



STEFFIROSKOPP

# A NEW GENERATION OF THE RIGHT

As Alberta prepares to elect a new leader of the Conservative Party, **MATT FREHNER** evaluates the policies often left behind, while candidates try to win our hearts in the province's hottest contest

**I**N THE NEXT FEW YEARS, THE Conservative government is going to be defined by how creatively it chooses to deal with Alberta's prosperity. How "progressive"-minded the PCs are will determine whether they go on to be Alberta's longest-reigning party, or whether Albertans vote for one of their once-in-a-quarter-century political upheavals. With no debt and a bulging surplus, social rather than fiscal issues should be at the forefront of Conservative members' minds when they head to the ballot box 25 November. Each candidate seems to be lamenting Klein's absurd lack of vision; it's time to stop stuffing cash into programs on a whim until we burn up all the oil. What follows is not a comprehensive overview of each candidate's platform, by any means. It's my take on some of the issues that are often overlooked in an Alberta focused on oil, the economy and their effects.

## The Arts

Arts and culture in Alberta are badly under-funded. Last year's \$2 million increase, to \$22.6 million, for the budget of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts—the group in charge of funding all arts groups in Alberta, from theatre to music to visual arts—was effectively the first since the AFA's inception in '91. Without going into the math, funding for the arts in Alberta hasn't changed in 15 years, meaning barely any money for new groups, and less money all around, even for the most established companies. This isn't the way to build a vibrant arts community.

A little over a week ago, CBC aired an all-who-decided-to-show-up-candidates' forum on the state of arts and culture in Alberta. The rhetoric was typical of any forum heavily attended by those directly affected by the issue: lots of cash was promised, new programs were designed on the spot, ministerial reform was pledged. Forgive me for being skeptical, but honestly Mr Hancock, are you really going to be able to push \$60 million for the AFA through the Legislature, as needed as those funds may be? What Hancock had on his side, though, was his understanding that creating a thriving arts community in Alberta can come simply through more money for the AFA. Those who talked of creating whole new advisory boards, or reworking the way funding was distributed entirely (like Lyle Oberg's cash-matching system, which would force arts organizations to fundraise half their budgets—a daunting task for all but the most successful and widely known groups) fail to realize that the cash-strapped AFA works quite well in principle.

Jim Dinning, for his part, pledged to raise AFA funding to \$40 million as well as create a council for the arts that

would advise the Legislature and also lobby the private sector for funding. Though less ambitious than Hancock, Dinning's proposals are slightly more realistic, and given his pull with current MLAs, he holds a better chance of passing his reforms. Aside from Oberg's proposal, which has some merit, the rest of the candidates were virtually carbon copies of each other, espousing vague platitudes about the need for arts education to keep kids away from drugs, and the value of culture in our province—we don't need to be placated, guys, we just need an actual plan.

Ted Morton and Victor Doerksen were suspiciously absent, though Ted has recently conveyed his love for the arts in a different (albeit unconventional) way. Two days ago, his campaign—which supporters call the "Ted Morton Freedom Train"—released its so-called secret weapon, his campaign song. Entitled "Ted Morton is the Man," the third stanza goes: "He's Albertan by choice / Now he's running for premier / He'll guard our future / And all that we hold dear." Forgive me if I'm not reassured.

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## Postsecondary education

With two consecutive tuition rebates, a lengthy PSE review and the deregulation of tuition policy, we in the postsecondary world have been shown a lot of busy work, with few substantive results. The recently released and entirely underwhelming tuition policy aside, Albertans are in need of some concrete policies that address the needs of rural and low-income families, while at the same time increasing the actual quality of education.

For all his detailed policy work in other fields, Jim Dinning really shat the bed on postsecondary when he supported the work of current Advanced Education Minister Denis Herard, a man whose lack of vision is matched only by his penchant for vague metaphors. That Dinning "trusts" Herard's "solemn promise" to consult with students doesn't bode well, considering Herard's penchant for avoiding students whenever possible. Dinning's discussions with the Gateway about PSE suggest a compelling lack of interest in the issues—unfortunate for an otherwise decent candidate.

Hancock, meanwhile, is like a pig in shit when it comes to PSE; it was his ministerial baby, after all. That he "happened" to be absent for the vote on Bill 40, the vote that deregulated

tuition policy, shows respect for the democratic system. As well, Hancock has laid out some sweeping suggestions for postsecondary, from a free first year of tuition to education tax credits for graduates.

Oberg and Norris are also opposed to Bill 40, but other than that, their positions differ widely. Where Norris finds the nearly 30 per cent that students pay towards their education as a formidable financial barrier, and suggests the government aim for a goal of ten per cent, Oberg (and Doerksen) feel the current rate is quite reasonable. Granted, there's more to accessible postsecondary than tuition fees, but simply massaging the student loan framework, as both Oberg and Doerksen suggest, does little to address the problem of already-insurmountable debt loads, or access for rural families. To Gary McPherson's credit, distance learning through increased technological support is one of his few solid points in a sea of vague discussion and sarcastic commentary.

Meanwhile, the sum of Morton's policy involves redistributing the Centennial Scholarships that Klein

introduced so that they benefit the Albertan economy alone—expressly counter to the good-will gesture Klein intended. Not much of a peep on anything else, aside from his support for Bill 40 and the recent linking of tuition-fee increases to the consumer price index, which is disappointing, considering his long history as a U of C professor.

## Health care

Ed Stelmach, who has difficulty standing out from the pack on almost every issue, actually succeeds in taking a principled stand on health care. Opposed to splitting the system into public and private-pay branches, he's looking to streamline the system (easy to say, hard to do), and also tie research done in Alberta to projects at Alberta hospitals—which might conceivably bring economic and health benefits, without draining the system further. Unfortunately, as with all of Stelmach's proposals, he may mean well, but he fails to back up his discussion with any substance. Private health care is perhaps the most explosive issue on the table, and with years of arguing the effectiveness of private versus public systems, it's difficult to know what kind of proposals are realistic. Hancock is in line with

Stelmach here, pushing for similarly vague "new and innovative thinking." Morton takes the opposite, pragmatic approach with his belief that long wait times can best be addressed through a private system, which he asserts allows Albertans "the freedom to choose and pay for the health care they need and want"—freedom, that is, as long as you have the cash in hand.

Perhaps the most passionate advocate of public health, though, is Dr Oberg. The plan he outlines puts others' to shame, with its attention to detail and achievability, its focus on preventative measures, and inclusion of a private health-insurance system balanced by assurances that the public end will not suffer.

## Social issues

A few months back, the federal Conservatives unveiled a proposed Defense of Religions Act, which would stymie the ability of gay couples to seek marriage licences from justices of the peace, along with allegedly allowing certain anti-gay comments to be made by religious groups without violating hate-crime law. This policy was based on a private member's bill (Bill 208) proposed by Ted Morton this spring. Certainly principled in his stance on social issues, especially those commingled with religion, Morton has gained a fair amount of his support from social conservatives who share his views. However, being an Albertan Tory doesn't necessitate social conservatism, especially with such a range of candidates struggling for recognition. Unfortunately, it's difficult to see where the rest fall on social issues, including gay rights.

Unlike the rest of Canada, where provincial elections actually matter, here in Alberta, the real democratic choice comes this weekend. With only about 40 000 members registered, the candidates' clichéd pleas are accurate: every vote does carry weight. As much as owning a Conservative membership may be vomit-inducing for those of other political stripes, the time to effect political change comes in choosing a leader for Alberta, rather than casting a wasted vote come general-election time. And since it's only \$5, you won't even feel that guilty ripping up the card once you've checked that box—just wait until after the second ballot.

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My ballot, if it were a preferential vote, which it isn't:

1. Hancock
2. Norris
3. Dinning
4. Oberg
5. None of the Above
6. The rest—all either frighteningly dull, terrifying in their social conservatism or plain incompetent.