

Campaign and Platform Launch

January 31, 2008

Edmonton, Alberta

UNDER STRICT EMBARGO UNTIL 7:00 P.M.

Kevin Taft

Leader, Alberta Liberals

Check against delivery.

Thank-you. What a great team you are! What a great team!

Are you ready for an election?

‘Cause I sure am.

About once a year I make a trip out of province as Leader of the Opposition. One of those trips was earlier this week, to fulfill an invitation to speak to the Economic Club of Toronto. I spoke of the next Alberta, an Alberta with a confident and sophisticated spirit, ready not just to be a partner in Confederation, but a leader. The kind of spirit I feel in this room tonight.

The icing on the cake was when the president of the club announced, after my speech, that every opposition leader who had spoken at the club had gone on within eight months to become a premier. A good omen.

On my way back, I learned that the New Democrats had called a news conference in my absence, to take a shot at our policy to convert natural gas rebates, into a program to permanently reduce home heating costs, by helping people improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

The NDs want to keep mailing hundreds of millions of dollars a year in subsidies to gas companies, that actually encourage waste and never move toward a solution. Then Mel Knight, the Minister of Energy waded in, and said the Tories weren't sure what to do, but were probably going to just cancel the program.

I thought about this for a minute, and realized: there's the election right there. You have the Alberta Liberals proposing a creative and gutsy solution to a problem that saves people money and reduces emissions; you have the NDs wanting to continue spending hundreds of millions of dollars on an unending subsidy that discourages efficiency; and you have the Tories planning to do nothing.

If that's how they want to fight the campaign, then bring them on!!

This will be a campaign of choices for Albertans. There will be big issues, and small.

Albertans will have a choice on climate change policy: the Alberta Liberals presenting a firm goal to work with industry and all stakeholders to get on top of this issue urgently. The Stelmach government presenting a plan that is so anemic it has accomplished the impossible: it makes Stephen Harper look like a tree hugger. Imagine Ed Stelmach having the nerve to come forward with a plan that doesn't reduce emissions for another 40 years! Albertans expect better. It's time.

Albertans will have a choice on health care policy: the Alberta Liberals presenting an aggressive plan to fix Alberta's stumbling health care system through some obvious repairs— we must urgently increase the training capacity of our medical and nursing and other health care professions. The Stelmach government is turning to places like the Philippines and South Africa. Since when should Alberta have to permanently rely on third world countries for health care staff?! Albertans expect better. It's time.

Albertans will have a choice on education policy: from pre-kindergarten to post-graduate, our future depends on education. In this area above all others there is no excuse for anything less than the best. Our children and our youth are Alberta's future. When I was in Toronto this week I met with a senior economist for one of the major banks, and you know what he identified as one of his biggest long-term concerns for Alberta's future? The fact that Alberta under this government has one of the worst high-school completion rates in the country. The scary thing: he's right! Albertans expect better. It's time.

Albertans will have a series of other choices in this election too. On issues like providing roads and schools and hospitals and other public buildings. On seniors, and cities, and open, accountable government.

But the biggest issue of all is the growing awareness that after 37 years of one party in office, it is time for a change. It is time to sweep the cobwebs from government. It is time to shatter the cynicism of a governing party built on a sense of its unquestioned entitlement to public power and public money.

It is time to break up the patronage system, where many crucial public boards are made up entirely of members of the PC party. It is time to stop the waste and mismanagement, where the Stelmach government spends more per person than any other in Canada, and can't even build enough elementary schools.

Is it any wonder then, that the issue over-riding all others is that after 37 years, it is time for a fresh start. This morning, on national radio, Peter Lougheed was asked, "Can one party be in power too long?"

His answer? (Quote.) "Never did I anticipate that our party would exceed the time in office that Social Credit were in office. I remember campaigning back in 1971 – can you believe this Social Credit party has been in office for 36 years. It is a problem for the current party to be in office for that length of time." (End quote.)

And I say, and all of us say, and Albertans in growing numbers are saying, let's...fix...that...problem.

The issues in this campaign are going to be hot, but the weather is going to be cold. We cannot let that slow us down. So here is something to think about, if you need any motivation to help you through what may be the coldest campaign on record.

Picture it is now the year 2012.

And I'm standing before you – because we've been in government 4 years, and we are about to go into an election.

The first election faced by an Alberta Liberal government... in a very very long time.

Of course, there'll be no more waiting till the polling numbers are up, or the ribbon's been cut, or the pork barrel's rolled out.

Because when the Alberta Liberals form government, there will be Fixed Election Dates.

So what is this new Alberta like in 2012, on the eve of that election?

Obviously we've changed. Obviously Alberta has changed.

First, in 2012, the economy has never been as solid:

By investing 30 percent of our Royalties, we're finally on the road to permanent prosperity.

We've pumped up the Heritage Fund and kept taxes low.

Only two more years – 2014 – and the infrastructure debt is gone.

Our endowment fund for the arts, social sciences and humanities has reached its cap of \$500 million.

Western Canada is becoming a Western Tiger, upgrading more bitumen than ever in Alberta and other Canadian provinces.

Electricity deregulation is dead.

P3s – otherwise known as debt – were avoided in building our new schools, roads and hospitals.

Yes, it's 2012 and our plan for education is fully in place:

Our Post-secondary endowment fund is surging.

Tuition is back under control, with more learning spaces created.

We've lowered the interest on student loans and increased earning limits.

There's way more campus housing, and it's more affordable.

In our schools, classes are smaller. School fees are gone.

Junior and full-day kindergarten are in full swing.

Kids with learning problems are being identified early, and Provincial Tests are now simply a diagnostic tool for improving education.

If kids are still coming to school hungry, not one of them is leaving that way.

After 4 solid years of this Alberta Liberal Government's aggressive measures, Aboriginal Students are completing high school at better rates than ever seen.

And if the economy and education are in high gear in 2012, what's happening on the farm?

We reopened regional agriculture offices, and began reinvesting in the programs and facilities that keep rural life vibrant, things like local schools and arenas and health facilities.

We now have oil and gas experts advising rural Albertans on their rights.

Farm workers have strong safety standards AND Worker's Compensation.

Local fruit and vegetable production is booming, much of it certified organic.

Of course in 2012, it's not just workers on the farm who are growing stronger:

Our Labour Code is finally up to snuff and being enforced. Our new Human Resource strategy serves everyone, including foreign workers.

And our much-praised inquiry into the Worker's Compensation Board has fixed that organization once-and-for-all.

Here in 2012, even culture workers have it better:

We didn't just tinker with arts funding; we tripled it.

The Alberta Arts Festival tours the province region by region,

Our Film and Television tax credit has reestablished the industry in Alberta.

And today – in 2012 – Municipalities can actually plan for their futures:

There are 6 years left in the sustainability initiative; by 2018, \$11.3 Billion will have been invested.

Calgary and Edmonton now have their authority secured in the Big Cities Charter.

And regional planning councils are working again, managing land use and development.

Back in 2008, we went on record; we said it's time again for fairness, humanity and generosity:

Since then, we have brought in our nation-leading Child Care plan, with start-up and operational funding.

AISH benefits are indexed.

And persons with developmental disabilities are finally getting more of the help they deserve.

We tore down the “welfare wall” by gradually adjusting benefits as people re-enter the workplace. Workers are no longer punished for doing a little better.

And our investment in the non-profit sector helps maintain staff and provide adequate services.

We also have a handle on housing affordability and homelessness in 2012

We proved affordable housing WAS possible.

Secondary suites, affordable housing guidelines, land swaps, tax breaks and municipal grants spurred the growth. Development fees were waived, permits fast-tracked, and Federal funding was matched. A temporary cap on rent increases was enacted until the housing market resumed a healthy balance.

Alberta, through a homelessness plan with non-profit and private partners, is on track to making homelessness a thing of the past.

Today in 2012, seniors are feeling empowered:

Dental coverage has increased, and the Senior's Benefit is inflation-proof.

Maintenance loans are keeping seniors in their homes.

Well-run senior centres have been able to expand their services, and new centres now provide one-stop shopping for a range of services.

Albertans said that a healthy environment was crucial, and we listened:

In 2012, We've got Alberta on track to be a world-leader in addressing environmental issues like climate change, water protection and stewardship of our land.

We've worked with the energy industry - 'cause they know that climate change threatens the value of all our energy resources.

Together, bold creative thinking is protecting our environment AND still building our economic strength. And now, that same resolve is moving forward to protect our precious water and irreplaceable natural areas.

And the 61 last Albertans who weren't concerned about the environment... well they've been out of office for four years.

In 2008 Albertans said they wanted health care properly funded, well-managed, and affordable... and we delivered:

After years in Intensive Care... just four years of an Alberta Liberal Government, and Public Health Care is alive and well again!

Wait times are down and Emergency Rooms are no longer packed.

More people are entering the health field, and physicians and health teams are funded in new ways, with specialized surgical centres astonishingly efficient.

Public pharmacare is containing costs and increasing access, and Continuing Care is expanding and solidifying. Home-care, midwifery, palliative care and mental health programs are flourishing.

Oh. And in case you forgot: Health Premiums... are gone.

Since 2008, we've finally had open and accountable government:

The Auditor General has real power, and the Public Accounts Committee has rooted out waste.

The Internal Audit Committee is finally non-partisan, with results released within 24 months – quicker than the old government's 15 years.

The Public Affairs Bureau has been replaced with a non-partisan communication service.

The Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform is preparing its provincial plebiscite.

Freedom of Information finally means just that. Whistleblower legislation protects us all.

And government boards are finally open to every Albertan, regardless of which party you belong to... and even if – holy cow – even if you don't belong to a political party.

Yup. We've seen a lot of changes in 4 short years.

If Alberta 2012 sounds unbelievably good, it doesn't have to. If I have said it once, I have said it a thousand times: there is no place on Earth that is more abundant than Alberta. This province is a gift; we must live up to the responsibility of that gift.

That's the Alberta we have a chance to shape.

And this? This is our moment.

The time for just dreaming is over. The time for wondering is past.

This is our chance, and it's going to take everything we've got, everything you've got.

The fact this goal is in me... isn't enough.

The fact it's in every one of our MLAs isn't enough.

It has to be in you. And I know it IS in you.

There's a lot to do between now and Two Thousand and Twelve.

The Alberta Liberals are ready for this province.

And this province is ready for the Alberta Liberals.

It's... Time.

END OF SPEECH