

PEOPLE FIRST

SETTING A NEW DIRECTION FOR GOVERNMENT IN ALBERTA

*A REPORT FROM THE ALBERTA FEDERATION OF LABOUR'S
"INVESTING IN TOMORROW" CONFERENCE
SEPTEMBER 18-20, 1997, EDMONTON, ALBERTA*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Giving Albertans a Voice	1
Executive Summary	3
Problems Identified	3
Recommendations	3
A Look at the Alberta Economy	5
Unemployment & Job Creation—Hidden Losses	5
Wages and Earnings—A Pattern of Decline	5
Public Finances	8
Conclusion	10

RECOMMENDATIONS

Wages and Income	12
Job Creation	14
Public Services	16
Policy Recommendations: Education	16
Policy Recommendations: Health Care	17
Policy Recommendations: Social Services	19
Taxation and Government Finances	21
Regulation	24
Labour Law	27
Training	29
Sector-Specific Recommendations	30
Globalization	32
Observation of the Response Panel	33
Bob Saari	33
Marjorie Bencz	33
Harvey Scott	33
Jan Reimer	34
Conclusion	35

FROM THE PRESIDENT

GIVING ALBERTANS A VOICE

BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 18 and 20, 1997, the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) hosted “Investing in Tomorrow: A Conference on Alberta’s Social and Economic Future.” The conference was organized as an alternative to the Alberta government’s Growth Summit, which has been viewed with scepticism by many Albertans.

The “Investing in Tomorrow” conference—held at the Crowne Plaza—Chateau Lacombe Hotel in Edmonton—was attended by about 250 people representing a wide range of labour, social, community and environmental organizations.

About half of the delegates came from the labour movement. But there were also delegates from organizations representing the poor and the homeless. There were delegates from women’s groups, environmental groups and groups representing people with disabilities. And there were delegates from church groups and from groups representing students and seniors.

The decision to organize an “alternative” summit was made at the AFL’s most recent convention (May 1997). When asked if the AFL should participate in the government Growth Summit, delegates to that convention urged caution. They pointed out that previous government attempts at public consultation—for example, the Health Care Roundtables—had failed. They also argued that the government’s summit put too many restrictions on debate.

In the end, most of our convention delegates agreed that the government summit is simply a public relations event—designed to win public support for economic policy decisions that have already been made. As a result, our convention voted overwhelmingly against the idea of participating in the government summit.

Despite this decision, we at the AFL still saw a need for a summit of some kind. After four years of sweeping changes in our provincial economy, we felt Albertans deserved an open forum to discuss what has been happening. And we felt ordinary working people should be included in the process of making plans for the future.

That’s why we decided to organize the “Investing in Tomorrow” conference. The conference—which was open to any and all Albertans interested in attending—was designed to address the following major questions:

- Are Albertans benefiting from the current economic boom? If not, why not? And, what can or should be done to ensure that the benefits of our current prosperity are shared more equitably?
- What role should the government play in the economy? Is the government moving in the right direction when it comes to regulation? What about government policies on taxation and resources royalties—are they appropriate?
- What contribution do public services like health care and education make to

the overall health of our economy? Are these services being adequately funded?

- What about the corporate sector? What responsibility do they have to their employees and the communities in which they operate?

Conference participants were divided into workshops to discuss these and other related questions. They were also presented with analysis and background information about the Alberta economy by several guests including the conference's keynote speaker, Jim Stanford—who is a researcher and economist with the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW).

After a day-and-a-half of intensive meetings, the delegates came up with a long list of observations and policy recommendations relating to economic development in Alberta. Most of these observations and recommendations can be grouped into nine “theme areas” including: wages and income; job creation; public programs and services; government finance and taxation; regulation; labour law; training; sector specific recommendations, and responses to “globalization.”

In this report, we will summarize the recommendations made by conference delegates in each of these nine “theme areas.” We will also provide a brief sketch of the Alberta economy as we near the end of the 20th century.

In addition, we will summarize the remarks made by a panel of guests representing business, environmental and social welfare organizations. We asked these people to evaluate our suggestions and discuss their possible impact on various sectors of the Alberta economy.

Throughout the report, we will also include quotes from “real Albertans” who attended a Townhall Meeting that was held as part of our conference. The townhall was designed to act as a forum for all those Albertans who had something to say about economic issues, but who didn't have access to the government summit and who could not find time to attend our three-day conference.

Overall, participants in the “Investing in Tomorrow” conference agreed that—despite the impressive growth and expansion of the Alberta economy—not all Albertans are reaping the benefits of growth. Our delegates also agreed that the provincial government should move away from its current market-dominated approach to economic issues and embrace what economist Jim Stanford called a “human-centred” model of economic development.

In other words, delegates to our conference agreed that what Albertans really need is a government that is willing to actively promote and protect their interests in the market place. Instead of a government economic policy that simply says “let the market decide,” we need an economic policy that puts people first. We need a policy that ensures that all Albertans—not just the wealthy—benefit from economic growth in Alberta.

Audrey Cormack, President, Alberta Federation of Labour

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INVESTING IN TOMORROW, the Alberta Federation of Labour's Conference on Alberta's Social and Economic Future, was intended to provide a forum for broad discussion of the current state of affairs in the Province. Specifically, the idea was to open the debate about our economic and social future to individuals and organizations who are excluded from the current corridors of power.

In that regard, the Conference exceeded its mandate. Interest and registrations from a wide range of individuals and groups from across the Province were so far beyond our expectations that it put a strain upon Conference organizers. Clearly, Albertans have a keen interest in this discussion, and, as we discovered, they have a definite point of view and a wealth of sound ideas for policy and programs designed to produce a better society for all Albertans.

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

Conference delegates shared a deep uneasiness about the current trends and direction of Alberta's social and economic development. Despite an extremely healthy and growing Provincial economy—one that has consistently outperformed the national average over the past decade—meaningful employment (particularly for young people) remains scarce and wages have declined from above to below the national average.

Core public services have been cut back so badly that key indicators now show Alberta public services lagging behind the rest of Canada and still deteriorating despite multi-billion dollar budget surpluses. Albertans are now facing extended waits for hospital beds and surgeries (we have the lowest ratio of hospital beds per 1000 population in the country), increasingly crowded classrooms and rising fees in public and post-secondary education. Our social welfare support levels are also too low to meet even basic needs.

Grave concern is also being created by the deregulation of environmental protection, occupational health and safety, public safety measures and, measures designed to protect the public good.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First and foremost, the Conference called on government to adopt a more human-centered public policy. They suggested that Alberta's 'human deficit' should now be of greater concern than the fiscal debt.

Delegates recommended that government take action to stimulate real wage levels in Alberta and take direct and indirect measures to create decent, full-time permanent jobs.

4 People First: Setting a new direction for government in Alberta

They called for reinvestment in core public services to restore them to previous levels that were above the national average. They asked for a full public review of Alberta's tax and royalty systems before any further lowering of taxes—particularly to the corporate sector—is considered. They asked for the repeal of the Balanced Budget and Debt Reduction Act—pointing out that it has systematically prevented badly needed reinvestment in public services and programs.

Most of all, our conference delegates asked that government take a more interventionist role in Alberta's social and economic life. They said government should shoulder its responsibility to govern instead of leaving that responsibility to the unfettered marketplace. More specifically, they want government to regulate and enforce regulations on safety, workers' rights, and the environment. They also suggested methods for supporting family farmers and for actively strengthening our arts and culture sector.

There is a wealth of good ideas in this document that could be useful for policy makers. One of the Conference objectives was to put these recommendations in front of government. But, more importantly, the delegates want their conclusions placed in front of the people of Alberta. In the final analysis, they will decide the future social and economic shape of our Province.

“Here in Alberta, we have the perverse situation where the economy is growing but people are actually getting worse off.”

– JIM STANFORD, ECONOMIST

A LOOK AT THE ALBERTA ECONOMY

ACCORDING TO THE conventional wisdom, the economy of Alberta is in fine shape. Unemployment is falling, jobs are being created, the deficit has been eliminated, and the province's finances are once again on a sound footing. With interest rates holding steady at fairly low levels and inflation under control, it seems that we finally have the economic "fundamentals" right.

Delegates to the Alberta Federation of Labour's "Investing in Tomorrow" conference learned that this picture is only a partial one, and that the province has serious economic problems that must be dealt with.

UNEMPLOYMENT & JOB CREATION – HIDDEN LOSSES

Unemployment in Alberta has fallen to about 6 percent, with some regions of the province enjoying rates as low as 3 percent. Job creation continues to be a strong feature of the economy, and the government cites these figures as evidence that its policies are paying off. There is, however, another side to the employment picture.

The labour force participation rate has fallen, making the unemployment rate look lower than it actually is. Over the last 15 years, Alberta has "lost" 45,000 people from the provincial labour force. This masking effect of labour force drop-outs is especially significant in the case of youth, where the true rate of unemployment is closer to 21% than to the "official" youth unemployment rate of 12%.

Official job creation figures also hide the drift in our economy towards part-time, temporary and contract employment. Fifteen years ago 59% of working-age adults were employed full-time; today that figure has dropped to 54%. Further, many people who have employment at full-time hours are working at jobs which are temporary, conditional, or on term contracts.

The net effect of this shift in employment patterns is to create a climate of uncertainty and fear in the work force—even though official unemployment rates remain low. Families and individuals face an uncertain future, and are therefore unable or unwilling to make long-term financial commitments for housing and other significant economic investments. Since part-time and casual jobs seldom offer a full range of employee benefits, this kind of employment also has the effect of reducing the economic well-being of working people in a way that doesn't show up in average wage figures.

WAGES AND EARNINGS—A PATTERN OF DECLINE

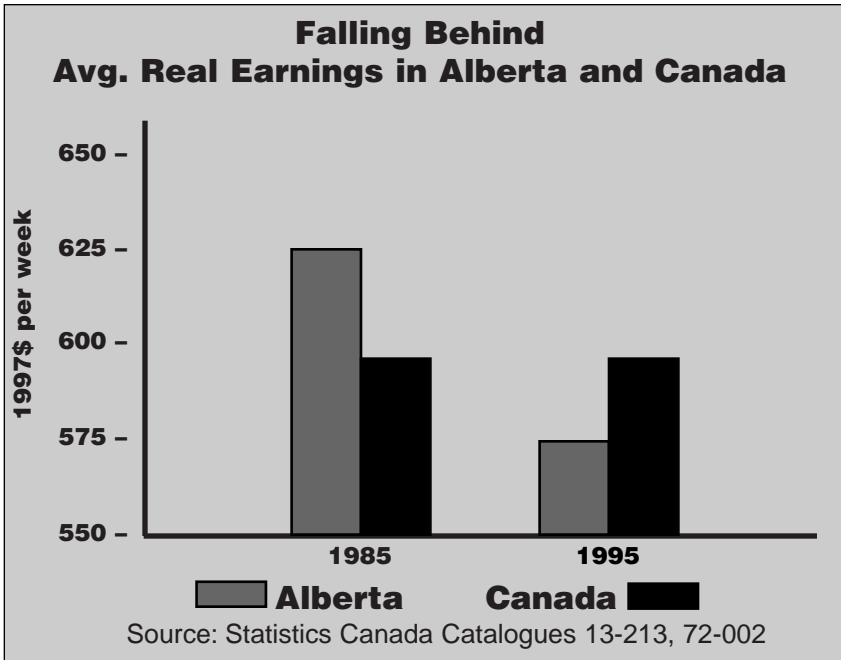
Real (after-inflation) wages have been falling in Alberta for much of the last decade and a half. This disturbing trend is in marked contrast to the rest of

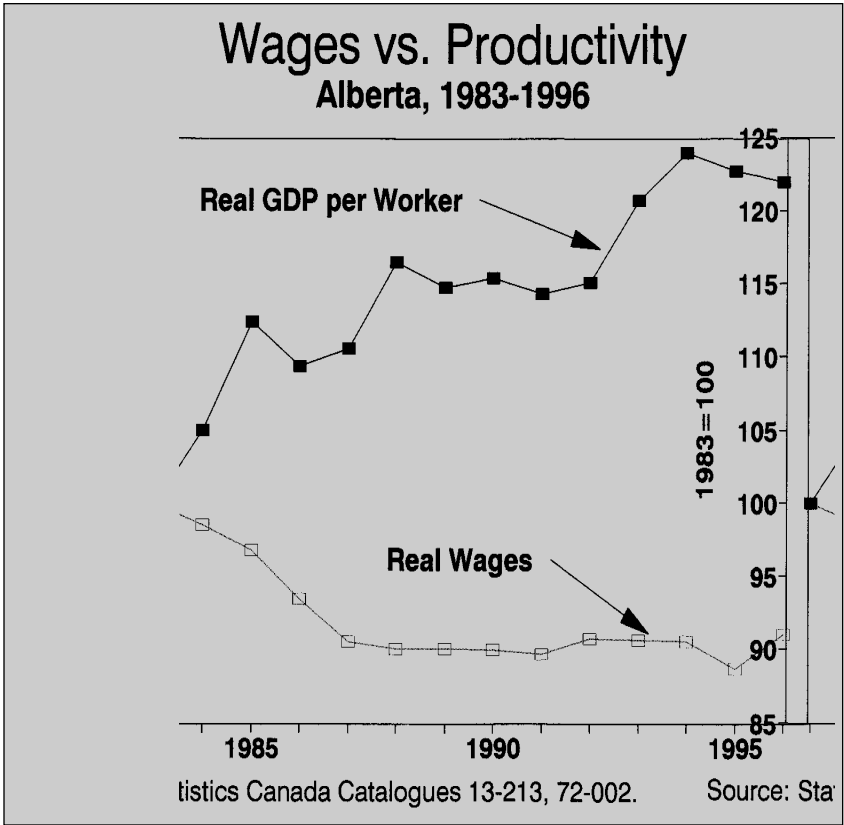
Canada, where real wages have been stagnant but have shown no serious decline over the same period.

There is no obvious reason for this trend, which has accelerated since the Klein government came to power. Alberta has the strongest record of overall economic growth of any province in Canada since the beginning of the 1990s. This growth has not, however, been reflected by increases in wages and salaries.

Alberta's labour laws and government policies toward unions may have played a role in depressing wages. Provincial legislation makes it harder to organize workers into unions than in other Canadian jurisdictions and the right to strike is denied to a larger percentage of unionized workers than in other provinces. Further, the government-as-employer has used its extensive powers under the Public Service Employee Relations Act to drive down real wages in the public sector.

Certainly the negative trend in real wages in Alberta does not stem from any of the traditional causes. In the past, economists and corporate leaders have argued that wage levels must reflect productivity, and that overall wage levels cannot rise until workers become more productive. But, in Alberta dramatic increases in worker productivity have not been matched by increases in real wages, instead the opposite has happened. This growing gap between productivity and wages has resulted in a boom in corporate profits—but a declining standard of living for most workers.

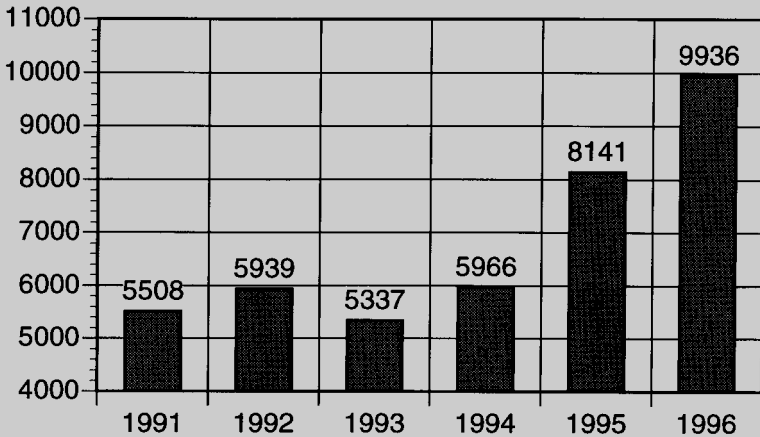




The trend towards lower wages has serious implications for the overall health of the Alberta economy. Growing wages stimulate consumer spending and increase the tax base from which the government draws its revenues. Depressed wages, on the other hand, result in reduced consumer demand, and limited growth in retail sales. They also cause increased costs for the public and industry, as more and more individuals are forced into bankruptcy. It comes as no surprise, that Alberta has the fastest-growing rate of individual bankruptcy in Canada.

In 1996, real hourly wages in Alberta showed a significant increase for the first time since the Klein government came to power. If this trend continues over the next few years, Albertans can look forward to better days. It is significant, however, that this increase in wages is occurring rather late in the business cycle—after five years of vigorous GDP growth. If the next recession causes the downward trend in wages to reassert itself, Albertans could find themselves locked into a low wage economy for the foreseeable future.

Consumer Bankruptcies Alberta, 1991-96



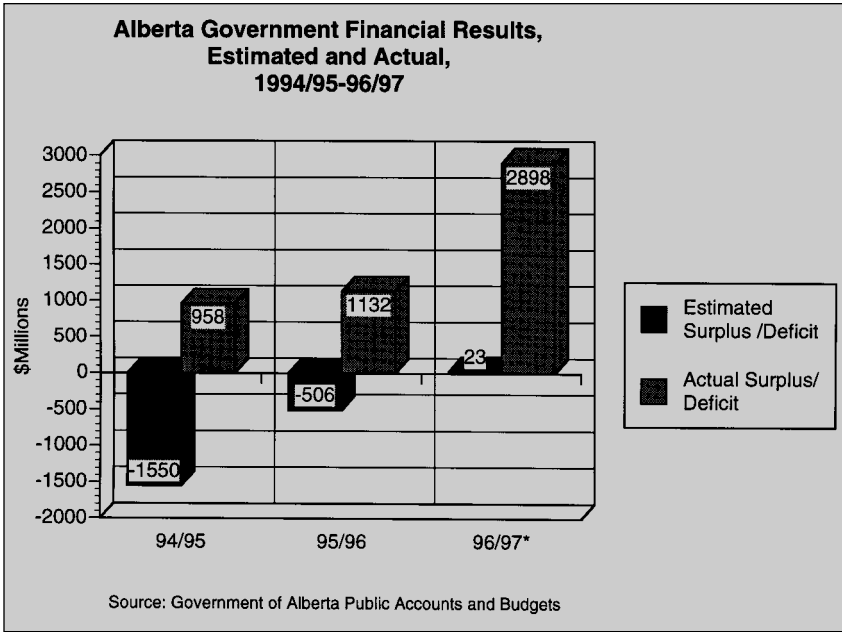
Source: Alberta Economic Development and Tourism, Monthly Economic Review, April 1997

PUBLIC FINANCES

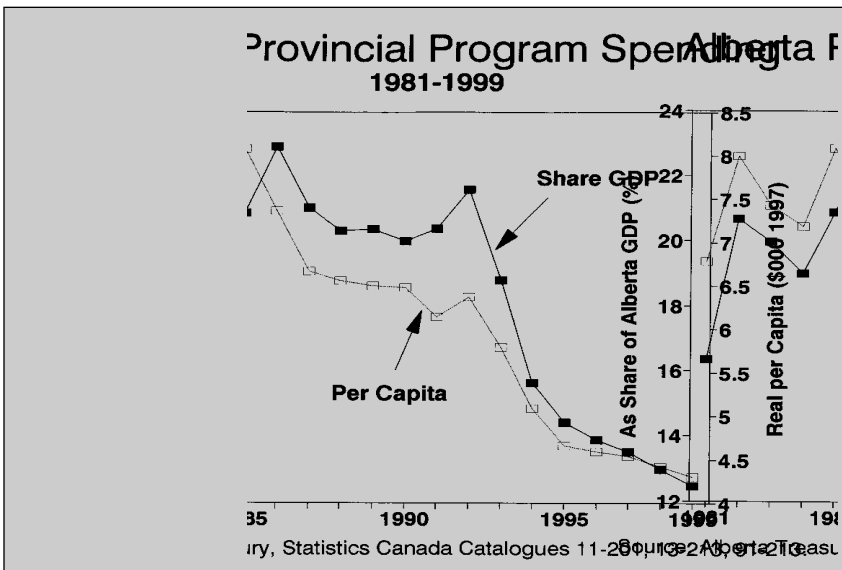
The government of Alberta has run three consecutive fiscal surpluses totalling just under \$5 billion. Despite this success, the province continues to spend less than the rest of Canada on educating its youth and caring for its sick, elderly, and poor.

The trend of declining real per capita public spending continues after a decade of cutbacks, thanks in part to the provisions of the *Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act*. This legislation requires the Provincial Treasurer to use extremely conservative estimates for revenue projections in the budgeting process, and to direct the resulting surpluses exclusively to paying down the provincial debt.

The precipitous decline in public-sector investment in Alberta affects the provincial economy in two ways. First, it acts as a drag on the overall growth of the economy. Second, it can undermine future economic development by lowering both the quality and the quantity of public services in the province. Alberta now has about half the hospital beds it had in 1991, and the average class size in schools has increased steadily for the past five years.



Repairing the revenue base of government is critical to any program of reinvestment in public services. The government of Alberta has boasted that their policies give Albertans the lowest taxes in Canada—the so-called Alberta Advantage. Delegates to the conference learned that while this is true for business and high income earners, less affluent Albertans pay higher taxes than they would in several other provinces.



**THE ALBERTA (DIS) ADVANTAGE
TAXES BY INCOME, RANKINGS, 1996**

SINGLE TAXPAYER, 1 DEPENDANT, LOW TO HIGH

	\$75,000	\$20,000
1	Alberta	Quebec
2	BC	Ontario
3	PEI	Manitoba
4	Nova Scotia	BC
5	Ontario	Nova Scotia
6	New Brunswick	Alberta
7	Manitoba	PEI
8	Saskatchewan	New Brunswick
9	Newfoundland	Saskatchewan
10	Quebec	Newfoundland

The move to user fees, levies, and other non-income-dependent levies has also served to give the overall tax system in the province a regressive character. While complaints about the tax system are routinely advanced from both the left and right ends of the political spectrum, the simple fact is that both the tax system and the system for gathering energy revenues are shrouded in secrecy. Until these systems are made transparent so that informed public debate can take place, real tax reform will be difficult if not impossible.

CONCLUSION

While the economy is booming, the majority of Albertans are experiencing a deterioration in their quality of life. Real incomes are falling and economic insecurity is increasing. Regulations designed to protect the environment and the safety of workers are being eliminated or go unenforced. Corporate profits and government surpluses swell while poverty increases and young people face a bleak future of contingent employment. There are serious problems developing in the Alberta economy, and the province is ill-served by those who ignore the warning signs.

“The average worker in Alberta produces 25 percent more than they did ten years ago, but they are getting paid ten percent less.”

– JIM STANFORD, ECONOMIST

**CONFERENCE
RECOMMENDATIONS**

WAGES AND INCOME

ONE OF THE MOST pressing problems identified at the conference was the absolute decline in real wages and income in Alberta over the past decade. Despite a healthy, virtually booming economy over the past four years, wage levels have yet to reach previous levels in real terms. This has created a serious drag on the economy—particularly in the housing and retail sectors which are extremely sensitive to changes in consumer spending power.

The following are recommendations for government action advanced by participants in the “Investing in Tomorrow” conference to address the problem. Delegates put a priority on raising the statutory minimum wage and benefit levels. They also called on government to abandon the current cheap-labour initiatives in the public sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) *Raise the minimum wage.* This was, by far, the most repeated suggestion in this category. One workshop called for a \$10.00 per hour wage—others related to the poverty line. The most recent and rigorous studies have shown that raising the minimum wage actually results in slight employment gains.
- 2) *Establish a system of mandatory minimum benefits.* Right now most management and unionized employees receive a broad spectrum of benefits like pensions, dental care, pharmaceutical care, eye care, sick leave and extended paid vacations. But the majority of Albertans get few or none of these benefits, and paying their own way is more expensive and a real drain on disposable income.
- 3) *Require pro-rated benefits for part-time workers.* Most part-time workers receive no benefits at all. That’s one of the things that make them so attractive to employers. Requiring pro-rated benefits for part-time workers, as was successfully done in Saskatchewan, would help end the use of part time workers as cheap labour, and put some badly needed money into their pockets.
- 4) *Establish minimum hour requirements for part-time workers.* Many employers carry far more part-time workers than they need. The result is a very insecure job that can leave such workers—many of them young people—forced to hold down two or three jobs just to get 16 hours of work in a week.
- 5) *Establish a pay-equity program.* Women workers still earn about two-thirds of the wages of men in jobs requiring similar levels of skill, knowl-

edge and responsibility. Basically, ‘women’s work’ has been artificially and systematically undervalued—with the creation of enduring job ghettos perpetuated by the marketplace. Pay equity programs are one of the few programs that effectively redress this injustice.

- 6) ***Include factory farm workers under all labour legislation.*** Farm workers are excluded from employment standards and other labour legislation. In the case of corporate ‘factory farms’, this has simply given government blessing to a cheap labour system.
- 7) ***Ensure adequate inspection and enforcement of employment standards.*** Unorganized workers are most likely to be dependent upon minimum employment standards. In the complaint driven system of employment standards now in place, individual workers have to put their jobs at risk every time they try to enforce their ‘rights’ to minimum wages, overtime pay, and statutory holidays. The only effective alternative is to put sufficient government inspectors in the field to ensure compliance without putting workers at risk.
- 8) ***Establish a sector council with full labour representation to review working conditions and wages in the service sector.*** Such a council could expose and correct some of the underlying problems in Alberta’s largest employment sector. Similar councils could be established to examine wages and conditions in other sectors as well.
- 9) ***Stop contracting out and privatizing public services and programs.*** The conviction of most participants was that, in such initiatives, lower wages are the only cost savings involved, and those are offset by the need for profits and the loss of control over quality of service.
- 10) ***Contracting-out and privatization should only be considered in those cases where it can be proven to be in the public interest.*** That would require a cost-benefit analysis with specific reference to total final costs to the community, and require that public needs for decent jobs, sustainable growth, elimination of poverty, and improved quality of life for all also be met before such initiatives would be approved.
- 11) ***Institute a fair wage policy for all services, production and public projects that are outsourced.*** Fair wage policies are government policies that require specific wage and benefit levels exist at any firm wishing to sell good or services to the government. These kind of “fair wage” laws have been successfully implemented in a number of major American cities.

JOB CREATION

THERE WAS A STRONG CONVICTION that government has a responsibility to ensure that there are enough jobs created to meet the needs of the people of Alberta—and that those jobs should be full-time and should provide decent wages and benefits. Again, some of the recommendations target the government as employer, while others examine other mechanisms the government can use for job creation:

- 1) *Reduce worktime with no loss in pay or benefits.* By reducing the statutory work week, governments in western Europe have made credible gains in job creation.
- 2) *Make all overtime voluntary.* Reductions of overtime hours also have a proven job creation aspect—and they go a long way to improving the quality of life for employees. According to StatsCanada, the amount of unpaid overtime has also been rising—something that should be dealt with by employment standards officers.
- 3) *Restrict business access to public support (grants, loans, tax breaks) to companies that meet specific job creation targets.* It is a very elementary step to include binding job creation clauses when government provides financial support to businesses.
- 4) *Allocate a portion of all natural resources produced in Alberta to domestic industry to stimulate value-added production and employment in the manufacturing sector.* This has been done in Alberta before, and is one way to allow smaller Alberta manufacturers to compete with huge out-of-province enterprises.
- 5) *Create decent paying, full-time jobs by expanding and protecting public sector employment.* Public employment should be the cornerstone of provincial employment strategies. Public employees should have decent paying jobs that will help buttress the economy against the booms and busts of resource-based industries, while at the same time greatly improving the quality of life for all Albertans through their work.
- 6) *Pressure the Federal government to implement door-to-door postal service in all communities with a population greater than 2,000.* Postal work provides a valuable public service and good jobs to Albertans. Right now, some people get the advantage of door-to-door delivery while others do not.
- 7) *Raise stumpage fees to the national average, and then enact an incentive program that reduces fees based upon job creation, sound silvaculture and maintenance of public recreation facilities.* This program would actu-

ally reward employers who created jobs and public benefit—instead of attempting to penalize companies which do not.

- 8) *Support the creation of labour sponsored investment funds by giving tax breaks to the investors.* These funds would provide venture capital to responsible employers to help create meaningful jobs. Such funds are already proving their worth in Manitoba and B.C.
- 9) *Introduce a ‘buy Alberta’ policy for government procurement of goods and services.* Government is a huge purchaser of goods and services. By giving preference to Alberta companies wherever possible, the government can stimulate job creation in the province.
- 10) *Upgrade the transportation, water treatment, sewage, communications and power infrastructure.* This upgrading is badly needed in Alberta municipalities. It would improve the urban environment, improve public health and safety, and create important jobs. As a major beneficiary of Alberta’s infrastructure, the corporate sector should be required to pay a special assessment to cover the costs of infrastructure development and maintenance.
- 11) *Focus on sustainable, local economic development in job creation strategies.*
- 12) *Encourage diversification through a program to provide secondary industry research and development.*

“We’re doing so well here in Alberta that even though the forest industry has grown by a factor of four in the past ten years, we laid off or got rid of half of the forest rangers.”

– A TOWNHALL PARTICIPANT

PUBLIC SERVICES

THE GENERAL CONSENSUS at the “Investing in Tomorrow” conference was that the government is responsible for maintaining the social infrastructure of the Province as well as the physical infrastructure, and that its first priority today must be restoring that infrastructure through adequate funding of public services and programs. As one of the wealthiest provinces in Canada, Alberta should be providing public services second to none.

It is public services, above all, that will protect the right of all members of society to: food, clean water, a livelihood, a home, protection from violence, health care, a safe environment, an education, equality of opportunity, and a say in the future and cultural participation. It is the responsibility of government to ensure that these rights are recognized to the highest level society is capable of providing. It is particularly important that government recognize the need to care for the sick, poor, and disadvantaged; to ensure equality of opportunity, and to protect a high quality of life for all Albertans.

Virtually all conference participants agreed that public services should be publicly funded, universally, and equally accessible, and publicly administered. Most believe that such services should not be operated ‘for-profit’, and should be delivered by public employees.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: EDUCATION

Recognizing that every child has the right to a fully-funded, quality public education, delegates made the following recommendations:

- 1) *Alberta must equitably fund public education—both K-12 and post-secondary—through fair taxation of persons, property and corporations.* Current education funding is woefully inadequate to meet students’ needs—and continues to shrink in real per capita funding. Student to teacher ratios continue to climb, and important educational support—like librarians, library acquisitions and speech pathology programs—have been cut.
- 2) *The objective must be to develop the potential of each student, and the resources and programs needed to do so must be provided.* Funding must follow program and student needs—not be dictated by budgetary concerns. In the public school system, the government has seized the property taxing ability which school boards had since the before the province was formed in 1905—cutting off a key revenue-raising resource.
- 3) *The current market-choice competition model of education should be replaced with one based upon human/community/social development.* Competition between schools for pupils that has resulted from the ‘funding

follows the student' approach is a destructive waste of time for educators. By its very nature this approach will result in a widening gap between richer and poorer schools and programs.

- 4) *To ensure equal access to post-secondary education, tuition fees should be frozen immediately and then significantly reduced.* Funding must be increased to compensate. If escalating tuitions are not checked, post-secondary education will become the preserve of the children of well-to-do families.
- 5) *To ensure equal access to public education, all fees must be eliminated in the public school system.* Funding must be increased to compensate. There are already school programs (like field trips) in which some children cannot participate because of economic circumstance and parental refusal to accept 'charity'.
- 6) *Accountability measures must reflect the goals of education for life, employment, and citizenship in a democratic society.* Simply measuring scores on specific tests in no ways accounts for the broad social education that is an integral part of public education.
- 7) *The desired levels of education should dictate the resources and staffing levels required.* Funding levels should then be set to meet those requirements. The need to attract and retain highly-qualified and dedicated staff must be recognized as crucial for the success of the program.
- 8) *Meaningful staff input into all decision making processes.* Teachers and support staff have expertise gained in front-line education. Their experience and knowledge must be part of the decision making process—most efficiently through their collective organizations.
- 9) *A mandatory labour studies course, created in consultation with labour, should be part of the public school curriculum.* Students need to be educated about the work world from a workers perspective. Most importantly, they should be taught about the laws and institutions that are in place to protect their interests in the workplace.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: HEALTH CARE

Recognizing that health care is a basic human right and that all members of society have a right to the highest possible level of health and health care, the government should:

- 1) *Restore adequate funding of health care:* Alberta now spends less per capita on health care than any other province in the country. Government spokespeople say that low levels of spending don't necessarily result in lower levels of care. But experience over the last four years suggests other-

wise. Without adequate levels of funding both quality and accessibility will continue to decline. Conference delegates suggested that per capita health spending should be increased at least to the national average.

- 2) ***Ensure that information on health outcomes and public health programs are available and accessible to the public:*** One of the big problems confronting defenders of Medicare in Alberta is lack of information. Without detailed information about health outcomes, it is difficult to evaluate the real impact of the massive changes that have been made to our health care system. Keeping this information confidential or neglecting to collect it may protect the political interests of the government. But it certainly will not protect the interests of Albertans—who deserve the best health care system that the government can possibly provide.
- 3) ***Make all regional health boards elected:*** Not everyone agrees with the regionalization of health care or the creation of health boards. But, if the government is going to hand important responsibilities over to these health boards, they should be accountable to the public.
- 4) ***Extend health care coverage to include prescription drugs, dental care, and non-institutional and alternative therapies:*** Canadians agree that comprehensive public health care is a right of citizenship. And economists agree that the system actually costs less than private alternatives and provides our businesses with a competitive advantage. But, despite all the public support for public health care and all the evidence showing its economic benefits, our health care system is not truly comprehensive. Conference delegates said the time has come to change this by extending Medicare to cover prescription drugs, dental care and certain alternative therapies. Such a move would help reduce overall health costs and guarantee that Albertans finally have access to truly comprehensive care.
- 5) ***Develop effective preventative health programs:*** One of the best ways to keep medical costs in check is through the practice of preventative health care. Conference delegates agreed that more money should be spent on preventative health care programs. Such spending will actually reduce health care costs in the long run.
- 6) ***Assume responsibility for training and upgrading health care providers:*** Medical technology and procedures change rapidly. In order to provide patients with the best possible care, health care practitioners must continually upgrade their training. But, as it stands right now, they often have to pay for these skill-upgrades themselves. In fact, government cuts have almost eliminated funds for training and upgrading. Delegates to the conference felt this should change. Adequate funding for training and re-training is essential for the delivery of high-quality health care.

- 7) ***Reaffirm support for the guiding principles of the Canada Health Act:*** This almost goes without saying. But, because of his government's dismal record on health care, conference delegates felt that Premier Klein should be encouraged to formally and publicly express his commitment to the guiding principle of Medicare. At the same time, he should be encouraged to renounce all policy initiatives that run contrary to those principles -- like the establishment of private, for-profit hospitals in Alberta.
- 8) ***Address the link between health and social conditions through improved social welfare provisions, such as school lunch programs and other means:*** Conference delegates felt very strongly that more attention should be paid to the link between poverty and ill-health. Concrete measures—such as school lunch programs—should be taken to ensure that all Albertans can grow up healthy and remain healthy regardless of their financial situation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS—SOCIAL SERVICES

The fundamental purpose of the social safety net is to ensure that all Albertans can live in dignity with an adequate income and appropriate supports to meet their unique and often challenging needs. To that end, government should:

- 1) ***Increase basic income support levels to exceed the Canadian Council on Social Development's low income cut-off.*** Alberta's income support programs do not even begin to cover basic needs. Recipients get no money for phones or transportation—yet they are expected to find work. Most have to decide between housing and buying enough food to survive—which explains the growing demand on food banks.
- 2) ***Fund a public housing program to create decent, affordable, accessible housing.*** There is a serious lack of decent, affordable housing—and unless it is built publically, it won't be built at all.
- 3) ***Create a universal, public child care program.*** This long promised public service is badly needed by virtually all working Albertans—whether on income support programs or not.
- 4) ***Establish an acceptable national standard for evaluating social programs.*** Right now, governments simply provide whatever level of service they feel like, and there is no meaningful way for the public to judge whether or not the programs are adequate.
- 5) ***Ensure that every Albertan has the choice of full and secure community integration.***

- 6) *Protect the right of families to access services that will enable them to maintain their children within their family home or local community.*
- 7) *Become a signatory to the United Nations convention on the Rights of the Child, and implement and enforce the terms of the convention.* The Alberta government has refused to sign this convention—and must be asked for a rationale. Many substantially poorer jurisdictions have had no problem supporting the convention.

“I’m a government worker and I’m sick and tired of hearing the myth tht were all lazy and overpaid. Our government is pitting the public that we’re here to serve against us.”

– A TOWNHALL PARTICIPANT

TAXATION AND GOVERNMENT FINANCE

OVER THE PAST FOUR OR FIVE YEARS, Albertans have been bombarded with dire warnings about public-sector debt. Politicians like Ralph Klein at the provincial level and Preston Manning at the federal level have built their careers around campaigns to bring the “debt monster” under control.

But despite all the “sky-is-falling” rhetoric, the evidence now shows that the Alberta government’s fiscal crisis of the early 90s had more to do with high interest rates, a regular down-turn in the economic cycle and government hands-outs to political friends (Bovar, Gainers, NovaTel, MagCan) than it did with “runaway spending” on public programs. In fact, once we adjust for inflation, per capita spending on public services like health care and education was actually falling in 1993 when Premier Klein launched his “deficit attack.”

Now, far from being an economic basket case, the Alberta government has racked up three annual surpluses in a row totalling almost \$5 billion. Yet despite this abundance of cash, the province continues to spend less on health care than even the poorest provinces in Canada. And spending on education has fallen well below the Canadian average.

At the same time, billions of dollars in potential tax revenue—money that could have been used to restore the quality of our public services and infrastructure—has been lost as a result of corporate tax breaks and low resource royalties (oil and gas) and even lower stumpage fees (forestry).

As a result of these trends, Alberta—the country’s richest province—continues to provide its citizens with substandard services. The government is also letting its citizens down by funding more and more of its operations through non-tax sources like user fees and gambling revenue.

To deal with these problems, delegates to the “Investing in Tomorrow” conference made the following recommendations:

- 1) **Repeal the government’s Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act:** In the eyes of conference delegates, the *Debt Retirement Act* is a dangerous political tool whose real purpose was to maintain the public “debt hysteria” that helped get the budget-cutting Klein government elected in 1993 and 1997. Delegates agreed that the Act has institutionalized under-funding for important public services like education, health care and social services. If the Act is not eliminated, delegates believe that the quality and accessibility of services in Alberta will continue to decline. In the end, Alberta — the wealthiest province in Canada — will continue to have the most poorly-funded public services in the country. To turn this situation around, most conference delegates agreed that the Act should be repealed. Some went further, saying a moratorium should be imposed on all debt payments — at

least until necessary investments have been made to restore the quality of public services in the province.

- 2) ***Establish an independent commission of inquiry to examine Alberta's tax and royalty systems:*** Virtually all conference delegates agreed that the Alberta tax and royalty systems are inequitable and regressive. Something is seriously wrong, they said, when people earning more than \$75,000 pay the lowest taxes in the country and people earning \$20,000 pay more than the national average. Conference delegates also questioned the wisdom of tax cuts for businesses and high income earners. These measures will simply rob government of the revenue needed to improve the quality of public services such as education and health care. Scepticism was also expressed about Alberta's system for assessing and collecting resource royalties (oil and gas) and stumpage fees (forestry). Delegates felt corporations exploiting Alberta's resources — especially our non-renewable resources — should be required to pay more for the privilege. To deal with all of these concerns, conference delegates proposed the establishment of commission of inquiry to look at taxes and royalties in Alberta. This commission should be independent from government and include representation from as many sectors of Alberta society as possible (i.e. labour, government, business, community groups, environmental groups etc.) The goal of the commission would be to fashion a new tax and royalty system that puts a priority on generating adequate revenue for high-quality public services and promoting a good quality of life for all Albertans.
- 3) ***Ensure strict enforcement of corporate tax collection:*** The majority of conference participants were also concerned about collection of taxes from corporations. Concerns were raised that billions of dollars in corporate profits go un-taxed each year. Steps should be taken, delegates said, to ensure that all profitable corporations shoulder their fair share of the tax burden.
- 4) ***Reduce or eliminate as many government user fees as possible:*** The majority of conference delegates felt that public programs and services should be financed directly out of government revenue — not through user fees. They argued that if the government introduced a fairer and more equitable tax system, there would be no need for extra charges. Delegates said that user fees essentially force Albertans to pay twice for services — first, when they pay their taxes, and a second time when they use the service. This kind of “two-step shake-down” is particularly hard on middle and low-income earners. Conference delegates were most adamantly opposed to user fees in schools and in the health care system.

- 5) ***Introduce a new budgeting process:*** Most conference delegates believed that the Alberta government's approach to budgeting has been dangerously narrow and short-sighted over the past few years. In particular, they felt that the government's exclusive focus on the debt and deficit had blinded them to the need for investment in people. Delegates recommended that the government develop a new budgeting process that looks at the whole business cycle — recognizing that massive spending cuts can actually lengthen a recession. The budget process should also acknowledge the need for on-going investment in health care education and other programs and services that bolster Alberta's "human capital" and strengthen its "social infrastructure."
- 6) ***Ensure that businesses receiving tax benefits or other public-sector financial support meet adequate standards regarding labour relations, environmental responsibility, health and safety standards etc.:*** From the point of view of most conference participants, very few Alberta businesses could be described as "good corporate citizens." Delegates suggested the government could promote better corporate citizenship by restricting tax breaks and other public support to businesses that meet certain ethical and community standards.
- 7) ***Increase Royalties on Resources (oil and gas):*** One of the reasons the Alberta government started racking up debt in the late 80s and early 90s is that the Getty government slashed royalty rates for oil and gas companies. This move was designed to encourage these companies to continue investing in Alberta even though oil prices had fallen dramatically. But when oil prices shot back up in the mid 90s and oil and gas companies again started making billions in profits, the government never returned royalty rates to their previous levels. The result was that the amount of money brought in from resource royalties plummeted and has stayed relatively low even though the oil patch is booming again. Conference delegates felt that if the government returned royalty rates to pre-1986 levels, there would be enough money for increased program spending (education, health care etc.) and debt reduction.
- 8) ***Eliminate gambling revenue as a source of funding for services:*** Conference delegates felt that government-sponsored gambling is an inappropriate way to raise revenue for services. This kind of revenue-generating scheme is essentially a tax on Albertans who can least afford it (the poor and the desperate). And it would be entirely unnecessary if we had a more equitable, progressive tax system that made sure all Albertans — including the wealthy — paid their fair share.
- 9) ***Introduce tax breaks or other incentives to encourage "social entrepreneurship":*** Government tax breaks should only be available to companies that meet certain social objectives, such as job creation, environmental protection or affirmative-action hiring.

REGULATION

SINCE THEY WERE ELECTED, Premier Klein and his cabinet have radically changed the face of government in Alberta. Under Klein's leadership, the Conservative government has taken a "three-prong approach" to reform. The first two "prongs" — budget cutting and privatization — have generated a lot of heated debate

The third "prong" — deregulation — has received less attention. But just because it has not been talked about as much doesn't mean that it is any less important than the other two "prongs." In fact, in the long run, the effects of de-regulation on the economy may be at least as significant as the effects of privatization and budget cuts for government programs and services.

Klein and other spokespeople for the government say de-regulation is good for the Alberta economy. They say it removes bureaucratic red tape and increases the flexibility — and ultimately the profitability — of Alberta firms.

But not everyone agrees. From the point of view of most delegates to the "Investing in Tomorrow" conference, the government's aggressive moves to deregulate the Alberta economy have been a disaster.

In particular, they felt that the government campaign to deregulate the Alberta economy is threatening our environment, and undermining workplace health and safety. It also has serious implications for public health and safety. Delegates were also extremely sceptical of new regulatory schemes that allow companies to regulate themselves.

In an effort to address these concerns, conference delegates made the following recommendations:

- 1) ***Abandon moves towards "self-regulation"***: In the words of one Townhall participant, "self-regulation is like asking a speeder to pull himself over, take himself down to the police station and write himself a ticket. It just won't happen." Pointing to the recent example of unreported chemical leaks at the Swan Hills Hazardous Waste Treatment plant, conference delegates argued that self-regulation really means little or no regulation at all.
- 2) ***Reassert government responsibility for making and enforcing regulations that promote the public good***: Given that "self-regulation" almost never works, conference delegates agreed that the Alberta government should immediately reclaim responsibility for making and enforcing regulation in the province. Delegates saw a particularly important role for government regulating the following areas: public health, public safety, environmental protection, consumer rights, workplace rights and workplace health and safety.

- 3) ***Increase resources allocated for regulation in key areas of the economy:*** In a complex and growing economy like Alberta's, effective inspection and enforcement of regulations is not easy. And it is next to impossible if the government refuses to allocate adequate resources. With this in mind, conference delegates called on the provincial government to significantly increase budgets for inspection and active enforcement of regulations. Delegates saw effective and aggressive regulation of business as one of the core duties of government.
- 4) ***Call on the federal government to re-regulate the transportation industry:*** In addition to de-regulation at the provincial level, conference delegates expressed concern about de-regulation of several areas of the economy that fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government. In particular, they called on the federal government to immediately re-regulate the following transportation industries: trucking, railroads and airline transportation. Most delegates agreed that de-regulation in these areas had led to economic instability (i.e. Canada's financial troubled airlines) and increasing health and safety concerns (i.e. tires flying off trucks on Canadian highways). Some delegates called on the federal government to re-nationalize major national transportation firms like Air Canada and Canadian National (CN).
- 5) ***Improve legislation and regulations that protect the interests of working people:*** One of the major concerns raised by conference delegates had to do with the weakening of regulations designed to protect the rights of Albertans in the workplace. Delegates agreed that the protections provided by the Employment Standards Code, the Alberta Labour Code, and various regulations governing workplace health and safety are already too weak. But without adequate inspection and enforcement they are almost totally meaningless.
- 6) ***Improve and actively enforce regulations to protect the environment:*** Delegates to the conference were concerned about deregulation in all areas. But many were particularly concerned about the long-term effects of de-regulation on the wildlife and the environment of the province.
- 7) ***Introduce an independent, autonomous citizens' group to monitor corporate adherence to regulations:*** In an effort to ensure better compliance with regulations, conference delegates proposed the creation of a citizens' commission — independent from the government — to monitor corporate compliance to regulations governing public health, public safety, environmental protection, consumer rights, workplace rights and workplace health and safety.

- 8) *Stop self-regulation in the forestry sector:* De-regulation in the forestry sector was another area that really touched a nerve with conference delegates. They said self regulation in this sector should be abandoned.
- 9) *Enact whistle-blower legislation:* Even in a system where government aggressively enforces regulations, many corporate offenders are able to get around the rules. To help avoid this problem, conference participants called for a “Whistle-Blower Protection Act.” Such an act would protect workers who report their employers for violating regulation designed to protect the public good. This would make regulation easier and more effective.
- 10) *Return Workers’ Compensation system to founding principles:* There was a broad suspicion among conference delegates that the Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB) is consciously rejecting legitimate claims and forcing injured workers onto an endless merry-go-round of appeals in order to reduce the number of claims in the system. Delegates agreed that the WCB should return its focus to its central founding principle—namely that workers should not be penalized financially for injuries sustained at work. Current WCB policy has resulted in too many denied and delayed claims. This approach runs entirely contrary to the original purpose of WCB and it should be stopped.

“Deregulation is one of those things that sounds so damn innocent when you read about it... but let’s not be fooled by small words. Deregulation is bad for Alberta and, dammit, we have to stop it.”

– A TOWNHALL PARTICIPANT

LABOUR LAW

THERE WAS BROAD CONCERN among the delegates about the state of workers' rights in Alberta. The Province has the lowest unionization rate in Canada—a fact that many tied to the dismal state of wages, the unchecked rise of part-time and conditional employment, and the poor state of seniors' pensions. Specific measures to improve and protect the fundamental right of workers to unionize were:

- 1) *Remove barriers to union certification.* Right now, Alberta requires a mandatory vote—giving employers time to 'electioneer' and use their immense power in the workplace to dissuade workers from supporting the union.
- 2) *Automatic certification upon proven support from a majority of employees involved.* Certification votes upon proof of 35% support from employees involved. These changes would make it impossible for employers to stop unionization by simply refusing to negotiate a first collective agreement.
- 3) *Enact meaningful remedies for anti-union, unfair labour practices, such as directed certification, imposition of collective agreements, and fines against employers who violate labour laws.* Under current labour law, employers can violate the labour code with impunity during certification drives and in bargaining (some simply refuse to bargain, knowing that there is no real redress for the union—unlike B.C. and Saskatchewan where first contracts can be imposed).
- 4) *Grant broad discretion to workers and unions in deciding the scope of a bargaining unit.* Many times, bargaining unit descriptions are arbitrarily set in a way that hinders employees' right to have a union.
- 5) *Prohibit government interference in the free collective bargaining process* (no compulsory arbitration or back-to-work legislation). Too often, Alberta workers are forced into the very employer-biased compulsory arbitration process.
- 6) *Extend the unrestricted right-to-strike to all employees.* Without the right to strike, employees are stripped of their only effective tool at the bargaining table. The United Nations has condemned Alberta for its exclusions on the right-to-strike. The labour market is the only place where the Alberta government does not support the 'free market'.
- 7) *Ban the hiring of strikebreakers.* The hiring of strikebreakers during labour disputes is the number one cause of picket line confrontations and the prime strategy of anti-union employers. They transform disputes about

wages and working conditions into a fight to protect jobs, and pit the unemployed against the employed.

- 8) *Protect the freedom of speech of elected union officers to voice the concerns of their members.* Union officers have the duty and right to speak out for their membership. Violating this right is a direct attack on labour and on the freedom of speech.
- 9) *Cooperate with labour to create a program to review and improve labour legislation.* The labour movement has been trying for years to improve labour legislation in Alberta.
- 10) *A significant recommendation calls for the government to develop bone fide and ongoing opportunities for business and labour (through the Alberta Federation of Labour) to have meaningful input into Alberta policy development and administration processes.* There was a dissent to this recommendation that criticized tripartite measures like this as unrealistic and ineffective for labour.

“I’m one of those Albertans who has a bit of an advantage. I have a good paying job with a lot of security. I’m able to take care of my family... But that’s because I belong to a strong union. We fought hard to get where we are today.”

– A TOWNHALL PARTICIPANT

TRAINING

A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS addressed the need for an active role for government in training the workforce. As production technologies change, so do the skill demands on the workforce. To accommodate this need, government should:

- 1) *Restore and expand the apprenticeship system, and create an active campaign to recruit young Albertans into skilled trade occupations.*
- 2) *Provide incentives to encourage employer participation in training, with the proviso that such training be portable and meet recognized government standards.*
- 3) *Levy a payroll charge on employers to be used for the education and retraining of workers.*

SECTOR-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

THERE WERE SEVERAL SECTOR specific recommendations that dealt with specialized problems. The agriculture and the arts and culture sectors in particular had problems that needed to be addressed outside of the more overarching issues.

The *agriculture* workshop had several key recommendations for government action:

- 1) *That the government recognize the family farm as the basic unit of agricultural production.* This would mean repealing legislation that encourages contract farming and corporate vertical integration in the industry.
- 2) *Land transfer legislation that encourages and supports new and young family farmers should be enacted.* Taxes on land transfers should either come due on the date payment is received, or be treated as Registered Income Funds or RRSPs.
- 3) *A farm safety net should be created.*
- 4) *The government should assume responsibility for promoting agricultural produce and products domestically and abroad.*
- 5) *Orderly marketing structures like the Canadian Wheat Board must be supported—not challenged with public money in the court system.* The agricultural policy process should not continue to be co-opted by the provision of public money to specific producer organizations.
- 6) *The government should assume responsibility for maintenance of the rural infrastructure by developing equitable cost-sharing and revenue arrangements with rural municipalities.*
- 7) *The government should reinvest in agricultural research and development, with the resulting intellectual property used in the public interest.* Genetic material patents rights should remain in the public domain. There should be a research focus on environmentally sustainable alternatives.
- 8) *The rail grain car fleet should be transferred to the control of Canadian farmers.*

The *arts and culture sector*, despite its relatively large economic impact, has had little success in effecting supportive public policy—largely due to its lack of a strong lobbying voice. The conference recommends:

- 1) *Reinstatement of the Ministry of Culture with a reformed Alberta Foundation of Arts that is elected, empowered and ensured of long-term funding.*

- 2) *Stable and long-term funding of the Arts and Culture sector, including the educational institutions, is needed.*
- 3) *Provide tax incentives to arts and cultural industries, including programs which promote the export of cultural activities and products.*
- 4) *Recognize artists as workers and enact 'status of artists' legislation.*
- 5) *Increase the level of appreciation of arts and culture through the educational curriculum.*
- 6) *Eliminate censorship and other barriers to freedom of expression.*

Other sector-specific recommendations cover a range of subjects:

Communications:

- 1) The Government should, in cooperation with the federal government, implement measures to ensure universal, affordable, regulated access to the information highway (Internet) for all Albertans through the expansion of existing public services.

Forestry:

- 1) Adhere to sound forest management practices by adopting a floating harvest level and area based harvest (as opposed to a volume based harvest).
- 2) Allow no new timber allocations.
- 3) Companies must not be allowed to exceed their annual allowable cut.

Energy:

- 1) The one year royalty on new oil wells must not be renewed.

GLOBALIZATION

THE GENERAL CONSENSUS at the conference was that the provincial government has not acted to insulate or protect the people of Alberta from the negative effects of the globalization of the world economy. The overall trends toward reducing and downsizing public services, allowing the incursion of private enterprise into public services, deregulating the economy, and the overall decline of real wage levels are not a specific Alberta problem. They are a consequence of widespread globalization that rewards those countries that have the lowest wages, the least environmental and economic regulation, and the lowest taxes with investment.

That kind of competition, enshrined in the Free Trade Agreement, the North American Free Trade Agreement, the World Trade Organization agreements on trade and tariffs and the APEC, is not in the best interests of the majority of Albertans.

The essential consensus of the conference was that the government should be actively opposed to globalization and free trade ‘deals’ and should be seeking ways to rethink the Alberta response to globalization. Suggestions included working for codes of conduct for international corporations, strong human and labour rights and environmental protection components for the trade arrangements—if not for the outright abrogation of those deals.

Recommendation: That Alberta refuse sale of primary resource products to companies with poor labour, environmental, and community practices, and that the Province work toward corporate codes of conduct that outline minimum labour wages, environmental, health and safety and environmental standards.

OBSERVATIONS OF THE RESPONSE PANEL

IN AN EFFORT TO ENSURE that specific voices were heard at our conference, we invited several prominent Albertans to represent their sectors responses to our conclusions. They were: Bob Saari of the Alliance of Manufacturers and Exporters of Canada, representing business; Marjorie Bencz, Director of the Edmonton Food Bank, representing the social justice sector; Harvey Scott, a farmer, retired University Professor and active environmentalist, representing the environmental sector; and Jan Reimer, representing a women's perspective and a public administration point of view.

BOB SAARI:

Mr. Saari supported the recommendation for workable tripartite (business, labour, government) input into public programs and policy. He disagreed with repealing the *Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act*, although he did feel it could be amended to allow more reinvestment in public services. Specifically, he supported strengthening the apprenticeship program and post-secondary education in general. He felt that there was no point arguing about globalization, that it was a fact of life. He agreed with the proposition for labour sponsored venture funds, but felt that blanket condemnation of deregulation wasn't appropriate.

MARJORIE BENCZ:

Ms. Bencz strongly supported the recommendations to increase the minimum wage and extend benefits to part-time workers. She pointed out that the current social safety net is totally inadequate to meet anyone's basic needs. She agreed that user fees should be banned, observing that for many, those fees created real hardships. She specifically spoke out for the need to consider the problems of native people and the handicapped when dealing with Alberta's "human deficit".

HARVEY SCOTT:

Mr. Scott was disappointed that more attention was not paid to the need to develop alternate energy sources and strategies, and discussed the importance of reducing dependence on hydrocarbon fuels. He was concerned that working people were being forced into a false 'jobs or the environment' choice. He warned about a growing, but ignored environmental deficit, and suggested that if it isn't dealt with, none of us will have a social future. He supported the recommendations on protecting whistleblowers and getting forest rangers back in the field.

JAN REIMER:

Ms. Reimer felt that the provincial government must first ‘right the wrongs’ that its policies have created—specifically for women, children and seniors. She agreed that we need an inquiry into the tax system before any changes are made. She felt that the *Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act* should be amended to deal with the ‘human deficit’. She strongly opposed two-tier health and education systems and spoke strongly for maintenance of the single-payer principle. She was concerned about the lack of recommendations dealing with global warming, specifically the lack of progressive initiatives supporting, for example, public transportation.

CONCLUSION:

WE AT THE ALBERTA FEDERATION OF LABOUR are extremely satisfied with the public response to our “Investing in Tomorrow” conference. We planned for about 150 delegates, but by the end of the conference, more than 250 people from a wide variety of organizations and backgrounds had registered. As a result of this diversity, we were able to conduct discussions with what we are convinced was a truly representative cross-section of Albertans.

But the “Investing in Tomorrow” conference was about more than just 250 people gathering in the same place — it was also about ideas and vision. And on that score, the conference was also incredibly successful.

The discussions that took place in our workshops were a real breath of fresh air. Discourse on economic issues usually focuses on dry statistics about corporate profits, productivity and production. But delegates to our conference explored the human dimensions of the economy. They talked about how the economy affects individuals, families and communities.

Almost without exception, our delegates believe that economic development should held up to a new standard. They argued that an economy can only be described as healthy if it actually improves conditions for ordinary working people. Booming sales figures and rising GDP mean nothing if ordinary people have less money in their pockets and if people still feel insecure in their jobs.

This, our conference delegates agreed, is the central problem with the Alberta economy today. We are the wealthiest province in Canada. We have the most productive work force. Our businesses are recording record profits. And our government is literally swimming in a pools of surplus cash.

Yet despite all these outward signs of economic strength, the Alberta economy still not really working for most Albertans. Wages have fallen below the national average. Full-time permanent jobs are becoming a thing of the past. Our rules and regulations to protect things like the environment, workplace safety and human rights have been gutted. And our public services have been dangerously weakened by the deepest budget cuts in Canadian history.

The message that was repeated over and over again during the “Investing in Tomorrow” conference was that things don’t have to be this way. We don’t have to have poverty in the midst of plenty. Workers don’t have to suffer from insecurity and declining real wages when businesses are making huge profits. There are alternatives.

Over the course of our three-day conference we heard about these alternatives. In particular, conference delegates called on the government to take the following actions:

- Increase the minimum wage—so that working people don't have to live in poverty.
- Re-invest in public services like education and health care—so that our children are properly prepared for the future and so that our communities remain healthy.
- Reassert a strong role for the government in the economy. In particular, the government should make and enforce strict regulations that protect the environment and promote things like workplace safety and human rights.
- Introduce stronger labour laws—so that working people have access to the kind of protection in the workplace they need.

Most importantly, delegates called on our leaders to make sure all their economic policies actually promote and protect the interests of ordinary working Albertans. There was a broad consensus from all workshops that the government of Alberta must become more active in the social and economic life of the province. The key theme was a demand that government take responsibility for ensuring that all Albertans share fairly in the current prosperity.

In the end, all the people participating in the “Investing in Tomorrow” conference agreed that growth for sake of growth is not enough. Growth that improves corporate profits but does not improve the lives of ordinary people is not acceptable. Only by abandoning economic policies based on the notion that “the market knows best” and embracing a new economic philosophy that puts people first, will the Alberta government be able to ensure that all Albertans share in the Alberta Advantage.