



ALBERTA

SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

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DELIVERED BY
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ALBERTA

BUILDING TOMORROW

A Plan to Secure Alberta's Future

MY FELLOW ALBERTANS, welcome to the Fourth Session of the Twenty-sixth Alberta Legislature.

Our gathering here today is part of an enduring legacy of centuries of democratic tradition. It's so easy to take for granted the blessings of democracy that this province and this nation enjoy. But it only takes a read of the daily newspaper to be reminded that this tradition is not enjoyed everywhere around the world. We read of discontent, violence and tyranny — and our hearts ache.

Here, however, in this magnificent chamber and in the communities outside these doors and across the province, we see the rich rewards of our democratic tradition, and our hearts soar.

Our ability — our *right* — to gather here today stems from a legacy of democracy which each of us must pledge to uphold and protect at all times.

Today, brave Canadian men and women in uniform are doing just that, half a world away. Indeed, many of those who have served us overseas have been fellow Albertans — our neighbours and our friends.

As we gather to celebrate our blessings today, we should acknowledge with profound gratitude the courage and sacrifice members of our armed forces are demonstrating in pursuit of the most noble of goals — the promotion of freedom and democracy.

Today, I speak as well of another legacy. Not the legacy of a particular government, or a particular Legislative Assembly, but the 100-year legacy of an entire province and its people: a legacy born from Albertans' dreams and hopes — for their children and for their province.

Indeed, new aspirations are being conceived right now, to be fully realized in the years ahead. I speak of Alberta's leadership role in Canada's New West.

Albertans know their province is poised to assume that leadership mantle. The last decade in Alberta has been one of astonishing growth — population growth, economic growth, and cultural and social development.

Because of this historic record of achievement, Alberta stands poised on the threshold of a glorious future. Securing that future must be our legacy, and your government stands ready to help Albertans achieve this.

Your government has a vision for our province that is crafted from the dreams of Albertans, and shaped by their hopes: a vision in which *all* Albertans benefit from the province's prosperity by proper, effective investments into services and infrastructure that improve quality of life; a vision of a province well-positioned to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population; a vision in which Alberta is master of its own future, and well-prepared to weather the global economic storms that appear on the horizon from time to time; a vision of a clean, healthy natural environment to be bequeathed to our children.

Above all, it is a vision of a province where individual Albertans are confident that the only limits to our success are the scope of our dreams and the strength of our desires; a province where families are strong, and where young people have a well-founded faith that the future holds promise for all in equal measure.

In this legislative session, and in all legislative sessions in which it has the privilege of governing, this government will lay out a clear plan for achieving this vision. This plan will support strong communities as the key to sustaining and enhancing our high quality of life. It will take bold action to combine development with a strong environmental ethic. And it will capitalize on new opportunities to grow our economy and secure long-term prosperity for all Albertans.

Your government will act on what Albertans have told it, and it will introduce legislation and initiatives that reflect the time-honoured values of Albertans and the bold spirit of Alberta's future.

Albertans know that the success of the last decade has led to unprecedented opportunity. And they also know, as this government knows, that complex problems emerge as growth creates prosperity.

Albertans are concerned about access to health services, even as the province spends record amounts on health care. They are troubled by what seems to be increased crime and violence in their communities, even as new crime-prevention programs begin to reap dividends. They are bothered by traffic snarls on Alberta's roads, even as the province invests heavily in new infrastructure. And they are anxious about the number of homeless Albertans, even as the province enjoys great prosperity.

In particular, they are concerned about the rising cost of housing and other expenses, even as family incomes increase. And they worry about the province's natural environment, even as citizens and government become more environmentally wise with each passing year.

The government's plan forcefully addresses these concerns, and commits to working in close partnership with Albertans on practical solutions — building a sound and sustainable legacy for the future.

Let us turn to that plan.

A Plan for Alberta's Health System

A major focus of the government's plan for the coming year is the promotion of lifelong health. We will continue the dialogue begun at last month's Forum on Healthy Communities to help individuals, families and communities take greater control of their health. We will work closely with community partners, First Nations and other stakeholders to address social causes of poor health, especially as they affect children and youth. And we will outline strategies to further increase access to community-based health care, and improve access to family physicians.

Your government will also take advantage of opportunities to improve the quality and safety of Alberta's health system. From implementing provincial standards to prevent and control infection, to investing in health infrastructure, Alberta will continue building an innovative health system that is among the best in the world.

Alberta will plan and provide for its current and future health workforce needs, which is vital to improving access to services. Government will increase the number of training spaces for health care workers, continue its

recruitment of internationally educated health professionals, and by working with the federal government and regulatory bodies, we will make it quicker and easier for qualified professionals to join the health workforce.

These and other policy changes will be guided by a new, long-term directional plan for Alberta’s health system. The plan will create a comprehensive framework designed to support high-quality healthcare that is accessible *when* and *where* Albertans need it.

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A Plan for Education and Employment

Lifelong learning goes hand-in-hand with lifelong health as key elements of a high quality of life. International testing shows that Alberta students are already among the best in the world. This government will not let up on its efforts to further strengthen our education system.

To provide a fresh and youthful perspective on learning, the government will establish a youth advisory committee on education. This committee will explore new and innovative ways to improve the learning opportunities available to young Albertans. Your government will also co-host an education research symposium to ensure that Alberta’s learning system meets the needs of students of the 21st century. And to establish stability in Alberta’s classrooms, it will implement the historic agreement to resolve the unfunded teachers’ pension liability.

For the post-secondary education system, the government will introduce legislation to reflect how Alberta’s post-secondary institutions are operating under a new, clearly defined framework — designed to support an unprecedented era of cooperation focused on benefits for students, taxpayers and society. This new “Campus Alberta” approach will improve transferability and access for students throughout the province, and enhance the accountability of all partners to ensure accessible, affordable and quality education.

Alberta’s higher-learning institutions will be responsive to all aspects of the skilled and knowledge-based workforce, especially in high demand areas such as health-based fields and trades training.

With education comes the desire for meaningful employment. And Albertans are finding that type of employment at record rates today. In fact, with Alberta's strong economy and low unemployment rate, meeting workforce demands continues to be a challenge. You need not go very far in Alberta to see the signs of a hot labour market and a shortage of workers.

The government and employers are working together to address this challenge through Alberta's 10-year labour strategy: Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce. This year, sector-specific strategies will be developed to address the needs of the forestry, transportation, and non-profit and volunteer sectors — and to increase participation of Aboriginal Albertans in the workforce.

With an anticipated shortage of workers and slowing inter-provincial migration, Alberta is looking abroad to help meet future labour needs. As part of Alberta's immigration strategy, a foreign qualification recognition plan will be implemented this year. It will put in place mechanisms to ensure that newcomers with foreign credentials and work experience are able to make the most of their skills in Alberta's economy.

Your government will expand the Provincial Nominee Program. This program allows Alberta to better target immigration toward our specific labour needs. The number of people nominated will double to 5,000 next year.

Alberta will also continue to work with the federal government to ensure that the temporary foreign worker program meets Alberta's needs and protects temporary foreign workers. Your government will provide support to workers through new advisory offices opened in December and through stepped-up inspections of workplaces.

A Plan for Community Infrastructure

I now turn to other aspects of your government's plan for Alberta's future.

Successful communities require modern, efficient public infrastructure. Catching up, and keeping up, with those needs continues to be a priority. Your government has developed a 20-year strategic capital plan for Alberta that will grow our economy, add capacity to health, education and transportation, and ensure that we *do* keep up with the needs of a dynamic province.

This year, your government will begin construction of 18 new schools in Edmonton and Calgary, using a new model of public-private partnership to finance and build more quickly, and more-affordably, than traditional methods.

The Government of Alberta recognizes the critical importance of maintaining and upgrading existing roads and highways. Over the next three years, provincial investment in highway repaving and bridge repairs will almost double, to nearly one billion dollars.

A Plan to Improve Services for Albertans in Their Communities

The government knows that a strong sense of compassion and desire for fairness is as much a part of Alberta's future legacy as is economic strength. The plan for Alberta includes meaningful measures to help citizens take their rightful places in society.

We will help low- and middle-income families with the costs of care for their school-aged children, enhance the availability of out-of-school care programs, and help ensure that children are in safe, supervised environments before and after school.

Government will work with First Nations and Métis Albertans to strengthen their important roles in Alberta. Effective partnerships will be created to support Aboriginal economic development and employment opportunities.

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And Alberta will work with other governments, friendship centres, and other Aboriginal representatives to enhance urban Aboriginal initiatives.

Your government recognizes the aspirations and special needs of Albertans with disabilities. Benefits under the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program will be increased, and additional employment supports will be provided to those AISH clients who want to work.

Further investments will help contracted agencies attract and retain qualified workers to support adults with developmental disabilities, as well as children and families.

A demographic planning commission will be appointed to study the needs of an aging population. Its findings will help government develop an aging population policy framework to help decision-makers prepare for meeting the needs of future seniors.

Your government will continue to take aggressive action on affordable housing and homelessness. It will work to fulfill its pledge to create more than 11,000 new affordable housing units over five years, and it will partner with municipalities to increase the supply of available rental accommodation, particularly for students and seniors.

It will take steps to *end* homelessness in Alberta within 10 years with the creation of the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness. The secretariat will work closely with municipalities throughout the province to co-ordinate and support regional strategies, using the best practices of programs that have *worked*.

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Cultural vitality is also important to Albertans. In 2008, the government will implement its bold, new policy — The Spirit of Alberta — to guide decisions on the support and development of Alberta’s culture. Collaboration between government and the private and not-for-profit sectors will be vital to ensure that the province has a vibrant arts sector in the future, and is recognized nationally and internationally as innovative and competitive.

A Plan to Reduce Crime and Violence

Your government understands that people must feel safe in their homes and their communities. That’s why Alberta will allocate significant new funding to implement an aggressive strategy to reduce crime and make all our communities safer.

Alberta will be getting tougher with law-breakers, especially chronic offenders — the small percentage of criminals who commit most of the crimes — and working harder to prevent some of the root causes of crime by increasing access to mental health services and treatment for drug addictions.

Your government will provide funding to add more front-line police officers to target serious crimes involving violence and drugs — crimes that erode our sense of safety. It will launch a new investigative unit to target organized criminal activities in our communities, such as drug dens, gang and prostitution houses. This unit will support safe communities by shutting down these properties that are breeding grounds for crime and disturbances that can devastate neighbourhoods.

Preventing criminals from re-offending is a critical factor in crime reduction. Alberta will put more probation officers in communities to enhance offender supervision, and provide increased support and direction to offenders who want to break the revolving door cycle of crime and become contributing members of society. New funding will be allocated to appoint more judges and hire more crown prosecutors and support staff. This will help speed up the justice system, and get law-breakers off the streets and behind bars faster.

Your government will also develop a strategy to foster sensible alcohol use and reduce alcohol-related harm. It will also increase the number of inspectors to ensure that the rules regarding the sale and consumption of alcohol in licensed establishments are respected.

A Plan for the Environment

It's no secret that Albertans have a special relationship with the land. Our province is big, beautiful and bountiful, and we are grateful for the opportunities it gives us. We place a high value on clean air, clean water and pristine open spaces.

With growth comes unprecedented pressure on Alberta's landscape, and this must be effectively managed. There are competing demands from forestry, mining, oil and gas, recreation, housing and infrastructure — often on the same parcels of land. This leads to conflict between users and has the potential to degrade the land, air and water.

Alberta must ensure that the land — *your* land — is managed responsibly for future generations. The old, *ad hoc* approach is no longer appropriate. An innovative, new approach to land-use planning and assessing the cumulative effects of development is designed to safeguard our environmental heritage in a time of phenomenal growth.

Our province is big, beautiful and bountiful, and we are grateful for the opportunities it gives us. We place a high value on clean air, clean water and pristine open spaces.

In particular, the Government of Alberta will continue to strengthen environmental protection for the oil sands region — the site of several approved and proposed major developments.

In partnership with the energy sector and other Albertans, government will develop a strategy for responsible energy development and use in Alberta.

The strategy will encourage innovative energy development, focusing on renewable and alternative energy, and reducing energy consumption through efficiency and conservation.

Alberta will continue to strive to be an international leader on climate change issues. The government will implement a practical and achievable climate change plan to ensure that the environment is protected and that Alberta remains a secure and sustainable supplier of energy.

Your government will also begin work with industry to put in place the infrastructure needed to capture and store carbon dioxide emissions from large industrial facilities. This is a move that will see truly significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in our province, and will ensure that Alberta's energy is clean energy.

Alberta will continue to strive to be an international leader on climate change issues.

Alberta will also continue to be a leader in water management. Water for Life, the most comprehensive strategy of its kind in North America, has guided water management policies in this province since 2003. However, population growth and the effects of climate change are putting new pressures on water supply and aquatic ecosystems.

The government is responding to those pressures. It will increase funding to improve knowledge of surface and groundwater resources, and increase the capacity to monitor water resources. The upcoming year will see a renewed focus on watershed planning, and water quality conservation.

There is no question that Albertans want to do their part to protect the environment. While others talk, Albertans lead. The next decade requires immediate and meaningful action to protect the environment. This government, working with Albertans, will meet that challenge with practical policies designed to reach achievable goals.

A Plan for the Cornerstones of Alberta's Economy

Even as Alberta's economy diversifies, Albertans rely on the economic cornerstones of energy, agriculture, tourism and forestry for much of the province's employment and economic stability.

A strong, thriving energy sector will continue to be a foundation of Alberta's economy.

This year, government will make the necessary legislative and process changes to implement the new royalty framework, which comes into effect on January 1, 2009. This will fulfill your government's commitment to ensure that Albertans receive a fair return for the development of the natural resources they own.

At the same time, the new framework recognizes the importance of Alberta's hydrocarbon industry, both to the present and the future of our province. It will maintain Alberta's position as an internationally competitive location for new investment and sustained development that will continue to provide thousands of jobs for Albertans and keep the economy strong.

A strong, thriving energy sector will continue to be a foundation of Alberta's economy.

Over the coming year, the energy regulatory system will be enhanced. Albertans can have confidence in this system. The new regulatory bodies that have been established will bring renewed focus to ensuring that Albertans affected by energy development are engaged and respected as part of the decision-making process.

Another economic cornerstone — agriculture — is as much a cultural foundation of Alberta as it is an economic one. Agriculture in Alberta has a long, rich and proud history. It is a sector upon which many of the great traditions of Alberta have been built.

Make no mistake: this government stands firm in its commitment to Alberta's agriculture and food producers, and in its resolve to help them thrive in the face of global challenges. Our farmers and ranchers have successfully weathered some tough times in recent years, and emerged as hardy and resilient as the land on which they toil. The BSE crisis has receded, for now at least, and grain and oilseed prices are strong. But this sector faces new challenges with increasing input costs and a high Canadian dollar.

Alberta will continue to work with agricultural producers to create long-term and industry-wide sustainability. Your government understands that industry is in the best position to develop its own vision and strategic initiatives, and will work directly with individual agriculture industries on a new competitiveness initiative. It will bring forward recommendations that will help transform the sector and promote long-term sustainability.

At the same time, Alberta will work to increase market access for all its agricultural products, both at home and abroad. On the world stage, this government will continue to advocate for an agreement in World Trade Organization negotiations to reduce harmful foreign subsidies, and increase access to key export markets. Within Canada, this government will continue to support the federal government in its plan for grain marketing reforms, including marketing choice for wheat and barley.

Like agriculture, forestry is facing challenges. Through the Forest Industry Sustainability Committee, industry and government will explore opportunities to improve industry's competitive position in world markets.

Alberta is also firmly committed to protecting the health of its forests. The government will remain vigilant in the battle against the mountain pine beetle. The focus in 2008-2009 will be protecting the watersheds of the foothills and preventing the front-line of the infestation from moving into the boreal forest.

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A Plan for Managing Public Dollars Wisely; A Plan for Health Care Premiums

It's clear that the plan outlined here today relies heavily — and wisely — on the people of Alberta in order for success to be achieved. But there is one part of the plan that relies directly on government. That area is the wise, prudent management of public dollars.

Today, as North America's only debt-free jurisdiction, Alberta has a unique opportunity to secure long-term prosperity for its citizens — and your government pledges to make the very best of that opportunity.

It will introduce a new savings strategy with a revitalized Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund, and a renewed commitment to save for the future. It will continue to give Albertans the opportunity to keep as much of their own hard-earned income as possible.

Fundamental to this philosophy is the principle that all Albertans must benefit from the opportunities that Alberta creates, and enjoy, as much as possible,

the fruits of their labour. To support that principle, the government will maintain Alberta's competitive tax advantage.

In 2008, your government will go even further to achieve this principle. This year, it will introduce legislation to phase out Alberta Health Care insurance premiums for all Albertans.

This legislation will lay out a plan for the elimination of premiums within four years. This will be achieved in a measured and fiscally responsible manner.

Premiums have served their purpose in Alberta over the years. But in today's Alberta, the time is right for Albertans to reap additional direct rewards of their ingenuity and their hard work. The elimination of premiums is a reward whose time has come.

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Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, these are the highlights of your government's plan for the coming year, and its vision for the future.

Besides these highlights, your government will move in many different areas over the next year to ensure that barriers to success are removed for all Albertans, and that the day-to-day work of government is conducted effectively and honourably.

Today's Alberta requires new ideas and new energy. The plan I have outlined is a bold response to the challenges brought about by growth. It is a clear set of answers to the issues Albertans want to see addressed. It is a roadmap to economic security and improved quality of life. It reverberates with the values and aspirations of Albertans from all walks of life.

It is a plan for the millions of Albertans who demonstrate their pride, energy and dignity every day across the width and breadth of our great province; a plan to enable young families to achieve their dreams; a plan for seniors who have dedicated lifetimes to Alberta; and a plan to build the prosperous and dynamic future all Albertans desire.

Together, we will build our legacy over the next decade and beyond. And we will continue to respect the values that this province has come to stand for over the last 103 years — values that excite the heart and spirit of each one of us who are lucky enough to be able to say: “Alberta is my home.”

God bless Alberta. God bless Canada. God save the Queen.

