

Edmonton Leader's Dinner
April 19, 2005

**Kevin Taft, Leader
Speaking Notes**

Checked Against Delivery

Thanks so much Glenn. And thanks to Keith and Colleen and the ticket sellers for all your hard work. And thanks to all of you for coming out tonight to show your interest and support.

An awful lot has changed since the last Leader's Dinner. Our membership has soared. We raised over \$800,000 dollars. Our party moved into a great new office and we have a new executive. Most importantly, we fought an election and went from three incumbents to 16!! We're on the way! As I said on election night, "The Tory government will inevitably fall; it is our job to make sure it falls to us." We are very much on that job.

Our thirteen new MLAs have been through trial by fire, through MLA boot camp. They've received tactical training from special agent Hugh MacDonald, and have been drilled on house procedures by Sergeant-Major Laurie Blakeman. If politics really is the continuation of war by other means, I am proud and confident to go into battle with our new team.

I have to start with a confession.

When I realized this dinner was on its way, and that I would be speaking to you - and for some of you... speaking to you *again*... I was a bit stumped.

First of all, I thought: how can I say anything new?

They've heard me speak while running for the Alberta Liberal leadership.

And/Or

They've heard me in the legislature or read it in the paper.

And/Or

They've heard me on the campaign trail.

I mean jeez: I'm just a nice boy from the south side. What more can I tell them?

What more can I say?

But I sat down.

I gathered my... "inner circle" around me.

Which in my case, is my wife Jeanette and a few friends.

And I challenged them: Okay, what more can we say about policy?

What more can we say about programs?

What more can we say about our platform?

I had my lists. I asked them to bring theirs.

There was lively discussion. They left.

But I still didn't know where to start.

How do you say something new, when really... in an important way, so little yet has changed?

Oh, we had an election. And we did ourselves proud.

And we're building a crackerjack team.

And we're upbeat, and positive and working very very hard.

But... But...!

Long term: what has actually... *changed*?

That's the problem. All the stuff I've talked to you about that needs fixing...?

Well, it *still* needs fixing.

Oh, I'm gratified that a few of our ideas have been actually lifted - piecemeal, mind you - but lifted by the government and announced as *their* new initiatives. But the fragmented adoption of a few tiny bits of our policies, hardly constitutes the attainment of our long-term goal.

Our goal: Of a province, a caring province... for *every* Albertan

So I stand before you today to say...

Yes!

We still need a government with real vision... and actual coherent policies with regard to...

Education

Health Care

Infrastructure

Post-secondary Education.

Surpluses

Cities

Farm families

Democratic renewal

But I'm not going to talk about those. Not directly. Not today. Goodness knows you've all heard enough about them - and more - over the last year. No: I want to talk to you about... *why* those are important.

Why.

To tell you a few stories to explain what those things really mean... to me. To you.

I'll give you an example:

You've probably noticed that as the Alberta Liberal Party is becoming successful and, getting stronger and stronger, we started getting attacked.

And I started getting attacked. And personally.

Don't worry. As much as I'm not a career politician, I could see it coming.

I just was surprised... at the *nature* of the attack.

'Cause you know what I was attacked for?

I was attacked... for going to school.

I was attacked... for learning things.

I was attacked... for having an education. An education!

That was nothing but an attempt to discredit me. As if Albertans didn't value education. As if going to university was somehow un-Albertan.

It was an insult to Albertans, because Albertans really know how important education is.

People in every corner of Alberta, like my wife, Jeanette's, family.

I'm going to tell stories (Jeanette doesn't know this) . . .

Jeanette grew up on a farm. Her grandma came over to Canada as an infant in the arms of her mother in the hold of a ship in 1893. Her family homesteaded in the Wetaskiwin-Bashaw-Ponoka area. Jeanette's parents farmed there. Raised Jeanette and her three brothers there. One of them, Bob, is here tonight. That farm is still in the family.

Jeanette and I met at university. Maybe that's why I'm such a big fan of universities. She was the perfect country girl; I was the city boy. Of course, that made me fair game for all kinds of tricks when I'd visit the family farm. Like the time they gave me the keys to the John Deere. Jeanette's dad got into the combine; her brother into this huge tractor; and they sent me around back of the barn to get the John Deere. Turned out it was a ride-on mower.

The first evening I was out at the farm, out meeting my sweetheart's parents, they sent me out to collect eggs in the henhouse. It was dusk and everything was quiet. "Just gently reach under the hens and feel for an egg," they said, and pointed me off to a particular corner of the hen house.

Turns out they were roosters. I still have the scars from that one. Now listen, city girls and boys, if you ever try to collect eggs from roosters make damn sure you're wearing heavy duty leather gloves.

A few weekends later, Jeanette's brothers were showing me around some fields. A bale had fallen off a truck in the next field and they asked me to climb over the fence to get it. Turned out it was an electric fence. I walked up to it, grabbed the top wire with both hands to push it down so I could get over. Nothin' happened. I was wearing heavy duty leather gloves by then. Didn't want to run into those killer chickens. Anyways, I swung my leg over the wire like you're supposed to. Straddling the wire I glanced up at my future in-laws. I don't think they ever expected it to get this far, cause their faces suddenly looked mighty anxious. I took consolation from that after the fact, cause I figured it showed that deep down inside they had a moral conscience. Everything might have turned out fine, except I then leaned a little forward, and as fate would have it my jeans had a metal fly. Yowzah!! Every since that moment I have had absolute commitment to the Canada Health Act!

Anyway, I digress - my point was about education. Jeanette's parents, neither of whom finished high school, expected their kids to get post-secondary education.

And you know what? Those four kids have 8 degrees and diplomas among them!

Jeanette's parents, salt of the earth from rural Alberta... they wanted their kids to go as far as they could in their education. To them... learning isn't something you had to *apologize* for. Just the opposite! And they're hardly alone!

How on earth did we ever reach the point where education was almost a dirty word? When did

learning and studying get turned into a liability? When did we decide that our leaders NOT be capable, NOT be qualified, NOT be... not be... *Ready?* How did this happen? How on earth could that be true?

And education isn't the only thing that's been turned into a dirty word in Alberta. While we're talking about the farm... I've noticed the last few times I've gone out there, the topic has been recast.

The talk isn't just about the weather, or grain and the price of cattle. It's also about how the land itself is changing. The soil; the water; the vegetation. Our cousins who farm west of Didsbury look across to the mountains – that incredible view – where the snow has stayed on the peaks year round for generations. Until about a decade ago. Now those mountains are bare to the top all summer long. Something in the environment is changing, and if we don't figure it out soon, the family farm will only be in *more* trouble, not less.

Like most Albertans, I believe in sustaining the environment. Not attacking any one industry; but accepting the fact that we are all in this together, and recognizing that if we don't all *work together* to come up with solutions to water usage, air quality, and so on ... it will be too late.

We *share* this environment, and I believe that the oil worker, the farmer, and the city dweller... we're all in this together.

When did it become wrong to care about the environment? It's where we grow our food. Where we extract our resources. It's where we live! Why has concern, genuine concern, active concern, for the environment become something to sneer at?

And I'm not leaving the farm yet.

The last while, the biggest story in rural Alberta has been BSE and the border closure problems. When I talk to farmers and ranchers... they are absolutely at wit's end being held hostage for two

years now, by two American meat-packers that are making huge profits while also getting huge subsidies from the Alberta government.

It's not that long ago that farmers like Jeanette's family could shop their livestock to Edmonton, to Burns, Canada Packers, Swifts Premium or the Edmonton Stockyards. For awhile, even Gainers... for a while. Farmers had real choice.

But now we're essentially down to two American multinationals - Cargill and Lakeside - and they have their own absolutely enormous feedlots and THIS much interest in the health of the family farm.

Why can't we start looking out for rural Albertans again? Why can't we look out for *all* Albertans? We're all connected; *all of us!*

A few days ago a major study came out showing that Alberta's economy is now more dependent on petroleum than perhaps it has ever been. Think about that. With the troubles in agriculture and tourism and other sectors, our economy is becoming less and less diversified. There are fewer and fewer economic legs to stand on. The fact is, if it weren't for petroleum our economy would be flattened.

Sure, the oil sands are big enough to produce oil for centuries. But countries around the world are investing billions of dollars every year on technologies to break global dependence on petroleum, to find new sources of energy. We are one major breakthrough in technology away from Alberta's greatest source of wealth getting phased out. And whether it comes in solar power, or hydrogen, or whatever, that breakthrough will come. And if we aren't prepared, we will meet the same fate of virtually every other resource-based economy in history. Our boom will go bust, when it doesn't need to.

The time to prepare for that day is now. We need a government that understands enough to begin

preparing...

Education. Environment. Economic diversification. That's how we stop our boom going bust. They're not dirty words; they're the future of the province!

We have to imagine that future. Together.

It's time to dream.

It's time to listen.

It's time to plan.

This last budget... It has no vision, no goals, short term or long. None.

Imagine a government – imagine for a minute, OUR government - that would say:

In 7 years we'll have the healthiest population in the world, and here's how we'll do it. Instead, this government shot down meaningful anti-smoking legislation two weeks ago, and last week introduced a budget with a 25% increase in funding to treat cancer. Go figure. Are they not connecting the dots?

Imagine a government –OUR government-- that would say: in 10 years we'll have the best educated citizenry. Or the most energy efficient economy on the planet. That's... Vision.

Or even... That as of next September not one child in this province will go to school hungry ever again! Because this morning, in Alberta, thousands of kids DID go to school hungry because there wasn't enough food at home. It will happen again tomorrow, and the day after. Let's help

those kids.

Those are clear targets, direct goals, achievable outcomes.

Fundamentally, it's so simple. Really:

You dream of what could be.

You set goals to attain it.

You plan... to achieve those goals.

And you follow through with accountability.

If you believe in those things... you're going to have to put your neck on the line and join us.

Back us. Fight along side us. We need your voice. We need your support. We need your dreams.

We're fighting for a set of values - *we once shared* in this province, and still do. Those things *we hold dear*, those things under attack, those things people are hungering for in public life.

We're fighting for a province where its okay to look out for each other.

Where its okay to care about each other again.

Where its okay to want things to be fair, to be able to trust, to do the right thing and to know that the right thing will be done by those in charge.

How do we reclaim that right? How do we *dream* again?

How? I'll tell you:

You dare to stand with us.

That's right. I dare you.

You believe in what we say?

I dare you to say it too.

Stand... *beside* us.

Walk... *with* us.

Fight... right alongside us.

And I promise you, together we can reclaim the heart and soul of this province. We *will* reclaim it.

Thank you very much.