (Referendum Party, 2024, p. 3). In this regard, and with the promise of a 'First-World future for the Western Cape and its people', proponents of independence intertwine economic and political grievances to advocate for WC separatism (Referendum Party, 2024, p. 4).

The WC independence movement also argues that the right to declare a referendum and for the people of the WC to determine their own future is enshrined in both South Africa's and the WC's own constitution. Indeed, Section 127(1)(f) of South Africa's constitution states that 'the premier of a province is responsible' for 'calling a referendum in the province in accordance with national legislation' (South African Government, 1996). The 'national legislation' referred to here is the Referendum Act (1983), which set out the process for how the State President can call a referendum (South African Government, 1983). While this does not appear relevant in the case of provincial premiers, because this legislation was passed prior to the creation of the 'new' South Africa in 1994, more recent legislation has equated their rights with that of the state president in the apartheid period, when it comes to calling a referendum (Van Staden, 2023).

Advocates of WC independence also draw on South Africa's constitution as justification for their cause of 'self-determination'. The CIAG, for example, points to Section 235 of the South African constitution, which recognises the right of self-determination for the 'South African people as a whole' whilst 'not precluding' certain groups (CIAG, 2023a). The Cape Independence Party contends that Section 235 of the Constitution gives 'the right of self-determination of any community sharing a common cultural and language heritage within a territorial entity in the Republic [of South Africa]' (Independence Party, 2024).

In this light, advocates of WC independence have tried to emphasise the distinct history and culture of the WC, pointing to the fact that Afrikaans is the most widely spoken language in the province and that the WC is the only province in which the Coloured community are the largest ethnic racial group (Craig, 2022). It should also be

noted that the WC is the only province in South Africa with its own constitution. While this document itself does not make reference to self-determination or the right of the WC Premier to call a referendum, its very existence and language, such as 'we the people of the Western Cape' (Province of the Western Cape, 1998), has been taken by advocates of independence as evidence that it:

> specifically identifies the Western Cape people as a group who are distinct from the South African people as a whole and this is in any event self-evident because the province has its own provincial government, parliament, and voters' role. (CIAG, 2023a)

While the perceived marginalisation of the minority ethnic groups within the WC is a motivational factor behind the WC independence movement's support, the tangible trappings of statehood the province already possesses make it easier to present a vision for secession. By presenting secession as the next natural step to the limited autonomy the province already has, potential supporters' fears are more easily allayed with greater certainty surrounding how the new state would initially function.

Tactics deployed by WC independence movement

Political parties such as the Cape Independence Party and the Referendum Party attempt to win votes in elections as evidence of support for their cause. While the Cape Independence Party is highly critical of many aspects of DA policy, the Referendum Party has emphasised that it does not want to unseat the DA Provincial Government, but instead wants the DA to lose its overall majority and be forced into a coalition with the various parties fighting for WC independence (CIAG, 2023b; Referendum Party, 2024). In this vein, pro-independence parties would seek concessions, such as a referendum, from the government.

CapeXit and CIAG seek to raise the profile of the WC independence movement. CapeXit is more focused on the lobbying of politicians (Worldview, 2021), while CIAG takes a more public approach trying to generate greater media attention to the issue. Indeed, Craig has arguably been more successful than the other figures in the WC independence movement in gaining media attention both in South Africa and internationally (Guppy, 2020; Walsh, 2024), as well as successfully courting high-profile right-wing politicians in Europe and North America in the hope of furthering CIAG's cause (Craig, 2025c; Farage, 2023).

The CIAG has also organised demonstrations for the purpose of displaying its appetite for independence, which it claims are regularly attended by thousands of its supporters (CIAG, 2022). While hard to verify, independent sources suggest that several of these marches have been attended by hundreds of supporters (Molyneaux, 2020). Another key aspect of CIAG's work is conducting polls to assess the support for WC independence, and the support for a referendum on the issue. While funded by CIAG, these polls are carried out by Victory Research, an independent polling company. In its latest polling, 51% of WC voters support a referendum on independence, with only 43% in favour of independence. Support is strongest amongst Coloured WC residents, with 60% in favour of independence. There is also considerable support from White voters, which sits at 47%. However, support amongst Black voters is considerably lower at just 16% (CIAG, 2025).

Both CapeXit and CIAG contend that the best chance the WC has to gain independence is to follow the path laid out by international law (CIAG, 2023a; Palm, 2020). First, a territory needs to demonstrate it has the authority to make its own decisions. While many provisions remain the preserve of the national government, the WC Provincial Government demonstrates that this condition has been met. CapeXit also emphasises the importance of not putting the 'wagon before the horse' and is attempting to form what in essence are shadow cabinets for the various government departments the WC would have to take over should independence be granted (Palm, 2020; Worldview, 2021).

Second, a territory needs to demonstrate that over 50% of the population desires this outcome. CapeXit, therefore, places considerable emphasis on gaining registered supporters with the aim of reaching 1.6 million – half the number of registered voters in the WC. While a referendum would be preferable, without provision for this by the national or provincial government this is viewed as the next best option. At the time of writing, it currently stands at 841,580 registered supporters (CapeXit, 2025).

Finally, a secessionist movement needs to demonstrate that all 'viable alternatives' have been exhausted (CIAG, 2023a). If it can be demonstrated that the other criteria have been met, and WC leaders have tried to negotiate for greater devolution or the creation of a truly federal state but no agreement can be reached, the WC could then hold its own referendum and declare itself independent under international law. Craig has stated that CIAG intends to hold a private referendum in the next two years (BizNewsTV, 2025). For this route to independence to be successful, the WC would need the international community onside. It is for this reason that CIAG in particular has been courting international support. For example, Craig visited Washington in May 2025 in an effort to secure funding and diplomatic support from the USA, and claims to have met several members of Trump's administration as part of this process (Craig, 2025c).

Impact of WC independence movement on established political parties

In light of the establishment of these pro-independence groups, and the growing media attention they garner, more established political parties have begun to take notice of the issue of WC independence. In the 2021 local government election, the FF Plus made WC independence official party policy and began working with CapeXit (Gerber, 2021). The FF Plus is a right-wing conservative party that draws the majority of its support from Afrikaners. It has also had some success in attracting Coloured voters in the WC. While the party is on the right and opposes government interventions such as affirmative action, it does not have the same level of enthusiasm for the neo-liberal policies espoused by some of the other groups advocating independence. FF Plus leader Corné Mulder, who until February 2025 had been the leader of the party in the WC, has been vocal in his support of independence for the province (Newzroom Afrika, 2021).

The FF Plus tabled a Private Member's Bill in the WC Parliament in 2023, which emphasised that the people of the province are distinct from the 'South African people as a whole', thus justifying their right to self-determination in accordance with the South African constitution (Marais, 2023). The bill has subsequently been paused as concerns were raised by other parties' representatives over the legality of proposing such a bill to the provincial rather than national parliament, and due to concerns over some of the

statistics used to support the arguments regarding the widespread use of Afrikaans in the province (WC Committee on Premier and Constitutional Matters, 2023).

The DA has also been forced to comment on this issue in recent years. While officially the party is an advocate of federalism and calls for much greater devolution of powers at a provincial level, it appears very uneasy about outright support for WC independence. Phil Craig contends that this is due to fears this will impact its popularity elsewhere in South Africa, where it draws roughly 70% of its support base (Ansara, 2021). Craig claims that the DA initially agreed to hold a referendum on WC independence in 2021, partly in response to losing support to parties on its right in previous national elections, but that its subsequent resurgence in the 2021 municipal elections led it to backtrack on this commitment (Conscious Caracal, 2024). The DA also played a role in pausing the FF Plus bill in the WC Parliament (Steenhuisen, 2023).

Nonetheless, the DA does appear to accept that, if it is to keep its supporters in the WC onside, it needs to do more to champion the cause for greater devolution for the WC, with its provincial manifesto for the 2024 election emphasising a 'push' for the WC government to have greater 'control of policing, transport and the ports' (Democratic Alliance, 2024). Prior to this, in May 2023, the DA tabled the Western Cape Provincial Powers bill. The bill sought greater federal autonomy, particularly in relation to policing, energy and transport – three areas in which the national government is believed to have failed particularly badly owing to high crime rates, rolling blackouts and major reductions in passenger train services (Steenhuisen, 2023). Advocates of WC secession claim this bill is essentially a face-saving device on the part of the DA in light of the FF Plus bill and growing support for the WC independence movement (Spread Great Ideas, 2024).

While polls conducted by CIAG demonstrate that WC's Coloured voters are the strongest supporters of independence, the issue has gained little traction with the Patriotic Alliance (PA) – a party formed in 2013 explicitly to advance the interests of the Coloured community. In fact, PA leader Gayton McKenzie is highly critical of the notion (Vulankungu, 2024). This disconnect between Coloured voters and the PA did not impact the party's popularity as it achieved its best results in the 2024 elections, gaining 2% of the vote nationally and 8.64% of the vote in the WC (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024).

Critique of the case for WC independence

The WC independence movement's use of the Constitution to support its claim has been called into question. For all its legal supporters' invocation of routine constitutional principles – the generous construction of human rights, the 'spirit and purpose' of the constitution, and the principle of subsidiarity (von Staden, 2021) – it can be argued that the constitutional text has been instrumentalised for ends other than those that go with the Constitution's grain and context. For example, the wording of the South African Constitution emphasises self-determination for the South African people *as a whole* (SMWX, 2024), which speaks to the collaborative, rather than unilateral, format of its nationhood. The right of self-determination, as recognised by international treaty law and customary law, uses the same language – the UN General Assembly's Declaration on Friendly Relations, for example, clarifies that self-determination is a right belonging to 'the whole people belonging to the territory

without distinction as to race, creed or colour'. Although this can be understood as a disaggregated and collaborative notion of peoplehood that recognises distinct identity-based subgroups as joint rights-holders (Raič, 2002), international law generally requires self-determination to be exercised internally, through appropriate constitutional arrangements, rather than externally, via secession (Supreme Court of Canada, 1998). Secession is not ruled out – it could be the outcome of internal negotiations between a sub-state group and the state – but so far as *unilateral* secession is concerned, international law reserves it as a remedial option in 'the most extreme of cases' (Supreme Court of Canada, 1998). While some within the WC independence movement have tried to emphasise that attacks on the Afrikaans language, the burning of statues and positive discrimination in employment law, which favours Black applicants, would qualify in its extremity (CapeXit RSA, 2018), the fact that the poorest and most marginalised of WC's racial groups are Black calls such suggestions into question. Moreover, international law's presumption in favour of territorial integrity can only be displaced when the extremely high threshold of remedial self-determination is met. This requires, *inter alia*, a distinct identity-based group constituting a majority in a distinct territory which has been subject to 'widespread and gross violations of their fundamental human rights' (Dugard, 2013). There is nothing to suggest that this high bar has been reached.

The notion that the WC population is a distinct identity-based group, or even a 'people', is also questionable – particularly as several of the independence movement's advocates conversely also emphasise the diversity of the WC and the fact that, unlike all of South Africa's other provinces, no racial group has an overall majority in the region. These individuals place great emphasis on the fact that Afrikaans is the most widely spoken language in the province, but this ignores the fact that this language is spoken by people in all of South Africa's other provinces and, far from being oppressed, is one of the country's 12 official languages.

The Provincial Government could hold a referendum in a similar vein to those of the failed Kurdish and Catalan secessionists in 2017 and 2019 respectively. There is no guarantee the 'leave' vote would win, and, if it did, the National Government could simply ignore it. Even in the unlikely event that the WC was deemed to constitute a distinct identity-based group within South Africa, a referendum result expressing a clear majority in favour of secession on a clear question would only engage the state's reciprocal obligation to commence good-faith negotiations. Law would shape that process but not predetermine the outcome (Supreme Court of Canada, 1998). From the state's perspective (and iInternational law is nothing if not a state-based system), a soft response could inspire other active secessionist movements, such as certain sections of the Zulu community in Kwa-Zulu Natal (Grootes, 2024) and a number of AbaThembu in the Eastern Cape that previously tried to secede in 2010 (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2010).

In addition to these legal critiques, the notion that the DA's supposedly exemplary provincial rule in the WC means that it would have far greater success as an independent country also requires greater critical analysis. Despite performing relatively well on some indicators, the WC still has high levels of poverty and unemployment as well as significant wealth inequality under DA rule. It also has high levels of crime and the highest murder rate of all of South Africa's provinces (Bruce, 2023).

There is also a lack of clarity over the geographical boundaries of an independent WC, which places further doubt on the secessionists' chances of success. Craig, speaking on behalf of the RP, has emphasised that the current boundaries of the province would be used (Mashinini, 2024); the websites of both CIAG and CapeXit allude to the possibility of these boundaries being expanded at some point after independence, should other areas within what was the old Cape province, which existed prior to apartheid's end, 'democratically decide' to join (CIAG, 2026, CapeXit, 2026). The Cape Independence Party has also previously indicated that the imagined independent state would include sections of the Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Free State province (Steele, 2011).

While there are justified critiques of the WC independence movement, including that some elements have racist connotations, it is worth noting that some points are often made flippantly in an attempt to shut down debates. While there is an uncomfortable parallel between Craig's British nationality and those of previous generations of settlers who sought 'responsible government' during colonial rule, too often political opponents have concentrated on Craig's nationality, suggesting he does not have the right to speak on the subject and that he should simply leave South Africa if he is unhappy with how the country is being run. At its most extreme level, there have also been calls to deport Craig as he is stoking division and, to some, his actions are tantamount to treason (Corrigan, 2025). Similarly, there have been instances where a rival political opponent has appeared alongside an advocate for WC independence in a television interview but has refused to debate with them, instead quickly dismissing them as racist rather than dismantling their argument (Newzroom Afrika, 2020).

A much more justifiable criticism is that the leadership of virtually all groups advocating WC independence is White dominated. When questioned on this, advocates of WC independence emphasise that their membership criteria are 'avowedly non-racial' and feature people from all of South Africa's racial groups (Worldview, 2021). As evidenced in poor election results, however, it is clear that the movement is struggling 'to expand beyond its mainly white base' (Hussein & Fessha, 2025, p. 186).

While the groups advocating WC independence may overtly emphasise their non-racialism, the implicit undertone of some of their speeches and contentions offers clear evidence of implicit racism within the movement. As stated, several leaders have alluded to a 'great replacement' taking place in the WC whereby the ANC are deliberately transporting Black South Africans to the province to dilute the White and Coloured vote, which is avowedly anti-ANC. Leading figures within the WC independence movement also champion the conspiracy theory that White farm murders in South Africa are tantamount to a planned genocide by Black nationalists, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary (Chibelushi & Maseko, 2025). Advocates of WC independence also make a subtle allusion to there being something psychologically wrong with Black voters who continue to support the ANC despite its apparent failings. Indeed, in a recent interview Phil Craig stated that 'in a two-horse race between the DA and the ANC any sane person votes for the DA' (Newsflash, 2025).

In reality, the reason the ANC has managed to maintain such strong levels of support for so many years since coming to power in 1994 is that for much of that period it genuinely improved people's lives. This is particularly true of poor Black people in rural areas who were given access to electricity for the first time under the ANC, as well as better health provision, schooling and increased government social welfare grants

(Fernandez, 2020). For a long time it was, therefore, in these people's interests to vote for the ANC. This is perhaps not so obvious to the White middle-class supporters of WC secession, as their standard of living, and share of the wealth in South Africa, has either declined or stagnated in recent years.

Conclusion

Secessionism in WC has attracted significant interest, locally, nationally and internationally. As we have shown in this article, the movement comprises various political and civil actors, united by the shared objective of establishing an independent WC but motivated by varying ideological and strategic considerations. Akin to other secessionist movements around the world, its proponents frame independence as a remedy to longstanding grievances against the national government, portraying it as a route towards greater prosperity, stability and self-determination. Tellingly, the movement has increasingly drawn on far-right populist narratives and conspiracy theories to mobilise support. This has amplified its visibility and also compelled South Africa's major political parties to articulate a position on WC independence. Nevertheless, as the analysis has shown, the path to independence remains highly uncertain, lacking a firm basis in both national and international legal frameworks.

Despite the justifiable criticisms of the WC independence movement listed in the article, it is clear that if South Africa's economy was growing, if the ANC government was meeting the service delivery needs of its citizens, and if crime was not at such a high level, it is unlikely this movement would have garnered support. Indeed, during South Africa's 'renaissance' under Presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, when relatively strong levels of economic growth were achieved, there appeared to be little support for WC independence. The mismanagement of the country by the ANC in recent years has played a part in galvanising the WC independence movement.

Nonetheless, these issues were present before the WC independence movement saw a considerable surge in interest and support in the early 2020s. This was in a large part due to the strict COVID-19 lockdown introduced by the ANC government, which saw South Africans largely confined to their homes and with ample time to take an interest in political issues and, potentially, fall victim to social media algorithms. It must also be noted that the efforts of the groups advocating independence, particularly CIAG, have been pivotal in drawing greater attention to their campaigns.

As discussed, although polls conducted by Victory Research indicate a considerable degree of support for WC independence, and even more support for holding a referendum on the issue, the chances of this movement being successful in the short or medium term appear slim. This is mainly due to the fact that none of South Africa's major political parties support the movement. While the DA wants greater autonomy, and gives tacit support for an independence referendum, it remains unlikely that the DA will prioritise this issue as it is much less of a concern at national level. This could change, however, should the DA lose its outright majority in provincial elections and be forced into a coalition with the Cape Independence Party, FF Plus, or the Referendum Party. WC independence thus remains a live issue.

Events at national level could also impact the DA's position. Should the Government of National Unity break down, or the makeup of the South African

National Parliament change in a subsequent national election, there is a significant chance that the 'doomsday' coalition DA voters fear – an alliance of the ANC, EFF and/or MK – will form a government, then the DA might draw further inwards and prioritise what, in its eyes, would be the 'survival' of a prosperous WC as a safe haven for South Africa's minorities. Nonetheless, even with the support of the DA, if the ANC, EFF and MK remain firmly against WC independence, there is little chance of it being granted. If the secessionists pressed on regardless, the chances of violence would also be significantly high.

However, events in South Africa are moving rapidly, and should the United States and other leading nations continue the slide towards more radical right-wing populism, and the active promotion of extremist conspiracy theories, the WC independence movement could find itself in a position to exploit the international *zeitgeist* to achieve its goals. The future trajectory of the Western Cape and its independence movement remains unknown, yet it is likely to remain a topic of considerable scholarly and public interest for the foreseeable future.

Note

1. While an offensive term in much of the world, in South Africa 'Coloured' denotes a specific ethnic group of shared racial heritage. This group traces its heritage back to inter-racial relationships between the Khoi and San people – the indigenous inhabitants of the WC – the Dutch settlers who arrived from 1652, and the South East Asian slaves the Dutch brought with them. This community speaks a version of Afrikaans, the language which evolved over time, spoken by the descendants of the Dutch settlers who are now referred to as Afrikaners (Adhikari, 2005).

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