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Edmonton Social Planning Council

Survey flawed, Alberta's future requires serious consultation

COMMENTARY September 2004

Responding to the *It's Your Future* survey

The government's survey of Albertans asking for our advice in governing a "debt free" Alberta is, in our view, disappointing and suspect. It comes across as a public relations exercise that will give citizens the impression they've been consulted, but cannot live up to its promise that citizens will be helping the government "make the best decisions about Alberta's future." (See the last page to view the survey questions.)

Election platform?

First of all, one can't help but be cynical about the timing of this survey. It is being released with full public knowledge that a provincial election will be held this fall. The results will be released in October, around the same time the election itself is likely to be called. Though the survey is being promoted as a tool to "help build the province's long-term strategic plan," one can only wonder if the answers provided by Albertans will form the core of the governing party's election platform. ESPC believes this survey will likely be regarded by Albertans as an election tool, and not as a public consultation tool as is claimed by the government.

Limited direction setting

If we can move beyond the promotional nature of this survey, it is additionally disappointing that the very design of the survey and its lack of specifics means that little direction will be given to the government. Despite the opening question asking "what choices would you make?" the survey really does not allow people to choose among the priorities. The survey tries to prompt us to make choices by warning that "we can't afford to do everything," but then it proceeds to have us grade each choice independently, with no reference to the others. It's highly probable that almost all of the policy areas mentioned (health care, education, the environment, cities, people who need our help, rural areas, diversified economy, infrastructure) will receive high priority rankings from Albertans. Also problematic is the non-specific nature of the questions. Few will argue with the need to "provide support to Albertans who need help." But there will be a diverse range of opinions about how to do this and who should receive that support. It's the detail of the latter that is missing in the choices set before Albertans.

And so the results will be non-definitive, giving government little worthwhile feedback. The survey should have been designed to force people to make real choices between various specific policy areas. After all, governments are about making tough choices in allocating limited dollars. Because these elements are missing in the survey, it will not be able to live up to its expectations of helping "set a direction for our province's future."

The survey's design is flawed by not having citizens make choices among competing priorities for 'limited' government dollars.

Not a serious consultation

If the intent of the survey is to seek public input into “the province’s future policies” – and we believe that being debt-free is a significant and complex new reality that needs serious consideration – then a thorough consultation is required, not a simple postcard sized survey. This government has conducted some serious consultations over the past decade where experts and citizens alike provided direction in decision-making. (Although there has been criticism that government policy has not in the end reflected the feedback generated by consultation.) The point here is that this government does know how to engage in thorough consultation with its citizens. In comparison, this survey comes across as a marginal effort that cannot provide the kind of insight and innovation that is required at this time in our province’s history.

The people of Alberta need to be involved in a serious comprehensive examination of our province’s priorities.

We recommend that the government undertake a comprehensive public consultation process about our future direction and commit itself to being open to the diversity of opinions and ideas that will inevitably come from Albertans. This might be accomplished if the survey was used as a first step in such a consultation process, to be followed by province wide hearings or focus groups where people’s stories and comments can flesh out the cursory responses solicited by the survey. A starting point for our conversations could be the well thought-out background questions and context-setting comments that are part of the preamble to the survey (but which get lost in the simplified and generalized survey questions themselves).

Better than last survey

To be fair though, this survey is more thoughtful and open than the *It’s Your Money* survey of 2000 because it at least attempts to focus on setting priorities and making choices rather than simply asking what people want to do with surplus dollars. For example the 2000 survey asked questions such as: “What would you like to do with your interest savings money when the debt is gone?” and “what would you like to do with unpredictable resource money?” The answers given to these “money” questions were predictable perhaps: 73% of Albertans said tax reductions are of high importance, 57% gave high approval to one-time tax rebates.

The survey asks about our societal priorities this time, rather than just about ‘surplus’ dollars.

The current survey seems to resemble a survey done earlier this year by the respected Canada West Foundation that asked: “Thinking about what governments can do to ensure the future prosperity and quality of life in Alberta, (how) would you rate the priority of the following (13 policy areas)?” In that survey only 40.9% of Albertans said lowering taxes was a high priority, tenth highest on the list, with health care being first and reducing poverty being fifth.

The government survey this time more closely follows this line of inquiry by asking: “there are important challenges to address ... tell us what you think the priorities should be?” Further, in the survey’s preamble it outlines a number of public interest areas for which the government is responsible, which gets us thinking about issues beyond money when filling out the actual survey.

Because of this focus on government priorities rather than money, it will be interesting to see if Albertans give a lower priority to tax reduction. In the end, this latter issue may be what this whole survey is about: finding out if Albertans really want more tax cuts and/or a royalty cheque of their own (which previous surveys suggested). Maybe by

being asked about priorities rather than money, Albertans will surprise the government by giving tax reduction a low grade. What would this government do with that kind of direction-setting advice?

What about the social deficit?

The government says this survey is being done because Alberta is now debt-free and so "we have new choices to make." Many critics have pointed out that the drive to eliminating the financial debt resulted in choices being made that created other debts and deficits. Social programs were possibly the worst hit during this decade of debt fighting, creating a social deficit that affects not just those living in poverty but has its ripple effects across our whole society. Among the "new choices" we can make in this debt-free province is to dedicate ourselves to (in the words of the survey preamble) "ensure that all Albertans benefit from our province's prosperity." People with low incomes, seniors, people with disabilities, children and families at risk, aboriginal people, immigrants – all of these should be among the first to be served by our debt-free status. We no longer have an excuse (if we ever did) for having a social deficit.

Social programs can be given a very high priority ranking, in contrast to reducing taxes which can be given a very low priority.

The survey itself, despite its abundant limitations, does give some room to address this issue. One of the priority areas we are asked to rate is to "provide support to Albertans who need help." The survey also provides space for people to briefly write in some of their ideas for what government should be doing for Alberta's future. We at ESPC believe priority should be given to addressing the social deficit in a number of ways: the building of more affordable and accessible housing; increasing welfare and minimum wage rates; reinvesting in public infrastructure; and providing new investment to municipalities struggling with debt and increased demands for public services. Should these kinds of ideas be part of the responses received by the government, the survey may go a small way toward addressing the social deficit in our province.

Governing in a debt free future

For more than a decade the Alberta government, like many other Canadian governments, has been obsessed with eliminating the financial debt. It has been their singular purpose; governing has been dedicated almost exclusively to that goal. In some ways it appears that the government is at a loss as to what to do now, and more importantly, how to lead now. Is the government still debt-obsessed with the talk of legislation to make it illegal for future governments to go into debt? The question is being asked in some quarters about whether the government that has fought the debt battle has the insight and ability to govern under this new debt-free reality.

Let's take some time to consider our priorities in a debt free future

But now that a debt-free status has been achieved the question 'now what?' does confront us all. How do you govern with no debt and the prospect of even more surplus revenues in the foreseeable future?

Perhaps the best advice would be for us all to sit on this new reality for a time. We need to accept that there's an inevitable letdown and confusion about what's next whenever a big goal has been achieved. Let's not be hasty and instead do as the survey preamble suggests: "with the debt looked after, it's time to think about what's important." Some careful deliberation accompanied by dialogue with our neighbours would likely serve us well at this time. The survey could be our discussion starter, a tool to help us begin to generate those new ideas needed to make post-debt choices for the benefit of all Albertans.

The It's Your Future Survey

Here are the introductory text and questions of the Alberta government's survey

Alberta is debt free. It's an outstanding achievement by Albertans. And now we have new choices to make.

With the debt looked after, it's time to think about what's important. The challenge isn't just about how to spend more money today. It's about making the best choices for tomorrow. What should the priorities be? Are there new ideas we should pursue?

It's Alberta's future. What choices would you make?

1. *There are important challenges to address, but we can't afford to do everything. Tell us what you think the priorities should be?*

(10 very high priority ... 1 very low priority)

- a. *Provide a quality, affordable Alberta health care system*
- b. *Provide an outstanding education system*
- c. *Build a more diverse, innovative economy*
- d. *Provide support to Albertans who need help*
- e. *Respond to growth in cities*
- f. *Preserve rural communities*
- g. *Protect Alberta's environment*
- h. *Invest in Alberta's infrastructure*
- i. *Reduce taxes*

The survey was sent to all Alberta households the first week of September

Albertans have until September 24 to respond

People can respond by mail or by filling out an on-line version at www.gov.ab.ca

The survey comes complete with brief background information on the "various challenges and opportunities that face Alberta" now that the province is debt free

The results of the survey will be released in October

2. *Now that the unexpected windfall money no longer has to go to pay down the debt, what priority would you place on each of the following options?*

(10 very high priority ... 1 very low priority)

- a. *Provide a refund to every Albertan*
- b. *Save the money and invest in the Heritage Fund*
- c. *Make long-term investments in priority areas*
- d. *Other (limited to 300 characters)*

3. *If there were three things your government could do for Alberta's future, what would they be? (limited to 50 characters each)*

4. *Your city/town and postal code*