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Advanced Education & Technology

Will Alberta's energy boom revolutionize higher education?; Buzz builds as petro-dollars roll in and universities add talent

The Globe and Mail

Wed 02 Jan 2008

Page: A1

Section: National News

Byline: Elizabeth Church

Source: EDUCATION REPORTER

Economist Jack Mintz has headed west. The former head of the C.D. Howe Institute has left his post at the University of Toronto to start a new school of public policy at the University of Calgary.

It was an offer, the Alberta native said, he could not refuse. "There is really a sense that Alberta is a takeoff place," said Prof. Mintz, who arrived back in time to celebrate the new year. "You can see a lot of things happening."

As oil-boom riches roll in, expectations are building that this new wealth will transform higher education in the province and shake up the postsecondary landscape of the country. Billions in research

funds, a campus building boom and university leaders with full pockets on the hunt for talent are adding to the buzz.

"This is a remarkable period in history," said Indira Samarasekera, president of the University of Alberta, who wants to put her school among the top 20 in the world by 2020. "People will look back at this time and marvel."

With wise spending and carefully placed bets, Dr. Samarasekera said she believes the province can use the "Alberta advantage" to position itself as a global magnet for academic talent. Once the bar is raised in Alberta, she reckons interest in the country as a destination for world-class scholars will follow.

It's an impressive vision. Can Alberta pull it off?

Here are some numbers to keep in mind. The value of Alberta's Heritage Fund is expected to be more than \$17-billion by the end of this fiscal year. There are \$1.6-billion in capital projects approved or under construction on Alberta campuses and billions more set aside for research through the Ingenuity Fund and the Alberta Heritage Fund for Medical Research. A new Ingenuity Fund program called Accelerator has earmarked \$100-million over 10 years to support between three and five promising research initiatives, a fund some believe is aimed at an Alberta-grown Nobel Prize.

But translating oil sands riches into Nobel Prize winning research and top-flight postsecondary institutions is about more than just money, caution many on the front lines of this continuing experiment. Others question whether there is the vision or the political will to pull it off. Even with all its prosperity, funding cuts in the 1990s mean that by many key measures such as faculty-to-student ratios, the province's colleges and universities are still playing catch-up to many of their peers in other provinces. A recent report on the residences at the University of Calgary, for example, said that five towers are in such disrepair they likely should be demolished.

"I will tell you right now that the challenge of Alberta will be priority setting," said Harvey Weingarten, president of the University of Calgary and the man who wooed Prof. Mintz to his new post. "If you don't establish priorities, then you will diffuse the impact of any money you spend."

Rather than looking at the piles of cash going out the door, Dr. Weingarten said the real test will be what is produced at the other end, and on this, the jury is still out.

"Don't be fooled by the amount of money being spent," he said. "To be world class, it's a wonderful aspiration, but you have to be very focused."

The University of Calgary has identified four core areas, including understanding human behaviour, institutions and cultures, which is where the new school of public policy fits in.

One of the key areas the province is betting on is the emerging science of nanotechnology - the manipulation of molecules and atoms that can be applied to a broad range of areas from computer chips to pharmaceuticals.

Jillian Buriak, an award-winning chemistry professor, is an up-and-coming star in this field that the University of Alberta snagged in 2003.

Nanotechnology is like the "grease in the wheels," explained Dr. Buriak, an easy-to-like bundle of energy who negotiates a busy university coffee shop with a pair of hiking boots swinging from her bag.

The Toronto native passed up a job offer from Princeton to come to Edmonton, where she is also a senior researcher at the National Institute for Nanotechnology on the U of A campus.

"People were surprised," she remembers, when asked about her decision to opt for Alberta over the Ivy League. The combination of the national lab that was just getting off the ground and a great university was too alluring to pass up.

Her most recent research efforts involve solar cells and applying nanotechnology to investigate the causes and treatments of disorders such as multiple sclerosis. "It's allowing us to do things that were unimaginable before," she said.

By concentrating on such breakthrough technology, the thinking is that the province will position itself as more than just an energy powerhouse.

Dr. Samarasekera said she believes it will take only a few breakthroughs to put her institution and the province on the map. "We are at a tipping point," she said. Finding a cure for diabetes or developing a commercially viable process for producing clean coal is the kind of big win she has in mind. By her estimates, U of A already has three or four individuals who are on this kind of research track and she is looking for more talent with Nobel-like research potential.

"What you really want to do is identify individuals around the world who are on that track and you bring them to your university and you give them the resources and the freedom to pursue their academic dream," she said.

Others say it will take a lot more than this and the dollars now going to the system to make Alberta world renowned for higher education.

Martha Piper, the former president of the University of British Columbia and a past vice-president of research and external affairs at U of A, recently wrote an article commissioned by the Canada West Foundation outlining what she would do with an annual investment of between \$2-billion and \$3-billion to Alberta universities. It's contained in a collection of essays called Alberta's Energy Legacy.

Her suggestions for transforming the system include hiring 5,000 new full-time professors to cut student/faculty ratios in half to 10:1. She also recommends the province's universities hire between 20 and 25 Nobel laureates to enrich teaching and stimulate excellence in research.

"Rarely has a geographic region been so well positioned to transform its postsecondary system through a strategic investment," she wrote.

Having said that, she is skeptical that the province has the vision or the will to enact this kind of transformation.

"It does require some very courageous leadership," Dr. Piper said. "University presidents can play a role, but it is dependent on political will . . . on key people stepping up."

Dr. Piper points to other jurisdictions - such as Singapore, a country with a population roughly the size of Alberta - that have not been shy about committing huge sums to build a presence in postsecondary education.

Much of the spending happening in Alberta comes from the funds established by past governments, she said, or involves one-time capital projects. There also is a lack of support for scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.

Doug Horner, the province's Minister of Advanced Education and Technology, is the man with his hand on the controls. A second-generation politician with a background in the agriculture industry, Mr. Horner has pictures of wheat fields and oil rigs on his website, not university spires.

Still, the approachable MLA said he understands how important investment in colleges and universities is to the province and the country. "The reality is, as Alberta's economy goes, so does the Canadian economy," he said. "We are not just talking about today or 20 years from now. We are talking about my grandkids and your grandkids. How are they going to have the same prosperity that we have today?"

For the moment, the province has its eyes trained on the nuts-and-bolts of system reform and on trying to answer the need for the qualified work force that its red-hot economy is demanding.

Student groups are pressing for better housing as rents in both Calgary and Edmonton soar, for more access to professors, tuition assistance and a greater focus on the quality of teaching. Julie Bogle, president of the student union at the University of Calgary, said the facts that nearly 18 per cent of students leave after the first year and only 61 per cent of students graduate demonstrate the need for more student support. "Education is our future," she said.

At the national level, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada is lobbying the federal government for a similar commitment to postsecondary education as a way to remain competitive. The Canada Research Chair program, created in 2000, with an annual budget of \$300-million, is widely credited with attracting and keeping top-notch researchers at Canadian universities.

While Alberta might be well positioned financially to make transformative changes, other universities across the country are involved in top-level research, and the few with established international reputations are outside Alberta.

"Money is not all it is cracked up to be," Dr. Piper said. The country needs to raise its game in research and postsecondary education, but that challenge, she said, need not be limited to Alberta.

"It could happen anywhere in the country if the will was there," she said.

Agriculture & Food

Banned poison urged to battle gophers

The Edmonton Journal

Wed 02 Jan 2008

Page: B5
Section: News
Byline: Renata D'Aliesio
Dateline: CALGARY
Source: Calgary Herald

Alberta Agriculture is seeking federal permission to use a poison banned 15 years ago to help farmers battle crop-destroying gophers.

Floyd Mullaney, branch head of the inspection investigation branch with the Alberta agency, said the province has applied for permission to use liquid strychnine this year.

"We've applied, but we haven't been approved yet," he said. "The application process, right at the present time, is in for the upcoming season."

Mullaney said he expects the pesticide will still be available after 2008.

"We've not been told that it won't be available," he said, noting the department applies for permission after the minister hears from the producers across Alberta. "The minister has received calls from various areas in the province," said Mullaney, noting the two main areas are Central Alberta and the Westlock area.

However, he said the request for emergency registration is to cover the entire province.

The Municipal District of Rocky View, which borders Calgary to the north, is one of several areas lobbying for the return of the pesticide, said Tim Dietzler, Rocky View's agricultural fieldman.

The federal government took the powerful poison off the market partly because of concerns it was harming other animals, including birds, dogs and endangered species such as the burrowing owl.

Other forms of strychnine are allowed, such as grain or pellets laced with the substance, but farmers contend they're not as effective.

"There isn't enough strength in the other poisons out there to beat them back," said cattle rancher Cherie Copithorne, whose family has ranched west of Calgary since 1886. She said the dirt-digging rodent has turned some of their fields into mounds of "prairie dog towns."

"They eat everything," she said. "They destroy the field completely."

Many farmers have resorted to shooting the gophers -- actually, they're Richardson's ground squirrels -- but this practice is time-consuming.

Rocky View Coun. Harvey Buckley invites his grandchildren and their friends to hunt gophers on his ranch near Cochrane, but said there are too many to control by gun. A single farm field can become home to thousands of gophers, which draw equally destructive badgers, looking for prey.

Insurance doesn't cover damage done by gophers, Buckley added. "You get whole lands that look like a battle zone afterwards."

This past summer, Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency granted Saskatchewan permission to use the controversial pesticide for one year under an emergency provision.

Dietzler said Rocky View and other municipalities are hoping Alberta will follow, with access granted for spring 2008.

"We have severe infestations in some places in Rocky View," he said, estimating that one-fifth of the district's 1,600 commercial farms -- about 320 -- are grappling with the problem.

CanWest News Service

Children's Services

Education

Employment, Immigration & Industry

Energy

Divided on going nuclear

The Globe and Mail

Wed 02 Jan 2008

Page: A14

Section: Letter To The Editor

Byline: John R. McClement

Dateline: Regina

Regina -- Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach told The Globe in a year-end interview that his government is taking its time moving toward nuclear power. Your editorial observes that with Alberta's power requirements predicted to increase by more than 60 per cent by 2018, and with the earliest in-service date for a nuclear unit pegged at 2017, "there is little time for such hesitancy."

A similar observation could be made of Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty's hesitancy to proceed with the next nuclear plant in his province, which is struggling with greenhouse-gas emissions from coal-fired generating plants.

Oil basks in glory as gas woes continue; Tight supply could drive oil to \$95 in 2008

The Calgary Herald

Wed 02 Jan 2008

Page: C6

Section: Calgary Business

Byline: Dina O'Meara
Source: Calgary Herald

There's good news and bad news on the horizon for the Canadian oilpatch come 2008, caveats of weather and political upheaval notwithstanding.

Commodity prices will continue to rally on the oil side and be more subdued in natural gas markets, widening the gap between have and have-not companies in the Canadian oilpatch, industry experts predict.

"It's not a scenario where the tide rises and everybody enjoys the lift," said Chris Theal, analyst with Tristone Capital. "It's going to be very selective in where we see Canadians outperforming and where we don't."

Oil

Crude oil estimates from local and international sources vary from a conservative \$72 US per barrel to a high of \$95 per barrel on a tight-supply, strong-demand picture unfolding in the new year.

Tristone sees crude oil averaging around \$80 a barrel this year on strong demand from Asia and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries pushing for a higher West Texas Intermediate price against a weak U.S. dollar.

Fundamentals such as lack of spare capacity, insufficient throughput at refineries and reduced global inventories have supported strong oil pricing, but not to the extent seen in the later part of 2007, argued FirstEnergy Capital Corp. analyst Martin King.

"The whole run from the mid-\$70s to the high-\$90s seemed very mysterious, at least to me," King said.

Crude prices surged to a record \$99.29 on Nov. 21, and are up 57 per cent from a year ago, despite indications high prices were dampening demand.

FirstEnergy foresees oil sliding to "a more realistic" average of around \$72 per barrel, adding up to \$6 per barrel during the beginning of this year.

"Global economic growth may be slowing but so, in our view, is non-OPEC supply," Robert Plexman, analyst with CIBC World Markets, said in an industry update.

Plexman anticipates global demand for oil will grow by 1.1 billion barrels per day, outpacing non-OPEC production's expected 900 million barrels per day increase.

Adding to the crunch, OPEC -- source of more than a third of the world's petroleum -- agreed in early December to maintain production, rather than increase it, on fears a weakening U.S. economy would curb global oil demand.

CIBC raised its long-term oil forecast to \$80 US a barrel from \$70 a barrel, with the U.S. exchange rate at parity with the Canadian dollar.

Instability in Asia and the Middle East also plays a part in boosting oil prices on concerns of supply disruption in the new year.

At the high end of forecasts, Goldman Sachs Group Inc., one of the largest security firms in the world, raised its forecast for 2008 oil prices to \$95 a barrel on "technical and political uncertainty."

Natural gas

Analysts are uniformly bearish about natural gas prices in 2008, pointing to a market awash with supply, record storage levels (for two years running) and flat demand as mild weather dominates forecasts for North America.

Prices averaged \$6.80 per million British thermal units on the New York Mercantile Exchange last year, from highs of around \$12 in mid-2005. At home, the weighted average at AECO, Canada's natural gas trading hub, fell to \$6.09 per gigajoule.

And the picture gets uglier, experts warned.

"If 2007 seemed a painful year, 2008 could be even more so from the perspective of cap ex coming off and layoffs," King predicted. "It's a very uninspiring story for natural gas, to say the least."

Around \$3 billion in capital investments were removed from the natural gas table between 2006 and 2007 as poor returns trimmed activity in Western Canada.

The latest warnings by corporations such as Canadian Natural Resources and EnCana suggest another \$3 billion cut is yet to come next year due in part to new royalty rates, meaning a third of spending in 2006 will be absent in 2008.

FirstEnergy forecasts a \$7.25 NYMEX price and a \$6.50 AECO price for natural gas in the new year.

Natural declines combined with slashed drilling programs will reduce exports to the United States by 900 million cubic feet per day in 2008 from 500 million cubic feet per day in 2007.

But the U.S. -- Canada's largest export market -- isn't exactly clamouring for more Canadian natural gas.

The pace of drilling rose by five per cent in the U.S. last year, mostly in the Rocky Mountain region, which is poised to flow volumes to the Midwest by February 2008 on the new Rockies Express pipeline.

Offshore operations pumped an additional one billion cubic feet per day from the huge semi-submersible platform Independence Hub in the Gulf of Mexico.

At the same time, imports of liquefied natural gas into the U.S. grew to a record average of 2.1 billion cubic feet per day, from 1.7 bcf per day in 2004.

But Tristone analyst Theal sees delays in LNG projects coming on board pressuring natural gas prices upward in 2008, and is forecasting a \$7.50 per mmBtu price for the year.

"The risk on both fronts, our oil call and our gas call, all boils down to weather at the end of the day," he said.

Mild weather for two years running has seen natural gas storage levels stay above average throughout the seasons, as heating and cooling demands hummed along without major price-moving spikes. This winter looks the same, according to climatologists.

"Our near-term outlook for natural gas prices remains fairly weak from a fundamental perspective," CIBC's Plexman stated.

He expects the gas surplus to last into 2008, downgrading the institution's AECO forecast to \$6.50 per thousand cubic feet from \$7, and its NYMEX forecast to \$7.50 US per mcf from \$7.75.

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Commodity prices

Average 2007

Oil: \$72.18 US per barrel

Natural gas: \$7.11 US mmBtu

Forecast 2008

Oil: \$72 to \$95 per barrel

Natural gas:

NYMEX: \$7.25 to \$7.50 per mmBtu

AECO: \$6.50 per mcf

Risks

Oil: Weak refining margins, rising stocks, falling U.S. dollar

Natural gas: Warmer/colder than average winter

For both: Impact on exploration from new royalty regime in Alberta

Fire-Damaged Scotford upgrader back up to 155,000 bpd after repairs

National Post

Wed 02 Jan 2008

Page: FP2

Section: Financial Post

Column: National Report

Source: Reuters

Royal Dutch Shell PLC completed repairs to its fire-damaged Scotford oilsands upgrader and is now producing in excess of half its 155,000 barrel per day capacity of synthetic oil, with full output expected next month. Shell spokesman Randy Provencal said on Monday that repairs were complete on both production trains at the complex, above, including the one damaged in a Nov. 19 fire at the site near Edmonton. One residue hydroconversion unit is already at full output. The second, which was damaged in the fire, is beginning to be restarted, a process that will be complete this month.

"Production has resumed at the upgrader," Mr. Provencal said. Shell's Muskeg River oilsands mine, which supplies tar-like bitumen to the upgrader, is also returning to production to provide feedstock for the facility. Shell's 98,000 bpd Scotford refinery, which is tied into the upgrader, has been running at full output using synthetic crude purchased from outside suppliers. However Mr. Provencal said the company will replace purchased feedstock with the upgrader's production. Shell owns a 60% stake in the upgrader and the Muskeg mine, with Chevron Corp. and Marathon Oil Corp. each holding a 20% share. Shell is the sole owner of the refinery.

Environment

Finance (including Pensions/Insurance)

Health & Wellness

Smokers abide by Alberta ban; Bingo players must go outside to light up

The Calgary Herald

Wed 02 Jan 2008

Page: B1 / FRONT

Section: City & Region

Byline: Kim Guttormson

Source: Calgary Herald

The smoke cleared from bars across Alberta on Tuesday, as the province's new smoking ban came into effect and tavern owners were forced to remind a few patrons to butt out.

"We took all the ashtrays off the table and we're non-smoking," said Emira Pirija, who owns the Powderhorn Saloon in Bragg Creek. "One regular (this morning) did pull his smokes out. We just said 'sorry, no smoking.' "

Alberta's new Tobacco Reduction Act bans smoking in any public place or workplace in the province, as well as within five metres of doorways, windows or air intake vents of public places and work places.

Also on Tuesday, Calgary's extension allowing smoking in bingo halls and establishments with separate smoking rooms expired. Last Jan. 1, all bars in the city had to butt out.

Amanda Hoffman, a bartender at the Strathmore Hotel, said business was slow -- no one showed up for a pool tournament -- which she attributed to the new ban.

"It's not as steady as it normally would be," she said.

Pirija feels it's too early to tell how much the ban will affect business.

"I think it's going to be the same because the locals are pretty much regulars," she said. "But I'm just waiting to see. I'll give it about a week and then compare it to last year.

"This time of year slows down anyway."

But those smokers who ventured out New Year's Day were abiding by the new rules.

"If I have to go outside, I'll go have a cigarette. Like, I can sit for a few hours and not have a cigarette," Bonnie Bentley, who was playing bingo in the city's northeast Tuesday, told Global television. "But it's not going to make me quit."

Bingo adviser Margie Byrne of the Bingo Barn said they checked attendance Tuesday against last New Year's Day and found the same number of people were out playing despite the new ban.

But the bingo hall is now offering more intermissions.

"They're running out the door to have a smoke and then coming back in," Byrne said. "We're doing fine."

While patrons at the Strathmore Hotel were heading outside to smoke, Hoffman said a few had to be reminded they couldn't light up indoors.

"People have been going for their smokes," she said. "It's autopilot."

While Calgary's smoking rules are enforced by its bylaw officers, the province will rely on complainants contacting police if there are infractions.

As of July 1, the remainder of the provincial Tobacco Reduction Act will come into effect. That includes no retail displays of cigarettes. In 2009, the sale of tobacco at post-secondary institutions, health-care institutions, pharmacies or larger stores that contain pharmacies will be prohibited.

The bill, passed by the legislature in November, puts the province on par with Ontario, Quebec, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories.

Nearly 20 Alberta municipalities, including Calgary and Edmonton, had already put smoking bans in place before the province introduced its sweeping legislation.

However, native casinos in the province -- including the newly opened Grey Eagle Casino on the Tsuu T'ina Nation -- have asked the federal government to approve a law that would allow smoking in their facilities.

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Smoke-Free Zone; Says You

The Edmonton Journal

Wed 02 Jan 2008

Page: B2

Section: Cityplus

Source: The Edmonton Journal

The new provincial smoking ban came into effect Jan. 1. It bans anyone from smoking within five metres of the doors, windows or air intake vents of a public place or workplace.

Few people were standing about Tuesday on blustery Whyte Avenue, but passersby had their opinions.

Tim Donnelly, 58, used to smoke 20 years ago.

"We should raise the damn taxes on the cigarettes so that (the smokers) pay for the health-care costs themselves. I quit, so why can't they?"

Bonita Skanks, 28, smokes about five cigarettes a day and says the law won't stop her from occasionally walking down the sidewalk with a smoke.

"I don't mind (the law). I usually smoke at home."

Rose Dustin, front desk clerk at the Strathcona Hotel, smokes a pack a day, usually standing just outside the hotel door.

"I think it's terrible. It's taking it a little too far. Are they going to start measuring footsteps away from the door? People drink and that's bad for your health. Why are they doing all this to smokers?"

Andrew Francis, 22, non-smoker

"I'm allergic to smoke so the less the better."

His last attack was three weeks ago when someone was smoking outside his work and when the door opened the smoke blew in. He gets a headache and constricted breathing.

Andrea Leader, 38,

non-smoker

"I think (the law) is a great idea. As for (banning smoking near) air intakes, no point in having no smoking inside if the air sucked into the building is smoky air."

Myles Evely, 55, smokes a pack a day.

"It seems really unfair that they should not be able to (smoke near their own door) just for some activists. Five metres away is just about out on the road. If (politicians) were really interested in stopping smoking, they would make tobacco illegal and forgo the taxes."

Rebecca Matthews, 29, smokes about once every three weeks when she goes to a bar.

"(The law) doesn't really bother me. Smoking isn't that important to me. I'd rather be warm."

Tristin Deveau, 24, doesn't smoke and was really happy when smoking was banned in bars.

"(The new law) is good. It's kind of irritating if you have to walk through (smoke) going into places all the time.

They'll keep on puffing; Many smokers won't follow new restrictions outside buildings

The Edmonton Sun

Wed 02 Jan 2008

Page: 3

Section: News

Byline: BY NICKI THOMAS, SUN MEDIA

Brent Leafloor is smoking mad.

The wheelchair-bound 61-year-old being treated at the Royal Alexandra Hospital for a broken hip is one of hundreds of Albertans flouting the province's new smoking legislation that, as of yesterday, requires people lighting up to do so at least five metres away from public doorways, windows and air intakes.

VIOLATORS

If caught, violators will be burned with a \$250 fine.

"It's not practical for a lot of people - we're in wheelchairs and walkers. We can't get out to the road to smoke. Wheelchairs do not do curbs very well," Leafloor told Sun Media yesterday as he puffed away in the cold, just steps away from the hospital's front entrance.

"I can't very well go scooting across the road for a smoke. And I'm not going to quit smoking for any damn politicians, vote getters.

"That's the one vice I have, and I'm not going to give it up."

Leafloor added that if he receives a ticket for smoking too close to a building, he won't pay it anyway.

"I don't care what they say," he said.

UNAWARE

The province's new Tobacco Reduction Act also bans smoking from all public places and workplaces - but some smokers are still un-aware of the new laws.

Selwyn Pascal, 54, smoking outside the doors of Kingsway Garden Mall, is one smoker who just learned yesterday of the new regulations.

He said he respects the rights of non-smokers and has no problem with the rules.

"They have the right to breathe fresh air," he said.

"The law is the law. We live in a civilized society where we abide by laws. Some people break it, but most people, I think, uphold the law."

Mark Garrett, spokesman for the city's planning and development department, has said there are no plans to put more bylaw officers out on city streets to enforce the ban on smoking in public places. As when bars banned smoking in July 2005, officers will respond to specific complaints.

Alan Heron, also smoking just outside the Royal Alex doors, said if the coast is clear, he'll light up.

"If I can get away with having a cigarette, I'm going to have a cigarette," said the 39-year-old, adding he's not from Alberta and would likely not pay any smoking violation ticket issued in this province anyway.

David Tate, 46, who joined Heron outside for a smoke, said he's careful not to smoke around children.

But if there are no kids around, said Tate, "I'm going to have a cigarette any time I want."

Effective July 1, the Tobacco Reduction Act will also prohibit wall displays of cigarettes in stores.

Les Hagen, executive director of Action on Smoking and Health, said the point of the plan is to protect children from promotional displays and encourage smokers to quit.

Enoch Cree First Nation, meanwhile, has passed its own bylaw under federal jurisdiction allowing smoking at its River Cree Casino on the western outskirts of the city.

Infrastructure & Transportation

International, Intergovernmental & Aboriginal Affairs

Justice & Attorney General

Top court quashes drug test ruling; No human rights protection in workplace firing, judges say

The Edmonton Sun

Wed 02 Jan 2008

Page: 4

Section: News

Byline: BY GLENN KAUTH, SUN MEDIA

Alberta's top court has dealt a blow to the province's pot smokers with a ruling upholding workplace drug-testing policies that were at risk.

In a new decision from the Alberta Court of Appeal, a trio of judges overturned a controversial ruling from Justice Sheilah Martin that drew scorn from 2006 Tory leadership candidate Ted Morton.

In that case, Martin ruled that a Fort McMurray employer discriminated against a worker named John Chiasson by firing him over a positive drug-test result.

The case turned on the question of whether Chiasson's use of marijuana in 2002 qualified him as disabled and whether, as a result, his employer had a duty to accommodate his condition.

While Chiasson himself admitted he was only a casual user of the drug, Martin accepted that in firing everyone who tests positive for drugs, engineering and construction company Kellog, Brown and Root (KBR) had essentially treated him as though he were an addict and therefore disabled.

As a result, the company had a duty to be more flexible in its testing policies by, for example, allowing for a washout period that would let recreational drug users get the drug out of their blood, Martin ruled. The theory was that occasional smokers don't necessarily pose a safety risk at work.

The Court of Appeal judges, however, have ruled otherwise.

"Extending human rights protections to situations resulting in placing the lives of others at risk flies in the face of logic," they wrote, noting that despite Chiasson's insistence that his drug use was his business, the effects of marijuana can linger for days.

Morton, now sustainable resources minister, called the previous decision a bad, judge-made law.

"It puts the rights of some guy to smoke pot above the safety of his fellow workers," he told Sun Media at the time of Martin's ruling.

"It is bad law because it creates new rules that cannot be found in the Alberta Human Rights Code.

"Drug use, much less illegal drug use, is not even listed as a 'disability' in the act. Nor was it ever intended to be."

Municipal Affairs & Housing

Seniors & Community Supports

Service Alberta

Solicitor General & Public Security

Sustainable Resource Development

Tourism, Parks, Recreation & Culture

***Miscellaneous Government**

***Election**

Wildrose, Alliance parties seek merger

The Edmonton Journal

Wed 02 Jan 2008

Page: B5

Section: News

Byline: Archie McLean

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: The Edmonton Journal

Alberta's political right may be in for a realignment in 2008, with the Alberta Alliance and Wildrose Party preparing for a merger before the next election.

If the union is accepted by members of both parties, the new Wildrose Alliance Party of Alberta will run a full slate of candidates in the next election.

Under the terms of the merger, the Alliance would accept the bylaws of the Wildrose party. Alliance Leader Paul Hinman said he's confident the plan will pass at a special general meeting on Jan. 19 in Calgary.

After years of splintering, Hinman said he's pleased the groups to the right of the ruling Conservatives are working together.

"It's exciting that the few small differences are finally getting set aside so that we can come together to get a good fiscally responsible alternative to the current government," Hinman said. "It's been so fractured and so many people are disgruntled, that they're finally coming to realize that the real problem is the Stelmach government."

Wildrose leaders also urged their members to endorse the marriage.

"The policy differences between our parties are minimal," Wildrose president Rob James said on the Alliance website. "We strongly urge our members to get behind this union."

Hinman would become leader of the new party at least until its annual general meeting, which will be held by the end of May.

The Alberta Alliance formed in 2002 as a home for conservatives disgruntled with the PC party. Two years later, the party elected its first MLA, Hinman, in Cardston-Taber-Warner. But the Alliance, like the Liberals and NDP, have not seen their poll numbers rise by the same margin as Premier Ed Stelmach's have fallen in recent months.

Partly for this reason, the Wildrose party came together this summer. It held its first policy convention in Edmonton in October and recently gathered enough signatures to become an official party, although it has not received that status yet. The Alliance considered a merger last year with the Social Credit Party, but the idea didn't get very far.

Hinman said the new party will be focused on fiscal responsibility, which he says the Stelmach government has forgotten.

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Columnists/Editorial & Comment

Law boosts odds for healthy future

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Byline: BY ROY CLANCY

With a new province-wide smoking ban in effect, we can expect the usual chorus of noisy complaints from the nicotine-deprived.

I sympathize. As someone who smoked several packs a day for more than 20 years, I know only too well the addictive powers of nicotine.

That's exactly why this smoking ban is long overdue.

Premier Ralph Klein resisted overtures from several health ministers to impose a provincial smoking edict.

Considering that one of Klein's major objectives was reducing the cost of health care, which gobbles up more and more of the total provincial budget each year, this was downright hypocritical.

Some 3,400 Albertans die of smoking-related causes every year, but this doesn't even touch on the sickness and anguish suffered as a result of chronic tobacco use.

The province forks out \$470 million a year on health-care costs related to smoking.

Despite the outraged cries deploring "nanny-statism" and the loss of freedom suffered by nicotine addicts to light up pretty much where they please, there's evidence the overwhelming majority of the population stands solidly behind the provincial ban.

About 20% of Albertans smoke. Let's assume the other 80% don't have a problem with the ban.

According to Health Canada, about 48% of adult smokers have tried to quit in the last year.

Even though only 4% to 8% of those who try are actually nicotine-free a year later, it's a safe bet that they're not exactly opposed to a tobacco ban either.

As anybody who has every tried to quit smoking can attest, one of the toughest challenges is going for a few beers with friends in a bar where the air is thick with cigarette smoke.

Removing this temptation will make the quest to kick the habit easier.

So if you winnow out those smokers who really want to quit, you're left with about 10% of the population who fall into the hard-core, don't want to quit, love the cigarette habit group.

Premier Ed Stelmach deserves kudos for paving the way for this long overdue legislation, which received support from all parties in the legislature.

The city's blanket smoking ban, which bans smoking in casinos, bingo halls and bars with ventilation areas, also came into effect yesterday, but is rendered moot by the provincial law.

The city, like the province, dithered for years over a smoking ban.

I predict it won't be long before we're asking ourselves what all the fuss was about.

Ireland banned smoking in 2004, becoming the first country in the world to impose a nationwide ban. And the Irish practically live in their pubs.

Germany and France, two other nations where a beer or coffee and a cigarette go hand-in-hand, joined the smoke-free club yesterday.

Alberta's Tobacco Reduction Act will also outlaw the visual tobacco displays common in many stores and tobacco sales will be banned in pharmacies, post-secondary campuses and health-care institutions by 2009.

As well as protecting Albertans from second-hand smoke and motivating many long-time addicts to quit, the big benefit from this new law will be to discourage more teens from beginning in the first place.

The statistics show if a person hasn't started smoking by a certain age, they will likely never smoke.

Those lured by the habit face years of ill health and a fierce battle to finally kick it. Someone who starts smoking when they're 15 and smokes their entire life has a one-in-two chance of dying from a smoking related illness, according to Health Canada.

In my mind, it is these potential smokers who will never start who are the real beneficiaries of this new law.