

# Demoralized and De-elected

by Brian Bechtel

*Late last year, Health Minister Gary Mar announced that the government would reduce the number of Regional Health Authorities in the province (from 17 to nine) and replace the current boards, which were half elected and half appointed, with wholly appointed boards. All of the previously appointed board members were re-appointed, along with some of the elected members. Mar said that the elected boards weren't working and that the reappointed members are "not necessarily those who have expressed support for the government in the past," but are "constructive individuals who have important things to say."*

On April 1 my political life in Alberta came to an end. On that day, Alberta's Health Authority boards were cleansed of those of us who were chosen by the people but found to be politically unacceptable to the government. At the January 29 meeting of the Health Board, when Health Minister Gary Mar announced this change, the futility and desperation of it all came into clear focus for me.

But I should begin at the beginning.

I left my job as executive director of the Edmonton Social Planning Council to run for the Liberals in the last provincial election. I lost by 141 votes (in Edmonton-Norwood), but I was not crushed, and when elections were held for the health boards a few months later, in the fall of 2001, I decided to pitch back in.

I had felt restrained by the cautious agenda of the Liberal Party in the provincial election, so this time I resolved to hold nothing back. I anted up \$3,500 of my own money, wrote my own brochures and pulled no punches with my opinions. I promised to oppose privatization and user fees and to make the Capital Health Authority open to public scrutiny and public debate. This time, I won handily, defeating former CHA board member and PC Cabinet Minister Les Young. I was excited.

Within days, however, it became clear that this was not going to be the exercise in debate, democracy and public policy I had hoped it would be. The CHA board chair, Neil Wilkinson, lost no time telling us how the board runs. Disagreements and debates were to be kept behind closed doors. Public meetings were to be carefully stage-managed affairs with everything determined in advance. Board members were to "support" all decisions made by the board. Debate, we were told,

would undermine staff and public confidence.

My rude awakening came with the release of the Mazankowski report on health care. I was called by an *Edmonton Journal* reporter and asked about my impressions of the report, and I gave them. I then received a call from Neil Wilkinson. He said that I should not have given that interview and that I should have referred the call to the PR people at the CHA. At a meeting shortly afterwards, many members of the board agreed with Neil's position. People like former city councillor and unsuccessful PC candidate Wendy Kinsella raised the possibility of my "censure." It was inconceivable to me that, having obtained a mandate from the people, I was disqualified from public discourse on the very issue upon which I was elected. I remained defiant.

Any matters of consequence were dealt with in private meetings. The board met in private frequently—and only six times in public in an entire year. This abuse of the public's fundamental right to know was possible because the board did not adhere to the Regional Health Authorities Act requirements with respect to public meetings. This had been obvious to me from the outset, and I had expressed my concerns, but to no avail. So, in the spring of 2001 I publicly released a six-page brief that exhaustively reviewed the board's meeting practices and concluded that we were in violation of the law. I decided to release the brief publicly because I believed that was the only way it would have an impact.

Well, it had an impact all right! Many members of the board were enraged with me. Former city alderman Olivia Butti asked me if I had a "degree in constitutional law." If not, what did I know about such things? she asked. (I resisted the temptation to point out that this was probably a matter of administrative law.) The board refused to consider the possibility that I was right, and resolved to hire a lawyer to shred my arguments. To make a long story short, I turned out to be right. As a result, new meeting practices were put in place to take effect in January of 2003. In that same month Gary Mar announced that as the number of Regional Health Authorities was diminished, the boards' elected members would be removed and replaced with politically acceptable appointees. I had won a battle, but lost the war.

One opportunity remained for me to make a statement about what I believed. The Romanow report on health care had been pilloried by Mar—he said it could have been written on the back of a postage stamp. I liked it. The board had spent days responding to the Mazankowski report, which was commissioned by the Klein government, but for reasons that I can only assume were political, the board chair made no effort to put the Romanow report on any meeting agenda. I had made a motion at the December 2002 meeting of the board to amend our agenda to include a discussion of the Romanow report. Members said it was too early and they had not had time to consider the report, despite the fact that it had been front-page news for days. My motion was soundly defeat-

ed. Undaunted, I announced at a later private meeting that I intended to table a motion again for the upcoming public meeting calling for the board to support the Romanow report as it had the "Maz" report.

The day of the public board meeting I received a call from Neil Wilkinson asking me about my intentions with respect to my notice of motion. I said that I still planned to follow through. He then told me that there was "a problem." My notice of motion was submitted only 10 days in advance, not the 12 required by policy, so he could technically rule me out of order. He added that he thought he could convince enough members of the board to vote to waive the technical requirement, depending on my "actions between now and the meeting." I asked him to clarify. He said that he had heard that the media might be alerted. I had contemplated alerting the media, but I told Neil that I hadn't done so. He said "Well, that will probably help your case."

I attended the meeting, feeling an uneasy sense that something was up. My motion was scheduled for 10 minutes at the bottom of the agenda. When it came up, Neil asked for a motion to waive my technical oversight of two days. It passed without a single complaint from anybody. Now I knew something was up. I knew there was no way that I was going to convince the board to pass my motion, but I resolved to speak strongly and stand up for what I believed in. I argued that the CHA was an excellent example of what could be done in the public system and that I had joined the board to protect the innovative public health care delivery I saw in practice at the CHA and read about in the Romanow report.

As soon as we completed introductory comments, Mollie Waring, one of the other board members, made a motion to table my motion, saying it was unwise to encourage the federal government when the feds had already said they wanted to negotiate with the province. It was a completely absurd point, but that didn't matter—a motion to table is not debatable. I could see that the plan was to deny any real debate on Romanow. By the time the CHA board next met, the federal/provincial agreement would be history and the new board appointed. The motion to table was put to a vote and everybody, except Sheila McKay and Margaret Plain, dutifully voted to table my motion, effectively killing it. This had clearly been orchestrated in advance. Open debate never had a chance.

I will leave Alberta sometime in the next year or so, for personal reasons. I leave feeling that a job is left undone, and I now fear that that job cannot be done. Alberta seems determined to grant its leaders greater and greater power to crush, demoralize and intimidate those who see a different vision for the province. Even for those of us who are used to being outvoted but still want to speak our minds, it has become a barren and empty place.

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