

Rotary Club Speech – September, 2005
Kevin Taft, Leader, Alberta Liberals

Thank you for inviting me here today.

It's a pleasure to be talking to members of a service organization like the Rotary Club.

When I told a friend I'd be speaking here today, he said... "Do you know why they sing at Rotary Clubs?"

I wasn't sure, and he didn't know, so I looked it up. Apparently - and I guess many of you already know this story - at one of the first Rotary Clubs in Chicago, a senior member started to sing... to drown out the speaker's... well... somewhat lewd joke. So everyone joined in, and you've been singing ever since.

Well, I don't have any racy jokes to tell. And though my songs might be described as off-colour, it's not the words... but my singing itself that makes people wince. Or want to drown me out.

I'm happy to sing along. But I don't think I'll be leading it from the podium.

And anyway; Rotary Clubs are certainly about more than singing - or you certainly wouldn't have invited me. You're a great and venerable service club.

I've always been intrigued with the notion of service, and of responsibility. For better or worse, it's what got me into politics.

I'm always encouraged to speak to an organization like yours, filled with people who have decided that they want to commit a significant part of their time to... improving things.

I admire an organization which has as its basic philosophy... the notion that like-minded people form powerful communities. Not powerful in the sense of oppressing others, but powerful in the sense that there is strength in numbers. And that people who are ready to devote time to organizations

like this will also gain the support of other people... making *everyone* stronger.

It's amazing how much can be accomplished when a group of people put their heads - and their hearts - together... to make the world a better place.

Politicians could certainly learn a lot from you.

I won't name any *specific* politician, mind you. But *I'm* willing to learn.

You know politics can be very demanding on families. It eats up time - it's almost impossible to take a vacation without physically leaving the province... and even then you have to turn off the cell phone, the blackberry, everything. It also transforms your private life into a public life. I may have chosen politics - and only very recently - but my wife and sons did not.

So I'm very fortunate to have a family that's so supportive.

My wife Jeanette, as some of you know, is a nurse who became a teacher, a teacher of nurses. She's been teaching at the U of A and Athabasca University for well over 20 years. She is a wonderful teacher because she teaches from the heart. She really and truly cares about people. And whenever it seems right, she seizes those moments when circumstances create a special opportunity.

I want to tell you a personal story today. It's somewhat of a parable, even though it actually happened, and very close to home.

In fact, not just *close* to home: this happened *In* my home.

When our boys were little - Jordan was five, Spencer was three (they're older teenagers now) - but way back then they were home with Jeanette, when a tussle turned into an argument...that escalated into a knock-down, drag-out fight.

It wasn't the first time, as over the preceding few weeks Jeanette had noticed that the tussles were becoming more and more frequent, and more and more heated.

Jeanette knew she had to step in, but she didn't want to be full-time referee; she wondered if there was any way to actually teach the kids the notion of

why it was important to get along... and why that was good... without her always playing enforcer.

Well, anyone who has little boys knows they share one big interest: and that's... *fire*. No, we never contemplated simply hucking the two into the furnace.

She did, though, consider a way to take that fascination with fire and channel it into something... positive.

Instead of yelling... she got out some candles and some matches, handed a candle to each boy... and asked them both to follow her.

Well, when you're five and your mom gives you a candle, AND she's holding matches, what's not to follow? And follow they did. She proceeded to the bathroom, the one room of the house with no windows.

The boys were more than a little intrigued; even more so when she each let them light their own candle. Then she lit hers.

And then... she turned out the light. So there they were. Completely in the dark... except for the little flickering flames from the three candles.

After a few moments of silence she said, "Okay Jordan, now you blow out Spencer's candle.

Jordan, the older, grinned happily and blew out Spencer's candle. Spencer was very concerned. Then Jeanette said, "look around, Jordan. Did the room get lighter or darker?"

"It got darker", he said.

Then Jeanette said to Spencer, "Now Spencer, you blow out my candle."

And he did.

And she asked of him, "Did the room get lighter or darker?"

And he said, "It got darker".

And now Jeanette and the boys were really quiet, the three of them sitting on the floor of the dark windowless bathroom, with just a single candle burning. And then... Jeanette gently blew out Spencer's candle.

And it got very dark. And very *very* quiet.

"See?" she said, "See what happens when you blow out people's candles? You make the world darker."

The boys were silent now, and maybe a little bit apprehensive.

She continued, "It's kind of like that when you fight with each other, when you argue and call each other names: It's like you're blowing out *each other's* candles."

And then she lit her candle, and she let each of the boys light their candles from hers, and as each candle lit the room got a bit brighter.

I can't say they never fought again. But it changed. Forever. The nature of the arguments? Those changed forever. Jeanette knew it about a week later.

She could hear tensions between the two boys begin to build again, when suddenly Spencer said with all the indignation of a three year old, "Jordan, it's like you're blowing out my candle!"

And Jordan did learn to share. About a month later at a friend's house he was stung by a bee. He took it bravely, but about ten minutes later he was stung a second time, and this time he began to cry. "I didn't mind that first one, but I sure would have liked to share that second one with Spencer!"

What's the point of that story? I happen to think there's a lesson there for politicians, and for governments.

I'm the Leader of the Official Opposition, and part of our job is asking tough questions, holding the governing party to account. But you want to hear something strange coming from an Opposition Leader? I don't believe in criticism for its own sake. Criticism without ideas is simply negativity.

I'd much rather light people's candles than blow them out. I believe that when voices asking questions are merely quashed, something is wrong. I believe that when someone disagrees, it's imperative at least to listen... to

consider what's being said.

When someone asks a question about Senior's Care, we mustn't just blow out their candle.

When someone asks a question about Education, we mustn't just blow out their candle.

When someone asks a question about Health Care, or train derailments, or ethics, we mustn't just blow out their candle.

I believe that people working together through their governments can do things that people working alone *cannot* do. Regardless of your political stripe, we're all Albertans. Rotarians know what working together can accomplish. And you know it... because it's true.

One of the genuinely amazing things about living in Alberta is how much we really could do if we worked at it. We live with such astonishing opportunity here every day, I think we sometimes lose perspective on it. We become kind of nonchalant, even sloppy about it.

Earlier this year I was scanning down a list of metropolitan areas in Canada and the US over a million people. The New York region topped the list. The two smallest cities to make the list? Calgary and Edmonton, which just squeaked on. I couldn't help noticing that Alberta's entire population of 3.2 million is considerably smaller than Montreal, and way smaller than metro Toronto. If you put all of Albertans together we are about equal to the population of metro Seattle. A middle sized American city.

And yet 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 is stunning! All of it – all those things-- to be shared among a population

equivalent to Seattle.

The theme suggested to me for today by your club was, “Dream it, Do it.” There is no place on Earth where the odds of making dreams come true should be better than Alberta.

And I think we COULD be doing better. That’s why I got into politics.

I’d like to hear some of your goals for an Alberta government. Here are some that we would like to set, and which we think are attainable:

Here’s one: In 7 years Alberta will have the healthiest population in the world, as measured by a range of health indicators.

Or this goal: in 10 years we’ll have the best educated citizenry. Remember, places with almost no natural resources –Singapore, Japan, Ireland-- rival Alberta’s success because of huge investments in education. To my mind, the U of A should eventually rank with the best universities in the world.

Or this goal, more relevant now than ever: by 2015 Alberta will have the most energy efficient economy on the planet. Both an economic and an environmental victory.

Or what about this: That as of this January 1, not one child in this province will go to school hungry ever again! Because this morning, in Alberta, thousands of kids ARE going to school hungry because there isn’t enough food at home. And it will happen again tomorrow. Let’s help those kids.

Those are clear targets, direct goals, achievable outcomes.

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're fighting for a set of values - *we once shared* in this province, and still do. Those things *we hold dear*, those things people are hungering for in public life.

We're fighting for a province where it is okay to look out for each other.

Where it's okay to care about each other again.

Where it's better to light candles than to blow them out.

Thank you very much.