The Noble Role of the MLA…

…in the noble work of government.

Of the 83 MLAs in our current Legislative Assembly, 68 are Conservatives. Why did Conservatives win so many seats in the last provincial election? Did we have such superb government from them for the previous 37 years that we wanted to reward them for their outstanding performance? Did we have intelligent stewardship of our abundant resources, outstanding public education, exemplary healthcare delivery, a strong social safety net? Was there not a mentally ill homeless person, a student buried in crushing debt, or a working mother at a food bank?

For the rest of Canada, the word "Albertan" is synonymous with "Conservative." Alberta has long been, in effect, a one-party state. The Alberta government's *Citizen Guide* celebrates this: "When the governing party has a majority of seats in the Assembly, the passage of government bills is assured." True, but an overwhelming majority stifles debate. Choice is the essence of freedom, but do Albertans feel free to choose a candidate from a different party at election time? People want an effective representative. What will happen if they don't elect a Conservative? If they elect someone who's not "in with the in-group," someone outside the entrenched power structure, will their whole constituency be shut out? Who is more likely to get the public works projects, the hospital built in their area, the hockey arena or arts centre? The MLA who's a member of the club, who's got clout on the Conservative team, or an outsider?

The aforementioned Alberta *Guide* says, "First and foremost, MLAs represent constituents." But other provinces place a different emphasis: In Manitoba: "The role of MLA involves understanding the spirit of existing laws, planning new laws, and studying, discussing and then supporting or opposing the enactment of new laws." In Saskatchewan: "Members are elected to represent the local interests of their constituents, but in provincial affairs Members are expected to consider the best interests of the province first."

The role of the MLA is not to feather the nest of his own constituency. Edmund Burke put it this way: "Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one people where, not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good. You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not a member of Bristol, he is a member of parliament."

The role of government is not to advantage some groups and disadvantage others. Good government enables us all to live together amicably. It doesn't leave us to fend for ourselves, nor to do whatever we want. As traffic lights prevent chaos, government regulation and oversight protect the safety and well-being of everyone. As a bus saves 50 individual car trips, public goods and services make efficient use of our resources.

In the last provincial election, 60 per cent of eligible voters didn't vote. What kind of democracy is this? Is a Conservative victory such a foregone conclusion that Albertans think they don't need to participate? Elsewhere in the world, "one-party state" means an anti-democratic system. The USSR was a one-party state. The people could vote—but only for the Communist party. Is it so unthinkable to vote for another party that Albertans would rather stay home, even when they're dissatisfied with government? Premier Stelmach has only a 14 per cent approval rating, the lowest in Canada. In recent polls, Liberals and Conservatives tied at 25 per cent support each. Maybe it's time we chose the best candidate to be our MLA, regardless of party affiliation.

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ALBERTA VIEWS is published by Alberta Views Limited Partnership
208-320 23 Avenue SW, Calgary, Alberta T2S 0J2 Telephone: 403 243 5334
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All requests for permission to reprint should be made in writing to the editors.
Printed in Canada. GST Registration No. 86847 0469. ISSN No. 1480-3151.
PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40024877.
RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO: CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT, 208-320 23 AVENUE SW, CALGARY, ALBERTA T2S 0J2