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Ralph should stop playing hooky and get to work

Hey, how about that ol' Ralph, playing hooky in a casino instead of suffering through long days of health policy wind-baggery last week in Ottawa.

He was supposed to be helping Paul Martin save medicare for the next generation--or for the next ten years--or for at least the next ten minutes.

But he knew this medicare conference was all about was making Paul Martin look like a hero by pouring in more tax revenue he should never have taken from us in the first place, for something that's constitutionally none of his business.

So Ralph snuck out to have fun, and it's hard to blame him.

To Klein, politics is more about getting elected than hands-on governing. It's about personality, not policy. In "Ralph's world" the main job is to be liked, not to lead.

"If someone starts the parade," he always says, "I'll get in front of it."

Unfortunately he's quite wrong about this, and I fear history will not be kind to him.

The usual political complaints we hear against Ralph, about electricity deregulation and auto insurance rates, won't last long. Such issues never do. What will last, because it matters more to future generations than to our own, is his woeful underperformance in provincial rights.

In this, Klein's been playing hooky for ten years. Consider:

On Ralph's watch the federal government has doubled the net drain of funds from Alberta into other provinces. It now stands at \$12 billion a year. The government hasn't uttered a peep of protest. Instead, Lieutenant Governor Lois Hole lectures us on the need to "share" even more.

In ten years the Klein government has done little, nothing or not nearly enough to fend off Ottawa's endless intrusions into our social and economic affairs. In every area of constitutional trespass--medicare, the wheat board monopoly, Kyoto, homosexual rights, species at risk, the Canada Pension Plan, policing, tax collection--Ralph has just let it happen. He doesn't care about these things.

But he should care. Alberta premiers all the way back to E.C. Manning have understood that the federal government is not supposed to be running social and economic development.

People who can't even run a gun registry shouldn't be trying to run hospitals.

All those showcase Liberal national social programs--employment insurance, the Canada Assistance Plan, the Canada Pension Plan, national medicare funding, regional industrial development, equalization--have turned into expensive white elephants.

In the end, they amount to paying businesses to create jobs and paying workers not to do them.

The original constitutional vision of Canada--the original deal--was that Ottawa would stick to areas of national sovereignty--defence, immigration, currency, foreign policy, the Criminal Code--and provinces would handle their own social and economic concerns.

Instead, however, Ottawa has allowed everything within its own mandate, from our dollar to our defence forces, become an international joke, while it sticks its fat nose in the business of the provinces. Paul Martin sits there lecturing premiers how to run their hospitals.

Next I suppose he'll order them to upgrade their daycare policies, another Martin social enthusiasm which, like medicare, is completely outside his constitutional mandate.

Paul Martin is a weak, vacillating, vulnerable leader. Ralph should be aggressively exploiting this opportunity, not waiting around for someone to start a parade.

- Link Byfield

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