

Re-energizing democracy in Alberta
Provincial election clearly shows a change is needed
A new citizens' assembly may help give Albertans a greater say in their future

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Freelance

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The following are excerpts from a speech by Preston Manning, president and CEO of the Manning Centre for Building Democracy, to the Alberta Enterprise Group in Edmonton on March 10 and the Small Explorers and Producers Association (SEPAC) in Calgary on March 11. Last week, the Alberta provincial election concluded with a resounding victory for Premier Ed Stelmach and his Progressive Conservative government and the decimation of the opposition parties, especially the provincial Liberals.

It is now in the interests of all of us, regardless of party affiliation, to hope that the premier and his colleagues will succeed, and to assist them to succeed, in coming to grips with the major challenges and decisions facing this province.

These challenges include:

- Balanced development: Dealing with the negative side-effects of our booming energy economy -- in particular, labour shortages, housing shortages, the stress on infrastructure, inflationary pressures, and the plight of those Albertans being "left behind";
- Environmental conservation: Harnessing the incentives and tools of the marketplace which we have so successfully applied to the development of this province's economy to the equally important task of conserving this province's magnificent environment;
- Fiscal management: Controlling provincial spending, keeping taxes low and royalties market-sensitive, and saving/investing sufficient non-renewable resource revenue to adequately provide for the future;
- Health care and education: Overcoming the obstacles which currently prevent Albertans from achieving the best health care and educational services in the world;
- Leading on the national stage: Vigorously, but wisely, asserting Alberta's growing influence on the national stage - for the benefit not just of Albertans but for all Canadians;

THE 'DEMOCRACY DEFICIT'

The challenges facing Alberta include one other -- deciding how to respond to the most disturbing aspect of the recent election -- one that I am sure concerns Premier Ed Stelmach and ought to be of concern to us all, and that is the challenge of Alberta's "democracy deficit."

I refer to the abysmally low turnout in the March 3 election of 41 per cent. This is even worse than the 44-per-cent turnout in the 2004 provincial election and appears to be part of a disturbing trend toward less participation by increasing numbers of Albertans in the political life of our province.

Despite a change in the leadership of the governing party, despite a sustained effort by the

official opposition to present itself as an alternative, and despite the activities of new parties, almost 60 per cent of the electorate -- or 1.5 million Albertans -- did not vote in the provincial election.

Did they stay home because they've never had it so good and are satisfied with the status quo? Did they stay home because they wanted something that none of the parties appeared to be offering? We don't know for sure, but whatever the reasons, they need to be ascertained and addressed in the months ahead.

Alberta needs the benefit of the thinking and involvement of the vast majority of its people to deal effectively with the major challenges facing our province. Forty-one-per-cent participation is simply not good enough.

And although the Progressive Conservative government received a healthy 53 per cent of the popular vote, 53 per cent of 41 per cent is only 22 per cent of the electorate as a whole. In order to implement solutions to the major challenges facing Alberta, I am sure the government itself will desire the active engagement and support of a far greater percentage of the Alberta electorate than that. This is yet another compelling reason for wanting to re-energize democratic discourse and participation in Alberta.

By re-energizing democratic participation I mean much more than simply getting the voting rates up in Alberta's provincial elections. I mean re-energizing public discussion and participation in meeting the major challenges facing Alberta and the engagement of the vast majority of Albertans, including the young and our best and brightest, in that discussion and the actions that follow from it.

So what can be done to re-energize democracy in Alberta? I have three proposals for Albertans to consider.

ALBERTA CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

A few years ago, our sister province to the west organized a citizens' assembly to address a specific democratic challenge. In their case, it was a perceived need for electoral reform. What I would like to propose is that Alberta -- with the concurrence of the provincial government -- organize a similar citizens' assembly, to be focused not on electoral reform but on two broader tasks:

- Ascertaining the reasons why 1.5 million of our fellow citizens opted out of the last provincial election, and proposing measures to secure their re-engagement.

- And employing those measure to re-energize public discussion and debate on one of the big challenges facing Alberta -- whether it be the environment, or health care, or Alberta leadership on the national stage, or something else -- and providing non-partisan input thereon to the provincial government.

An Alberta Citizens' Assembly is therefore proposed specifically to address our democracy deficit, to seek to re-engage the 1.5 million Albertans who chose not to vote for a representative in the Alberta legislature, and to provide non-partisan input to that legislature on some key issue of importance to us all.

AN ALBERTAWIDE PRIMARY

British Columbia used a process of random selection from the B.C. voters' list to choose the delegates to its citizens' assembly. I would like to propose a different, more democratic process for selecting the delegates to the Alberta's Citizens' Assembly.

I would propose that we organize an Albertawide primary, something like those statewide primaries that the Americans use to select delegates to the conventions that select their presidential candidates, only with distinctly different content and features drawn from our own political traditions and values.

The Albertawide primary would be scheduled for a certain date in the near future. All Albertans would be invited to register with a central registry and to vote, all on one day in all 83 provincial ridings, on delegates to represent them at the citizens' assembly to be held shortly thereafter.

To participate in the primary, you wouldn't need to buy a party membership. No selling memberships at the door or packing of a school gymnasium with instant supporters to get someone's second cousin nominated instead of the person most capable of making a constructive contribution to the citizens' assembly.

If you are a citizen of Canada, a resident of Alberta, and in agreement with the selection rules and purpose of the Albertawide primary and citizens' assembly, you would be eligible to register and to vote on primary day. And only delegates democratically elected via the primary election on a "one-person-one-vote" basis would be eligible to participate in the assembly. And who would you be voting for? Whose names would be on the ballots? Those of people recruited by local recruitment committees and people like yourselves -- Albertans whom you and the recruitment committees would consider most capable of dealing with those key issues to be addressed by the citizens' assembly.

Would there be risks and problems in organizing such an Albertawide primary? Of course there would. But since when did anticipated risks and problems ever prevent Albertans from experimenting with new approaches to anything?

And if this primary can be made to work for a one-time citizens' assembly -- if Albertans like it and participate in it in significant numbers -- it may well become a model for adoption as a broader and fairer method of selecting candidates for the legislature the next time around.

TEAM ALBERTA

Thirdly, who should organize this Albertawide primary and citizens' assembly if enough Albertans, if enough people like you think they are worth proceeding with?

My suggestion would be that a well balanced steering committee from across the province, composed of experienced and respected citizens concerned about the democratic deficit in

Alberta, be struck and tasked with the job. Perhaps we should call it Team Alberta.

Team Alberta would need to hire a support staff and raise a substantial amount of money to finance its activities, including a major advertising campaign to explain and promote the primary and the assembly.

I personally don't think the Alberta government should be called on to foot the bill for either, although perhaps it could make a substantial contribution if it was supportive in principle of such an endeavour.

Most importantly, Team Alberta must be well balanced, with respected representation from northern and southern Alberta, and respected representation from urban and rural Alberta, to insure a united effort to re-energize Alberta democracy, not one that pits north against south or urban against rural.

We want to avoid the battle of Alberta within Alberta politically, so perhaps we should present each Team Alberta member with a composite Flames/Oilers hockey jersey and call them the Flaming Oilers (it sounds slightly better than the Oily Flames).

However it is done, the creation of a well balanced Team Alberta dedicated to re-energizing democracy in Alberta would be a prerequisite to proceeding with either the citizens' assembly or the Albertawide primary.

WHY IS MANNING DOING THIS?

What is my personal interest in advancing these proposals?

Let me state, categorically, that I am not putting forward these proposals with the intention of entering provincial electoral politics on a partisan basis.

I have been encouraged to do so in the past on numerous occasions and appreciate those invitations, but have always declined.

I feel that I can make a greater contribution to the future governance of our province and our country through my present work with the Manning Centre for Building Democracy and wish to continue to do so.

But having said that, please do not think that I am in any way indifferent to the political future of Alberta or the state of democracy in this province. How could I be?

Like you, I too am a proud Albertan. Our family has been involved directly and indirectly in the politics of this province for over 75 years. My father sat in the Alberta legislature for 33 years, 25 as premier. Both he and I represented Albertans and Alberta values in the federal Parliament for over 20 years between us.

The Manning Centre for Building Democracy is specifically dedicated to attempting to restore faith in democratic processes and institutions by building democratic infrastructure such as idea

generators and training programs to improve democratic participation.

After all Alberta means to me and my family, it would be inexplicable, indeed irresponsible, for me to be indifferent to Alberta's political future or to the democracy deficit right here in our own backyard.

So if there is support for re-energizing democracy in Alberta through any of these proposals -- or some variation of them -- I am more than willing to be personally and actively involved in their promotion and implementation.

In implementing these three proposals, Albertans would be using the tools that democracy itself provides -- freedom of speech, freedom of association, citizens' assemblies, and broadly-based electoral processes -- to re-energize democracy itself, and directing that renewed energy to "seizing the day" on the great issues and opportunities which presently confront our province.

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