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Off-Road Democracy: The Politics of Land, Water, and Community in Alberta

Democratization is not about being “left alone.” . . . To become a democrat is to change one’s self, to learn how to act collectively, as a *demos*. It requires that the individual go “public” and thereby help to constitute a “public” and an “open” politics, in principle accessible for all to take part in it.¹

—Sheldon Wolin

If we persist long enough, preach and protest long enough, we may be able to support this fragile, ancient bio-diverse landscape. Somewhere democracy may still breathe.²

—Francis Gardner, southern Alberta rancher, Pekisko Group member

I

The question of how Albertans communicate politically—and whether, in fact, they do—deserves a serious answer, not a flippant one, though it may need to be exploratory and circuitous in nature. The temptation to be flippant is obvious enough. By appearance and reputation, Alberta is easily the most apolitical, perhaps anti-political, province in the country. It elects dynastic parties for generations at a time—the current one since 1971. Its elections are

rarely real contests where the outcome is in doubt, and even when they are, voter turnout is still puzzlingly low. In the past decade, Alberta's political life has been characterized variously as hollowed-out, enigmatic, impoverished, the "false front" of a self-deceived frontier town.³ Its legislature typically sits for fewer days a year than any other in the country. One former premier (Don Getty) mused that if it met even less often, it would pass fewer laws—presumably a good thing. Another, Ralph Klein, famously dreamed of a government run on "autopilot" and questioned the need for an Official Opposition since all it ever did was oppose.⁴ Such comments did not exactly light up the radio talk shows. Indeed, Albertans sometimes seem to accept the contradictory caricatures spun about them: that they are maverick, live-free-or-die libertarians, or at least indifferent to politics unless roused momentarily against a threatened federal raid on either the provincial pantry or their gun cabinets—in which case, they need to speak with one voice—and that dissenters, by definition, are not real Albertans.⁵ Alternatively, they are cast as timid inhabitants of what is, in effect, one big resource-based company town where industry calls the shots, government generally does its bidding, and individuals think twice before taking public positions that put their jobs or their community projects in jeopardy.

Caricatures often contain a measure of truth, to be sure, but they are also dangerous foundations for political action and weak substitutes for political understanding. If they do not tell the whole story, neither do they necessarily tell the right one or the most fundamental one. Alberta is a complex, openly heterogeneous, globally connected place. There are, in fact, many "Albertas"—delineated, for example, by geographic region, subculture, and economic sector. The province is no monolith. It is certainly not downtown Calgary writ large. It is home to an impressive number of policy institutes and political-cultural magazines, as well as a flourishing blogosphere populated by both insiders and outsiders, from Conservative MLAs to libertarian-pagan socialists. The letters pages of its newspapers, even in smaller centres, reflect a diversity of views and, at times, enough criticism directed at the provincial government that an unfamiliar reader might wonder how it ever received the votes to get itself elected.

And yet Alberta is somehow different. There is, I want to argue, a frustrated, elusive, almost subterranean quality to its politics. For a province once steeped in a robust conception of skilled citizenship and a populist distrust

of representation, what is now striking is how difficult it is for people to have an honest, meaningful, and public conversation about the interlaced policy challenges that confront Alberta. Those challenges include the roller-coaster public finances of a resource-based economy, the right levels of oil and gas rents, societal expectations for a high level of public services but without high taxation, the environmental and social costs of energy development and their uneven distribution across the province, the national and international politics of climate change, and the capacity of government to chart a constructive path through such complex terrain. Where and how do Albertans say what they want—and what they don't want? How do they begin to test ideas, disagree in good faith, and strike tentative balances? Is there, in fact, common ground? Is there enough interest to find out? As will be evident, my focus is on political communication not as the tactical domain of government, political parties, and organized interests, but rather as the characteristic activity of citizens when they engage the state and each other. This is, of course, a more elusive subject. As the political philosopher Charles Taylor observes, the "malaise of modernity" is partly the inability of individuated societies to form an "effective common purpose through democratic action."⁶ But this problem has a specific coloration in Alberta. What makes public conversation so difficult and, perhaps, so promising here?

II

Sometime around the start of the latest energy-fuelled boom-and-bust cycle, around the ebbing of Klein's premiership—when his aspiration to a government run on autopilot had been turned against him by impatient critics, even inside his own party—the sense of political opening was impossible to ignore. The most self-assured days of the Alberta Advantage had passed. The sense of a province out of balance had become a subject of coffee-shop analysis, and with it, the anxiety of not frittering away another economic boom. The talk did not emanate only from the usual suspects: the small opposition parties, say, or activist think-tanks like the Parkland Institute, which a prickly Klein once helped boost to prominence by denouncing as a communist the author of its first sponsored book, future Liberal leader Kevin Taft.

Instead, it came from a host of less-expected sources. By mid-decade, for example, the Calgary-based Canada West Foundation had published a series

of research studies championing the idea of a provincial sales tax, a political near-heresy, as the key piece in a reform of the province's public finances to increase savings and achieve greater revenue stability. Other mainstream economists followed suit.⁷ Rural municipal leaders had begun to be bold enough to say, as a government strategy paper conceded, that the prosperity of the Alberta Advantage was concentrated inside the Edmonton-Calgary corridor even though the resources that produced it were extracted mainly outside it and that reinvestment in public infrastructure was required for rural communities to have a future.⁸ Big-city mayors had claimed more resources to build infrastructure in the new engines of the economy. Most notably, former premier Peter Lougheed had chided the government for leaving the province in a "mess" because of its aversion not just to planning, especially the "orderly development" of the oil sands, but also to collecting a fairer share of non-renewable resource rents for the people of Alberta, who were its collective "owners."⁹

Lougheed's intervention, however, was not necessarily the most pointed or provocative at the time. Like the others, it identified the problems as managerial or distributional in nature. In the fall of 2004, Preston Manning went a step further in a column published in several newspapers, including the province's major dailies. Part punditry, part positioning, the column began by recalling the peculiar historical pattern of Alberta politics, in which a new political movement with a "big, new idea" eventually sweeps a tired dynastic party from office. Manning speculated that the "idea that will elect the next provincial government" would not be spending more on public services or building firewalls between Alberta and the rest of Canada—the cause to which Stephen Harper and other Calgary-based policy thinkers had committed themselves by an open letter. Rather, it would be environmental conservation. Manning noted the surprising prominence of environmental issues in public-opinion surveys of Albertans, as well as the proliferation of conservation groups—"many disillusioned with the provincial government's responses to their concerns and organizing increasingly at the grassroots level." Perhaps he had in mind the newspaper photographs of the iconic singer-rancher Ian Tyson and his neighbours riding horseback into the foothills south of Calgary to make a statement against oil-and-gas development in their heritage rangelands.¹⁰ In any case, Manning's column concluded: "If some group, properly led and organized politically, were to figure out how to marry the Alberta

commitment to marketplace economics and fiscal responsibility, with a genuine, proactive, approach to the conservation of the province's natural capital, the times and conditions are nearly ripe for such a group to form the next government.”¹¹

Whatever Manning's motives at the time—he did, after all, consider and decide against a run for the Progressive Conservative leadership in 2006—he has persisted in the idea that a new “blue-green” politics is both necessary and possible in his home province. The concept of “living within our means” is his proposed common ground for fiscal conservatives and conservationists.¹² As recently as February 2010, the Manning Centre organized the “Conference on Alberta's Future,” in which the three lead agenda items were the “handling of public money,” “balanced” and “responsible” economic growth, and environmental conservation. My interest here is precisely *not* to revisit the journalistic speculation about what impact such an event might have on the ruling coalition that is the Progressive Conservative government, in which, safe to say, Manning has long been a divisive figure and the subject of as much suspicion as admiration. Even less does it lie in the merits of his quixotic attempt to orchestrate a conservative unity of free-market economics, little-guy populism, and deliberative democracy, though he is not the first politician to assume that “the people,” rightly informed, would align with him ideologically.

Rather, my interest lies in at least three important instincts represented in Manning's formulation of a blue-green political agenda. One is that environmental issues cannot be disentangled from the core cluster of policy issues in Alberta. Indeed, they are the best-bet “next wave”—the simmering discontent waiting to be captured by a savvy, ear-to-the-ground political movement that can speak its language. A second, by implication, is that the environmental issues facing Albertans are, in good measure, within the realm of policy choices made in Alberta. In other words, they amount to more than the external threat to oil-patch jobs routinely conjured up in the form of carbon-taxing politicians in Ottawa, regulators in Washington, or “climate-change jihadists” in Copenhagen, as the business-page columnists and radio talk-show hosts took to calling them. Consequently, they require more than marketing campaigns to counteract the glare of negative national and international publicity. The third instinct—possibly the most important, if also the most presumptuous—is that there is now no adequate deliberative forum in which a genuine

conversation could happen. The legislature alone could not be that forum. Nor could an election campaign. It had to be created new. Regardless of whether the “Conference on Alberta’s Future” was sufficiently representative (predictably, it wasn’t), regardless of whether its deliberations were too much entangled in the prospects of the upstart Wildrose Alliance (predictably, they were), the point is that the challenge facing the province was not just managerial or distributional. It was also political.

III

A short history lesson from an ill-remembered agrarian past: in late June 1921, Henry Wise Wood took to the stage of Medicine Hat’s Empress Theatre to make the evolutionary case for co-operation (the “higher law”) over competition, democracy over plutocracy, and popular self-government over the “primitive” party system. The occasion was a federal by-election rally on behalf of the United Farmers of Alberta candidate. Though the Lincolnesque, Missouri-born Wood, the UFA’s leader, had been unsuccessful in keeping the movement out of electoral politics, he insisted for his audience that the purpose was to build a counterforce that could transform the political system itself—so that people were no longer powerless, suspended in weakness, but instead developed the capacity for self-government.¹³ The UFA movement was steeped in the notion of democracy as capacity. Its modestly titled pamphlet, *How to Organize and Carry on a Local of the United Farmers of Alberta* (1919), was a primer not only on how to run a meeting but also on how to develop the “power of self-expression of every member” through small libraries, formal debates, and meetings for community discussion of “all public questions.”¹⁴ The UFA won its federal by-election and, within months, swept into office in Alberta with a majority of legislature seats. While it proved to be a fairly cautious provincial government—caught between fiscal limits, the impulse toward technocratic, “non-partisan” administration, and the demands of a more radical membership—the widest impact of the farmers’ movement arguably was experienced at the local level through both the UFA and the Wheat Pool. Agrarian populism in Alberta was motivated by more than grievance at malevolent economic forces and indifferent governments. It has been credited fairly with having “contributed more to Canadian thought about the nature and practice of democracy than did any other regional or class discourse.”¹⁵

Its adherents lived out the idea of self-government in a generation of local institution-building: school boards, creamery co-operatives, credit unions.

It took the shock of the Depression and a political scandal in the premier's office to bring the UFA era to a close. What emerged in its place was another movement, Social Credit, whose woolly economic cure was scarcely understood except as a desperate hope and whose leader, William Aberhart, was very much the central figure in its popularization. He held Albertans spell-bound by radio, encouraged them to "put aside politics," and asked merely for a declaration of the general will—in this case, to be delivered from hunger and want—while trusting the "experts" to bring "results." Commentators have described the new populism as "plebiscitarian."¹⁶ While the transition was not so dramatic as one election in 1935, there is no single, unbroken populist tradition in the West—no straight line, as Manning would have it—from Riel to Reform. In the words of historian W. L. Morton: "Social Credit was the end of politics in Alberta and the beginning of popular administration."¹⁷

From the vantage point of its early democratic history, what Alberta has experienced since is a process of political deskilling.¹⁸ After 1947, the economy shifted toward oil production and refining, bringing with it a new reliance on US-based capital and expertise. The traditional resentment of central Canadian domination shifted targets from the railroads and banks to Ottawa. The provincial government, in turn, had significant new resources with which to provide a relatively high level of services—roads, schools, hospitals, seniors' lodges—without having to fund them through onerous levels of taxation. Alberta was no longer poor. But along with prosperity, I have argued, came a paralyzing patron-client politics, especially in overrepresented rural areas. At the heart of it, essentially, has been an exchange of state largesse, less generous by the mid-1990s, for fairly passive citizen support, mostly at election time. Within two generations, the memory of a more robust politics of community self-defence has been buried deep beneath an increasingly industrial landscape.

IV

Alberta's political communication might seem elusive or subterranean in several senses, though in this essay I address only one of them. I am not concerned here with the question of whether real debate happens, as we are

assured, inside the “big tent” of the government caucus; or whether energy executives have routine back-door access to the premier; or whether the furtive undercurrents of elite discontent might someday surface as an electoral coalition that changes the party-political landscape. Nor am I concerned here with whether the government’s high-profile, highly politicized Public Affairs Bureau is so effective as to merit the nickname bestowed by its critics and sometimes by its staff: the Ministry of Truth.¹⁹

Instead, I am concerned with a species of political communication that is subterranean not because it is secretive—if anything, it can be downright noisy—but because it occurs mostly out of range, in the “other” or “outer” Alberta. It is off-road politics, invariably local or regional, often rural. It organizes under banners like the Voice of Community and Land (VOCAL), Citizens for Responsible Development, the Pekisko and Livingstone Landowners groups, the Peace River Environmental Society. Their activity may not always sound and feel like politics even to participants. Its primary focus is not to replace the party in power, though its target commonly is the provincial government or, say, its health authority or its energy regulator. It is seldom enlisted successfully by the opposition parties. The intent is more immediate and practical, set within the parameters of what people experience as a single-party state. It may be to save something—like a hospital, a watershed, a stretch of heritage rangeland, a market-garden belt within a sprawling city or newly minted industrial “heartland”; or it may be to stop something—like sour-gas flaring, a factory farm, a massive coal-mine project, or a high-voltage transmission line; or, in rare cases, it may be to build something—like a co-operative to buy and operate a short-line railroad otherwise destined for abandonment.

This list of examples is suggestive but reflects the fact that, in the past two decades, Alberta has become a place of intense conflict over land and water use, and over competing resource, residential, and recreational development pressures. Iconic landscapes have been crowded by the industrial countryside of pipelines and wellsites, petrochemical plants, forestry cutlines, waste-disposal dumps, intensive livestock operations, gravel pits, and utility corridors.²⁰ The conflicts they have provoked are, in essence, about alternative futures, local and provincial. Typically, they are eruptive and short-lived; they may generate no more than an inchoate proto-politics. They may cause participants, for example, to ask critical questions—why doesn’t “our government”

defend us?—but not always to connect the dots, join forces on a larger scale, or arrive at a sophisticated understanding of power, institutions, and decision-making. The outcome may be nothing more than a more resolute fatalism. Nonetheless, such groups are a recurring feature of the landscape—notwithstanding the national media preoccupation with isolated, decidedly apolitical individuals such as Wiebo Ludwig.²¹ Some of these groups show signs of effective communication, organization, and political re-skilling.

While land-use conflict is inherent in a resource economy such as Alberta's, the landscape arguably shifted in the late 1980s, when, as oil prices tumbled, the province responded to desperate pressures for job creation by supporting the development of a large-scale, export-oriented pulp industry in the north. The proposed Alberta-Pacific (Alpac) mill on the Athabasca River was a centrepiece of the government's resource diversification strategy.²² While it enjoyed the support of municipal and business leaders in the region, as well as the construction industry, it also became the focus of intense opposition expressed most notably during the lengthy public hearings that were required as part of the environmental impact assessment. Ultimately, the project was too big and too important politically to be derailed. But, as one critical account later put it, the province had been "dragged" into "the most comprehensive scrutiny of a pulp mill ever conducted in Canada"—mostly by the efforts of local people, "relatively uninformed, unorganized individuals in rural northern communities," who were up against corporate money, the government's clear preference, and "the authority of specialists and experts." They had to assert their own complex knowledge. They also had to "violate the rules of country etiquette to ask tough, public, and sometimes embarrassing questions" of company officials who otherwise were treated like "guests" by mill boosters.²³ In some ways, though, the challenge to the Alpac project was unusual. It benefited from the presence in the region of professors recruited to a new university and from a fairly generous scope of environmental impact assessment for a project that fell under both provincial and federal review. It was not typical of what was to come, though the project itself symbolized a decisive policy shift in favour of resource extraction. Consequently, the rural landscape of the past two decades has been dominated by large-scale industrial development representing at least four Ps: pulp, petroleum, pigs, and power.

In the economic downturn of the mid-1980s, the provincial government had also responded by scaling back oil and gas royalties and, in the next decade, making significant changes to its regulatory regime. The Energy Resources Conservation Board was absorbed into a bigger agency, the Energy and Utilities Board. Its new mandate stressed “discovery, development, and delivery,” but not “conservation” of resources; its ability to monitor the industry and enforce regulations was further limited by staffing reductions; and its application process was streamlined to reduce opportunities for public participation in decisions. As one environmental scholar has observed, this last shift reversed a decade in which “rural citizens” had succeeded in broadening the scope of assessment beyond mere technical-geological considerations and had learned to represent their concerns effectively in both public hearings and informal consultative processes on issues such as sour-gas emissions.²⁴ Not surprisingly, the renewed intensity of conventional oil-and-gas activity across the province in the 1990s was accompanied by pockets of white-hot anger in the countryside. In places—for example, west of Grande Prairie—it produced a constructive citizen-led effort to establish a monitoring regime for airshed quality. More often, that anger was aggregated in venues like the Alberta Surface Rights Federation, whose annual meetings in Camrose drew landowners armed with file folders containing the documents and photographs of their individual quests for redress against the industry for improper land reclamations, wellsite abandonment, corrupted water sources, or the downwind health effects of sour-gas flaring. While the federation produced materials and engaged counsel to give members a clearer sense of their legal rights, it struggled to point their anger in a political direction. Instead, it was caught in the calculations of patron-client politics and the greater provincial “public interest.” The federation did not necessarily possess more power than to summon a sacrificial senior EUB staff member to absorb the anger in the room.

When the Klein government, like New Democratic governments in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, embarked on a plan to boost livestock production and processing, anticipating that grain transportation reforms would shift grain-growers from export wheat to feed barley, it did so with a model that provoked sharp divisions in proposed site communities. In Alberta, beef was the flagship industry; the result was the emergence of cattle feedlots as large as 100,000 head in the south. Perhaps because beef is more deeply

embedded in the provincial mythology, it was pigs that produced the strongest local reactions, most notably around the unsuccessful efforts of Taiwan Sugar Corporation, which had been recruited by the province, to find sites in sparsely populated eastern Alberta on which to build a 7,200-sow, multi-barn complex. The company first tried in Forty Mile County in the south, where the municipal appeal board revoked a development permit in the face of a local campaign led by two farm women between seeding and harvest. One of them, Lisa Bechtold, recalled later:

Our municipal politicians . . . didn't feel the need to find out what the people in the community or the people that were living in the area, if they thought that was OK, and didn't bother to do the research themselves to find out what negative impacts there could be. . . . We started petitions and we asked the county if they would hold a meeting, trying to present some of the facts for both sides, not just the one public relations side. They felt that was adequate. And so we held our own meeting, and we advertised it in the paper. And we had a soil scientist come out, and a biologist, and held our own public meeting, and we had 150 or more people just at that first meeting. . . . So we educated them, we put letters to the editor in the paper every week.²⁵

Following the decision, Bechtold spoke at international conferences, lobbied in Washington, and helped form a national organization to oppose factory farming: "I never thought I'd know this much about pigs or manure and, or politics for that matter."²⁶ Taiwan Sugar, meanwhile, eventually abandoned its second site—in Flagstaff County, three hundred kilometres north—after area residents mounted a campaign at the municipal level and then in the courtroom. Midway through the campaign, one of them admitted: "Out here in the rural, we've got to learn to do politics all over again."²⁷ The province's legislative response, in short, was to transfer authority over confined-feeding livestock developments from the "emotional" domain of local government to a "science-based" provincial regulator with limited provision for community intervenors beyond those "directly affected."²⁸

A variation of the same pattern played out in the more publicized recent case of opposition from central Alberta landowners to a 500-kilovolt, north-to-south transmission line. Although the project was initially approved without public notice, a landowners group quickly organized to force a second

round of hearings to review the original decision and then seek a Court of Appeal ruling against the EUB on the basis of procedural irregularities. In the meantime, as hearings continued, it was revealed that the EUB had hired private investigators to gather information about protestors who, because the board feared violent disruption, had already been banished to watching regulatory hearings on closed-circuit television.²⁹ In the political and legal fallout, the EUB chair was replaced and the agency ultimately dissolved, the hearings were cancelled, and the project was postponed pending a new application and new regulator. The leader of the landowners group, Joe Anglin, contested the 2008 election as a Green Party candidate; he received 23 percent of ballots cast in a rural riding in which the turnout was slightly less than half of the eligible electorate. In 2009, the government reintroduced legislation whose most controversial provision, deleted prior to third reading, would have exempted “critical transmission infrastructure” from the requirement that the new Alberta Utilities Commission consider the public interest—in particular, the social and economic impact—of any development applications it hears.³⁰

The other major “power” development proposed in the same period was a coal mine and gasification project one hours’ drive southeast of Edmonton. The project, led by Sherritt International and the Ontario Teachers Pension Fund, would involve the excavation of more than three hundred square kilometres of land—much of it good farmland—over several decades to generate a synthetic alternative to natural gas for oil sands and other industrial purposes. In the 1970s, residents of this rural district had mobilized against a Calgary Power coal-mine project that Lougheed intervened personally to stop in the late stages of development. Three decades later, the district was older; some of its farm people, especially those who had no children interested in succeeding them or those who had grown tired of the economic stresses, were readier to sell; and a rich seam of coal still lay underground. Municipal and business leaders in the nearest town, Tofield, quickly swung in behind the promise of more than a thousand jobs during the construction period and three to four hundred jobs on an ongoing basis. Edmonton’s municipally owned utility, Epcor, entered the partnership to explore how it might provide water and generate onsite power.³¹

While Sherritt was careful from the start to consult openly with residents and commit to environmental best practices and above-market compensation for those who were displaced, organized community opposition eventually

coalesced around the multi-generational farm families whose place and livelihood were directly threatened. In this and other cases, some land uses simply do not coexist easily with others. In the district, the new group Voice of Community and Land (VOCAL) emerged alongside the older Round Hill-Dodds Agricultural Protective Association, which had been formed in the 1970s and took a more cautious position this time. VOCAL committed itself to be “a unified voice in opposition to the project”; to raise awareness of its environmental, social, and economic impact; to evaluate risks independently; to help regulatory authorities, “with their appreciation of the public interest,” promote conservation and alternative energy sources; and to work with like-minded groups.³² Since its establishment, VOCAL has met regularly with Sherritt and with the local MLA, former Premier Ed Stelmach. It has exercised care not to split the neighbourhood. It has sponsored practical workshops on energy topics. It has also built relationships with university researchers and students, resulting in a participatory social-impact assessment, a thesis, and a YouTube video (“Julie’s Story”). VOCAL’s website attests to communication by member newsletters, a billboard, meetings with politicians (government and opposition), national TV and radio coverage, a folk-music festival, Rotary Club speeches, and the active use of social media in circulating the message even into the heart of Ontario.³³ Bill Sears, chair of VOCAL, has described the group’s method as talking to as many people as possible so that they are in a better position to determine the province’s future: “Because industry will develop—that’s their job. Government’s job and people’s job is to say how we want that development to take place. . . . What are we leaving for our kids?”³⁴ The Sherritt project has been in limbo since mid-2008, though VOCAL remains active.

The same combination of rootedness, environmental concern, and diffuse, web-based communication characterizes the Pekisko and Livingstone groups. They represent landowners and grazing-leaseholders—mostly ranchers—in adjacent southern foothills regions, the focus of recent sour-gas and coalbed methane exploration, and a pipeline development application. They describe themselves as “families bound together” and “stewards” of a “special place” (Pekisko), and as dedicated to “community consultation and participation with industry and government in the planning of future development” (Livingstone).³⁵ Their websites post the details of industry applications, documents filed with regulators, sample legal agreements, fact sheets, press releases, research studies, media coverage, videos, and eclectic links. What’s

perhaps most interesting is that they represent traditional ranch country—in other words, people culturally averse to collective action, land-use planning, and politics. In 2005, in a letter to the EUB, two government ministers, and opposition environment critics, the Livingstone group challenged plans for “high-density” energy development within its region: “Let us remind you that the Public Interest is not legitimately defined as maximum development of the energy sector, stunning profits to corporations, and royalties to the Government of Alberta, with a much-ballyhooed trickle-down ‘Alberta Advantage’ effect for the rest of us—while landowners and residents bear the extreme costs of this kind of development.”³⁶

The two groups and municipal governments were among the sponsors of what became the Southern Foothills Study, an independent environmental assessment and future modelling of “business as usual” cumulative effects.³⁷ The goal is to establish key indicators at the community level, invite the resource industries to talk, and set land-use parameters for what activity occurs where, partly in order to conserve rangeland. Long-time rancher Francis Gardner, a Pekisko leader, has identified a more immediate, positive outcome: “What I guess I [am] most proud of is that the entire area in the foothills has come together to help set some bearings on the compass of land use. We have created a community that corresponds with each other more than it used to, meets more and has more hope for the future. We have in real terms challenged the model, found it lacking and have been able to do something about it. . . . The facts were simple, do it ourselves or we would lose the opportunity for any meaningful input.”³⁸

It may have been no coincidence that late in 2008, the provincial government unveiled a long-awaited *Land-Use Framework*. The document acknowledged that Alberta had reached a “tipping point”—marked by “conflict” among users and “stress” on the land. It made commitments both to regional planning based primarily around major watersheds and to a regime of cumulative-effects management.³⁹ Alberta Environment had already announced a number of model cumulative-effects projects with community stakeholders: one, coincidentally, in a three-county region in east-central Alberta that included the proposed Sherritt mine, another in the southwest. While rural activists approached the subsequent consultations and model projects warily, unsure that their investment of time really would be rewarded with meaningful opportunities to map “desired outcomes,” unsure that the policy shift was

more than rhetorical, it is hard to imagine that any such shift would have occurred without them.⁴⁰

v

The kinds of activism I have described in this essay are not easily dismissed as mere self-interested, “not in my backyard” behaviour. For one thing, they draw attention to the fact that, however the benefits of resource development may be distributed in Alberta, the messes associated with it have been concentrated in particular places—mostly out of sight, out of mind—in what is now a very urban province. For another, they demand serious learning on the part of those who are mobilized, even if members begin, as VOCAL’s Bill Sears told a journalist, as “just ordinary farmers that want to be farming but are forced into this situation to protect their land.”⁴¹ The campaigns in the countryside build political capacity—though not always, and not always easily. They may require a crash course in regulatory law and the science of parts-per-million, emergency zones, clay liners, or soil reclamation. They require of leaders the courage to speak publicly for a community, name its values, meet with political leaders without being intimidated, and deal with journalists, scientific experts, and national environmental organizations with their own agendas. They require the ability to sustain organizations with ideologically and socially complex memberships and to deal tactfully with the tensions that result in face-to-face local settings where municipal leaders, Main Street businesses, or neighbours might see an economic opportunity rather than a threat—for there is no such thing as a simple, tight-knit community. This kind of political re-skilling recalls what the nineteenth-century European political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville observed in his classic work, *Democracy in America*: only when private people are drawn out of their homes to join in some association, even for reasons mixed with self-interest, and learn from that experience to speak, listen, and act can they develop a “taste” for the public realm and its “dangerous freedom.”⁴²

From the perspective of political communication, particularly citizen communication, the kinds of activism described in the preceding section do merit serious attention. They represent real instances of political mobilization in rural Alberta. As training grounds, they are perhaps the closest contemporary equivalents of the Wheat Pool or the United Farm Women’s campaigns for

hospitals early in the last century. At the same time, though, quasi-judicial regulatory hearings, environmental impact assessment processes, and other such venues have obvious political limits. They are reactive, fear-filled, and adversarial; they pose narrow, technical questions; they routinely discount local knowledge; and, in the words of Daniel Kemmis, they “set science up by expecting it to give us the answers without having done the civic work of first deciding what the questions are.”⁴³ They can be a substitute for civic work. By default, they assume that the public interest lies in large-scale resource development and the jobs it promises. In a large, diverse province—filled with self-selected *arrivistes* recruited by economic opportunity, not the Sierra Club, and living mostly in the cities⁴⁴—they can serve to quarantine environmental concerns geographically so that it is left to small host communities to absorb the intense conflict generated by provincial economic imperatives. Citizens who are mobilized around development decisions rarely get a platform from which to address a larger audience on bigger questions. Even less likely is a two-way conversation. Their talk, moreover, is directed at authorities—often in the strange dialects of science and law—but not at each other, as equals, “negotiating and acting together” and thereby “exercising power *together* as citizens” in relation to communities, places, watersheds.⁴⁵ In other words, they struggle for meaningful settings for words and actions; without them, democracy is “managed.”⁴⁶

Still, it is a start. The example of VOCAL or the Pekisko group suggests that local self-defence, however subterranean, can generate a sense of common interest, a broader environmental analysis, a democratic sensibility, and, not least, the surprise of citizenship. Those organizations are not defined strictly by the regulatory processes that may lie ahead of them. What they require as a next step, though, is the kind of larger, honest, difficult conversations toward which some Albertans keep groping, and in which rural people on the front lines of land-use choices must be able to speak for themselves and for their communities and livelihoods, their landscapes and watersheds. More than most know, the province’s political vitality may depend on it.

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NOTES

- 1 Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy, Inc.: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 289.
- 2 Francis W. Gardner, "Rangeland Home Maintenance: What It Means to 'Get It'—When You Live on the Grasslands," in *Homes on the Range: Conservation in Working Prairie Landscapes*, ed. Robert G. Warnock et al. (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2008), 54.
- 3 Keith Brownsey, "Ralph Klein and the Hollowing of Alberta," in *The Return of the Trojan Horse: Alberta and the New World (Dis)Order*, ed. Trevor Harrison (Montreal: Black Rose, 2005), 23; Doreen Barrie, *The Other Alberta: Decoding a Political Enigma* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2006); Mark Lisac, *Alberta Politics Uncovered: Taking Back Our Province* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2004), 2, 58.
- 4 Mark Lisac, "Tory Leaders Ponder Their Legacy: Klein Promises to Pay Off Debt but Reluctant to End Medicare Premiums," *Edmonton Journal*, October 30, 2000. The premier repeated the "autopilot" comment on several other occasions, among them his victory speech after the 2001 election.
- 5 Mark Lisac, a long-time newspaper columnist with a circumspect, non-partisan reputation, and now the publisher of a weekly political newsletter, does a masterful job on all this in his book *Alberta Politics Uncovered*.
- 6 Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1991), 117.
- 7 See, for example, Kenneth McKenzie, *Replacing the Alberta Personal Income Tax with a Sales Tax: Not Heresy but Good Economic Sense* (Calgary: Canada West Foundation, 2000); L. S. Wilson, ed., *Alberta's Volatile Government Revenues: Policies for the Long Run* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press/Institute for Public Economics, 2002).
- 8 Government of Alberta, *A Place to Grow: Alberta's Rural Development Strategy*, February 2005. The strategy followed the report of a task force of government MLAs, *Rural Alberta: Land of Opportunity*. The task force was struck after a Conservative candidate won a by-election in east-central Alberta by a large plurality but with the votes of only one in seven eligible voters.
- 9 See, for example, "Ex-Premier Reflects on Alberta," *Calgary Herald*, September 3, 2006; and John Gray, "The Second Coming of Peter Lougheed," *Globe and Mail*, August 28, 2008.
- 10 Wendy Dudley, "Heritage Ranchers Take On Oil Industry," *Western Producer*, October 10, 2002.
- 11 Preston Manning, "Will Alberta Turn Green When Conservatives Fade to Black?" *Edmonton Journal*, September 27, 2004.
- 12 Preston Manning, Nicholas Gafuik, and Peter Andreasen, "Development, Conservation Can Be Achieved," *Calgary Herald*, October 26, 2006.
- 13 In this section, I draw on Wood's short articles and the transcript of the Medicine Hat speech found in the Walter Norman Smith and Amelia Turner Smith finds (M-1157-103;

- M-1157-50) in the Glenbow Museum's digital archive. See my book, *We Are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays*, especially chap. 5: "Statues of Liberty: The Political Tradition of the Producer" (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008).
- 14 See Epp, *We Are All Treaty People*, chaps. 4 and 5. The UFA pamphlet is available in the University of Alberta's digital archive at <http://peel.library.ualberta.ca/bibliography/4540.html>.
 - 15 David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 3.
 - 16 See Epp, *We Are All Treaty People*, 68–69. I owe this characterization in part to Laycock's *Populism and Democratic Thought*.
 - 17 W. L. Morton, "A Century of Plain and Parkland," in *A Region of the Mind*, ed. Richard Allen (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1973), 178.
 - 18 I have described this phenomenon at greater length in "The Political De-skilling of Rural Communities," in *Writing Off the Rural West: Globalization, Governments and the Transformation of Rural Communities*, ed. Roger Epp and Dave Whitson (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press/Parkland Institute, 2001), 301–24.
 - 19 The most careful and substantial study of the bureau over the long period of Progressive Conservative government is in Simon J. Kiss, "Selling Government: The Evolution of Government Public Relations in Alberta from 1971–2006" (PhD diss., Queen's University, 2008). Kiss argues persuasively that for all the Lougheed administration's skilful use of television, it was under Klein that control over the bureau was centralized in the premier's office and its activity—increasingly in advertising, opinion polling, and "aggressive news management"—thoroughly politicized. Kiss characterizes the result as "the public relations state" (chap. 5), though he is careful not to attribute the Conservatives' longevity simply to media manipulation or to suggest that the lessons of Alberta are easily implemented by other governments in more competitive political environments. For other critical accounts, see, for example, Shannon Sampert, "King Ralph, the Ministry of Truth, and the Media in Alberta," in *The Return of the Trojan Horse: Alberta and the New World (Dis)Order*, ed. Trevor Harrison (Montreal: Black Rose, 2005), 37–51; and Don Martin, *King Ralph: The Political Life and Success of Ralph Klein*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Key Porter, 2003), chaps. 11 and 15. Martin, a former legislature reporter and columnist, described the bureau as a "streamlined and scripted communications empire," "a tightly disciplined, highly partisan and powerful tool for the Klein government" (134), especially while it made deep budget cuts in the mid-1990s. Curiously, as if to reinforce the case for the bureau's power and ubiquity, its home website was the top result of my Google search for "Alberta" + "Ministry of Truth." See <http://publicaffairs.alberta.ca/index.cfm>.
 - 20 I have described these land-use pressures in more detail in "Farming Out Our Future," *Alberta Views*, October 2007, 38–41; and "1996—Two Albertas: Rural and Urban Trajectories," in *Alberta Formed, Alberta Transformed*, Provincial Centennial History Project, ed. Michael Payne, Donald Wetherell, and Catherine Cavanaugh (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press; Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006), 726–46.
 - 21 Ludwig is patriarch of the multi-generational Trickle Creek Farm in northwestern

- Alberta, near the centre of some of the most intense energy activity in the province. After a series of attacks against wellsites and a pipeline, he was charged in 1999 and eventually found guilty on several counts. He spent nineteen months in jail. In January 2010, he was arrested but not charged in relation to a series of explosions in the Tomslake area of northeastern British Columbia. One account of the earlier period is Andrew Nikiforuk, *Saboteurs: Wiebo Ludwig's War Against Big Oil* (Toronto: Macfarlane, Walter and Ross, 2001). See also Byron Christopher, "Maclean's Interview: Wiebo Ludwig," January 20, 2010, <http://www2.macleans.ca/2010/01/20/macleans-interview-wiebo-ludwig/>.
- 22 A good account of this period is Larry Pratt and Ian Urquhart, *The Last Great Forest: Japanese Multinationals and Alberta's Northern Forests* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1994).
 - 23 Mary Richardson, Joan Sherman, and Michael Gismond, *Winning Back the Words: Confronting Experts in an Environmental Public Hearing* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1993), 2, 175, 125.
 - 24 See Arn Keeling's "The Rancher and the Regulator: Public Challenges to Sour-Gas Industry Regulation in Alberta, 1970–1994," in *Writing Off the Rural West: Globalization, Governments and the Transformation of Rural Communities*, ed. Roger Epp and Dave Whitson (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press/Parkland Institute, 2001), 279–300.
 - 25 Lisa Bechtold, quoted in "The Canadian Clearances," *CBC Radio One: Ideas*, a two-hour radio documentary produced by Dave Whitson and Roger Epp, first broadcast September 7–8, 2004.
 - 26 Lisa Bechtold, interview by Roger Epp for the CBC radio documentary "The Canadian Clearances."
 - 27 The comment was made to the author in a telephone interview. See also *We Are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008), 150–53.
 - 28 *Natural Resources Conservation Board Act*, Revised Statutes of Alberta, Chapter N-3 (Edmonton: Queen's Printer, 2000), http://www.qp.alberta.ca/574.cfm?page=No3.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncIn=9780779744923.
 - 29 See, for example, Andrew Nikiforuk, "Not in Our Back Yard!" *Canadian Business*, October 22, 2007, 77–83; and "Tories Urged to Fix Spy Scandal," *Calgary Herald*, September 14, 2007.
 - 30 Legislative Assembly of Alberta, Bill 50, *Electric Statutes Amendment Act* (2009). The revised act, however, was part of a suite of legislation that gave the provincial cabinet more direct authority to designate land use and approve major development projects. The legislation and revived AltaLink transmission line project have caused a political firestorm, particularly in the countryside, though the reaction has been framed primarily and narrowly around "property rights" and the spectre of expropriation rather than, say, the quality of democratic decision-making or community-level participation in conceptualizing the public interest. The final amendments are found in the *Alberta Utilities Commission Act* (Art. 17), Statutes of Alberta (Edmonton: Queen's Printer, 2009), http://www.qp.alberta.ca/574.cfm?page=A37P2.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncIn=9780779746651.
 - 31 Sherritt International, *Dodds-Round Hill Coal Gasification Project*, Public Disclosure

- Document, January 2007, environment.alberta.ca/documents/Sherritt_Dodds-Roundhill_PDD.pdf.
- 32 See the group's website, <http://www.vocalalberta.com/about.html>.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Quoted in Scott Harris, "Not in Anyone's Back Yard," *Vue Weekly*, July 31, 2008; "Round Hill Landowners Want to Repeat History-Changing Victory over Coal Barons," *Edmonton Journal*, January 18, 2008.
- 35 See http://www.pekisko.com/pk_about.html and <http://www.livingstonelandowners.net/about-us>.
- 36 Letter from Jillian Lynn Lawson on behalf of the Livingstone Landowners Group, June 15, 2005, <http://www.livingstonelandowners.net/archive>.
- 37 *The Changing Landscape of the Southern Alberta Foothills*, Report of the Southern Foothills Study, Business As Usual Scenario and Public Survey, June 2007. An Executive Summary of the report can be downloaded at http://www.salts-landtrust.org/sfs/sfs_reporting.html. See also the community visioning report, released in fall 2011, at http://www.pekisko.ca/pk_sfi_results.html.
- 38 Gardner, "Rangeland Home Maintenance," 52–53.
- 39 Government of Alberta, Sustainable Resource Development, *Land-Use Framework*, December 2008, 6. The framework's release followed three years of work beginning with a report commissioned by the province: Roger Gibbins and Barry Worbets, *Managing Prosperity: Developing a Land-Use Framework for Albertans* (Calgary: Canada West Foundation, 2005). The Canada West report, striving for balance, noted that there was "heightened competition for a limited land base," that natural areas had been "compromised," and also that "investment uncertainty" had become prevalent among resource industries unsure of their access to land for development. It also recommended a shift to cumulative-effects management.
- 40 The outcome in the case of the East Central Alberta Cumulative Effects Project was not entirely reassuring. After a diverse group of regional stakeholders had made considerable and imaginative progress in charting a desired future, the project was brought to an abrupt conclusion—ostensibly to redirect government staff resources to the Land-Use Framework.
- 41 Bill Sears, quoted in Harris, "Not in Anyone's Back Yard."
- 42 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, trans. Henry Reeve, rev. Phillips Bradley (New York: Random House, 1954), 127. Alternatively, Alberta's rural landowner groups can be understood in terms of what social scientists have called "new social movements"—that is, organizations that exist for purposes other than that of achieving state power or building electoral coalitions. George Konrad, the dissident Hungarian intellectual, defined such activity in the 1980s as "antipolitics," not in the sense in which that word is sometimes applied to Alberta but as a form of struggle that is built around informal "networks of friends," that rejects the goal of conquering state institutions or "deputizing others to do our work for us," and that instead sustains a "debate between power and creativity" and defends place and work from deterioration: "The success of

this independent ferment cannot be measured by the replacement of one government by another, but by the fact that under the same government society is growing stronger, independent people are multiplying, and the network of conversations uncontrollable from above is becoming denser. Let the government stay on top, we will live our own lives underneath it.” George Konrad, *Antipolitics: An Essay*, trans. Richard Allen (New York: Henry Holt, 1984), 176, 198. I am grateful to Lars Hallström for reminding me of Konrad’s work from an earlier time and the different world of late-communist Eastern Europe.

- 43 Daniel Kemmis, “Science’s Role in Natural Resource Decisions,” *Issues in Science and Technology Online*, Summer 2002, http://search.nap.edu/issues/18.4/p_kemmis.htm.
- 44 See the extensive study by Harry Hiller, *Second Promised Land: Migration to Alberta and the Transformation of Canadian Society* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009).
- 45 James Tully makes this distinction in “On Local and Global Citizenship: An Apprenticeship Manual,” *Public Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2:290–91.
- 46 This is Wolin’s point in *Democracy, Inc.*, especially chaps. 12 and 13.