

Notes of the Remarks of Sandeep Dhir to the
Edmonton Manning Alberta Liberal Constituency Association
Nomination Meeting
Thursday, May 17, 2007
Londonderry Community Hall

Check Against Delivery

Good evening. Mr. Chairperson; Alberta Liberal Leader Kevin Taft; Members of the Legislative Assembly; Ladies and Gentlemen; Fellow Liberals; Friends All.

Thank you to my Nominator Paola Ruiz and my Secunder Eugene Rienks

Thank –you also to Mark Razzolini, Edmonton Catholic School Board Trustee for this Ward for his generous introduction. Mark’s commitment to smaller classes and diversity in teaching methods in our schools has made him a leader on the Board and in our community. I am honoured to have his endorsement and his support.

Friends, if you will forgive the self-indulgence, allow me to acknowledge the presence of some special guests.

Thank-you to my family; my parents and my in-laws for their love and support.

Thank-you to my friends, some whom have traveled some distance to be here tonight.

Thank-you to the Partners, Lawyers and staff of my law firm, Field. I am privileged to work with a group of brilliant lawyers and staff. Their commitment to our clients and to our community sets a standard of excellence. I am grateful for their support and for the presence of so many of them here tonight.

There is an old saying “That the greatest gift one person can give to another besides their love, is their labour.” I want to acknowledge the all the effort, the commitment and the personal sacrifice of time spent with family that my campaign team has made over the past few months to make this night happen.

To George, Connie, Matt, Dan and the rest of the team: I am in awe of your skills and talent. I am humbled by your support.

I spoke of labour and love. To my Partner and wife of 15 years; my best friend, Sandra Rein. My life’s journey simply would have no meaning without you.

And thank-you to all of you for being here tonight. Your presence is a testament to the growing mood in our province for change.

Not a superficial change; like the changing of the guard that we witnessed in the recent Tory leadership campaign, but real, fundamental change to the way that Alberta is governed.

Like all of you, I have grown more and more troubled by the absence of leadership by this government. On the critical issues of the day, our government is able only to provide platitudes and pays lip service to the concepts of “accountability” and “transparency.”

On a host of fronts, it has become increasingly clear that this government has no plan.

Most recently, we have witnessed a debate over affordable housing and the dramatic spike in rents for so many of our neighbours.

As a starting point, the fact that this issue has reached a crisis is proof that this government has had no plan to deal with our booming economy.

In a growingly competitive and global market place, the Tories have staggered and stumbled on auto-pilot.

Instead of using the levers of government to control and manage our economic growth; the government has let the economy race ahead; without any strategy.

Rising rent and the lack of affordable housing are just one symptom of the failure to manage the economy.

Now, in the case of rising rents, the government actually appointed a committee to study the issue.

The committee studied the question; reviewed the competing options and came back with a plan. The committee recommended temporary rent controls as a solution.

The government rejected the plan out of hand. Instead, they decided to limit landlords to one rent increase a year.

The result was as inevitable as it is sad. And Albertans have paid the price – we now have reports of rent increases of several hundred and in some cases over a thousand dollars.

In reply, our Premier and his Minister expressed surprise and shock at the turn of events. The Premier went so far as to call the conduct of certain unscrupulous landlords “un-Albertan.”

Let’s be clear. He offered no solutions; no plan; just a vague promise that his Minister would meet landlords privately for a discussion. Then he disappeared.

The recent rent debacle is just the latest example of the price we all pay for a government that refuses to plan beyond winning the next election.

And even when it gets a plan, in this case a Committee Report, it sacrifices the plan on the Darwinian altar of survival of the fittest and a vague notion of the market adjusting itself.

But it goes deeper than just a failure to plan;

This government is a government of fiscal mismanagement and fiscal irresponsibility.

Since 1971, when the Tories came to power, \$220 billion in oil and gas revenue has been collected by the government. Let me say that again: \$220 billion.

Over 93 cents of each of that \$220 billion has been spent and squandered the Tories.

There is an old aboriginal saying which I am sure you have all heard: “We do not inherit this land from our parents; we borrow it from our children.”

Albertans understand this concept. We work, we save and we plan for the future. And our children’s future.

Peter Lougheed understood this too.

After investing in our infrastructure, our schools, colleges and universities.

After investing in our health care system and in our roads and highways.

After investing in cities and in our towns, Premier Lougheed set up the Heritage Trust Fund.

With foresight, Peter Lougheed anticipated that famous bumper sticker we all saw in the 80’s: “Lord, please give me another boom, I promise not to waste it away again.” Or something close to that – “waste” might not be quite the word that was used.

Today, the famous “rainy day” fund has only \$15 billion dollars in it. It has withered away and been abandoned by successive Tory governments.

Now compare that to Norway who has \$230 billion in its Petroleum Fund or closer to home, Alaska which has \$37 billion in its Permanent Fund and you start to see the picture of a government that squandered our children’s inheritance; our Province’s future for their electoral gains.

Every time our children come home from school with another chocolate bar fundraising drive or magazine sales drive, we are reminded that something isn't working.

Every time an Alberta family sits around the kitchen table and tries to figure out how they are going to pay the rising tuition costs at our universities, colleges and technical institutes, we are reminded that something isn't working.

Every time we wait for hours for emergency services at our hospitals; or read that most family doctors in Edmonton won't take new patients, even as our city grows. Or drive through towns with signs advertising for a doctor, we know that something isn't working.

Or recently, when we learned that there is a critical shortage of experienced Crown Prosecutors, which is compromising the safety and security of all Albertans, we know that something isn't working.

Every time we drive on our roads and feel the failing infrastructure under our tires, we know that something isn't working.

In the recent budget, the government finally announced much needed spending for infrastructure. But as Graham Thompson of the Journal noted, these expenditures are going to cost Albertans an extra \$1.3 billion because of the increase of costs in completing the work.

If part of what's not working is revenues being frittered away by the Tories, the other piece of the puzzle is lost revenue.

As an example, there has been some discussion of increasing the province's royalty rates from oil and gas.

If we had simply matched the rates charged in Texas, hardly a radical socialist State, we would have collected another \$16 billion in revenues between 2000 and 2006.

So where was the plan? Where was the Premier and his Minister of Finance, Lyle Oberg when these decisions were not being made?

Well, in fairness to the Minister of Finance, he did tell us that this was the way it was. It was only a year ago, that he announced that there were "hidden skeletons" in the closet of this government.

Everyone was fixated on what this meant for then Premier Klein. Was it the end of Klein's leadership? Was it proof of divisions in the Tory caucus?

What was forgotten in all the smoke and haze, was that the skeletons we assume he referred to dealt with the administration of our government. The "closet" in which these problematic "skeletons" were hidden was the people's closet. This was the business of all Albertans.

This government's failures and Mr. Oberg's glib references to other secrets is disconcerting because it tells us that the Premier and his Minister of Finance think that accountability for the way they spend our money ends inside the offices of the Tory Party.

What all of these examples highlight is that the Tory regime has become so arrogant in power, so complacent in their right to govern, that they no longer consider themselves responsible to any of us.

Their idea of a plan is give \$400.00 in "Ralphbucks" to all Albertans and hope we won't notice that they have betrayed the trust we placed in them to lead.

And I submit to you that this failure takes on moral dimensions when we consider the rise of homelessness in our province. In Edmonton alone, homelessness has gone up over 19 percent in the past 2 years and there are now over 2500 people of who live on our streets.

Several years ago, the Mayor's Task Force on Affordable Housing declared the situation in Edmonton to be a crisis.

As President of the Edmonton Inner City Housing Society and a member of the Board for 6 years, I heard monthly of the growing waiting lists of people needing our services.

I listened to the frustration of our staff who had to deal with the pain and suffering of our neighbours.

I met some of our residents who explained to me that without the affordable homes we had provided to them, they had been without an address and phone number to give to prospective employers.

I was struck by how basic a concept this was. How could we expect these people to get a job when they did not have a phone to accept the offer of employment an employer would make?

I dealt with a government which did not seem to care and did nothing to address this issue. Our Premier was silent then, other than a drunken foray to a shelter one night to abuse those who could not defend themselves.

Over the past few days, as I reflected on what I wanted to say to you tonight, I thought about the residents of the various Edmonton Inner City projects.

I thought about the 2500 others who don't have basic housing.

I remembered the motto of my law school is "fiat justitia" – quite literally, "let justice be done."

I was reminded that the Hebrew word for charity is justice.

I believe that a society is judged by how it treats the weakest; the most vulnerable of its members.

If for no other reason, the Tories must be held accountable for their immoral betrayal of the weakest members of our community.

Let me be clear. As Liberals we believe in a guarantee to opportunity.

We do not believe in a guarantee of outcome; but we believe that everyone has the right to a fair chance of success – a right to participate in the so-called Alberta Advantage.

When people have nowhere to sleep in the dead of winter, they simply did not get that fair chance. To leave people in this condition really is “Un-Albertan.”

The Alberta Liberal Party’s values are Alberta values – where hard work is rewarded and all of us can expect basic fairness and justice.

I expected that the recent Tory leadership race would address these and other issues facing the province.

Instead, the debate became focused on Ted Morton. Like many Albertans, I was horrified at the thought of a Morton win.

Mr. Morton and his brand of conservatism represents a shallow, selfish view of the world.

His preoccupation with whom individual Albertans live and sleep with speaks to a troubling narrow-mindedness.

The fact that he is now a member of the Cabinet tells me that this government has further strayed away from mainstream Alberta values.

I can’t continue tonight without saying that while we must be respectful of all religious beliefs, such religious beliefs must never be permitted to be used as a shield to defend intolerance and bigotry.

Nor should such religious beliefs ever be allowed to influence public policy as a sword to discriminate against a discrete minority.

Now, how do we address all of these issues?

The first step is to take the issues out of the closet. To openly and honestly admit that these skeletons exist.

That is the difference between the Alberta Liberals and the Tories. It is a difference which can be measured in courage and confidence.

Under the leadership of Kevin Taft, Alberta Liberals have the courage to address the various issues facing our province.

We have the confidence to say that we will not leave anyone behind; that we will not break faith with the values that built the province and we will keep the promise to our children and our grand children of a better Alberta.

We will manage the economy and make sure that all Albertans enjoy the benefits of our good fortune.

We will ensure that our schools; our universities and our colleges receive the funding they need to deliver the quality of education our students deserve.

We will ensure that tuition fees and money never again become the reason that all Albertans can't strive for their dreams.

We will ensure that the health care system – a model for the world – is never again compromised to the point where people see queue jumping ahead of their neighbours at a private clinic as their only option.

We will keep the faith with our seniors who remember the Depression and the reality of a medical bill which bankrupted families and we will never again allow the dangerous creep of user fees.

We will provide affordable, accessible child care for all Albertans so families never again have to choose between the children they love and the jobs they need.

We will keep the promise made by Peter Lougheed 36 years ago, that the Alberta's economy – 50 percent of which is dependent on oil and gas – will finally be diversified so that our children and grand children can enjoy the same prosperity that we have.

We will challenge the world with support for cutting edge technology that makes Alberta a global leader in the new economy.

This research and development will engage the environment – which quite plainly is this generation's great challenge – and pursue sustainable environmental technologies.

And we will stop once and for all the foolish questioning of overwhelming scientific fact – global warming is real and unlike this government we will not ignore it anymore.

We will take our rightful place as a leader in Canada and speak for national objectives and national standards.

Confident that the new Alberta does not need to blame a 25 year-old policy as proof of a central Canadian conspiracy; we will lead in the now and give voice to our commitment to the Canadian project.

36 years ago, Peter Lougheed went to Albertans with a simple proposition. He argued that Albertans should receive a fair royalty return for our oil and gas.

He said that Albertans deserved a competent government which could manage the complexities of the economy of that time and plan for the future.

The Social Credit government had been power for 36 years and was complacent and out of touch.

Mr. Lougheed's slogan then was simply "Now."

36 years later we find ourselves at a similar juncture in Alberta's history. Peter Lougheed's criticisms of the Socred government can be applied with equal justice to the Tory government.

The parallels between 1971 and now are striking. The choice between the Parties is clear and the stakes could not be higher.

Over the next few months I plan to door knock in Edmonton Manning and talk about these issues.

For the first time, in a long time, there is a real opportunity for change.

The riding of Edmonton Manning will be closely contested in the next election, and I need your help.

Albertans want a responsible and competent government. After 36 years its time for a change and I'm ready. NOW.

Thank-you.