

## Is criticizing provincial policy “un-Albertan”?



When was the last time you read or heard any group speak forcefully about a provincial government policy? If you can't remem-

ber, it isn't that your memory is failing. The fact is that duelling with Alberta's provincial government in public is rare.

Curiously, the most silent are the largest, potentially most powerful organizations in the province: school districts and municipal governments. And no organizations have more cause to speak out. In the last decade, the Klein government has systematically taken complete control of all public finances. Controlling all revenues and tax collection isn't enough; they decide how most public money is spent. They've done it very effectively in education, where locally elected school trustees lost their ability to tax and to make spending decisions with what little money the provincial government gives them. Municipal governments, which once received substantial grants from the province, now get much less and are told how to spend almost all of it. Community lottery boards, set up to distribute lottery money in their communities, were erased. Even elected boards governing health authorities were wiped out.

Shockingly, not a peep was heard from any of them. Revenue-starved municipal governments still haven't said a word in anger against a provincial government that continues to put the boots to them. Ditto school districts. They've been slapped around for years. Rather than fight back, they whine and whimper. Last November, the Learning Minister gave school districts about 10 per cent of the amount the Learning Commission recommended—and school trustees

gave him a standing ovation at the Alberta School Boards' Association convention. Lottery boards disappeared as did 40 per cent of the lottery money—no reaction at all. Even student groups, who should have no fear of government, are reluctant to go public in a big way to curb the growth of tuition fees.

The silence is puzzling. Even major newspapers are careful in how they question government policy. Is criticizing provincial policy “un-Albertan?” When the question was



raised with school trustees, the answer was downcast eyes and a shrug. When the question was raised with municipal councillors, the answer was more expressive—fear that the provincial government will “get even” with organizations that dare criticize it in public. How will they get even? Meetings with MLAs are tougher to get, letters get lost, requests aren't heard, grant money takes longer to arrive, and information channels break down.

Conservative MLAs aren't shy about it; groups that complain in public won't get a sympathetic ear. MLAs will lecture organizations that speak their minds. In a recent meeting, an MLA became angry and threatened to walk out when a group persistently wanted to talk about money. Over

time, the message sinks in: suck up or else. The premier put it in blunt terms last November when asked why he was absent for two weeks of the three-week Legislature session: he said he didn't want to answer “stupid questions.”

This is the same provincial government that does exactly the opposite when it deals with the federal government. While demanding that organizations in the province be silent and cooperative, Premier Klein runs to the nearest newspaper reporter when he has another of his many complaints about the federal government. If talking tough is the preferred approach with the feds, why aren't others entitled to the same practice with the province?

With a big majority and no political threat in sight, the Klein government can do just about anything it wants. Groups are conditioned to beg quietly—in private. Conventional wisdom says the government will be grateful and generous with those who do so. If only it were true.

Silence rarely works. School districts still get minimal increases in funding. Without local taxation, they are completely controlled by the province. To meet expenses, municipal governments must raise their own taxes and suffer the wrath of local taxpayers. The province now decides all by itself who will get lottery money—and who won't. As an election approaches, the payoffs will begin.

This is a frightening way to run a province. Only the foolish think government has a monopoly on wisdom. Only the irresponsible give up their voice on public affairs between elections. But, in Alberta, that's exactly what's happening. It's tough to stand up when everyone else is lying down.

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