

What is the role of government?



What role do we want government to play? The rallying cry of almost all parties during the recent federal election was the promise to cut taxes and downsize

government. The attitude seems to be—the less government the better. What a blessing if government were to disappear altogether! No more taxes, no more annoying interference in our lives, no more restrictions on our freedom.

Neither left nor right seem to approve of government nowadays. The right advocates privatization, and the left, normally in support of government as the best vehicle for providing public services, has now lost faith because of government's complicity with corporatism. Government has given away our sovereignty through NAFTA.

However, we really can't do without government can we? This issue of *AlbertaViews* looks at the roles government plays. Even the right-wing Fraser Institute acknowledges that "the legitimate function of government is to do those things that people cannot do at all, or cannot do very well, acting in their separate and individual capacities" (see page 12). They give as examples national defence, flood control projects, mosquito abatement programs.

Beyond providing for public safety, government actions have an enormous impact on our economy. Recognizing our vulnerability to the rise and fall of oil and gas prices, the Alberta government has attempted to diversify our economy by providing various incentives for business: low taxes, outright loans, small sympathy for unions. This seems to have worked. Don Drummond, chief economist for the TD Bank, says that personal and corporate tax cuts will make Alberta the low-tax mecca for business investment from across North America during the next few years.

But business investment comes with social costs. Michael Broadway ("Here's the Beef," p. 26) shows that the growth

of the meatpacking industry has meant increased crime, a shortage of housing, and higher need for welfare and emergency shelters in the towns where the plants locate. Although government can play an important role in the alleviation of suffering, recent provincial policy has been to cut funding for health and social services. So the interests of business are promoted by government policy, but the interests of poor people and immigrants are not.

Cheryl Mahaffy ("Crisis in Daycare," p. 32) argues that it is in the best interests of all of us to attempt to provide good daycare for children. Is there a role for government here? A fall 1999 poll of parents with children at home conducted by Angus Reid for *The Globe and Mail* found that 64 per cent believe the state of the family today is a national crisis and the government must take steps to alleviate it. And that 78 per cent support setting up an inexpensive daycare system open to all families who want it.

Is it the role of government to buy books and art? We have only to consider the great benefit of public libraries, museums and galleries for our answer. As individuals we could never amass the books we need to understand our world; but together, through our municipal governments, we create a collection of millions of books and resources available to all. Mardiros and Rubinstein ("Spreading the Word," p.37) discuss the necessity in a democracy of free access to books. And in "The People's Art Collector" Mary-Beth Laviolette shows us the spectacular work of our artists held in the collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

Through government we exercise our citizenship, being part of something bigger than ourselves, our obligation to foster justice between persons. As Mark Kingwell says: "Without it we are cut adrift from each other—and ourselves."

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