

# Will the Real Golden Rule Please Stand Up?



At the 2001 Bob Edwards luncheon, the late Timothy Findley, that year's recipient of the award, had the

temerity to criticize the oil industry. Alberta Theatre Projects, the organizer of the event, was inundated with outraged phone calls, and ultimately lost sponsorship funding. In Alberta the Golden Rule seems to be: "He who's got the gold rules."

The Alberta ethos involves a sense of entitlement among the elite that goes beyond "he who pays the piper calls the tune." The ethos is if you're rich you must be right. The decisions of the boards and staff of charitable foundations, for example, are often affected by donor sensitivities. Organizations with values or political perspectives different from donors may not receive grants.

Similarly, when a professor at one of the province's universities is critical of business, company CEOs feel within their rights to complain to the university administration. It seems some captains of industry seriously expect universities and event organizers to censor speakers and muzzle critical comment. But donors receive a tax receipt—not the right to control the organization that receives the money.

Why the righteousness? Because the industry elite see themselves as the source of the province's prosperity and they think they ought to have the authority to make decisions in *all* realms, business, political and cultural. Many Albertans take it as given that Premier Ralph Klein is dictated to by the oil industry, and this accounts for his

government's stand on the Kyoto Accord. But perhaps Klein is just thoroughly imbued with the Alberta ethos, and he too believes that whatever's good for the oil companies is good for Albertans—that by protecting their well-being, he protects ours.

IT MAY BE that the success of our economy is tied to the success of oil companies. But our well-being is not measured only in terms of economic or material prosperity. According to the Canadian Policy and Research Networks, citizens value the environment, a safe community and good social conditions and programs more than the economy and employment. But above all, they value democratic rights and participation.

Freedom of speech is a fundamental principle of democracy. The citizen in a free society says, "I disapprove of everything you say, but defend to the death your right to say it." Dissent is to be not only tolerated, but encouraged. Stifle the free exchange of ideas and we crush the opportunity to discover the truth.

Even more basic is the principle of equality—that every human life is of equal value. The real Golden Rule—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—refers to *all* others, no matter how brilliant or dull, lofty or lowly, rich or poor.

A society imbued with the ethics of democracy would give no special privilege to the rich.

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