

Alberta Politics – What Next?

By David Swann, MLA for Calgary Mountainview

Since the March 2008 provincial election I have heard from many constituents and other Albertans who are not satisfied with the current political reality. Like many of them, I am committed to open discussion of our parties and electoral system. Everything is on the table. It is essential that we, politicians and citizens, recognize the profound cost of our failing democracy and work together to re-engage each other in a healthy political process.

Thirty seven years of Conservative government rule coupled with a consistent decline in citizen participation bring us to the current reality. In the last election, 22 per cent of the total electorate chose another Tory majority government with 85 per cent of the seats. Almost 60 per cent of Albertans simply did not vote and we need to know the reasons. One likely possibility is discouragement in the first-past-the-post voting. Another is that politicians did not inspire people to participate.

I believe there is a widespread anxiety in Alberta about the future and the unique challenges we face. We have a severely over-heated economy, unparalleled growth pressures and over-stretched human services and infrastructure. We have saved very little of our diminishing fossil fuel wealth for future generations and global climate chaos demands severe reductions in fossil fuel use. Yet we have invested very little in shifting to energy efficiency and a renewable energy economy such as Norway has done since 1991. The decisions today are not serving the long term public interest and people feel powerless to influence this.

We must ask tough questions. Are the current parties and their representatives relevant? Are citizens too busy or cynical to be part of the political process? Have people lost trust and respect for the political process? We all have a responsibility to deal with these fundamental questions.

Some people are offended by partisan and adversarial positions without constructive solutions or plans for our uncertain future. Right-left distinctions are no longer relevant to many Albertans, according to many young people, who simply want a politics of integrity, hope and opportunity for all.

Albertans long to see men and women engaged in honest conversations that recognize the urgency of our provincial and global crises: sensible economic development, safe food, water, and human services. We desperately need leadership with vision to build bridges and create the conditions for healthy communities. That should be the purpose of politics.

Over the months ahead we will see whether the Alberta Liberal party and other alternate parties will rise to this historic occasion. As an elected Liberal representative, I am committed to finding out as much as possible about these issues and how Albertans want to be involved in political change.

Will Albertans come together in public forums, group discussions and debates, internet chat rooms and blogs to take the next steps to distil key principles and goals in renewed and more democratic organizations, with more new faces - especially women, young people and visible minorities? Is there an opportunity for consensus on key issues such as the environment, fiscal prudence and democratic reform?

After 37 years of one-party rule, the writing is on the wall. Alternate parties must change or become more marginalized. And if existing parties are not able to find common cause or make the necessary changes, then a more inclusive democratic party of the center must emerge which will inspire and engage citizens in the grand experiment that is Alberta. Let's get to work.

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