

Calgary Airways Speech – October, 2005

Kevin Taft, Leader, Alberta Liberals

Thank you for inviting me here today.

In coming to speak to the Calgary Airways Business Association... Let me state: I did not fly here on a government plane.

Not that they'd ever let me; but I just thought you should know.

It's a real pleasure to be talking to the members of your business association. I don't know if you ever imagined "Business Association" and "Alberta Liberal" in the same sentence, let alone the same room, but I'm here to prove it a good idea... and maybe one that's a little overdue.

Because... you'll be surprised what a good fit we are with the world of business. We both know that success takes teamwork; that together... it's far easier to spot opportunities. Just being a member of this association means you understand. You're here, together, to take a look... at a different way, a different party, a different possibility, and that openness speaks volumes.

I'm still pretty new to politics. But I love this province, and I'm deeply concerned about its future, so I threw my hat in the ring, and I guess enough people agreed with me, that here I am. And I'm loving it.

You know, Alberta is the land of opportunity.

The question is, are we taking full advantage?

Earlier this year I was scanning a list of metropolitan areas in Canada and the US that has populations over a million people. New York topped the list.

The two smallest? Calgary and Edmonton: they just squeaked on.

*Alberta's* entire population is smaller than Montreal's; way smaller than metro Toronto. You put all *Albertans* together... we're the size of metro Seattle: a mid-sized American city.

Yet look at our opportunities. This may well be the most abundant piece of real estate on the planet. We have a major agriculture sector. Extensive forests. We've got mountains, water, tourism, high tech; a young, highly-educated workforce that's the hardest working in the country; we live in peace and security next to the largest, richest economy in the world. We have some of the world's largest coal reserves, and we're one of the world's largest exporters of natural gas, AND we own oil reserves that rival Saudi Arabia.

All of it to be shared among a population equivalent to... *Seattle*.

But what we don't seem to have right now, is direction.

What we don't seem to have is debate.

What we don't seem to have is... a *plan*.

If we're going to fully grasp the unparalleled opportunities this province has, we need a government that's able to... see beyond *today's* price of oil.

We need... imagination.

As Leader of the Official Opposition, part of my job is asking tough questions, holding the governing party to account. But you want to hear something strange coming from an Opposition Leader?

We don't believe in criticism for its own sake; without ideas... criticism is simply... negativity. But if new ideas are routinely tossed away with almost no consideration... well... Where's the democracy?

We don't just want a government... that sees the opportunities.

We want to be part of a government... that *seizes* the opportunities. And that means a government that's ready to hear every voice, weigh every point, debate every idea.

We need a government that really considers... when someone speaks up... or imagines a different path. When someone offers a new way, we need to listen... consider what's being put forward.

Because... *it might be a good idea*. Sitting as government does not give you a monopoly on good ideas. But ideas need a forum. Did you know that Alberta's Legislature sits the fewest days of any in the country? Other voices *aren't* being heard.

When somebody asks why there are 75 foodbanks in this land of plenty, let's at least discuss it.

When someone sees a different path to Senior's Care... let's - at least - discuss it.

When someone sees a different path to Education, let's - at least - discuss it.

When someone sees different paths for Health Care, or electricity deregulation, or ethics, let's hear what they have to say and discuss it. But if those other voices can't even be heard... something's terribly... wrong!

We laugh about backward dictatorships far away overseas... and then ignore the fact that today in Alberta... government opposition, government backbenchers... even government cabinet members(!); all are being ignored.

If those voices are silenced; the public, the *government* MLAs... if our own voice is routinely ignored... what are we allowing? There's an old saying: People get the government they deserve.

If that's true... until we have some real democratic reform, the situation will get worse; not better.

What do I mean when I say democratic reform?

How about:

1. *Fixed election dates.* At least expose pre-election goodies for what they are.
2. *Whistleblower protection.* Rooting out corruption should not cost you your job.
3. *An Auditor General with power.* Look what Sheila Fraser has rooted out federally. We need the same powers here, provincially.
4. *A cooling off period* for senior civil servants... before they can turn around and become lobbyists.
5. *A legislature that actually sits.* That's right. It's called healthy debate, the heart and soul of democracy.

I believe that people working together *through* their governments can accomplish things that people working alone **cannot**. Regardless of your political stripe, we're all Albertans. You belong to this association: You know what working together can accomplish...

However: though we may have **unparalleled** opportunities, we don't have **unlimited** opportunities. Too many of us remember when government spiraled beyond our means, when public finances nearly fell apart.

If we don't have a plan, and the discipline to stick with it, we'll make the same mistakes again.

We'll need to re-issue that infamous bumper sticker about "Dear God; Let there be another oil boom, and this time I promise I won't piss it all away." And I say that not as the Leader of the Opposition, or Leader of the Alberta Liberals, but as an Albertan who loves this province.

Just yesterday in the Herald, Don Martin - Klein's fawning biographer - had this headline: **Behind boom lurks a bust: 80's-style insanity makes a comeback.** Don Martin then quoted a "senior member of the provincial bureaucracy" regarding the runaway spending spree, and he responded...

*We're almost running out of ideas.*

There's no "almost" about it.

This province was built on hard work, not hand-outs. I've yet to meet anyone who's said, "The only way to fix everything... is \$400 extra spending money!". There are certain things Government does better - or **should** do better - than can citizens flush with a little extra cash. For goodness sake: that should be our job! To govern! Responsibly.

Unlike Don Martin, I'm not saying the sky is falling; I **am** saying we owe it to our children... and their children... to proceed... with care. Before we all agree to throw caution to the wind, here's a few things to consider:

**First:** In 1999 the price of oil was \$19.24; in 2000 it was \$30.20; in 2001 it was \$25.90, and two years ago the average price was \$30.90. We'd be reckless to assume prices are *staying* up....

forever.

**Second:** The Heritage Fund today is worth about 12.5 billion; and in 1988 the Heritage Fund was worth... about 12.5 billion. That means: in 17 years the Heritage Fund *lost* almost 50% of its value to inflation, while our population has *grown* by almost 50%! It would take 7 billion right now, just to get the Fund back to where it was in '88, and that doesn't account for our larger population... or how much that investment SHOULD be worth.

Norway's Petroleum Fund is worth 170 Billion ... Alaska's Permanent Fund is worth 31 Billion... That's almost 40,000 US dollars for each Norwegian, almost 50,000 for each Alaskan; or, by comparison, less than *4 thousand dollars Canadian*... for each Albertan. We have the second largest oil and gas reserves *in the world*, and have managed to saved almost nothing! And now we're set to give away so-called bonuses equal to 10 percent of our dwindling Heritage Fund!

**Third** - and perhaps most disturbing: our Infrastructure debt may now be as high as 11 billion...

The Alberta Liberal Caucus has run a few projections and it will take years and years of well-managed surpluses to get Alberta's finances and infrastructure... back to the levels of 1988.

Does Alberta need a plan more comprehensive than a *\$400 chicken in every pot*? You bet it does.

There's no place on Earth where the odds of making dreams come true are as good as Alberta's. I know the private sector is leading the way. But the government... I know we could be doing so much better.

And I'm not alone: Last Wednesday the Calgary Herald printed the results of a recent survey about the \$400 prosperity bonus. Only 14% of Albertans surveyed now think it's a good idea. By comparison, over 37% want the surplus to go to services; Albertans feel this opportunity is

being missed.

Last fall we announced *our* surplus policy:

1. 35% into the Heritage Fund, with interest flowing back to general revenues... forever.
2. 35% into a post-secondary endowment fund, to build an education system that is second-to-none.
3. 25% into rebuilding Alberta's decaying roads, sewers, and public buildings; and...
4. 5% into an endowment fund for the arts, social sciences, and humanities.

Not one-time "gifts" scrawled on a drink napkin; long-term *planning*! And we have the figures to back it up!

You know, Albertans always tell the world... we're *mavericks*. We're the steely-eyed free-thinker; independent, ready-to-adjust - change - at a moments notice. Ear to the ground, savvy. And yet, have you ever considered this?

In the last seventy years, this province has had but *one change of government*. The Tories in '71. Seventy years, a *lifetime*, and only one change of government. That's not free-thinkin'... that's pathological!

Can we do better? It's time to find out. Think of the next election as a... once in a lifetime opportunity. *Your* lifetime.

Because when you get a gift, when the cheque comes in the mail, remember this: It's not from someone else; it's from you, each of you, the *future* you.

It's a piece of ... the future of health care, the future of education, a piece of future roads and

towns and libraries, the future of this province; it's *all of our futures*...

And we're letting ourselves be fooled if we think it is anything else.

Our chance is right now, right here. If ever there was an opportunity to create an ideal blueprint for the future... That Time Is Now. I know the future **I** see...

But... I'd like to hear some of *your* goals for this province.

Fundamentally, it's so simple. Really:

You dream of what could be.

You set goals to attain it.

You plan... to achieve those goals.

And you follow through with accountability.

We want a province with a plan. A real plan.

Where the playing field is level. For everyone.

Where it's fair to start and run a business. For everyone.

Where it's a good and noble thing to earn your living. For *everyone*.

We acknowledge there are obstacles.

But we see the possibilities, all of us; we rejoice in the opportunities.

If the wealth of this province is to serve the people... then the people must take charge.

Thank you very much.

END OF SPEECH