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What's the truth about cytology lab?

2009/04/15

Editor:

Although Minister of Health, Ron Liepert, announced on April 6th in the Legislature that the cytology labs in Alberta would be centralized in Edmonton and Calgary, the lab at the CRH has been told to prepare a proposal as the decision has not yet been made. Either Minister Liepert is ignorant of what's going on in his portfolio, or the decision has been made and our local cytology lab is being led down the garden path. Which is it?

The RFP (request for proposal) was sent out on February 2nd by Alberta Health, yet on March 19th, when Minister Liepert was asked in the Legislature about the possible centralization of the labs, he claimed to know nothing about it, referring to the question as hypothetical or rumour. Only three weeks later he announces centralization of the labs to Calgary and Edmonton as a "fait accompli."

Furthermore, the RFP from February 2 uses the phrase, "costly duplication of services" as justification for centralization. However, on April 6th, when the minister was asked if a cost benefit analysis had been done, Mr. Liepert replied that it was not because of cost, but that "there are good reasons for it." Which is it? What then are these good reasons? Why are Albertans not being included in the discussions about centralization?

Mark Sandilands,
President, Lethbridge West New Democrats

Re Carbon capture will cost us all

2009/04/01

This is a response to a letter that appeared in the Lethbridge Herald on March 21 stating that carbon capture and storage is a waste of taxpayers' money and not necessary.

Editor,

I partly agree with Xxx when he questions the advisability of carbon capture and storage (Carbon capture will cost us all, March 21). However, it's necessary to address some of the misleading information in Mr. Xxx's letter. Yes, the Earth's atmosphere contains 0.038 per cent carbon dioxide (more commonly stated as 387 ppm or parts per million); however, this value (according to US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) is up 40% since the start of the industrial revolution and the highest for the last 650,000 years.

Some have suggested that Canada, with only 2% of the world population can only make a small difference. This too is misleading. But Canadians are the second worst carbon emitters on the planet, next to the Americans. And Canada is in the top ten nations, regardless of population, for CO2 emissions. Finally, Alberta is the top carbon emitting province in Canada, and by far the worst on a per person basis. We can thank the petroleum industry and our widespread use of coal for electricity generation for this dubious distinction.

So what to do? Some are indeed suggesting that we force coal-fired electricity generators to capture their CO2 and store it underground. Both the Stelmach and the Harper governments are spending our tax dollars on research ways of achieving this.

However, it's now becoming apparent that the emperor has no clothes. For example, New Scientist magazine recently reviewed CCS technology. It quotes a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) study called The Future of Coal, which concludes that, "the first commercial CCS plant won't be on stream until 2030 at the earliest." Greenpeace also released a report on CCS. "Carbon capture and storage is a scam. It is the ultimate coal industry pipe dream,"

according to the report's author, Emily Rochon. "Governments and businesses need to reduce their emissions—not search for excuses to keep burning coal."

On March 18th, Tim Weiss of the Pembina Institute described some encouraging alternatives: Efficiency, Wind, Hydro, Biomass, Geothermal, Micropower, Cogeneration, Recovered Industrial Energy, Virtual Power Plants, and Power Storage (<http://www.pembina.org/pub/1764>).

According to Weiss, Alberta could be almost entirely free from coal generated electricity by 2028. It would, however, take political will for this to happen, either from the current government (unlikely) or from a government of a different stripe (one can hope).

Mark Sandilands, Lethbridge

The role of an opposition in government

2009/02/14

Editor,

The recent news stories about the possibility of Bridget Pastoor leaving the Alberta Liberals to join the Alberta Progressive Conservatives (Pastoor won't switch teams, Feb 13th), in addition to some recent national events, deserve comment.

The Alberta Progressive Conservatives are notorious for trying to attract members of opposition parties over to their side. It's even been rumoured that they once attempted to lure Raj Pannu, leader of the Alberta NDP at the time, to join them. Sometimes they've been successful. Most recently there was Aboriginal Affairs Minister Gene Zwozdesky, who was elected as a Liberal in 1993, then left the party to sit as an independent in 1998, then joined the government a month later.

Why would a party, such as the PCs, with an overwhelming majority want to entice even more MLAs to join them? One answer is that they just don't like opposition. Ralph Klein set the tone for not wanting to listen to opposition by keeping the sitting days in the legislature to the lowest number in all of Canada, save PEI.

Nationally, the Conservatives and their followers also don't like to hear opposition voices. I'm thinking of the widespread criticism of Jack Layton when he said, quite honestly, that he wasn't going to vote for the Harper budget even before he'd seen it. I ask: is it not the role of the opposition parties to criticize and oppose the federal budget? As opposition leader, Stephen Harper voted against Paul Martin's government's budgets 100% of the time. It's a given.

Opposition parties are SUPPOSED to vote against the budget. Only in a minority situation where a budget is developed (or should be) as the result of negotiation and collaboration between the governing party and one other party does the collaborating opposition party vote with the government. But if a minority government has already found one opposition party to support them, it's even more important for the other opposition parties to point out problems in the budget, or to question the ruling party's motives and vote NO.

Lately I've been reading a book I highly recommend, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan (<http://www.michaelpollan.com/omnivore.php>). In a chapter on growing food naturally, Pollan makes the point that a forest growing beside a pasture actually makes the pasture healthier by, for example, providing a place for the birds that eat insect pests. It's similar for governments: the opposition keeps the government healthy by keeping it honest. Pity jurisdictions where there is no opposition. They're called dictatorships.

Kudos to Bridget Pastoor for resisting the siren call from the Stelmach Tories.

Mark Sandilands

Lethbridge

The importance of independent research to an economy

2009/02/08

Editor:

Congratulations to Rick Casson for joining the Conservative Party's post-secondary education (PSE) caucus committee (Herald, February 7). I note that this is a new committee--apparently the Conservative Party has not thought it necessary to have a PSE caucus up to now. Pity. Perhaps a functioning PSE caucus committee could have prevented some of the worst parts of Flaherty's budget presentation on January 27th.

One example was a section on pages 106-107 headed "Further Developing a Highly Skilled Workforce" that included (with no further elaboration) this statement, "Scholarships granted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council [SSHRC] will be focused on business-related degrees."

SSHRC scholarships are for the best graduate students in social sciences and humanities, providing them with funding for advanced research in areas such as reducing poverty, on how regional innovations can become international successes, and on programs aimed at increasing language acquisition in children, just three examples from hundreds.

Focusing SSHRC funds on business students is shortsighted and just wrong. Business students may certainly compete with students in other disciplines for scholarship money, but there is no evidence that governments have ever had success in predicting what will be the most productive academic discipline. Much evidence shows the opposite.

Further, Flaherty and Harper's move to cut funding to Genome Canada and reduce funding to the granting councils by \$148 million over the next three years are appalling decisions. In the USA, Mr. Obama is increasing funding to research by \$12.5 billion, putting innovation out front where it belongs. This is the example Canada should follow!

"For university researchers, this is the worst federal budget in more than a decade," said Graham Cox, Chairperson of the National Graduate Student Caucus. "It boggles the mind that Minister Flaherty can imagine a prosperous Canada with less innovative university research." Let's hope Mr. Casson and other members of his PSE committee have come together to receive messages about the importance of research and not to interpret the Harper government's view in the reverse direction.

Mark Sandilands
Lethbridge

Listeria Outbreak and cutbacks

2008/09/15

Editor: The latest news regarding the infection of meat with the listeria bacteria shows how dangerous Stephen Harper and the Conservatives' policies are to the health of Canadians. According to news stories published on August 30th Harper and his band of free marketers bent to pressure from the meat industry and cut back on inspections by meat inspectors across Canada. Most Canadians think their inspection regimes are tougher than the American ones, but not in the case of meat inspection. The policies of the Canadian Department of Agriculture are significantly weaker than those of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

However, because many meat-processing plants export to the USA, Canadian processors must open their doors to USDA inspectors who then take their reports back to the USA to inform USA consumers. Canadian consumers are left in the dark. But freedom of information requests to the US government are very revealing. An example is one at a PEI company where the floor drainage was so poor that a worker had to stand surrounded by water with blood in it.

Cutbacks to inspectors began with the Liberals under Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin and have picked up pace with Stephen Harper whose government now wants to turn over inspection of food processing plants to the companies themselves with the federal inspectors simply auditing the work now and then. It's like putting the foxes in charge of the henhouse. Canadians should turf out Harper and turn over government to a party that's not in bed with the corporations.

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