

# COMMENT

## ALBERTA



THOMAS WALKOM

### A dilemma for social democrats

When economy goes bad, that's when social will is tested

For social democrats, winning power can be a mixed blessing. Alberta Premier Rachel Notley is learning this through experience.

Sometimes, left-leaning parties such as Notley's New Democrats inherit government when the economy is going gangbusters. In such situations it is easy to introduce modest reforms without upsetting the big players of market capitalism.

But more often than not, voters turn to the left only when they calculate that the economy isn't working for them.

In these circumstances, the job can become tougher.

Think of Greece where Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras's left-leaning Syriza government, after winning a mandate to fight austerity, reversed itself and undertook the drastic social spending cuts it had specifically promised to avoid.

At one level, Tsipras had no choice. International creditors, in the form of the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, threatened to wreck Greece's economy unless he complied.

But at another level, Greece's experience points to an important role social democracy plays in global capitalism — which is to act as the reluctant heavy when tough measures are needed to keep the system intact.

If right-wing parties cut social spending, they are labelled mean. But if left-wing parties do the same, they are called realistic.

Alberta is not Greece. Its economy is radically different; its public finances are significantly sounder.

Still, Notley was elected last May on a wave of discontent. The ruling Progressive Conservatives were seen as out of touch. Their fiscal solutions — spending cuts plus tax increases for the middle class — were thought unfair.

Some voters moved to the even more right-of-centre Wildrose Party. Others gravitated to the NDP, with its call for higher taxes on corporations and the rich, action on climate change and more spending on infrastructure, health and education.

On winning power, Notley moved quickly to implement part of her platform. She raised taxes for corporations and the well-to-do. She also announced a new carbon tax set to take effect next year.

She did all of this without antagonizing the main corporate players in Alberta's oil sands.

Had oil prices remained in the \$100 per barrel range, this moderate tinkering would have been relatively painless. But the collapse in world oil prices and the consequent recession in Alberta have changed everything.

A fiscal update this week from the provincial finance department predicts that Alberta's economy will shrink by 2.7 per cent this year, while the unemployment rate will hover at about 8 per cent.

Government stimulus is expected to create 10,000 new jobs this year. But that number will be swamped by the 50,000 jobs already lost to the oil-price induced recession.

Thanks in part to the Fort McMurray fire, Alberta will face a \$0.9 billion deficit this year. The government's books are not expected to reach balance until 2024.

The province's usually stellar credit rating has already been downgraded.

In spite of all of this, the NDP government insists it will stay the course — that it will not slash government spending and that it will continue to fight the recession with fiscal stimulus.

Logic is on Notley's side. Her government may be running deficits. But net debt as a percentage of the province's gross domestic product is still below 4 per cent, a remarkably low measure. By comparison, Ontario's debt to GDP ratio is about 40 per cent.

Her promise to wean Alberta's economy away from its reliance on the vagaries of world oil prices should, in today's context, have even more urgency.

And her job-creation measures, while not enough to make up completely for the collapse in the oil economy, are better than nothing. Still, the pressure on her government to change course promises to be intense.

Notley is already inside with business when it comes to the oil sands. She spends much of her time lobbying for pipelines to move bitumen to the oceans.

Yet she still insists on social democratic nostrums, such as spending public money on health care and education and refuses to fret about deficits.

"Austerity just makes things worse."

Toronto Star

## THE BARFING RISK

### School daze

How to survive the first-year university roller-coaster ride



PAUL BENEDETTI

Every year about this time thousands of young people prepare to head off for the greatest adventure of their lives.

A ride on the giant roller-coaster at Canada's Wonderland while high on medical marijuana.

Just kidding.

They're actually preparing to go away for their first year of university.

Which, when you come to think about it, is not all that different from the Canada's Wonderland thing.

But in any case, many of these exuberant teenagers are seeking advice about their foray into undergraduate university studies. And by many, I mean "none" since every teenager I have ever met already knows everything and wouldn't listen to a parent or any other old geezer even if the rear of their jeans was in flames and you were standing there holding a fire extinguisher.

You: "Care for a spray?"  
Them (feigning boredom while smug):  
"Woody Allen once said that '80 per cent of success is showing up.' He was right."

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billows around them): "Whatever."

I know this from personal experience because I tried it with my daughter a few years ago when she was heading off to Montreal for school.

"You know, honey," I said gently, "I actually went to university and might have a few tips for you."

"Oh god Dad, that was like a million years ago. You didn't even have computers, right?"

"Well, yes that is right, but ..."

"Ha, ha, ha ... You kill me. What, did you write on clay tablets? Did everyone carry around papyrus rolls and wear togas? Ha, ha, ha ..." (Leaves room wiping away tears.)

I would have admitted that the toga part was at least kind of accurate, since the mid-'70s was the apex of Toga Party madness, but those stories were better left untold, now that I think about it.

So since none of the young people in my extended family will listen to me, I've decided to do what all parents my age do, just walk around the house talking to myself.

Dear First-Year Student:  
You are on the cusp of one of the most amazing experiences of your life.

Frosh Week.  
Again, just kidding, although that can be quite something — a bit like marine boot camp crossed with Mardi Gras, but with more throwing up.

No, you have been given the wonderful opportunity of spending your parents' hard-earned money, sorry, I mean spending the next four years learning about culture, art, science, history and politics. Some of that may even happen at school.

To make the most of it and to prevent your parents from becoming eternally bitter about the vacations they missed and

the lousy, old cars they had to drive to save for your education (not me, of course, I really enjoy driving a dented 2009 Impala that makes me look like an undercover police officer. I do.) please do the following:

1. Go to class. That's right. Actually go to your lectures. If your parents wanted you to sit around playing video games and eating Doritos, they would have left you in your room.

2. Go to class. Yes, I'm saying it again. Woody Allen once said that "80 per cent of success is showing up." He was right. The online video, the class slides, your friend's notes, are no substitute for actually listening to a living, smart person, even if they are wearing a really bad sports jacket.

3. Be there. If you are in the lecture, then BE in the lecture. Don't be on your cell-phone texting your pal about last night's bong party. Forget Facebook Snapchat and Instagram for 45 minutes. They'll be there when you get out of class. Trust me. And forget tweeting funny comments about the prof on Twitter. No one is reading your feed anyway.

4. Try actually READING the readings. I know, it's "Totally pages and pages of, like, words," with no video clips or music or anything. Dude, it's so, like, boring. I know, but if you actually take some time and read the stuff, you might discover that it's full of "ideas" and that can be a thrill. Not like shotgunning a tallboy of Molson Ice, but a thrill nonetheless. And, actually, you don't barf later.

5. Have fun. Of course, have fun. But if fun is all you want, the trip to Wonderland is a lot cheaper. And you'll probably barf anyway.

Paul Benedetti teaches at the University of Western Ontario and lives in Hamilton.

## HE GAVE SHELTER, DIGNITY

### In honour of my father and his well-lived life

Yes, my father is living, very much, and I for one am grateful



THOMAS FROESE

It was a different time and place on the day I watched another human being die in my father's arms. I was just a boy.

Bert had epileptic seizures, medically uncontrollable then. Tall and lanky, he'd crumple and fall hard on the floor in the house, or outside under the apple tree, or in places between, shaking, convulsing, rigid as a board. I'd watch. All the time. Bert lived with us.

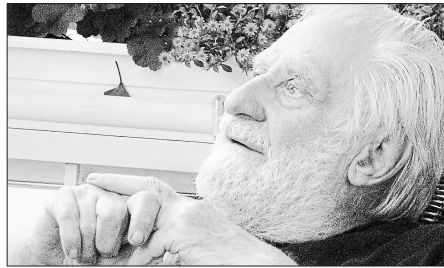
One day, while Bert seized, my father held him on his lap, there, at the kitchen table at the window to the outside world. It was just the three of us. Eventually, unexpectedly, like a punctured bike tire, he gave one, last exhausted breath. My father held Bert for some time. I remember the breadth of my father's forearms. Funny, recalling such a detail.

Others died, and lived, at that home, my home, my family's home, which was also a community home for lost souls unable to care for themselves. Some were old, maybe stroke victims. Others were young, often with psychiatric histories. Many had no visitors. Even family. Ever.

It was an education. There was Gerry (the boxer, a best friend, really), Steven (who died one Easter Sunday), Walter (kidneys shot from drink), Donna (arrived at 28, brain already fried), plus an entire church choir of out-of-tune characters. Some days I could write a thousand books on it all. Other days, not a word.

Today falls somewhere between, a day to celebrate what anyone wants to be remembered and honoured for one's life, a dignity and courtesy, it seems to me, easily offered the dead, but not nearly enough to the rest of us, the living, who could use it more. Today, August 27, my father turns 85. Yes, my father is living, very much, and I, for one, am grateful.

His youth was filled with chaos not unlike today's refugee experience. At 13, as a young German, he was taken prisoner by



THOMAS FROESE PHOTO

Gunther Froese, father of Spectator columnist Thomas Froese, turns 85 today. An immigrant from Germany after the Second World War, he has practised as a registered therapeutic massage therapist in the Niagara Region for 56 years.

the Soviet Red Army in war-ravaged Germany. While he survived, his family split apart.

Later, he came to Canada, joining family already arrived.

In 1960, in Niagara, he opened a therapeutic massage practice, his choice of a healing, if not arduous, vocation. He's continued ever since, for 56 years, even into his frail years, more than a decade after Ontario's therapeutic massage association formally recognized his longevity and remarkable professional contributions.

Plus his running of that home for more than 20 years, while a widower and single dad.

My father once told another newspaper of his desire to live a life of service in the spirit of his Mennonite heritage, recognizing his many "bonus years" after those early wartime traumas.

Some days it's hard to know what to make of it all: family, war, peace, finding what only you can give the world so you can somehow receive back what you in turn need: wholeness.

Some days you want to run from it, life's traumas and banalities, both. You want to protect your elderly from the indignities of aging and your children from their own threatening shadows.

Then you wake up to realize that neither is possible nor helpful. Not really.

My own kids have just said goodbye for many months, again, to their friends and family, including my father, their Opa.

With my stepmother, he'll remain in that memorable, old 1870s estate home, the place where those struggling souls sought shelter and dignity in my youth. This, while I return my family to Africa, a place where, unremarkably, people also die in each other's arms.

One day it was Timothy, a dear Ugandan friend. It was cancer. He was 15. That day, at his home, he walked to his mother, reached up, and simply collapsed in her arms.

Then, seeing whatever he saw, he spoke the last word through the last breath his exhausted lungs could push: "Jezeus."

After the funeral, my son, Jonathan, then eight, said, "You mean he died in his mother's arms? Right in her arms? Dad, I thought that only happens in the movies!"

Sure son.

In the movies.

And in real life. Real holy life.

All things considered, to go so divinely, so naturally, in a loving hug ... what more could anyone, anywhere ask?

Thomas Froese writes about news, travel and life. Find him at [www.thomasfroese.com](http://www.thomasfroese.com) and [www.dailydad.net](http://www.dailydad.net)

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