

December 29, 2003

## **This winter we'll find out if Albertans are winners or whiners**

Now comes the moment of truth.

The Klein government's hearings into the Alberta Agenda open in Hinton on January 15, travel to 11 more locations, and finish in Calgary March 4. Ralph wants to hear what Albertans think about the way Ottawa treats us.

Specifically, citizens are being asked whether Alberta should take control of its share of the Canada Pension Plan, the local policing duties of the RCMP, and collection of provincial personal income tax. These together constitute the "Alberta Agenda."

Legally, the government of Alberta has a clear constitutional and statutory right to take over all three. But should it?

Some Albertans will insist that everything's just fine the way it is, and all these activities are best left to Uncle Ottawa.

This would be sensible if things really were fine. But they aren't.

Ottawa vacuums \$9 billion a year out of the Alberta economy each year, never to return--far more than from any other province. Most others are net recipients.

Nine billion is the difference between the \$24 billion Ottawa takes out in all forms of federal revenue and the \$15 billion it sends back in all forms of federal spending.

If you like math, it works out to \$1 million an hour. It's a steady yearly loss of about 6% of Alberta's provincial economy.

Apparently, however, \$9 billion isn't enough. As the next federal election looms, Quebec is quietly pushing Ottawa to increase what Alberta pays, and what Quebec receives, by changing the federal Equalization formula. And which province do you suppose Prime Minister Paul Martin of Montreal will favor--Alberta or Quebec?

There are two main arguments for the Alberta Agenda.

First, Albertans would get better services at lower cost if they looked after these jobs themselves. Second, until Alberta fully exercises its constitutional rights and responsibilities, Ottawa will go on getting worse. And why shouldn't it? If Albertans don't look after their own interests, why would Ottawa?

People who shirk their responsibilities find their lives being "managed" by others, along with their bank accounts.

According to the Fraser Institute, an Alberta Pension Plan would pay seniors the same benefits they now get under the CPP--while saving working Albertans \$300 each per year, or \$500 per family.

At the same time, it would deprive Ottawa of close to \$2 billion annually.

Still, it would be a very gutsy thing for Alberta politicians to adopt the Alberta Agenda. Most will want to play it safe.

"Let's start with easier things," they'll say. "Let's all complain some more about the wheat board monopoly, and gun control, and Kyoto. Let's explain that this time we're really, really upset. Then, once we've made some progress on these, we'll try to get other provinces on side and talk about national reform of the CPP."

Yes, that would be safe, and a total waste of time. Albertans have been talking about all these things for years--talking and talking and talking. And Ottawa just laughs at us and keeps pumping.

Albertans should turn out by the hundreds at these hearings to tell the McClelland Committee the talking is now done.

It's time to act.

(You can contact the Committee through its Web site [[www.gov.ab.ca/albertaincanada/](http://www.gov.ab.ca/albertaincanada/)], or call 780-644-1249, or write Ian McClelland at 622 Legislature Annex, 9718 - 107 Street, Edmonton, T5K 1E4.)

- Link Byfield

*Link Byfield is chairman of the Edmonton-based Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy.*

*"Just Between Us" is a feature service of the Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy. The purpose of the Citizens Centre is to improve the quality of life for all Canadians by promoting policies that foster individual initiative and personal responsibility.*