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### REVIEW

## 'Democracy Derailed' in Alberta

### *Democracy Derailed*

By Kevin Taft  
Red Deer Press (2007)

By [Jeremy Klaszus](#)



[TheTyee.ca](http://TheTyee.ca)

**March 6, 2007** | For over 35 years, Alberta has been ruled by one party: the Progressive Conservatives. The party exerts control over nearly every aspect of government, even those that should be non-partisan. Patronage is commonplace, and the line between government and business has all but disappeared. Opposition parties are marginalized and political infrastructure has been manipulated to serve the ruling party.



Recipe for pork barrel

These realities and more are pointed out in *Democracy Derailed*, Alberta Liberal leader Kevin Taft's latest attempt to rouse Albertans from their political indifference. You see, while Albertans talk big about the federal government, they are incredibly complacent when it comes to provincial politics. Fewer than 45 percent voted in the 2004 provincial election and Conservatives hold almost 75 per cent of the seats in the legislature. (That despite receiving less than half the popular vote.)

**Tories' fat catalogue of scandal**

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If Albertans care enough to tune in, they will find in Taft's thin volume evidence enough to shake them from their collective stupor. Other Canadians, meanwhile, can read the book and shake their heads at the absurdities of political life in Confederation's one-party province.



Taft outlines the ways the Conservatives have brazenly misused their power over the last decade. It's a dark narrative full of scandals that would have ruined a government in any other province:

A Calgary hospital is sold to Tory supporters in 1997 for \$4.5 million only a few years after the province spent over four times that amount to improve the building. Today, the Calgary Health Region pays over \$4 million a year for services provided in that same building.

A "consultant" for then-health minister Gary Mar is awarded \$389,000 in contracts by Alberta Health and Wellness from 2002 to 2004. The "consultant," Kelley Charlebois, is Mar's former executive assistant, and there is no paper to show he actually did anything for Health and Wellness. Opposition parties **raise a fuss**. But the Auditor General, after slapping the government's hand in his annual report, refuses to do a special investigation on the contracts.

During a 2004 debate about auto insurance, then-premier Ralph Klein tangentially brings up a paper he wrote for Athabasca University about Augusto Pinochet's 1973 CIA-backed overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile. Pinochet, Klein says, was "forced" to mount the coup because of Allende's socialist reforms. Alberta's Chilean community protests angrily, but Klein refuses to apologize. **His essay**, meanwhile, is posted on the Edmonton Journal's website, where a university professor discovers that **large portions are plagiarized**. The news is splashed all over the media. The Tory learning minister, Lyle Oberg, calls the presidents of the Universities of Alberta and Calgary and asks them to comment on the situation. Within hours, both have written **letters** to The Journal and Calgary Herald praising Klein's "commitment to lifelong learning."

The list goes on. But while scandals like these are baffling, they don't get traction in Alberta. Each new boondoggle makes headlines for a few days or weeks, before dropping off the news agenda. Albertans, meanwhile, forgive and forget when elections roll around. Since over half of Albertans can't be bothered to cast a ballot, the Conservatives continue to extend their already-lengthy reign.

### Critics chilled

Taft argues the Conservatives have eroded democracy by punishing dissent and creating a climate of fear and conformity in the province. He's bang on. The university president's response to the Pinochet essay is but one example.

Taft calls it the "fear factor." Some examples: Social agencies are afraid to criticize policies that harm the vulnerable because they

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worry about losing their already-dwindling funds. Social workers can't talk because they worry about losing their jobs. Civil servants keep quiet about wrongdoing for the same reasons. (Alberta has no legislation to protect whistle-blowers.)

Even some journalists toe the line with embarrassing eagerness. In January, Premier Ed Stelmach hired two working legislature columnists -- people who are supposed to be his critics -- to head up his communications team. But nothing much has changed there. Tom Olsen of the Calgary Herald and Paul Stanway of the Calgary Sun were peddling Tory fluff long before they were on the government payroll.

Serious journalists, meanwhile, routinely find themselves stonewalled. Any reporter who has filed a Freedom of Information and Privacy request in Alberta knows the government goes to great lengths to keep information out of the public eye. The process gets dragged out as long as legally possibly, or even longer, until pages and pages of censored material are released, often at considerable cost. The Official Opposition, too, encounters these roadblocks. When Taft's caucus FOIPed information about a review of Alberta's labour code, they were told the information would cost \$115,000. As one Edmonton journalist observed: "If you've ever dealt with the FOIP laws, you'd be forgiven for thinking the acronym stands for F--k Off, It's Private."

#### **When Albertans change, they change big**

Taft has a thankless job. As leader of the opposition in a province awash in oil and gas wealth, he is tasked with rousing Albertans from political indifference and conformity. So far, it hasn't worked. Taft's party is miserably low in the polls. Most Albertans can't imagine any party but the Conservatives in power. Taft knows and acknowledges both facts. "One-party politics has become entrenched in Alberta," he writes.

But if Albertans woke up and gave a damn about what happens in their government, that could change. Albertans have historically put up a party for decades. But when they kick a party out of government, it's a hard boot -- Alberta has never had a minority government. A change of government happens in Alberta once in a lifetime, literally, but when it does, it's quick and decisive.

By showing just how far the Conservative regime has fallen, *Democracy Derailed* gives Albertans convincing reasons to choose a new government. Whether or not they will actually do it is anyone's guess.

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