

## Remediate Incompetence

Response to the Budget 2010  
February 10, 2010

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As Leader of the Official Opposition, I have the duty and privilege of rising today to respond to yesterday's budget.

Mr. Speaker, I am frankly astounded by the haphazard nature of this budget, with massive spending increases in certain areas offset by drastic cuts in others. Far from striking a balance, this budget throws Alberta wildly *off*-balance, with no plan for sustainable spending and our province's future prosperity in jeopardy.

This is a balancing act, all right, but it's like a high-wire performance: a big show for the audience with potentially catastrophic consequences. Only it's like the Minister of Finance is sitting safely on the sidelines, poking Albertans out onto the high wire without a net.

Over and over again during my time as Leader of the Official Opposition, I've stated my belief that Alberta is in dire need of a government that understands the importance of planning for the long term. Albertans have told me that they share that view. But clearly this Tory administration has no concept of what a long-term plan entails.

Why else would they lurch from budget to budget, shifting priorities on the fly, commissioning studies only to abandon them, ignoring the advice of the Auditor General, passing a law to make deficit spending illegal only to repeal that law as soon as oil and gas prices collapsed? Is it a spending problem, or is it really a competence problem in this administration? We believe this budget confirms that it's definitely a competence problem.

Both as a physician and an Officer of Health, I took a careful, comprehensive approach to assessing problems, coming up with solutions, and following up to be sure that my solutions were working, amending as necessary.

For example, if a patient came into my office with a headache, I couldn't just give him a pill and send him away. I needed to know his medical history, what other medications he might be taking, any other health issues, any problems at work or home, and so on. Once deciding upon a course of action, I monitored the patient's progress and made changes to his treatment as necessary.

The same common-sense approach can and should be applied to policy problems. The state of public health care, the condition of our economy, social issues such as homelessness and child care – all of these issues require responsible leaders to consider the big picture, without the baggage of ideology or personal prejudice.

Comprehensive analysis, full assessment, action, monitoring and amending: that's the approach a responsible government would take to the big issues of the day. Instead, we have ad hoc policy designed to address partisan political problems, while many equally important issues get swept under the rug.

### **The Cuts**

The cut to children's services, for example, is a scandal, and the decision to slash nearly forty million dollars from a crucial program is beneath contempt, especially when the amount being cut is the same as the amount being devoted to subsidizing the dying horse racing industry.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans care about children a heck of a lot more than they care about horse racing, and I am profoundly disappointed by the lack of empathy and shortsightedness displayed by this administration's decision, especially given the news stories of troubled foster families this past week.

Yesterday I talked about the impact this administration's cuts have had on Alberta's students, the next generation of engineers, tradesmen, scientists, doctors, artists – the leaders and builders of tomorrow. Over \$200 million cut from Advanced Education and Technology, creating even higher student debt and imperiling access to postsecondary education.

If there's one investment that could lead to creating a sustainable economy for Alberta, it's education, but this administration, with typical shortsightedness, just made it even harder for countless Albertans to achieve their full potential. The consequences of this decision will affect Alberta's prosperity for a long, long time, and it certainly makes it no easier to address our critical shortage of health care professionals. That two billion dollars added to the health care budget won't help much without new doctors and other professionals to make the system work.

Clearly the heartfelt but logical appeal of University of Calgary medical students Rithesh Ram and Natalie Liu, whose letter I read in this house yesterday, fell on deaf ears. Student debt, already crippling, is going to rise even higher, and I don't see how the Minister of Advanced Education is going to deny any of the proposed tuition increases given these cuts. High youth unemployment, declining Registered Education Savings Plan values, a frozen minimum wage – all of these factors, combined with this administration's cuts to advanced education, make this is a terrible time to be a postsecondary student in Alberta.

Slashing income supports in an economic recession shows not only a lack of compassion for Albertans struggling to cope, but again reinforces this administration's reputation for shortsightedness. You predict that the unemployment picture is not going to improve, in the near term, so why cut benefits? They're going to be needed, especially since employment tends to lag behind general economic growth; it takes time to recover lost jobs. In the meantime, Alberta families will struggle to cope.

The choices made by this administration reveal a “flavour of the month” mentality. You have recognized, correctly, that Albertans are concerned about health care. But rather than address the complex problems of management and resource allocation, you have decided to take the easy road and throw money, tons of it, at the problem.

### **Health Care Increase**

I can't imagine how the Minister of Finance wrapped his head around this administration's incredible two billion dollar increase in health care spending. In fact, there was a comment on Twitter that I thought was quite funny and revealing; I'm paraphrasing here, but it said something like, “Mr. Premier, when your Finance Minister is in tears while reading the budget, that's not a good sign.”

You know, if I'd called upon this government to increase the health budget by two billion dollars, the heckling from that side of the assembly might very well have brought the house down around our heads. And yet here we have an ideologically conservative administration, or at least, certainly, an ideologically conservative Minister (or so he tries to appear), telling Albertans that their prescription for saving health care is throwing dump trucks full of money at the system.

As an MD, I can tell you that yes, the system needs money, but what it needs most is competent management. Given this administration's disastrous record with public health care, why should anyone believe that this huge increase in the system's budget will actually lead to better results?

This administration's own throne speech, delivered just days ago, admitted that Alberta receives far less value per dollar spent on health care than other provinces. Now we'll receive even less value per dollar, because I don't trust this administration to use those extra resources efficiently. In fact, by cutting child intervention services and income supports, you will foster situations that lead to

bad health outcomes for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Albertans – and they'll wind up in health care, costing the health system more in the long run.

I find it incredibly ironic that two years ago this very administration was trying to tell Albertans that health care spending was out of control. Oscar Wilde might not have been a big fan of consistency, but I think most Albertans want a government that isn't constantly sending out mixed messages.

A few months ago, this administration claimed that they could find two billion dollars in savings through greater efficiency. You seem to have come up about \$700 million short, and you certainly haven't found any appreciable efficiencies in health care – not when, as I explained yesterday, there are cases of keeping patients in intensive care for days at a cost of thousands of dollars rather than shelling out less than a hundred dollars for antibiotics.

Or cases like that of a former colleague, forced to wait too long for what would have been a relatively inexpensive gall bladder treatment that eventually resulted in a serious, life-threatening infection, costing the system thousands of additional dollars and, more importantly, resulting in a vastly less desirable health outcome for my friend.

### **Stories from Albertans**

Yesterday, in my response to the Throne Speech, I shared some stories from the many Albertans who have contacted us with stories of how they're trying to cope with this administration's mistakes.

I shared those stories because I think it's important that we all remember that the decisions we make as elected representatives have real impacts on real people – our neighbours, our fellow citizens, the people we have been entrusted to serve. When we fail them, we fail in our primary reason for being in this Assembly.

I hope that at least a few of the government Members will take those stories to heart, because we all share some responsibility for them.

Here's one that I didn't bring up yesterday:

**“After 10 years of billions of dollars in surplus, we now find ourselves facing a 4 billion dollar deficit...**

(Of course it's even larger now.)

**...WHERE DID THE MONEY GO??? I live on a disability pension, I don't have a lot of money to throw around, I have MS and upon occasion I need a Chiropractor and need some adjustments but Mr. Liepert saw fit to delist the treatments and now I cannot afford to go to a Chiropractor. I have no balance and fall frequently and require adjustments often.**

**Also, I cannot afford my prescriptions because [the Minister of Health] raised the price of the Plus for Blue Cross from \$44.00 per month to \$82.00 per month. Doctor appointments are over a month wait to see them. The more you can do please do and more power to you because we need help.”**

And another:

**“I asked for Hospital Beds. Not a 250 million dollar a year ambulance transition. In April this year AHS took over EMS services throughout Alberta at a cost of 250 million a year forever, after refusing to release publicly, the findings of the EMS Discovery project in the "former" Peace and Palliser Health Regions. What is our Health Minister trying to Hide? I wrote my local [government] MLA and received this response from her in writing. She stated ‘I am unable to share these findings with you’ and that ‘the findings of the EMS discovery projects cannot be released publicly.’**

**Disgusting -- Very George Bush style of governance. This was a great selling feature to tax payers. For example, in Calgary where EMS operations were close to 30 million a year, this was [not] supposed to be passed on down to us. Then why is it that I am facing a 4.8% property tax increase? This system is clearly not working.”**

### **Conclusion**

Believe me, these stories represent just the tip of the iceberg; to paraphrase Shakespeare, this is surely the winter of Albertan discontent. This budget uses a boatload of cash to wallpaper over some problems, while failing to address fundamental issues of poor governance, mismanagement, and failure to consider the long-term implications of habitual moment-to-moment decision-making.

I believe that as a society we must do our best to live within our means so that future generations won't be compromised. As our First Nations citizens might say, we do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children. This budget borrows very heavily indeed from the next generation of Albertans. I only wish I could believe that this administration had the skills to put the loan to best use.

Clearly, Mr. Speaker, we are dealing no longer with merely a financial problem, but with a competence problem.

There's a better way.