

"With so much power and so much money, why aren't our politicians delivering?"



Has any elected government ever had it so good? Alberta is the wealthiest province in the country; we're on an economic joyride fuelled by the energy industry and a weak Canadian dollar. The Conservative government is awash in cash. The political opposition is struggling to remain credible. The media is government-friendly, to put it charitably. Alberta's Conservative MLAs don't have to die to get to heaven; they're already there.

In this luxurious political environment, where a government can do anything it wants (as long as it's legal), Alberta should have the best education system, the best health system and the best public services in the country.

It doesn't. Our education system lacks for money: on a per student basis, funding is about fifth among the provinces. The TD Bank Financial Group reported in April that the percentage of Alberta high school students moving on to post-secondary education is the lowest in the country. Our health system continues to be under fire. The Mazankowski Report, released in January 2002, said that as a percentage of government spending at least four provinces put more into health than Alberta does. While the quality of health care isn't a major problem here, access to it certainly is.

The people primarily responsible for health and education are our provincial politicians. They determine the direction, they write the laws and they dictate where the money will be spent. With so much power and so much money, why aren't they delivering? Where is the long-term agenda? Where is the vision beyond a debt-free province?

One reason for this lack of vision: the best people aren't running the

province. A handful of MLAs are first-rate, some are mediocre and the rest simply fill space. The current government doesn't begin to compare to the professionals, the community activists and the province-builders that Peter Lougheed attracted to politics in the 1970s (and who stayed until he retired in 1985). With the endless possibilities and limitless resources, why isn't the Legislative Assembly attracting the best people in the province again? Four reasons.

First, money—not provincial money, but the ability for individuals to earn money. An economy built on energy breeds opportunity. Business leaders and entrepreneurs are doing extremely well. Entering politics means giving up the peak earning years in a career. To trade the wealth potential of the private sector for the relatively meagre pay of politics isn't a good deal. Why would any business person earning well over \$200,000 swap it for a cabinet minister's \$110,000? Or worse, for about \$70,000 on the backbench and no pension to speak of.

Second, politics kills careers. Two or three terms—between eight and 12 years—makes it difficult, if not impossible, for business people and professionals to return to their previous careers. The private sector market for retired politicians isn't attractive. Some—like Lougheed and Lou Hyndman, the rare fellows who left politics with their personal reputations intact, if not enhanced—become consultants, lobbyists or directors with large private companies. Lawyers can become judges. For most of the rest, post-political life is a struggle.

Third, Alberta offers MLAs a severance package based on longevity but no pension, so politics becomes a career and a closed club. Legislature Speaker Ken Kowalski has been in the Assembly since 1979, Halvar Jonson since 1982, Shirley McClellan since

1987. Ralph Klein, Ty Lund, Don Tannas, Pat Nelson, Pearl Calahasen and Stan Woloshyn have been there since 1989. Sixteen of 24 cabinet ministers were first elected in or before 1993. The same people running the show year after year eventually means stale, unimaginative government.

Fourth, the quality of candidates is directly related to quality of leadership. Lougheed was a successful businessman and lawyer before entering politics. He attracted similar people: business entrepreneurs, professionals, community leaders and academics. Ralph Klein brings an entirely different background to his leadership. As a media guy, he was neither connected nor respected in the corporate and academic worlds. He's a very successful politician, but he hasn't drawn exceptional people out of the business or professional sectors. The candidates Klein attracts lack the sense of public duty that MLAs in previous governments felt. Conservative MLAs get a lot of attention, but not nearly as much respect.

IF CHANGE ISN'T PART of the system and doesn't come voluntarily, it must be forced. Term limits—serve two terms and you're gone—is a possibility. Another is a salary hike. In our capitalist society, you pay for what you get. Alberta is a \$22-billion corporation; the people who run it should be paid for that responsibility. Public service shouldn't be a personal sacrifice or the end of a career. Pay MLAs well for two terms (eight years) to attract good people and give them a generous severance package to re-enter private life. Only then will politics attract the best, guarantee change and open the door for the kind of fresh, invigorating government demanded in this rapidly changing province.

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