

Welcome to Alberta

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After getting 44 per cent of the popular vote and a four-point margin of victory in the June election, the Conservative government insists it has the right and obligation to dismantle Alberta's social safety net.¹ Health, social services, and education have all been severely affected. In response, thousands have attended protest marches and meetings outside the Alberta legislature, in Calgary, and in other smaller centres. A rally by students in Lacombe even made the *Globe and Mail*, which described the chaotic scene as students laid down on mainstreet and halted traffic.

The particularly vigorous opposition of students and the well-organized lobby of teachers has caused the government to backpedal on its promise of 20 per cent across-the-board spending reductions in all departments, only to say that any cuts not made in education will be found elsewhere.

Welfare recipients are not and never will be a very strong lobby group, and staff from many social agencies are terrified to speak on behalf of their clients for fear of their agency being singled out for funding cuts. When that's combined with social services minister Mike Cardinal's sincere belief that welfare has "destroyed" Aboriginal people and others, we can look forward to further reductions to welfare benefits. There are even rumors that all welfare for single employable people will be eliminated.

All efforts to have the government reconsider its cruel treatment of the poorest and most defenceless members of society fall on deaf ears. Premier Klein, defacto premier Ken Kowalski, and government ideologue Stockwell Day all made flippant comments about the 5,000 strong crowd which gathered outside the legislature October 23 to beg the government to change direction, and all vowed to stay the course on the budget 'plan.'

While roundtable discussions have been held to discuss future directions for health and education, Mike Cardinal has refused to do the same in social services. At a meeting with agency representatives October 25th, he insisted that there was no point holding any roundtables because "no-one outside Edmonton has complained" about the cuts.

People in the human service field seem to have very few avenues left open. More rallies will likely be held, but it is hard to match school students' spontaneity and impact. Letters and telephone calls are ignored. The official opposition is in a minority in the legislature, and is treated with derision when it expresses concerns.

All is never lost. Any one strategy is unlikely to dissuade a government convinced of its righteousness and with four years left before the next election. But in combination, innovative and determined action can make even the most intransigent minister and government think again. Every person who cares about the hungry, the weak, and the children needs to explore her own conscience and decide what she can do to help protect the defenceless. There are many different ways to speak up for a caring Alberta:

- Government members come exclusively from Calgary and rural areas. A few phone calls from constituents and meetings with rural MLA's probably affect this government's policies more than 10,000 Edmontonians on the steps of the legislature. Organizations and individuals can reach out to their contacts across the province. Food banks in rural areas are already starting to talk to their government representatives about the hunger and pain government policies are causing. Churches must begin to use their province-wide networks to insist upon caring policies and social justice.
- Long term alternatives need to be developed. If government policies are short-sighted and ultimately costly, what would be long-sighted and ultimately cheaper? For example, many leading economists have commented that the budget balancing plan is both harmful and unrealistic. They have recommended increasing taxes which remain much lower than anywhere else in Canada. Their message should be repeated, multiplied, and amplified.
- Every government is a coalition of different interests and opinions. While many of the more enlightened members of the Lougheed and Getty governments are in retirement, they still influence the Conservative party and need to stand up for their beliefs in balanced and humane government. Human service advocates can encourage them to do the right thing.
- The government of Alberta is given money by Ottawa to pay for the welfare program. Even with federal cuts, about 44 per cent of Alberta's welfare bill is actually paid by the federal government. As a result, our welfare program must be delivered according to principles set out by the federal Canada Assistance Plan Act. The reforms seem to contravene some of those principles. Federal officials need to review the province's welfare program and direct Alberta to bring the program up to standard.
- Former Children's Advocate Bernd Walter recently completed his review of child welfare services *In Need of Protection*. The report warns that the child welfare system does not properly protect children at risk and needs major reforms. Instead of an overhaul, the system has suffered severe cutbacks. Restrictions on services to some groups, like

16 and 17 year olds, clearly contravene the Child Welfare Act. The government must be made aware that its negligence in this field will invariably lead to needless suffering and even deaths among children refused protective services or provided inadequate protection.

- Our new federal government can provide some balance to government policies, and thus help protect the many Albertans who are being cut out of the 'new Alberta.' Edmonton is represented by four talented government members, of whom one is a senior cabinet minister. They can be expected to advocate for federal programs and policies which will serve the interests of our city.

We must change the attitude of our government towards the disadvantaged. Not so much because of the details of the cuts, which are bad enough. More dangerous is the message our government is sending to Albertans, that it is OK to let the poor go hungry and the children go without protection because they are not our friends, not our kids. This is exactly the perspective Reagan and Bush promoted in the United States. It ended up with the inner cities in flames and a bigger deficit than when they took over.

Premier Klein says he must balance the budget to show that Alberta is "open for business." Let us ask him, what kind of business wants to relocate to a place where we would have the poor go hungry and the children go without protection if that means avoiding paying even one cent more in taxes?

NOTE

1. This article first published in *First Reading*, December 1993. Jonathan Murphy is executive director of the Edmonton Social Planning Council.
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