

WHOSE SIDE ARE THEY ON?

Do Alberta's political cartoonists critique our attitudes, or merely reflect them?

by Doug McIntyre

Malcolm Mayes isn't one to shy away from a little controversy. In 2002, the *Edmonton Journal* political cartoonist unfurled a scathing attack on the Catholic Church in a cartoon depicting a small boy in a confession box shouting "You first!" at the attending priest. "I see everyone as fair game," says the satirist. "Now occasionally, you run across an editor who doesn't share the same point of view. My job is to call it as I see it and I leave the legal stuff to the editors and the lawyers. I just do my thing, and if it crosses the line, they'll tell me. The best political cartoons try to push that line to the fertile ground beyond."

Do Alberta's political cartoonists often go to the fertile ground beyond, to the place where a real critique of popular attitudes is possible? The variety in their work does refute the traditional portrait of the province as a homogeneous political entity. Yet attacks on the Catholic Church notwithstanding, true critique remains a minefield in Alberta's conservative climate, particularly in an era when western alienation is the dominant media paradigm.

In Alberta's formative years political cartoonists could assume a controversial stance without fear of backlash or reprisal. But the rise of corporate media convergence has streamlined both newspaper opinion and budgets. These changes seem to have neutered the Alberta political cartoonist, reining in his more radical inclinations although not muzzling him entirely. Which wasn't always the case.

THE LATE EVERETT SOOP, a genuine rogue of the editorial pages, was an artist who lived entirely in the "fertile ground beyond." The most irreverent, acerbic voice in the history of Alberta political cartooning, he honed his craft outside the mainstream, unmolested by sporadic editorial interfer-



By Don Kew, from the *Edmonton Sun*, Jan 24, 1993.

Alberta Provincial Archives 98.870/697

ence or the unofficial partisanship of the major dailies. Even in the free-wheeling 1970s, Soop would have been the bane of any mainstream, big-city newsroom. It should come as no surprise, then, that he belonged to the most marginalized segment of Canadian society. A member of the Blackfoot First Nation, he lived the cartoonist's credo of "no sacred cows" to its maximum. The self-proclaimed "pit bull terrier of native journalism" was truly an equal opportunity satirist, savaging both

Aboriginal and white society with equal aplomb.

"As an Indian, I grew up believing that the body's function was to be given a good thrashing every now and then just to make sure that it was still in good running order," Soop wrote in his 1990 autobiography, *I See My Tribe Is Still Behind Me*. "The average day is not only a nuisance but a torture test." Beset by muscular dystrophy for much of his life, Soop spent his final years wheelchair-bound and died in Lethbridge in 2001 at age 58. He left a rich legacy of commentary on the plight of Canadian natives, a siren call that highlighted the stark realities of addiction, sexual abuse, suicide and corruption while never laying blame exclusively at any one doorstep.

Soop first came to public attention in 1968 when he began contributing written commentary and political cartoons to the *Kainai News*, a government-funded newspaper designed as a communication tool for southern Alberta natives. His first bylined article listed his qualifications to be a chief—namely that he was easily bribed, a sound sleeper and a kindergarten dropout. An early cartoon with the caption "Me and My Shadow" shows a puzzled native regarding his own shadow, which happens to be shaped like an RCMP officer.



By Everett Soop, from the *Kainai News*.

Soop also fixed his baleful stare on the rampant nepotism and corruption of reserve politics.

Critics of Soop slammed his work as racist. Witness a cartoon in which a native man and a white man watch an old Western movie in a dark cinema. “How come Indians don’t play themselves in the movies?” the white man asks the native. “A white man portrays stupidity better,” the native replies. Another cartoon shows an aging native couple in a horse-drawn wagon looking at a sign that reads, “Caucasian Days—Indians must pay to enter.” In one of his particularly blistering written diatribes, Soop referred to Conservative icon and former premier Peter Lougheed as “Ayatollah Lougheed.”

Yet the racist charge fails to absorb the duality of Soop’s work, which eviscerated native culture and religion with the same zeal he directed at politicians and bureaucrats. Soop believed the mainstream media, bound by political correctness, were overly sympathetic to the plight of Canada’s first peoples. So he fixed his baleful stare on the rampant nepotism and corruption of reserve politics. One cartoon depicts a secretary speaking to a dusty skeleton outside an office: “The [band] council will see you now.” Another cartoon, showing a native in traditional dress genuflecting before a dollar sign in the sky, reads, “A misconception: Indians worship the sun. They belong to the universal church.”

“I don’t want to flatter the Indians; I want to annoy them,” Soop told *Calgary Herald* reporter Kathy Warden in 1979. “I can do things a non-native can’t. I think of myself as part of them. I don’t exclude myself when I pass com-

ment on them.” Soop’s outsider status, however, gave him the perspective he needed to be genuinely critical—a perspective that seems to be in short supply today.

MAINSTREAM CARTOONS ARE COLOURED by partisanship and western alienation, long the trademark theme of Alberta’s political history. Western alienation finds its roots in the feelings of insecurity, if not outrage, among the Alberta populace over the province’s supposedly less-than-equal role in Confederation. In its modern guise, western alienation portrays the federal Liberals’ stranglehold on power as an affront to healthy democracy.

The Alberta media have typically supported this notion of the West as the vibrant, yet overlooked red-headed stepson of eastern Canada, the dynamic yin to a staid yang of crumbling institutions and old money. The *Calgary Herald* has produced the most cartoons on the subject in watershed moments of angst, especially during the implementation of the despised National Energy Program in the early 1980s. The paper’s cartoonists skewer the Pierre Trudeaus and Jean Chrétiens of the political universe while gently, even lovingly, satirizing homegrown favourite sons like Peter Lougheed, Ralph Klein and Preston Manning.

Alberta political cartoonists sharpen their knives principally for the feds, but homegrown favourites are not immune from satirical persecution. Former Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day was ruthlessly lampooned in the *Herald*, *Journal* and both the Edmonton and Calgary *Suns* when he went from fresh new face to national joke overnight. One example is a cartoon by Malcolm Mayes in which Day is standing in a recycling bin, his hands clasped in fervent prayer and a beseeching, beatific grin on his face. Even Klein, arguably the most beloved premier in Alberta history, is not bulletproof. “People like Klein around [the *Journal*], but they also appreciate when you make a good strong argument against Ralph,” says Mayes. “I never sense hostility or resentment when I go after a homegrown guy like Ralph as opposed to Jean Chrétien.” Former *Calgary Sun* cartoonist John Larter poked fun at Klein’s unrepentant pro-Americanism, not to mention ample girth, by drawing the people’s premier saying, “Here, fishy, fishy,” while luring a U.S.-labeled shark with a barrel of Alberta crude.



By Everett Soop, from the *Kainai News*.

AN OCCASIONAL HONEST LAUGH at the expense of a beloved Alberta politician or ideal, such as the province's ongoing love affair with the right-wing movers and shakers south of the border, barely compares to the havoc wreaked by a cartoonist in a particularly fractious era of Alberta's history. During the mid-1930s to early '40s, *Herald* cartoonist Stewart Cameron was the thorn in former premier William Aberhart's side. A one-time apprentice at Walt Disney studios, Calgary-born Cameron returned to his hometown in 1936 during the rise to prominence of Aberhart's Social Credit movement. In the blustery, ubiquitous "Bible Bill," Cameron found a caricaturist's dream.

The cartoons produced by Cameron during this period seem radically subversive, even libelous, by today's standards. One published on September 28, 1938 shows a swastika slowly evolving into Aberhart's jowly countenance. Another cartoon, published on April 2, 1937, features Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler in full fascist salutes and Aberhart with palm extended for more taxpayers' money. Cameron's artistic attacks on Aberhart and the highly charged political passions of the time were so venomous that the intrepid cartoonist entered and exited *Herald* headquarters via a rear fire escape to avoid being confronted at the main entrance by the many readers who had threatened him.

As fearless as Cameron seemed, his attacks on Aberhart reflected the *Herald's* editorial stance. The early Social Credit years were divisive in Calgary, splitting the city into pro- and anti-Aberhart camps, with the *Herald* firmly ensconced in the latter. This is not to imply that Cameron was merely toeing the company line; rather, such spirited attacks suggest his own aversion to Aberhart's policies more than adherence to editorial dogma. Cameron's position reflected the attitudes of educated Albertans at that time toward the opinions of the masses.



By Stewart Cameron, from the *Calgary Herald*, Nov 22, 1937.

Aberhart was a caricaturist's dream. Cameron's cartoons seem subversive, even libelous, by today's standards.

VANCE RODEWALT, the *Herald's* political cartoonist since 1984, believes a contemporary cartoon that positioned Ralph Klein with the likes of, say, deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and North Korean despot Kim Jong-il simply wouldn't fly in today's political climate. But not because of public discomfort at seeing an Alberta politician equated with the worst of modern tyrants. "This is a personal opinion," he says, "but I think it's evolved into where people are more educated and expect more sophistication."

Even in this modern era of converged mass media conglomerates, Rodewalt staunchly maintains that the political cartoonist remains the sovereign jester, unimpeded by the ideology of the publication he works for—and, unlike the typical news reporter, unencumbered by the shackles of objectivity. "When a newspaper changes hands, ownership will often change editorial direction, but the cartoonists are pretty much independent," he says. "One of the main differences, I think, between American and Canadian cartoonists is that American ones work for Republican or Democrat papers, so they follow the party line. I would find that hard to do. We're spoiled up here in Canada; we can attack in any direction."

Although Rodewalt doesn't feel artistically beholden in the partisan sense, his admittedly pro-West sentiments are in tune with the *Herald's* sharp veer to the right in recent years. As part of a leaner and meaner newspaper in the aftermath of the strike, the *Herald's* opinion page has been remodeled into something of a clearinghouse for the



By Stewart Cameron, from the *Calgary Herald*, Feb 3, 1938.

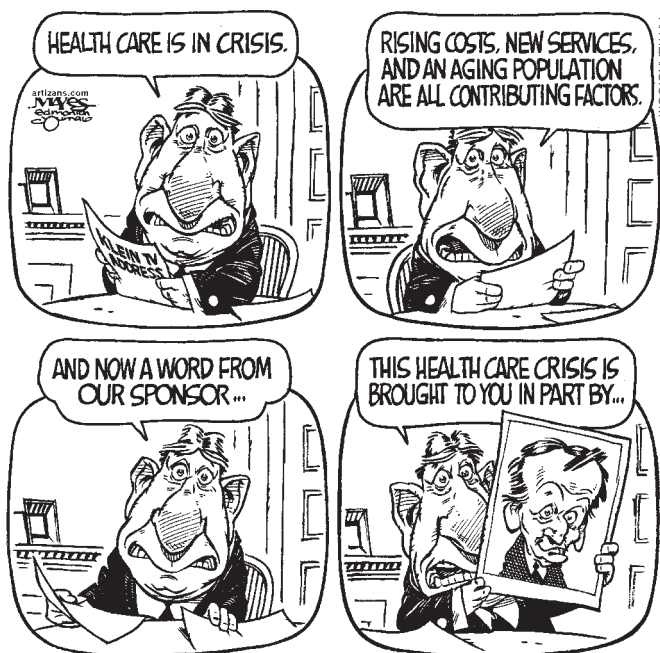
smouldering voices of Western discontent. Reform Party founder Preston Manning, Canadian Alliance leader Stephen Harper, former Klein campaign adviser Rod Love, even the movers and shakers behind Alberta's nascent separatist movement—all these and other conservative stalwarts, their common thread an almost knee-jerk disenchantment with Ottawa, are regularly allotted column space. The adjacent cartoons drawn by Rodewalt, the bulk of them fuelled by western alienation, fit into this motif and support the *Herald's* editorial agenda.

Rodewalt says any public figure is fair game for his satirical pen, although his work more often than not focuses on the foibles of the federal Liberals—the traditional enemy of the West in Alberta's political mythology. In a cartoon published on September 10, 2003, a wizened Jean Chrétien is shown watching television and commenting "I've been watching *Canadian Idol* for 20 minutes... still no sign of me!" Chrétien's penchant for self-absorption is but one flaw highlighted in the piece. A golf club leans against his knee and several balls litter the floor, a subtle nod to the lingering aroma of Shawinigate. The family cat shreds a doll of Uncle Sam, a pointed indictment of Chrétien's alleged anti-Americanism—and on the eve of the second anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks no less. Draped from a recliner is a blanket, upon which is sewn a biting diatribe that underscores Rodewalt's inherent distrust of the political culture in Ottawa: "Be nice to me, I've got friends in high



By Vance Rodewalt, from the *Calgary Herald*, Apr 16, 1989.

Rodewalt sees the role of the cartoonist as a conduit, if not an unofficial record, of prevailing viewpoints.

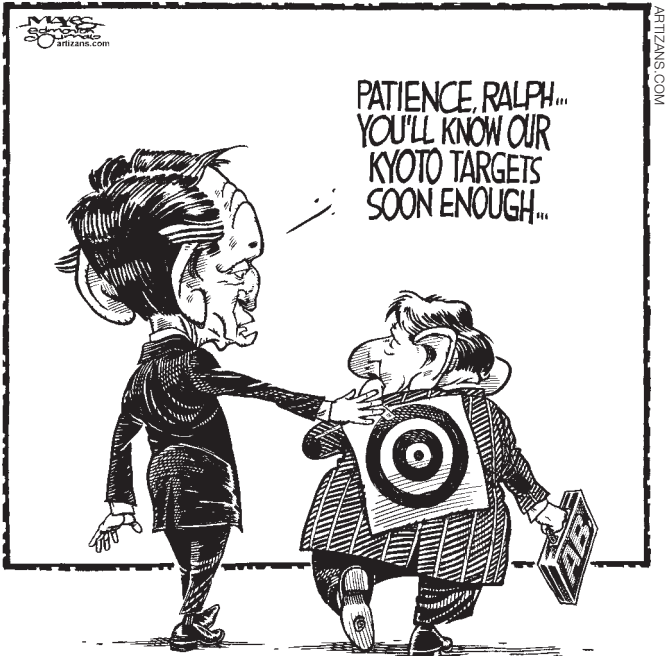


By Malcolm Mayes, from the *Edmonton Journal*, Jan 22, 2002.

places. I know, because I put them there." Another Rodewalt cartoon, published September 27, 2003, is entitled "News item: [Paul] Martin vows to 'fix' Western alienation." The picture shows the heir apparent to the Liberal throne, a befuddled look on his face and a massive Band-Aid tucked under one arm, as he says, "Okay... which way's west?"

Such sentiments accurately reflect the *Herald's* editorial stance and, quite frankly, the views of much of its readership. Accordingly, the straight-talking, shoot-from-the-hip Rodewalt makes no bones of his pro-West inclinations and disparagement of the East. "It's because I'm from here," the Edmonton native says succinctly. Rodewalt sees the role of the cartoonist as a conduit, if not an unofficial record, of prevailing viewpoints. And with western alienation the predominant theme of much of the *Herald's* columns and political coverage, Rodewalt is an accurate weathervane. Paradoxically, he does not see the role of the political cartoonist as being political. "The business of getting on soapboxes and coming up with solutions, you're becoming a wannabe politician," he says. "I don't think cartoonists would make good politicians. I don't think anyone makes good politicians."

THREE HOURS NORTH, in the *Edmonton Journal's* newsroom, a few blocks away from the provincial legislature, Mayes argues otherwise: "A political cartoonist should definitely bring his own politics to the table to say, 'This is what I think and why, I think this is wrong and this is why, I think this is stupid and this is why.' A really good political cartoon has to have a distinct point of view that plants its feet in the ground. For a political cartoonist to do throwaway gag cartoons every day, I think it's pretty lame."



By Malcolm Mayes, from the *Edmonton Journal*, Oct 1, 2002.

Although Alberta's political cartoonists have weathered the flood of convergence relatively unscathed, their independence intact, changing media management has exerted undeniable influence. Nowadays, newspaper execs are frequently drawn from accounting and commerce. This hiring practice differs from the 1970s and '80s, when top-level managers were typically former reporters and editors more attuned to the merits of an incisive political cartoon or hot-button news scoop. "I don't want to say 'bean counters,' but they're much more conscious of the bottom line now," Mayes says. "They're much more sensitive to when someone phones and says they're cancelling their subscription or are going to boycott the paper."

Mayes feels the hegemony of convergence has impacted him minimally. "In my case, I'm granted a lot of freedom. Now that's not the case for every political cartoonist, but after years of doing this I understand how far to go, and I like to go to the fine line and dangle my toes in there." Mayes says a cartoonist's freedom depends on the editor working immediately above the cartoonist—and that interference is not unheard of. "In most cases, the immediate editor, usually the editorial page editor, will let the cartoonist alone to do his thing, but occasionally a cartoonist is faced with a micro-manager editor who tries to introduce his opinion into the cartoon. Also, a good editor will shield his cartoonist from pressure from above to toe a certain line, if such pressure exists within a newspaper or newspaper chain."

If anything, the most daunting challenge facing the contemporary political cartoonist—in Alberta and beyond—might be the dearth of physically distinctive political figures ripe for caricature. The politicians of previous eras were enough to make today's cartoonists drool: Trudeau with his buck-toothed playboy flair, the perpetually-

disheveled René Lévesque, the roly-poly Klein, the horse-chinned Brian Mulroney and, of course, Chrétien, the politician ready-made for editorial page satire. The current aesthetic runs to bland, Wonder Bread lawyer-types, personified by Paul Martin, John Manley, Alan Rock and Stephen Harper. "I'm all for those crazy Sheila Copps-types," laughs Mayes. "They're my bread and butter."

Although always ready to dig into a politician sandwich, Mayes sees political cartoonists as tightrope walkers, maintaining a delicate balancing act between toeing the line and stepping clear across it. The formula goes like this, according to Mayes: a cartoonist should be in sync with his community 75 per cent of the time and against the grain the other 25 per cent. In this quadrant lies the opportunity to rile and even upset readers, hopefully causing them to stop and self-evaluate. "You can't always be coming out of left field," he says. "You must be in sync with the community or people won't read you or relate to you. But a political cartoonist must piss into the wind sometimes, even if there's blow-back." 📄

Doug McIntyre is a reporter/photographer for the *Rocky View Times*. He holds a degree in political science from the U of C.



The challenge of the political cartoonist is to turn devils into angels when the public mood shifts. By Stewart Cameron, from the *Calgary Herald*, Jun 24, 1941.