



MATT FREHNER

PC convention all steak, no sizzle

It's like there's a party in Alberta, and only conservative people are invited

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Stepping into the Conservative leadership forum at St Albert's Arden Theatre yesterday, I felt a little bit like Hunter S Thompson at that police convention in Vegas: suddenly on the inside of a mysterious and exclusive club. Only, if there's one thing the Tories ostensibly aren't, its exclusive—the buzzwords of the night for these popularists were "accountability" and "transparency," and many talked at length of respecting the views of their constituents.

"Constituents," though, is not a synonym for "all Albertans," despite what these leadership hopefuls might think. Edmonton as a whole is no longer Tory-backing, and apart from the token university-age supporter that each candidate brought along, the theatre was overflowing with expanded waistlines and grey hairs. And while there was some vague discussion about education, the term "postsecondary" was dropped exactly twice—the same number of times someone referenced 9/11.

The forum's opening remarks were lead by Ed "small man, big pins" Stelmach, who outlined with clinical precision his plans for Alberta's health care and infrastructure—and barely once looked up from his typed notes.

Dr Lyle Oberg followed, his passion for health care shining through as he discussed the need to privatize select services while maintaining a strong public system through mandatory public hours for each doctor. He also set himself apart from other candidates by not damning the federal transfer program outright because of what he described as a need to respect the rest of Canada.

Alberta-centric Ted Morton was the polar opposite, championing tighter links between western provincial

governments as well as a desire to halt the increase of transfer payments while diverting the money saved back into Alberta—a comment that Jim Dinning "misinterpreted" as a call for higher taxes and something that I'm sure Morton opposes.

Due to the format of the event, however, Ted was unable to respond to this or any other comment he disagreed with, and bottling up one's emotions is never good for the complexion. Morton's face became increasingly flush as the night progressed, especially when Alana DeLong made her sole significant comment of the night, proclaiming same-sex marriage a tired issue to gasps of audience disapproval.

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This admirable conviction aside, Delong failed to stand out in any other regard: her answers were always vague, laboured and filled with platitudes. It's unfortunate, but I got the impression that she was there only as a "she"—the token female candidate, there to show that the party is not just middle-aged men with sensible ties.

Speaking of somber attire, Victor Doerksen's getup was as austere as his personality, while Dave Hancock stood out with his patterned tie and tan pants. Dave wasn't all glamour and glitz, though: the only candidate to speak confidently without notes, his grasp of the issues went beyond the minutiae without devolving into generalizations—well, most of the time anyway. He was also the most left-leaning Tory of the bunch; I get the impression that Hancock would have ran for the Liberals, except that

in Alberta being a Conservative is a sounder career choice.

Gary McPherson pleaded for us to look past his wheelchair and examine his credentials, but unfortunately he spent too much time cracking jokes and not enough time convincing people that his views were at all nuanced.

The only two who could hold the floor against Hancock were Mark Norris and Jim Dinning. While a good speaker, Norris spent too much time trying to be the good guy, and as a result ended up patronizing the audience and his opponents with empty promises of fair play and Cabinet seats, respectively. Dinning, on the other hand knew where he stood on each issue and articulated it clearly—though his stance on pay packages for health care administrators was a bit appalling.

The unexpected gem of the evening came from Dinning, too. When asked about how he would reform postsecondary education, he explicitly mentioned pulling out of the Canadian Student Loan Program, a policy move that Alberta's own Minister of Advanced Education Denis Herard has steadfastly avoided commenting on until continually pressed. A most amusing slip, considering the efforts each candidate has put into promoting government transparency. Here's a hint, Mr Herard: when the media confirms a policy initiative through a chance comment at a candidate forum, you're not doing a very good job.

Most candidates lacked either a pulse or a grasp of the issues, but few had both. If all of Alberta were to vote for the new Conservative leader, I would guess (or maybe hope) that Hancock would get the nod. But based on the last night's audience and each candidate's charisma, I expect Dinning will be the one to lead the PCs into a general election. So, if Dinning isn't your man, this isn't the time to be an ideologue: go out, spend \$5 on a Conservative membership, and vote for the leader of your choice. Because we all know that here in Alberta, the PC leadership convention is the real election.

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