

Kevin Taft
Speaking Notes

Alberta Liberal Leader's Dinner
Calgary, Alberta
June 7, 2005

Thanks so much.

A special thanks to the dinner co-chairs, Pat Raymaker and John McWilliams. This was a lot of effort and they did a great job. And a big thanks to the ticket sellers for all your hard work. The sales for this dinner show a 70% increase over last year's Leader's dinner! Finally, thanks to all of you for coming out tonight to show your interest and support.

An awful lot has changed since the last Leader's Dinner here. Our membership has soared. We raised a million dollars. Our party moved into a great new office and we have a new executive. Most importantly, we fought an election and went from three incumbents to 16!!

We're on the way! As I said on election night, "The Tory government will inevitably fall; it is our job to make sure it falls to us." We are very much on that job.

Our thirteen new MLAs have been through trial by fire, through MLA boot camp. They've received tactical training from special agent Hugh MacDonald, and have been drilled on house procedures by Sergeant-Major Laurie Blakeman. And they have done well!

If politics really is the continuation of war by other means, I am proud and confident to go into battle with our new team.

And partly because of our new Calgary members, I get to spend a lot more time down here. And I love it. The energy, the people, the spirit. Walk down Stephen Avenue at noon on a sunny day, and you're struck by the combination of restored architecture, soaring sky-scrapers and fine restaurants - which at least the oil and gas guys can afford.

It's close to a perfect urban experience. Factor in a world class zoo, and Spruce Meadows, the Stampede, the downtown Cultural District.

Now if only the Hyatt would take a page from West Edmonton Mall and offer theme rooms.

Calgary really has so much to offer, so much to be proud of.

But Calgary's also had its share of challenges.

I have to admit, my first term as an MLA, I could never figure out why you never heard any voices from Calgary in the Legislature. Not a peep - in spite of problems with the Health Region, Infrastructure or Schools - we'd look across the floor and the Calgary members were silent nodding puppets, still hanging from the hook. It was like Calgarians had done their duty: sent a wall of Tory MLAs to Edmonton - and now their job was to be quiet and do as they were told.

Well, not any more. At least, not for three particular MLAs. Folks, regardless of your political stripe, there are three new Calgary voices in the legislature singing out - on your behalf - and doing so... loud and proud: your Calgary Trio is being heard. The resonant baritone of Dave Taylor; the infinitely clever song styles of Harry Chase, and the dulcet reverberations from Dr. David Swann. They've actually introduced a new tune to the Legislature; Tory anti-Calgary bias. If that didn't get them a standing ovation, it sure got them attention from the back of the house.

In fact, with the 3 Amigos from Calgary, Bridget Pastoor from Lethbridge and the Edmonton 11 - we are actually changing politics in Alberta. We're making a dent.

Consider that if not for us, the mess at the Alberta Securities Commission, the tangle in Ward 10, the situation in long-term health care, the Post-Secondary funding crunch... if not for your Alberta Liberal MLAs, those topics - and many more - would never have made their way from the legislature to the front page. And don't blame the messenger; the rot that's there deserves to be aired out and placed in the light... for everyone to see.

No sane politician wants to wander into Calgary and blindly bad-mouth the party that so much of this city has supported for so long. But, with all due respect, after having watched it up close and personal I believe this Provincial Government is show all the raunch you get with any government that has been in too long. And without an Auditor General with real power, and without whistle-blower protection - with no real mechanism to turn to - we have almost no way to root out the rot.

Because, ladies and gentlemen... there is rot. And it's only getting worse.

So when faced with this Leader's Dinner, a dinner partly to celebrate just how far the Alberta Liberals have come, I found myself a bit stuck:

How do you say something new - I had this same discussion with my wife, Jeanette - how do you say something new when, truly so little has really changed?

Oh, we had an election. And we did ourselves proud.

And we're building a crackerjack team.

And we're upbeat, and positive and working very very hard.

But, long term: what has actually changed?

That's the problem. All the stuff I've talked about before that needs fixing? Well, it still needs fixing.

Oh, I'm gratified that a few of our ideas have been actually lifted - piecemeal, mind you -

but lifted by the government and announced as their new initiatives. But the fragmented adoption of a few tiny bits of our policies hardly constitutes the attainment of our long-term goal.

Our goal: Of a province, a vibrant province, for every Albertan

So I stand before you today to say...

Yes!

We still need a government with real vision and actual coherent policies for:

Education

Health Care

Infrastructure

Post-secondary Education.

Surpluses

Cities

Farm families

Democratic renewal

But I'm not going to talk about those. Not directly. Not today. Goodness knows you've all heard enough about those - and more - over the last year. No: I want to talk to

you about why those are important.

Why.

To tell you a few stories to explain what those things really mean... to me. To you.

I'll give you an example:

You've probably noticed that as the Alberta Liberal Party started doing better and better, getting stronger and stronger, we started getting attacked.

And I started getting attacked. And personally.

Don't worry. As much as I'm not a career politician, I could see it coming. I just was surprised at the nature of the attack.

Because do you know what I was attacked for?

I was attacked for going to school.

I was attacked for learning things.

I was attacked for having an education. An education!

As if Albertans didn't value education. As if going to university was somehow un-Albertan.

It was an insult to Albertans, because Albertans really know how important education is.

People in every corner of Alberta, like my wife Jeanette's family.

Jeanette grew up on a farm. Her 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 the Wetaskiwin-Bashaw-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 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 around 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 out at 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.

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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, 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 that 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.

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. To them, learning isn't something you had to apologize for. Just the opposite! And they're hardly alone!

How on earth did we ever reach the point where education wasn't considered and investment, and learning wasn't considered an asset?

Education isn't the only thing that's been under pressure. While we're talking about the farm... I've noticed the last few times I've gone out there, the topic has been recast.

The talk isn't just about the weather, or grain and cattle prices. It's also about how the land itself is changing – the soil; the water; the vegetation. Something in our environment is changing, and if we don't figure it out soon, the family farm will only be in more trouble, not less.

Like most Albertans, I believe in sustaining the environment. Not attacking any one industry; but accepting the fact that we are all in this together, and recognizing that if we don't all work together to come up with solutions to water usage, air quality, you name it, it will be too late.

We share this environment, and I believe that the oil worker, the city dweller, and the farmer. We're all in this side by side.

One other lesson from the farm: it's a good idea to diversify your crops.

A couple of months ago a major study came out showing that Alberta's economy is now more dependent on petroleum than perhaps it has ever been. With the troubles in agriculture and tourism and other sectors, our economy is becoming less and less diversified. There are fewer and fewer legs to stand on.

The fact is, if it weren't for petroleum our economy would stalled.

Sure, the oil sands are big enough to produce oil for centuries. But countries around the world are investing billions of dollars a year on technologies to break global dependence on petroleum, to find new sources of energy.

Are we preparing to take part in that next phase in energy development? And before we question if we can afford to, perhaps another way to look at it is; can we afford NOT to? Even the Calgary Herald main editorial last Thursday said:

“A world consuming energy at the same rate as the North American continent is simply unsustainable.”

We must prepare for our future. It isn't a question of whether we have 50 years or even a hundred years of natural resources left. The question is: are we doing all we should to prepare for that day... that day which will inevitably come?

The time to prepare for the future is now. We need a government that understands enough to provide leadership.

Leadership on Education. Environment. Economic diversification. That's how 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.

This last budget? It had no vision, no goals, short term or long. None.

I was offended when, less than 48 hours after the budget was introduced, cabinet ministers were already openly speaking of off-budget spending. What's the point of a budget? What happened to the idea of discipline? It takes discipline to build a solid future. Discipline is the difference between chaos and vision.

Imagine a government - OUR government - that would say:

In 7 years we'll have the healthiest population in the world, and 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 September, 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.

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.

But in the absence of vision, in the absence of goals, in the absence of planning, in the absence of accountability, everyone starts to get cynical.

Cynicism reinforces those very things that we oppose.

Cynicism begets political fatigue. If you want to understand political fatigue, here's a jarring thought:

2005 marks the 70th anniversary of the Socreds forming government in Alberta.

In the last 70 years, there has been only ONE change of government; the Tories in '71.

An entire lifetime and one change of government! That's not tired; that's pathological!!

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 us...

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, other; to care about each other;;

Then it's time to reclaim that future.

How? I'll tell you. It's easy:

Join with us.

That's right. Join with us.

Do you believe in what we say?

Then stand with us 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.