

Medicine Hat
Alberta Liberal Leader's Dinner

Speech by Kevin Taft

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Check against delivery

Thank you very much.

I've been travelling all around the southern half of Alberta the past few weeks, and it's great to see that the harvest seems to be pretty well in hand. It is pretty amazing to see so many fields and ditches with standing water even in late fall.

Even if most of us aren't farmers, we can all agree that farming is risky at the best of times. And these certainly aren't the best of times.

One of those winners of that huge Lotto 649 last week owned a farm, and after he learned his portion of the winnings was over \$3 million he announced: "Fantastic, now I can keep farming another three years."

I'm a city boy, but even so, harvest has some vivid memories for me. My wife Jeanette's family farms near Bashaw, and it's definitely a late harvest there.

Jeanette's grandma came over to Canada as an infant in the arms of her mother, in the hold of a ship in 1893. Her family homesteaded in that Wetaskiwin-Ponoka area. Jeanette's parents farmed there. Raised Jeanette and her three brothers there. That farm is *still* in the family.

Jeanette and I met at university. Maybe that's why I'm such a big fan of post-secondary education.

She was the perfect country girl; I was the born-and-bred city boy... So when I'd visit the family farm, being the city boy made me fair game for all kinds of tricks:

Like one harvest... when I'd come out to "help":

Jeanette's dad climbed up into their enormous combine; her brother scaled this huge tractor, and they started them up. What a roar; what power. Then above that din, her dad threw me down some keys and shouted, "Go 'round back of the barn and get the John Deere!". Cool! I fairly sprinted around that barn: The John Deere.

Man!

That was respect. That was trust. That... was the John Deere Riding Mower.

The very first evening I was ever visiting the farm, they brought me out to collect eggs from the henhouse. It was dusk. Everything was quiet. "Just gently reach under the hens and feel for an egg," they said, and pointed me off to one particular corner of the hen house.

I took my basket and reached under the first bird I saw, felt something round and warm - though a bit smaller than I'd imagined - and it seemed stuck, so I pulled... and hard.

Turns out they were roosters.

- Word of advice: Don't ever collect eggs from roosters -- but if you do, make damn sure you're wearing heavy gloves.

And unlike a hockey fight, keep the gloves on.

A few weekends later, Jeanette's brothers were showing me around some fields. A bale had fallen off a truck in the next field, so they asked me to climb over the fence and get it.

They did not mention... it was an electric fence.

I walk up to it, grab the top wire with both hands to push it down: So I could get over. Nothing happened.. After all; by then I had taken to wearing heavy duty leather gloves. Didn't want any trouble from those killer chickens. Anyways... I swung my leg over the wire, like you're supposed to.

And straddling the wire, I happened to glance up at my... future in-laws.

In retrospect, I don't think they expected it to get this far, 'cause by this point, their faces had suddenly turned rather anxious. I took consolation from that after the fact, because it showed that deep down they had a conscience. Very deep down, but present.

So there I am, straddling an electric fence and everything might have turned out fine, until I leaned just a little bit too far forward.

They don't make jeans with *nylon* zippers. I wish they did then, and I still do today, but no;

As fate - and clothing manufacturers - would have it, my jeans had a metal fly.

Ever since that electric moment, I've been utterly committed to the Canada Health Act! Some lessons are more painful than others, but learning - education - is the key.

I recently read an article about the transformation of Finland from one of the poorest and most backward countries in Europe to one of the its leading nations. Like Ireland, they made one critical decision a few decades ago: Invest in Education.

That's it; that's the magic pill: Education.

Just look what your College has done for you here. And imagine life in this city with a full-fledged university.

You know, education shouldn't be a hard sell in Alberta.

Jeanette's parents, neither of whom finished high school, expected their kids to get post-secondary education.

And you know what? Those four kids have 8 degrees and diplomas among them! Jeanette's parents, salt of the earth from rural Alberta, they wanted their kids to go as far as they could in their education.

That's what you want as a parent. Just *having* kids is a recognition... a belief... in the future. And to build a school, to build an *educational system*... is the tacit acknowledgement that we believe in our children... that we believe *in the future*.

The time to prepare for that future... is *now*. We need a government that understands enough to provide leadership. We need a government willing to listen to the needs of each community. Everyone knows that local educational issues are best dealt with at a local level, with local school boards. Everyone, that is, except the current regime in Edmonton. And if *THEY* won't provide it; then it's up to *US*.

It's time we all accepted that WE have to prepare for the future of our province! WE have to imagine that future. Together. It's time to dream. It's time to listen. It's time to plan.

A \$400 chicken in every pot! We can do better than that!

Because when you get that "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

I'm all for government spending for projects that are needed and well thought through. But any project that meets those tests should be in the budget.

This past month alone the Tories have announced unbudgeted spending in the *billions* of dollars.

For practical purposes they have given up all pretense of control on the public purse. What happened to the idea of discipline? It takes discipline to build a solid future. Discipline is the difference between chaos and vision. If we represent the people of this province, we owe them something better.

Because democracy is a precious gift; care for it, it will serve you forever. Squander it,

and you'll have to fight to get it back.

Heck, our legislature sits fewer days than any other in Canada!

It's time for a new approach to governing in Alberta. A new approach to democracy. If the incredible wealth of this province is to serve the citizens, then the citizens must take charge.

And that is going to require a renewal of democracy itself.

When I speak about democratic renewal, democratic reform, I know it's not the sexiest of topics. But when I have to deal with the issues day-in and day-out... well I think: boy, do we need a change. We *need* fixed election dates.

We *need* an auditor general, and a Public Accounts Committee, with real teeth.

We *need* whistle blower protection.

We *need* a lobbyist registry.

We *need* a citizen's assembly on electoral reform.

And we *need* a government... that actually sits.

Because true democracy? That's where debate, where other voices, where other opinions... are celebrated; not censured. True democracy; where the little guy, the regular person, the still, small voice... are embraced, not shunned. True democracy; too much of a rarity in a lot of the world, and something we imperil... the moment we take it for granted.

When the Young Offenders Detention Centre was closed here last year... there was no consultation, no discussion, no debate. None! And though the effects of that heavy-handed decision are being sorely felt, to even raise the question is to risk personal attack.

In Alberta, we need to lift the curtain of conformity that has descended on our politics. It is unacceptable when it has become bad form to question the governing party. It has gotten to the point where people are actually frightened to speak out. The politics of fear reinforces the conformity. To speak out... stops being an act of engaging in healthy debate or exercising democratic rights and civic responsibilities... and instead becomes an act of courage. And Bridget Pastoor, our MLA from Lethbridge, knows what an act of courage it takes.

Last May, Bridget got onto the Long-term Care Review Committee. Bridget asked - in the Legislature - to sit on the committee, and to the Premier's credit... he placed her on it. That was extraordinary in Alberta, though business as usual everywhere else; an Opposition member on a policy committee. We all hoped it signalled a new era...

But that euphoria was short-lived:

Because we quickly became concerned when one of the co-chairs pronounced - at the beginning of the committee's work - that “everything is A-okay in Alberta's long-term care system”.

Then Bridget discovered that the committee’s plan didn't even include public consultations!

With pressure from Bridget – and others - the process was opened up. And the evidence that everything wasn't “A-okay” was simply overwhelming. But through that opening up of the process, the committee gained credibility and was working well.

Then Bridget had some points she wanted to make, especially around the urgency to act quickly. Before the committee's report was drafted she told the two Tory co-chairs she was considering preparing an *adjunct* report.

The response was immediate: she was cut out of the process! Couldn't partake in drafting the report; wasn't invited to its release... And the irony is, she thought their report was pretty good! It's just that *her* biggest concern was to get help to people in nursing homes A.S.A.P., and - in her opinion - the committee wasn't pressing urgently enough...

So she got punished for trying to speak her mind. Shut down for thinking for herself.

Something is very wrong, when every time someone dares question the actions of those currently in charge, they're attacked.

Which is especially odd, when you think about it: After all, what's the image Alberta presents to the world?

Alberta: home of... the maverick. The rebel. The iconoclast.

The free-thinker, able to see through the haze of conformity and choose the clear course of action.

Except, of course, we have a paradox.

Do you realize, that in the last 70 years, Alberta - the province of mavericks - Alberta has seen only ONE change in government!

One! Just one.

And that's in 70 years.

That's a *lifetime*.

One change of government in 70 years? That's not free-thinking! That's pathological!

Ladies and Gentlemen: We *Can* Do Better. We just need the chance... to *prove* it.

Imagine a government - OUR government - that would say: In 7 years we'll have the healthiest population in the world; here's how we'll do it.

Imagine a government -- OUR government -- that would say: in 10 years we'll have the best educated citizenry. Or the most energy-efficient economy on the planet.

That's Vision. Or even, that as of next January, not one child in this province will go to school hungry ever again! The fact is this morning, in Alberta, thousands of kids DID go to school hungry, because there wasn't enough food at home. And it will happen again tomorrow, and next week.

Those kids are our future: let's give them the tools to learn, beginning with a hot lunch!

Those are clear targets, direct goals, achievable outcomes.

I believe that people working together through their governments can do things that people working alone *cannot* do.

If we are doing so well - and goodness knows that we are - don't we have a duty to ensure... that bounty is being shared? By all?

After all: look at our opportunities!

This may well be the most abundant piece of real estate on the planet. We have extensive forests. We have a major agriculture sector. There are mountains, water, tourism, high tech. We have a young, highly educated workforce that is 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 if that weren't enough, we're one of the world's largest exporters of natural gas and we own – outright – oil reserves that rival Saudi Arabia. It's stunning!

There is no place on Earth where the odds of making dreams come true should be better than Alberta. But privatizing everything in your path is not the way. The entire province envies the municipal ownership of your utilities. You know first-hand how much better it works.

I think we could ALL be doing better. That's why I got into politics.

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.

So let's think of our mission this way: We are working to give Albertans a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity -- a change of government.

Because, we see a better Alberta.

And if you're like me...

If you dream of how *truly* wonderful it could be here;

If you dream of a glorious future for this province;

If you dream that our resources must provide a legacy for our children and our grandchildren,

If you dream of rekindling a set of values we once all shared in this province... to care about each other;

Then it's time to reclaim that future. How? I'll tell you. It's easy:

Join with me. That's right. Join with me. Do you believe in what I'm saying?
Then stand with me and say it too.

Together, we *will* be strong enough.

I promise you; together we can reclaim the heart and soul of this province.

We *will* reclaim it.

Remember: It is inevitable that this Tory government will fall. The commitment I make to you tonight is, *when* it falls, we will be *ready* for it to fall to us.

Thank you very much.

END OF SPEECH