

## **Democracy in Alberta**

### **Alberta Views**

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Alberta is a province which began with all the energy and all the ambitions of a deeply democratic society. Look at the early history of the province. The real driving forces were not, as is so commonly said today – those of American immigrants followed by American businessmen and their ideas of trump-all-else individualism. The real Alberta was an area integrated into the prairies, where the toughness of the circumstances required an equal balance of individualism and community effort. In many ways, that balance between the strong individual and the strong community lie at the heart of the Canadian idea of the middle way with edge. There's nothing soft about it. But there's nothing selfish about it either.

It was not an accident that the great Farmers' Movement of the prairies arose as much out of Alberta as it did out of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Nor was it an accident that for most of the early days of the area the First Nations people had a role and that that role was a positive contributor to the balanced Albertan idea of people and place and fairness. For me, that remarkable marriage between Sir James and Lady Lougheed stands as an image, not for the politics of Canada, but for the long-term reality of Canada – the joining together of a European immigrant with the daughter of a First Nations leader.

In other words, Alberta was born out of an idea of openness, individualism and cooperation. It's important to remember that. Why? Because the last few decades have left us with a false idea of how the province should work. Somehow the repeated regurgitation of an imaginary version of Texas economics as the best and only natural way to make the province work has come to be accepted as the only way in which the province can work.

This was a denial of the Farmers' Movement, which in the early twentieth century laid out the very foundations of modern Canada, whether we are talking about transfer payments or women's rights or fair markets for farmers or volunteerism. All of these things are very far away from the ideas of an all-powerful marketplace. They are also far away from the ideas of socialism. But it was one of those ridiculous simplifications of the last few decades, that if you weren't in favour of the dominant marketplace you must be in favour of some sort of old-fashioned socialism. The answer to all of that lay in Alberta's own history. What we were and what we are, as Nellie McClung famously said long before Roosevelt, is "the land of the Fair Deal." She, the broadest thinking leader of the Feminist Movement, spent her life between Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia. And she had a clear understanding of how a society could work. And what fairness really meant.

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For me, there was a moment, during those cynical, empty and wasted years of Premier Klein, when the wrong track – the unfair track – became perfectly clear. It was the day on which Mr. Klein spoke out about the individual's right to choice in hip-replacements. Of course, he said, Albertans all had the right to have hip-replacements on Medicare. But why would one take away

from Albertans the choice to have a better quality hip-replacement if they could afford one? He presented this as if it were a matter of simple choice. A matter of individualism. Of course, it wasn't a matter of choice. It was a matter of money.

The simple question that seemed unaskable at that time was – who needed the better hip? The Albertans who would use the hip to go to their offices and their golf-courses? Or the Albertans who worked on the drilling-rigs, the ranches, and the farms and who had lower incomes and would therefore not be able to afford a better hip? Surely those in need were those who worked for themselves, their families, and the better life of Alberta and Canada with their bodies. Their actual, physical bodies. They therefore needed the best hip available to get on and off their tractor, horse, rig. But somehow in the tortured reasoning of that time it was not possible for the province to reply to Mr. Klein that what he had said was an insult to the people.

This was a sign of populism at its very worst. What is that? It is a man able to combine his hold on public power with his one personal talent – that of finding the emotional weak spot in all of us – to cause people to speak out against the interests of the public good in favour of some abstract theory of choice, which was really all about giving more to those who had more. That is the classic, historic genius of a populist.

His cynical mindless era is over, but no new era has begun. It lies perfectly within the historic range of Albertans to do something quite different now. I look across the ocean at Norway and see a country with far less going for it than the province of Alberta, and yet a country which has known how to take the money and the royalties from its petroleum industry and turn it into both savings and massive investments and a shared income across the country. You will not find in Norway the kind of income disparity that you find in Alberta. You will not find in Norway the kind of poverty or hard-working citizens on the edge of poverty that you find in Alberta. Instead, what you find is the kind of sophisticated approach towards diversification and investment which reminds us of the intent of Premier Lougheed's government. That simple idea of fairness and governmental intelligence was somehow swept out of sight under the bumbling meaninglessness of the Klein years.

There is a strong tradition in Alberta of participation and of volunteerism and of community. People have gradually come to treat this as something which lies outside of the broad political arena. One of the few things I know is that volunteerism is not a special activity to be undertaken outside of an integrated view of the public good. It's something which is shared by people, whatever their politics, from right to left, and which relates directly to the most profound ideas of citizenship. When an Albertan volunteers for the public good, they should see themselves as doing it within a broad political context – a context which tells them what they think about the province as a whole and the province's shared public good. When an Albertan living in the richest province in Canada is faced by continuing problems of poverty and homelessness in its two major cities, they are in effect being faced by a clear message: that there is a disjunct between the remarkable tradition of volunteerism and the broader idea of the citizen and their society. That link needs to be re-forged, so that when people decide how they want their province run they link it directly to the solving of the problems which now have to be dealt with in an undefined, ad hoc manner by volunteer groups. There is no idealistic solution to the problems of any place in the world. If we were to remove the worst of the exclusion which exists in Alberta,

an endless list of other challenges and problems would appear. But that's no reason not to attempt to remove problems which stare us in the face.

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When I look at Alberta over the last few decades I see a place where there has been solid debate. There have been citizens and organizations which have constantly spoken out. There are think-tanks in Edmonton which have led the way in re-thinking the royalties scheme. When they began they were written off as being idealistic and left-wing. Now their arguments belong in the very mainstream of public debate. Why? Because people have come to realize that they, as citizens of Alberta, have been robbed of their proper income – the sort of income the citizens of Norway received without there being any question of left or right. The creation of a magazine like this – Alberta Views – came out of the need for solid, continuous reflection on what wasn't happening in Alberta and what should be happening in a province with such a strong and remarkable tradition of citizen involvement. I often think – and don't mistake this for an easy compliment in an anniversary issue – that this is the finest magazine in Canada. Not simply because it's well-written or well-designed or has a wonderful sense of images and subjects; but above all because it's a magazine which, for a decade now, has kept its eye on the broad direction of the public good and has found ways of expressing it through discussions of everything from politics to agriculture. This magazine anniversary comes, interestingly enough, at a time when the province is beginning to think seriously about direction and purpose. Part of that thinking has to be a consideration of the last few years and whether they have been a success or failure.

Canadians don't like to look at what they have done wrong. We are practical people and we like to get on with things. But the way in which democracy works best is that we look at what we've done, then examine what has worked and what hasn't worked. When we see what hasn't worked, it helps us to do the right thing next. If we don't take that time for reflection, the tendency will be to bounce off a somewhat unconscious discontent into perhaps a new approach, but an approach which has not been fully considered.

As many people know, I claim Alberta and Calgary as one of my home provinces and home cities. I feel a strong affinity for the character of the place, to say nothing of its beauty. I feel strongly that, as this anniversary issue comes to the newsstands, there is an opportunity in the province to rediscover that idea of Fairness which Nellie McClung so eloquently spoke of, and with it that idea of community which carried through the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

The difficult thing now will be for Albertans to avoid backing themselves into a defensive corner as the world outside of Canada gradually focuses on the environmental implications of the oil sands and loud protests are increasingly heard. As this begins to happen, the implications of the loss of royalties over the last decade and the looming reality of limited gas reserves, will settle in. There will be a temptation to turn the resulting anger into another wave of self-limiting populism. But that will not solve the province's coming problems. Nor will it allow the province to take the kind of lead which it could and needs to take in Canada for itself and for the rest of the country. Instead, citizens need to reach deep into that historic democratic tradition of participation and community, balanced with responsible individualism, which will help Albertans find their way to the next stage.