



the fACTivist

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On June 15, 1993, Ralph Klein and the Progressive Conservative party (“Ralph’s team” was their campaign slogan that year) were elected with a promise that the way government operates was going to change. The changes were quick and unprecedented. The goal: make government smaller. The result: massive cuts in government spending. On the 10th anniversary of that election, this issue of the fACTivist takes a look at the consequences of this mode of governing. We focus especially on its impact on our research and advocacy interests: the lives of those living in poverty. We begin with an overview by one of our colleagues at the Parkland Institute (www.ualberta.ca/~parkland/).

Counting the costs of 10 years of Ralph Klein

by Trevor Harrison, Research Director, Parkland Institute

What does Alberta have to show for 10 years of Klein government rule? On an obvious level, this time has corresponded (whether fortuitously or by design) with enormous economic growth. Today, Alberta boasts the strongest provincial economy in Canada, with budget surpluses continuing to roll in with the regularity of the Bay of Fundy tides – at least \$2.2 billion in 2002-2003 alone. Yet strangely, in this land of plenty, there is discontent, with many Albertans perhaps feeling they have been left out of the good times.

Consider the following. Real wages for Alberta’s working people have stagnated since 1991. Today, working people in the province earn roughly \$14 per hour, the same as they did in 1991. Alberta’s minimum wage rate (at \$5.90 per hour) is the lowest in Canada. (BC’s is the highest at \$8.00 per hour.) Alberta’s social allowance rates also are among the lowest in Canada and have only changed marginally since 1993 when they were reduced by 20 per cent. Indeed, if one adjusts welfare rates for inflation (about 20 per cent since 1993), welfare recipients receive today about 40 per cent of what they did when the Klein Tories were first elected. Meanwhile, some Albertans continue to

pay health care premiums, all pay a growing list of user fees, and middle income earners (under the flat-tax regime instituted in 2001) pay more in taxes than their counterparts in British Columbia and Ontario.

At the level of public services, Alberta – Canada’s wealthiest province – is actually about middle of the road when it comes to spending. After years of savage cuts, health care spending in 2001-2002 finally rebounded to its previous high of about \$1,600 per person in Alberta. Similarly, per student education (K-12) spending in Alberta has rebounded, to \$4,500 per student in 2002, but remains below 1993 (about \$4,700 per student) and the high of \$5,229 per student in 1987. After years of austerity, post-secondary spending in Alberta today is where it was in 1995, around \$5,800 per student.

But social services remains the government’s forgotten child. Total social service spending was cut by the Klein government in 1993, from about \$1,000 per person, and remains virtually static today at about \$700 per person.

Alberta today is a place of contradictions. The fight to end fiscal deficits has been won, but at least some Albertans have been wondering, “at what cost?”

Who's not being heard?

by Nicola Fairbrother, Executive Director, ESPC

When I think about the impact of the last ten years of the Klein government—on people living in poverty and on advocacy organizations such as the Edmonton Social Planning Council—one of the things I've noticed is how our perception of democracy has been affected by the current government.

Alberta's politics in this last decade have become a matter of who deserves to be heard and who does not. When the drought struck Alberta the government quite rightly moved to provide assistance, but the same quick action has not happened for other groups of people at risk. For example, when the results of the Low Income Review were released two years ago, no respite was provided for the very people who the government's own documents indicated were in need.

It leaves me wondering: What is the state of our democracy when we systematically exclude some citizens from being heard?

Increasingly over the past ten years many of us no longer feel safe to disagree with the government in Alberta. For people who live in poverty and for the agencies that provide services, there is fear that the hand that gives is going to take it right back if we utter one word out of place. Or there's been the unfortunate scenario of organizations fighting between themselves for funding to provide the core services that make a difference in our community. There is a universal response from people, agencies, and service organizations—if you want to keep doing business, play ball. And playing ball often doesn't reduce poverty.

There's no doubt it makes sense to work with government. After all, shouldn't government be the organizing institution that guides our collective efforts to deliver services and promote access and equity?

Heard around the office: "If democracy is three lions and a gazelle sitting around deciding what to have for dinner, why do I always have to be the gazelle?"

But it seems the legacy of these past ten years is that even the bravest of community advocates are fearful to speak out.

A lesson to learn from the political experience of the last ten years is, I think, that we have, as a broader community, forgotten the power we have to create change. We need to put aside this fear. Let's embrace our power as an electorate. Let's talk about how we can be advocates. Let's indulge in radical thinking and radical action. Let's remember that the only way to be treated as equals is to act as equals.

The social and economic determinants of health

The Edmonton Social Planning Council has been interested for a long time in the link between poverty and health. We are not alone in this interest. This winter 400 Canadian social and health policy experts, community representatives, and health researchers met at York University in Toronto. The evidence heard at the conference showed that the health of Canadians is profoundly affected by **social and economic determinants**, including, but not restricted to, the following:

- ◆ income and its equitable distribution
- ◆ employment and working conditions
- ◆ unemployment and employment security
- ◆ housing
- ◆ early childhood development
- ◆ education
- ◆ food security
- ◆ health care services
- ◆ social exclusion
- ◆ the social safety net

The conference concluded with a charter containing several resolutions including a call for governments at all levels to review their current economic, social, and service policies to consider the impacts of their policies upon these social determinants of health. You can view the charter at:

www.socialjustice.org/conference/torontoCharter.PDF

Bearing witness to 10 years of social policy reform

by John Pater, ESPC Communications Coordinator

“Since 1993, Alberta has undergone a period of sweeping social policy reform and government restructuring ... A group of citizens concerned about the lack of attention being paid to the consequences of social policy reform came together to talk about the effects.” (from the introduction to the first report of the Quality of Life Commission, *Listen to Me*, March 1996)

They are a who’s who of Edmonton’s political, social and religious life. The original commissioners of the Quality of Life Commission included Lois Hole, the present Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta, Douglas Roche, a Canadian senator who was formerly a Member of Parliament and served as a United Nations diplomat, Virindar Lamba, active in the Sikh community and with the Interfaith Council on Human Rights, and Bruce Miller, an activist United Church minister and religious scholar.

Incidentally, it was a sermon by Miller, titled “Do Albertans Have Any Compassion?” which prompted a meeting at the Edmonton Social Planning Council in 1995 which in turn led to the commission being started.

“We wanted government policy makers to pay attention,” says Kay Feehan, presently co-chair of the commission, and one of the people at that initial meeting. And so some respected, well-known individuals were approached to give a credible face to the concerns being expressed by many about the massive cuts to social services. “We heard directly from people who were affected by the cuts,” says Feehan. The result was a 50 page report called *Listen to Me*. “It was mostly ignored by the government,”

says Bruce Miller, “they said it was too anecdotal, and not statistical enough.” “But,” says Feehan, “at least we were able to keep the issues in front of the policy makers.”

“Everything we are we owe to Ralph,” says the other co-chair Don Mayne. “There wouldn’t have been a Quality of Life Commission if it wasn’t for Ralph Klein.” Mayne, who also served as one of the original commissioners, says the drastic government measures pushed many of them to get active. “We were socially aware individuals, but most of us weren’t activists, politically, until the Klein government cuts made it clear that somebody should do something about this.”

In 1999 the commission did a follow up study focusing on children’s experiences with poverty. *Listen to the Children* got better feedback from the various levels of government, resulting in the launch last year of a project that will take an in-depth look at

families on low income and particularly at the sports and artistic needs of children living in poverty.

There wouldn’t have been a Quality of Life Commission if it wasn’t for Ralph Klein

Over the years, the Quality of Life Commissioners have met frequently with provincial and civic government officials. Members of the commission have also provided input to various government consultations over the years: the Growth Summit, the Lotteries and Gaming Summit, the Health Summit, and the Future Summit.

Don Mayne says they’ve had the most success in talking to civil servants who work under the elected officials, such as deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers, and city managers. “We’ve built a reputation with the government,” says Mayne, “of generally doing our homework well.”

For more information about the Quality of Life Commission and to check out their publications go to their web page:

www.albertaqualityoflife.ca/

Tenant-landlord disputes dominate work of Edmonton Centre for Equal Justice

by Andrew Bachelder,
ECEJ Staff Lawyer

Jim was thrilled when he found a low-rent apartment close to his part-time job. The apartment was filthy, but with some work it would be suitable to Jim's needs. He met the landlord who seemed friendly. Jim paid one month's rent and one month's damage deposit in cash. The landlord told him he would do a move-in inspection later and at that time provide him with a receipt. Jim moved in. He cleaned the apartment, but couldn't get rid of the cigarette burns on the carpet or the pen marks on a wall. He put his couch against the wall to cover the marks and a coffee table covered some of the burns.

Jim noticed that the landlord never seemed to be around. Each month an agent came to pick up the rent. Months went by. Jim received a letter from a property management company informing him that the building had been sold. Four months later, Jim received a 3-month eviction notice from the new landlord. The notice said that the building would be undergoing major renovations and that all the tenants would have to leave. Jim searched for a new home. It wasn't easy. There were very few places available, and fewer that were habitable. Finally, however, Jim found another apartment. He cleaned his old place fairly well and was pleased that it was in

much better shape than when he moved in.

Jim requested his damage deposit from the management company. He was told to leave a forwarding address and they would be in contact with him. Two weeks later, Jim received a letter from the landlord informing him that they were keeping his security deposit and that he owed \$1,610 for carpet replacement, repainting, and cleaning. The letter said that if he didn't pay within 30 days he would be sued. Jim felt like he had been kicked in the stomach. He had left the place in good condition! Jim didn't know what to do or who could help him.

The Edmonton Centre for Equal Justice (ECEJ) exists to help people like Jim. ECEJ, a project of the ESPC, provides free legal services for people living with low incomes. ECEJ takes cases in Residential Tenancies, Human Rights, Small Claims, Income Support (SFI, AISH, CPP etc.), Debt and Immigration.

The 1% solution: gimme shelter

Take a look at a new study by the Canadian Centre for Social Justice: *Gimme Shelter: Homelessness and Canada's Social Housing Crisis* (available online at www.socialjustice.org)

The study proposes that each level of government must return to spending at least one per cent of their annual budgets on social housing. The "1% solution" means an additional \$2 billion a year from the federal government, and \$208 million a year from the Alberta government (based on this year's budget of \$20.8 billion). Compare that to what Alberta has budgeted this year:

- \$23.5 million for affordable housing
- \$3 million for homeless shelters
- \$36 million for housing support allowance

The biggest area of law ECEJ deals with is Residential Tenancy (landlord/tenant) disputes, accounting for over 40 per cent of the Centre's clients. With the frighteningly low vacancy rate in Edmonton, it seems that more and more unscrupulous landlords are taking advantage of tenants, knowing that either the tenant won't do anything for fear of losing their home, or that if the tenant leaves the rental unit will be filled again quickly.

With over 50 volunteer lawyers working evening clinics, and a dedicated team that operates the Centre, ECEJ can help with information, advice, referrals, or legal representation. Contact ECEJ at 702-1725.

Ten years of neglect in housing

by Jim Gurnett, *Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness*

During the past ten years, people in need of low-cost affordable housing have suffered an attack on health, security and dignity that is difficult for most of us to imagine.

More than \$200 million has been cut from funding of social housing over those years. The status of housing has been relegated to a distant corner of the cabinet room. And a strong economy has meant a withdrawal by the private sector from involvement in low cost housing because there's been more than enough work in more lucrative housing opportunities.

The number of homeless people have grown each year—increasing more than 60 per cent in Edmonton between 2000 and 2002. Emergency shelters are frequently at more than 100 per cent capacity. The number of homeless children is growing.

Thousands of Edmontonians pay more than 30 per cent of their incomes for rent. A third of renters in need have incomes below \$15,000. Deregulation in the energy sector has added more pressure by pushing utility costs up dramatically too. What chance do they have to find anything that is safe, healthy and secure?

With the withdrawal of provincial (and federal) dollars, new housing has not been coming on stream despite rapid population growth. Existing housing has been deteriorating. Low-cost housing in the private market has been shrinking due to conversions to condominiums for sale. And the demolition of substandard housing, always popular with politicians, has not resulted in enough housing to replace them.

“Access to safe, adequate and affordable housing is fundamental to the physical, economic and social well-being of individuals, families and communities.”

City of Edmonton Task Force on Affordable Housing

Municipalities across Alberta have identified an urgent need for hundreds of units of emergency housing and thousands of units of low-income affordable housing—more than 5,000 units are needed in Edmonton alone.

Between October 1995 and October 2002, rental rates in Edmonton increased by 36 per cent. But the province has capped the rent supplement program so fewer people are able to benefit from it.

In addition to the cutbacks, there has been a lessening of internal government commitment to housing. At one time, under the Lougheed premiership, housing was a ministry in its own right; now it has been shuffled to being a little tack-on in the ministry of seniors. As well, the major policy documents issued in the past few years have made it clear that the Alberta government does not see a commitment to affordable housing as part of its responsibilities; instead it talks about the private and voluntary sectors dealing with it.

The growing number of people trapped in poor housing in Alberta is shameful. The Klein government needs to correct these ten years of neglect in housing and properly address the human right of everyone to adequate housing.

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Renters in need*

SFI + shelter allowance for family of four:	\$1,275
Average rent for two/three bedroom:	\$ 742
Left over for other living expenses:	\$ 533
<i>Rent is 58% of total income</i>	

Two income household at minimum wage:	\$ 1,917
Average rent for two/three bedroom:	\$ 742
Left over for other living expenses:	\$ 1,175
<i>Rent is 38% of total income</i>	

*The City of Edmonton considers **renters in need** to be those who spend more than 30% of their incomes on rent.

Alberta welfare, minimum wage rates challenged by new tool to assess low income

by Phil O'Hara, ESPC Research Manager

The release in late May of the much anticipated Market Basket Measure (MBM) challenges the Alberta government's low social-assistance and minimum-wage rates.

According to the MBM, a family of four in Edmonton needs \$23,571 annually to buy a basket of necessities. In comparison, the social assistance benefits for that family are \$15,300 annually. For that same family with one wage earner being paid minimum wage in Alberta, their annual gross income is \$11,505.

The MBM is a new measurement tool developed by the federal government to help assess low income in Canada. (For more details see our fact sheet "Just The Facts – Market Basket Measure" also available on this web page.) The apparent simplicity of the MBM is part of its appeal: it measures the cost, in different locations, of buying specific goods and services related to food, clothing, shelter, transportation and other needs.

MBM Rates (family of 4) in Alberta	
Edmonton area	\$23,571
Calgary area	\$24,180
Alberta Rural	\$24,509

Like the current low income measures, the MBM is not an official poverty line, nor was it designed for determining eligibility for government programs and services.

But after the release of the MBM, the *Edmonton Sun* noted, "Provincial officials will now be hard-pressed to pretend that welfare rates are adequate". In a follow up story, an Alberta Human Resources and Employment spokesperson told the *Edmonton Sun* the

MBM is just one of the tools being used to help set new welfare rates to be announced in January 2004.

"Will we be giving people who we expect to work 100% of the MBM?" asked the spokesperson. "Probably not, but a decision on what the benefit rates are going to be has not been made yet."

Chris Sarlo, who is linked to The Fraser Institute, is concerned the MBM was created, at least in part, as a compromise between competing measures. He draws a distinction between the MBM as a measure of poverty for "information" purposes and as a tool for setting policy (e.g. social-assistance rates).

In a recent e-mail to the ESPC, Sarlo noted the MBM "straddles both conceptions of the poverty line." Sarlo argues that he thinks "this is a mistake and the subsequent confusion about the function of a poverty line will work to its detriment. So I am disappointed on that score as well."

Ken Battle, president of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, told *the Globe and Mail* "I think provinces will be very nervous about it (MBM). If you look at welfare incomes, they're 60 or 70 per cent of these lines. Because the MBM looks to be a better measure of poverty, it's more difficult for governments to say it's not reasonable to compare them."

But the MBM isn't the cure-all for poverty and it's a mixed blessing. As an absolute measure of low income, the MBM, at best, only obliges us to ensure that everyone can buy a specific basket of goods; it doesn't commit us to ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to share Alberta's growing wealth. In other words, the MBM doesn't measure how low-income people are faring in comparison to the average income. As a result, if the MBM becomes the standard measure of low income, people with low incomes will fall progressively further behind the Alberta norm as average incomes increase and lifestyles improve.

“As the council moved into the 1950s there was uneasiness and dissatisfaction ... the work which the Council was doing and its value in the community was not generally understood ... Thus began the first period of internal examination and discussion through which Council members over the years have struggled to describe and define the work of this organization which has proven so often not to be easily defined.”

From *A Wealth of Voices: A History of the Edmonton Social Planning Council 1940-1990* by Marsha Mildon

ESPC community consultation underway

by Wanda Dennelly, *President, Board of Directors*

Throughout our 64 year history, we have paused occasionally to reflect on where we have been and where we should be going (see side bar). We are engaging in a period of introspection once again to examine our values, mission and goals.

During the process this time we decided to seek the evaluation and feedback of our friends and community partners. The opinions and perceptions of those we work with and support are integral to shaping our role as a social planning council. We invited stakeholders from a cross-section of the community to participate in a consultation process over the past few months.

With the assistance of Alberta Community Development, who facilitated the consultations, we have heard some constructive feedback and amazing ideas for the future. Participants have helped us to identify gaps in services and think about the role ESPC could take in filling those gaps.

As the ESPC continues to move forward this year, the Board and staff are excited about all the possibilities for the future. Once the consultation process is complete, we will move into strategic planning this fall. Our final plan will be shared with everyone who is interested as we seek to be an effective and transparent organization.

We deeply appreciate all of the feedback and input from individuals and organizations. The Board and staff are committed to ensuring the ESPC continues to evolve and provide meaningful service to our community.

Thanks for the plug!

Heard in the Alberta Legislative Assembly on May 5, 2003 during debate on Bill 32, The Income and Employment Supports Act.

“...certainly the Edmonton Social Planning Council has a great deal of insight into the whole issue of poverty and poverty-related issues, and I would encourage honourable members to consider their research and perhaps pay heed to some of what they say at least.”

Hugh MacDonald, Liberal MLA, Edmonton-Goldbar

ESPC 2003 Board of Directors

Terry Anderson*	Cindy Olsen*
Marilyn Corbett*	Wilson Porat*
Wanda Dennelly	Peter Rothe*
Mayja Embleton*	Bryan Sandilands
John Henderson*	Andrea Spevak*
Marcel Labbe	Jenny Wong*

* New board members as of the April 29, 2003 Annual General Meeting.

Elected as **executive** members of the board:

President - Wanda Dennelly

Vice-Presidents - Bryan Sandilands, Peter Rothe, Wilson Porat

Officer-at-large - Marcel Labbe



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Vision Statement

A community where all people have a commitment to social justice and shared responsibility as the foundation for community well-being.

Mission Statement

Responding to the changing political and social environment, the ESPC will:

- identify trends and emerging social issues
- create opportunities to debate and address social issues
- initiate and support community action through research, coordination and advocacy

Join us! Membership has its privileges!

- ✓ Receive our newsletter, *the fACTivist*
- ✓ 20% discount on ESPC publications
- ✓ Keep informed about upcoming events and current issues
- ✓ Stay updated about our work
- ✓ Attend ESPC Brown Bag Lunches
- ✓ Enjoy the Annual Seasonal Open House
- ✓ Vote at the Annual General meeting
- ✓ Serve as a member of the Board of Directors
- ✓ Attend Council Board meetings (as non-voting member)

Annual Membership Fees:

Organization	\$45	Family	\$25
Associate*	\$20	Individual	\$15
Limited Income	\$5	Student	\$5

* Associate members do not receive a vote or discount

Membership Application:

Name _____

Organization _____

Position _____

Address _____

City/Town and Postal Code _____

Phone Number with Area Code _____

Fax Number with Area Code _____

E-mail address _____

Please send completed form with a cheque or money order payable to:

Edmonton Social Planning Council

Membership form and details also available on our web page at www.edmspc.com
 Donations welcome, may include with cheque or money order for membership

The Edmonton Social Planning Council is pleased to present our redesigned website. We update the site regularly and post current events and news in the "What's New" panel. This edition of *the fACTivist* is also available on the site, as are some recent news releases. Come visit us on-line anytime at www.edmspc.com



The **fACTivist** is published by the Edmonton Social Planning Council



The Edmonton Social Planning Council is a member agency of the United Way of the Alberta Capital Region