

FULL SPEED AHEAD, EASY ON THE GAS

by Roger Gibbins

Ralph Klein's Progressive Conservative government is in a somewhat paradoxical position. On the provincial scene, it is moving with unrelenting speed and determination in its efforts to transform the fact of government. However, on the national scene, and with specific reference to the emerging national unity debate, the government faces near paralysis.

AT HOME IN ALBERTA

Most Canadians are familiar with the basics of Alberta's deficit reduction plan. The government announced in February 1994 that it planned to eliminate the provincial deficit in three years. This was to be accomplished through a very modest anticipated increase in revenues (6.6%) and deep cuts in expenditures (18.3%). The program cuts varied somewhat across government departments. For example, education has been cut by 12.4%, advanced education by 17%, family and social services by 19.3% and environmental protection by 29.8%. These cuts have been accomplished in part through a 5% reduction in salaries and benefits for all public sector employees including Edmonton bureaucrats, teachers, nurses and university professors.

An important point to stress about the Alberta deficit reduction plan is that it is driven primarily by expenditure cuts rather than by revenue growth; the government has been adamant that there will be no tax increases (user fees are not considered taxes!). Unlike the strategy taken by the federal government, there is no optimistic reliance on economic growth as the solution to the deficit crisis. As a consequence, the government is well positioned

should revenues increase and, indeed, this is what is happening. Rigorous expenditure cuts coupled with unanticipated revenue growth will mean that the government will likely meet its goal of a balanced budget in less than two years, rather than three.

What many Canadians may not realize is that the deficit elimination program and its associated expenditure cuts are only part of the restructuring process that is underway in the province. The Klein government is determined to use deficit reduction as the justification to reduce the provincial state in many ways that have nothing to do with expendi-

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tures. Thus, for example, the government has embarked on an expansive process of privatization. Legislation passed in part during the fall session, and to be concluded in the spring, will enable cabinet ministers to privatize any aspect of their departmental operations, and to do so without either legislative debate or any ongoing public responsibility for the behaviour of private contractors. Privatization will likely extend to jails, environmental protection and many forms of social services. It should also be noted that the government has moved to centralize control over education by radically reducing the number of school boards and by gutting their taxation powers.

In summary, the Klein government is moving ahead with an ag-

gressive plan to reduce not only the deficit, but also the size and scope of the provincial state. And, despite the massive transformations that are being undertaken, the government is not encountering significant political opposition. The changes have been so extensive, and have been taken so rapidly, that opponents barely have time to catch their breath, let alone mount any coherent opposition. Certainly, the opposition Liberals have been sidelined in the expenditure reduction despite significant legislative strength.

THE NATIONAL STAGE

This image of a relentlessly aggressive and single-minded government changes dramatically when we shift to the national stage and more specifically to the emerging national unity debate. There the Klein government faces two very difficult problems.

The first stems from the fact that it is not clear that the Alberta government has anything useful to say with respect to the national unity debate, or at least useful in the traditional sense that it would build bridges to moderate opinion in Quebec. The constitutional principles that Alberta has staked out in the past—the constitutional equality of the provinces and Senate reform—are non-starters in Quebec. Given the litmus test that is generally used to evaluate political ideas in Canada is their receptivity among Quebecers, there is little to be gained by the Alberta government speaking out on national unity issues for the language it would use would not be shared by political elites east of Manitoba.

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The second problem stems from the Klein government's ongoing commitment to public consultation. While this government is by no means reluctant to move, it is reluctant to do so without at least the veneer of public consultation and input. The problem on the national unity issue is that it is clear what Albertans will say if they are consulted. They will recommend an early referendum in Quebec (tomorrow would be just about right) and they will recommend, even demand, a straightforward, three word referendum question: in or out?

Thus, if Klein government goes to the public, its position on national unity issues will be highly constrained and will be seen in the parts of the country that count (Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto) as being unreasonable, even bigoted. Therefore, the government is paralyzed; it has little that is "constructive" in any event, and if it engages in public consultation, it may have even less to say.

It is for these reasons that the current Alberta scene is somewhat contradictory, combining an aggressive provincial agenda with a standpat, low-key national agenda. In the months ahead, the Klein government can be expected to keep a relatively low profile on national unity issues while at the same time arguing that its deficit reduction model is one for all Canadians. Whether the first strategy will be successful, and whether the second will be believed, remain to be seen.

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THE DE-RE-GENDERING OF SOCIAL POLICY

by Janine Brodie and Leah Vosko

Feminists have long argued that state discourses and practices around social welfare are critical to understanding the character of gender relations during any period of structural transformation and the way in which women both identify with and mobilize in politics. The welfare state, for example, represented a marked departure from the rigid boundary between the public and private spheres that was enforced by the laissez-faire state. It also altered the character of the gender order and women's place within it. It presumed a stable middle-class nuclear family that contained a male breadwinner, a dependent wife, and children that relied on the unpaid domestic labour of women. Through the protection of unionization and collective bargaining rights and through social policy, the welfare state ensured that there would be a family wage. The individual male worker was expected to bring home an adequate enough income to care for his family. To the extent that the welfare state spoke to women, it spoke to them as mothers. Indeed, it readily transferred money from working women who did not fit this dominant cultural model to women who did — mothers.

Of course, the structural foundations for this particular model of social welfare provision and the post-war gender order have long passed. The branch plants have closed and the concept of a family wage is now premised on two parents working in the labour force and not one. More than this, the model post-war family is being replaced by alternative families and, in particular, the spectacular rise of lone-parent (read women-headed) families.

NEO-LIBERAL NEWSPEAK

How then does Human Resource Minister Axworthy's discussion paper, *Improving Social Security in Canada* (ISSC), recast the welfare provision, the gender order, and women's place within it? In short, it first degenders women, making them employable individuals instead of mothers; it is hard to find women in this discussion paper even though we know that the provision of social welfare is highly gendered. Second, it regenders them as welfare dependants in need of therapeutic and educational interventions. For example, some 60 percent of single mothers live below the poverty line and this group, in particular, finds strong representation among the ranks of welfare recipients.

Finally, the problem of lone-parent poverty is no longer identified as a common phenomenon among women. Instead, single mothers are cast as employables — potential workers — who are a burden on the state. The poverty of single mothers is divorced from the poverty of their children: children are the new "vulnerable" poor, and "deadbeat dads" become the cause of their poverty. As the discussion paper explains, "one key reason why there is such a close link between poor children and lone-parent families is inadequate, unreliable, or unpaid child support payments." Axworthy's document sees the lone-parent family as a gender-neutral one when, in fact, we know the vast majority of these families are female-headed.

Instead of recognizing the highly gendered division of the labour force both in the work force and the home, the government proposes to help