

“When Klein rants, the rest of the country turns off.”



Back in the dead of winter, Premier Ralph Klein set up another of his many travelling road shows, this time to tour the province to talk about Alberta's relationship with the federal government.

Officially entitled the MLA Committee on Strengthening Alberta's Role in Confederation, its real purpose was to send a message to the new Prime Minister and his cabinet that Albertans want a better deal.

But do most Albertans really care about the state of the relationship between Ottawa and Alberta? Not likely; half the province doesn't have the interest or the time to vote in municipal and provincial elections. Many Albertans have little understanding about which level of government does what.

The Albertans who exploited the committee were the rabid anti-federalists who want any or all of the following: a separate Alberta, smaller or no transfer payments, an elected Senate, a provincial police force, a less progressive federal tax system, withdrawal from the federal pension plan, no gun registry, no Kyoto Accord, no laws that make life more tolerable for homosexuals, a more active role in writing the federal budget, participation in international affairs, and the federal government out of the health care system.

In other words, Premier Klein played the firewall game again. He seems to be in a constant state of verbal warfare with the federal government. The diatribe may work inside the province because it taps into Alberta's long-held resentment of all things federal. The more Klein rants against the federal government, the better his chances of winning big in the next election.

Some Albertans believe such tactics work and that Klein is a powerhouse in national affairs because he's been around so long and his criticisms attract so much media attention.

But does anyone outside the province give a damn? This kind of politics is having the opposite reaction outside the province. The other premiers pay little attention to the headline-grabbing tactics of a province with so much money it must devise creative ways to hide it.



Check the record: the Alberta agenda has gone exactly nowhere in other provinces. Alberta set up a single-rate personal income tax regime; no other province paid attention. Alberta deregulated parts of the electricity system; no other province will touch it. Alberta privatized the retail liquor business; no others are interested. Alberta vigorously fought the Kyoto Protocol while the other premiers sat back and watched. Alberta did its own health care report—the Mazankowski report—and released it in advance of the Romanow and Kirby reports because Klein hoped to influence those, but nobody was listening. It turns out that even the Alberta government ignored much of the Mazankowski report. Few provinces sympathized with Alberta over greater privatization in health

care, or over the gun registry or Canada's position on Iraq.

While Klein rants, the rest of the country turns off. With his friend Mike Harris long gone, Klein has few friends among the other premiers. This is the same man who tolerates no criticism within the province but revels in criticizing others. This is the same man who talks glowingly of partnerships within the province but rides by himself outside the province. To have influence in a federation such as Canada, Klein needs friends. Only through alliances with other premiers can Klein exert influence in Ottawa.

The stuff of effective diplomatic relationships is not political rage strewn across the front pages of the newspapers, but mutual respect, quiet behind-the-scenes lobbying, and compromise. We live in a global community in which no single province, no matter how strong economically, can have an influence all by itself.

Klein thought he could bypass Ottawa and go straight to the White House. He thought he could make friends in the U.S. by going against the federal government and supporting the American position on Iraq. The Americans thanked him by closing the borders to Canadian cattle and taking a tougher line on softwood lumber.

Alberta must develop the relationships and alliances that earn it more power and more influence nationally and internationally. Sitting back and complaining doesn't cut it.

Alberta needs a constant presence in Ottawa. The whining must stop. Albertans have to start thinking positively and constructively about the province's place in the country and the world. Alberta must better manage its reputation. Investing in the future requires more than money.

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