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IN PRINT

Review

No democracy for you

Liberal leader Kevin Taft exposes the rot in Alberta politics

DEMOCRACY DERAILED: A Breakdown of Government Accountability in Alberta—And How to Get it Back on Track

By Kevin Taft. Red Deer Press. 112 pp., \$9.95

In any other province—hell, in almost any other developed nation—you wouldn't be reading this review. Just about anywhere else, *Democracy Derailed*, Kevin Taft's latest exposé of Albertan politics, would saturate public consciousness. The statistical proof of governmental corruption that he assembles would fly off the lips of even junior high students. Taft's face would be on the cover of newspapers and magazines. Parents would be naming their firstborn children "Kevin," or maybe even "Taft."

And then, because Taft is not just Alberta's most prominent public intellectual but an elected Member of the Legislative Assembly, the newly enlightened Albertan public would choose him and his party to lead the province. Independent weeklies, so tired of the controversy, wouldn't even bother reviewing his book. We'd save the space for something truly underground.

Well, welcome to Alberta, kids. It ain't like that here.

Democracy Derailed is Taft's third exploration into the complex jungle of Albertan politics. Like the first two (including 1997's much-discussed *Shredding the Public Interest*), this one is required reading for Albertans, for Canadians, or for anyone who wishes to see how a modern democracy can devolve into a one-party state.

The handy, portable *Democracy Derailed* packs a lot of dissent into its 112 well-designed, reader-friendly pages. Topics include how Alberta's auditors general have consistently failed to take action on blatant corruption and nepotism; and how, in the wake of the public's raucous outcry over Bill 11 (it would have seriously compromised public healthcare, if you remember) the Conservatives stifled debate on the issue by severely limiting the time that the government could discuss pending legislation before shoohing it through legislature.

Add to this the fact that Alberta's absurd Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIP) procedures prevent the severely underfunded Official Opposition from obtaining simple information relevant to legislation. In a typically infuriating anecdote, Taft describes how fellow Liberal MLA Laurie Blakeman spent nine months requesting information relating to the Conservative's so-called "Third Way" healthcare reforms. FOIP initially wanted to charge her \$8,400.25 for the 6,331-page collection of documents. Much, much later she received 168 pages of the 6,331 she requested—most of them containing useless information—and paid \$1,081 for them. (She got a discount because the information was of public interest.)

Taft also describes how hard it was to obtain government flight records (which, let's remember, is public information) and being told that he had to pay \$4,671 for data that was instantly accessible at the City Centre Airport.

Taft opens his book with one of the most infuriating stories of all—an account of how both municipal and provincial officials permitted workers and patients to be exposed to asbestos in Calgary's Holy Cross Hospital. The government cronies who had bought the hospital hired homeless people to remove the carcinogen, equipping them with paper face masks.

When Taft was running for office, a soon-to-be-defeated NDP hopeful refused to criticize Taft's platform since, he felt, Taft should have been running as an NDP. But what difference did it really make? Neither party would ever be elected to govern. Taft knew that in Alberta, *any* opposition is good opposition. But the suggestions and criticisms Taft offers in *Democracy Derailed* arise not from partisan nitpicking, but a

genuine concern for the livelihood of our province. Of course, the book can't help but to shore up support for the Liberals. But that's really because we don't have much other choice.

Sure, for the \$10 cover price, you could buy two memberships to the Conservative Party. Make the sacrifice, though—for just a sawbuck, it's quite a read.

JAY SMITH

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