

Quality of Life Commission Meeting, September 26, 2005

Introduction By Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

Since the debate over Alberta's surplus wealth began, we have heard a lot of words concerning this unique situation: words like "prosperity cheques," "tax cuts," "drop in the bucket," "raiding," "not in the cards," and, of course, "the wisdom of Solomon." What we have not heard very often are words like "sharing," "a sense of fairness," and "human resources."

The panel assembled tonight will examine what should be done with Alberta's "windfall," which is currently expected to top \$6 billion this year and may be considerably higher. The Alberta government caucus, having met on this matter, has stated its preference: 1/3 to go to the government's capital projects; 1/3 to savings, presumably in the Heritage Saving Fund; 1/3 in a refund to taxpayers, which, divided among the province's 3.25 million taxpayers, would work out to more than \$300 per person.

The government's finance officials are now tasked with creating an official plan for dealing with the unallocated surplus, which will be submitted to cabinet this fall.

The prospect of so much wealth suddenly flowing through Alberta's coffers as a result of startlingly high oil prices has attracted a lot of

attention. But there has been little formal debate. There has been virtually no attention paid to addressing the values in our society, which would seem to be important in deciding questions of financial allocation. Such discussion as there has been has been focused on how Albertans can best self-enrich. The focus is on how individuals can best gain out of this new bounty and on warnings to non-Albertans not to get any ideas about plundering our wealth.

Is this the limit of the discussion we want to hold? Is self-enrichment all there is in life? Is Alberta a financial “island” unto itself?

The Quality of Life Commission does not think so. The Commission would like to stimulate a public discussion that looks at this subject from the broader basis of the common good.

For the past decade, the Commission, a voluntary group of concerned citizens, has listened to the voices of Edmonton people whose lives have been severely affected by policies in health, education and social service, and sought to give a voice to those who too often have been ignored or hurt by government policies. The voices of vulnerable Albertans need to be heard in this new debate about surplus wealth.

In deciding what to do with extra money, the government of Alberta needs to hear about such needs a long-term care for seniors, low-cost

housing programs, First Nations requirements, single mothers, children left behind, education. In short, our society is very much in need of public discussion that focuses on investing in human resources.

The 2005 Budget of the Government of Alberta is called, “Investing in the Next Alberta.” It contains a Section, “Quality of Life,” which says:

Each year, thousands of people from the rest of Canada are drawn to this province, well known for its exceptional standard of living. Alberta is a prosperous region, where residents share a rich natural environment and enjoy outstanding opportunities in recreation, arts and culture.

To this, the Quality of Life Commission says, yes, indeed.

Residents should “share ... and enjoy outstanding opportunities.” Let us tonight send a message to the government that the most vulnerable Albertans must be included.

A Quality of Life Commission report on tonight’s meeting will go forward and be personally presented to the government and appropriate Legislative committee. We are fortunate to have three outstanding speakers, former Senator Thelma Chalifoux, Jim Gurnett, Executive Director of the Mennonite Centre and Rev. Bruce Miller, MLA. At the conclusion of the meeting, Rev. Don Mayne will sum up proceedings.

