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Alberta needs leaders like Wall

CALGARY

— Democracy in Alberta might not be dead but it's certainly semi-conscious. Voter turnouts are now so low the majority of Albertans no longer control their political system. That's alarming today and might prove frightening tomorrow.

Middle-aged people shake their heads in disgust and stay home. Many younger Albertans find our politics meaningless. Barack Obama inspires them more than anybody in Alberta.

We can't excuse this as part of some vast Canadian malaise. The ugly truth is our alienation from politics is a made-in-Alberta problem. Quebecers, for instance, share many of our attitudes about provincial rights and autonomy but they live and breathe politics. They think anybody who doesn't deserves what they get. They are correct. The Alberta voting trends are truly alarming. As recently as 1997, turnout was still well above 50 per cent in provincial elections. Then it dipped sharply to 44 per cent in 2004 and plunged again to 41 per cent this past March 3.

Civic turnouts are even more dismal. Only 19 per cent of Calgarians voted in the city election in 2004. That rose last October, but only to 33 per cent.

This seems mysterious. Why should Albertans be so much less interested in politics just as the province becomes more prosperous and influential? Why are turnouts so low in the towns and cities, when civic governments are the ones we complain about the most? (Ask any alderman — there's nothing like a road detour or property tax bill to make voters furious.) The standard line from elected politicians is Albertans don't vote because they're so darned happy with the government.

Finance Minister Iris Evans, for instance, says the voters are content. We shouldn't worry about democracy because the turnout will go up if they ever get angry. It's a comfortably lazy theory for a newly-elected government with 72 MLAs — but it's not true.

From 1926 to 1997, through emotional states from contentment to fury and frustration, voters headed to the polls in far higher percentages than they do today. In 1935, 82 per cent cast ballots in the first Social Credit victory. The turnout was 60 per cent as recently as 1993. Angry or happy, people voted.

Today, Albertans are staying home no matter how they feel.

In a poll done by Leger Marketing for Elections Alberta, people gave all sorts of reasons for not voting. They said they were too busy or out of town, they forgot, they didn't care, they didn't know enough about the candidates. Those are excuses, not reasons, the political equivalent of "I've got a headache." They're the things people say when they're just not interested.

There are always deeper reasons why people make excuses. A couple of those, I think, help explain our dismal decline into democracy-lite.

One problem is many people think they can't possibly have any impact on a government that's been around since 1971. Voters who like the Tories tend to stay home out of complacency, while those who hate the government are so discouraged they don't bother.

The only thing that ever seems to worry the Tories on election day, in fact, is the prospect of too many supporters staying on the sofa. Consequently, frustrated enemies of the Tories call Alberta a one-party state, although it isn't, not technically. The term describes places where only one party is legal.

But we have certainly evolved something approaching a one-party mentality. It has grown more debilitating over time and now the dulling results are upon us.

The biggest problem of all, it seems to me, is the insipid, uninspiring political leaders our system now puts in front of the voters. Albertans have almost forgotten what it's like to hear a great speech and an inspirational vision from a premier. Peter Lougheed always had that quality. Don Getty and Ralph Klein never did. Despite Klein's personal appeal, he was a curiously halting speaker. But they were a pair of Ciceros beside Premier Ed Stelmach and Kevin Taft, the Liberal leader who's stepping down.

Alberta needs what Saskatchewan now has in Premier Brad Wall — inspiration and vision wrapped up in clarity, humour and eloquence. When Alberta finally has leaders like that once again, the voters will come streaming back to the polls.

I hope.

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