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Alberta Liberals call for urgent action to safeguard Albertans' Charter right to vote

Edmonton – The Alberta Liberal Party today called for urgent action to safeguard the democratic rights of Albertans under section 3 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

A story in the Lethbridge Herald today says there will be no polling stations on the lands of the Piikani and Kainai Nations near Lethbridge to serve the thousands of eligible voters there. The Herald quotes a spokesperson saying for Elections Alberta Returning Officer Carol Brown that, “The returning officer was unable to make contact with anyone’ on either reserve.”

Brown told the Alberta Liberal Party today that she had polling stations on both reserves in the last election, but that she tried and failed to find places to accommodate them for this election. The Herald quotes Piikani elected Chief Reg Crowshoe saying, “I don’t know why they couldn’t have a polling station in our community,” he said. “I know we weren’t approached by the province.”

The Herald story also says, “But Premier Ed Stelmach, in Lethbridge during a campaign stop Wednesday, said there’s nothing his government could do about the electoral officials’ mistake.”

Kainai Nation voters will be forced to drive to Fort Macleod, the official location of a polling station for thousands of prospective Kainai electors, rather than being able to vote at a polling station at Stand Off.

The Election Act provides for mobile polling stations, which do not require facilities of a fixed address.

Mike Judd, the Alberta Liberal candidate in Livingstone-MacLeod, was quoted in the Herald saying, “It appears to be outright discrimination against First Nations people.”

The Alberta Liberals call upon Elections Alberta to urgently act to establish polling stations at Stand Off on the Kainai Nation lands and at Brocket on the Piikani Nation lands.

Campaign Co-chair Glenn Rollans also called upon Elections Alberta to urgently act to establish mobile polls at additional locations in Drumheller identified by Alberta Liberal candidate Tom Dooley. There are six mobile polls at Stettler institutions but only three in Drumheller, where Dooley did well in last year’s by-election.

This follows an unsuccessful earlier call for action to Elections Alberta. The Alberta Liberals demanded yesterday that the Chief Electoral Officer exercise his responsibility and authority to supervise and enforce the impartiality of Returning Officers, restoring the perception of a fair election that has taken such a beating in Alberta during this campaign.

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It's time.
AlbertaLiberal

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Rollans took a response call from Chief Electoral Officer Lorne Gibson this morning in which Gibson said bluntly that he had “no intention of acceding to any of [the Alberta Liberal] requests.”

Gibson also said he would not provide a prompt written response to the Alberta Liberal letter because he is “trying to run an election.”

In addition to urgent action to restore public confidence in this election, the Alberta Liberals believe it is time for a major overhaul of Alberta’s electoral system.

Rollans said today in Edmonton that Tory returning officers, a weak, underfunded supervisory agency in Elections Alberta, and voting rules and practices that disenfranchise First Nations voters, students and voters working away from home, combine to make Alberta the least democratic electoral system in Canada.

Rollans stated a partial list of the Alberta Liberal concerns.

“Over two dozen Returning Officers have overt Tory connections, appointed by the Premier and his Cabinet on the recommendation of the Tory party machinery. A former employee of the local Conservative candidate serves as a Returning Officer in Edmonton-Castle Downs. There are public reports of Returning Officers and their staffs openly rooting for the Tory candidate as the ballots were counted in the last election, and the same Returning Officer has been appointed to run this election. A Returning Officer in Drumheller-Stettler establishes mobile polls at seniors institutions where Tories are traditionally strong, but not where the Alberta Liberals polled well during the last by-election. Reform recommendations by the Chief Electoral Officer two years ago are ignored by the Stelmach Tories.”

Alberta Liberal Leader Kevin Taft, in Medicine Hat and Lethbridge earlier today, asked, “How can this be, that almost five decades after First Nations People gained the right to vote, we are still not giving them the means to do so?”

He said that the failure to put polls on First Nations lands is unacceptable neglect.

“If Elections Alberta has the mandate but neither the resources nor the capacity to do its job, we have to ask why the Stelmach Government put them in that position. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* says that every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election that forms a legislative assembly,” Taft stated. “These citizens are being denied that right.”

The anti-democratic practices of the Tory government go deeper, said Taft. “We’ve had calls from students all over the province, from Keyano College to the University of Lethbridge. Out-of-town students aren’t able to vote where they live and go to school. They’re expected to go home, to Grande Prairie or Edmonton or Medicine Hat, to vote. Or they must use a ponderous Special Ballot process that must begin weeks in advance. Is it any wonder they don’t exercise their democratic rights?”

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Taft also slammed the Tory failure to let non-resident oil sands workers cast ballots. “There are thousands of workers living in the camps and in temporary lodgings in Fort McMurray who are working an extended shift and can’t get home to vote. In other provinces they could go to a nearby polling station, ask for the candidate list for their own constituency, and cast a write-in ballot for their home constituency that would be counted. Not in Alberta. What possible reason is there that we can’t do it here?”

“The silence of Elections Alberta on these issues is troubling,” said Alberta Liberal Campaign Co-Chair Glenn Rollans.

He noted that Ed Stelmach has on every occasion stated that electoral problems are the responsibility of Elections Alberta, not his government. Yet Elections Alberta states that it had “insufficient time” to make polling arrangements on First Nations lands near Lethbridge. Elections Alberta has advised the Alberta Liberal Campaign that it will not take proactive measures to ensure the fairness and impartiality of votes in constituencies where Returning Officers have been identified as having close links to the Tory party. They will only respond to complaints after the fact.

“All of this tells us that we have a government that systematically neglects and disenfranchises large numbers of voters, and an elections agency that has neither the time, nor the resources, nor the inclination to do something about it,” Rollans said.

An Alberta Liberal government would:

- End the practice of letting the Tory party pick the referees, and give the Chief Electoral Officer the responsibility of appointing non-partisan Returning Officers;
- Implement substantially all the other reforms recommended by the Chief Returning officer in his 2006 Report;
- Properly fund Elections Alberta and give it a clear mandate to maximize all voters’ ability to cast their ballots;
- Allow students to choose whether to vote according to their academic residence or their residence the rest of the year; and
- Implement non-resident voter procedures that will give workers away from their homes a real opportunity to cast a ballot.

“This isn’t some academic issue,” said Kevin Taft. “These are real people being disenfranchised. These are real voters whose democratic rights are being ignored or placed at the mercy of referees appointed by the ruling party. It’s time — it’s long past time — to overhaul this system and do the job of democracy right.”

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