



ALBERTA

Speech from the Throne

FEBRUARY 4, 2010

Third Session of the
Twenty-Seventh Legislature

DELIVERED BY
HIS HONOUR
NORMAN L. KWONG, CM, AOE
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

Alberta 

Freedom To Create. Spirit To Achieve.



ALBERTA

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the Third Session of the Twenty-Seventh Alberta Legislature. It is my honour to deliver the Speech from the Throne, as it has been my honour to serve Albertans as Lieutenant Governor over these past five years.

I hope the House will indulge me for a moment as I reflect on what a privilege it has been for my wife, Mary, and me to see so much of our province, and meet so many of its amazing people during my time as Her Majesty's representative in Alberta.

This job has been the highlight of a rewarding career that took many unexpected turns. No one could be as surprised as I am that my road brought me to where it did. I'm grateful for every day and every experience I've had as Alberta's Lieutenant Governor.

Much has changed in our province since I was appointed to this role. The unprecedented growth we knew has given way to the deepest recession the world has seen in half a century.

Our world may have changed, but our people have not. They remain hard-working and innovative, entrepreneurial and compassionate, and most of all: confident about our province and its future.

That confidence is well-placed. Our province has substantial cash reserves and low taxes, providing a solid foundation from which we can make a strong recovery. Albertans have worked hard to earn this fiscal advantage. And the actions we take now will ensure that our province emerges from these difficult times even stronger than before.

Alberta's Fiscal Advantage

Alberta's resource-based economy brings with it one of the most volatile revenue streams in North America — providing surpluses in good times, but prone to sudden economic reversals.

Your government took aggressive steps to create a cushion for the inevitable downturn, improving the fiscal position of the province by almost \$50 billion while maintaining low taxes. A \$23-billion debt was paid off in full, and nearly \$25 billion has been saved and invested on behalf of the people of Alberta.

Most of the money we saved went into the Sustainability Fund — \$17 billion in cash reserves which could be called upon quickly if the province experienced a sudden drop in income. These dollars are now at work protecting municipalities, social programs, educational institutions and the health care system from the kind of cuts seen in other places.

The Sustainability Fund enables Alberta to keep investing in the public infrastructure we know we will need for tomorrow, at a time when we can take advantage of lower costs. We will continue to strengthen the province's transportation, health care and education infrastructure in all regions of the province.

The government's wise financial and capital planning is now supporting tens of thousands of jobs across the province. While other jurisdictions are cutting back and growing their infrastructure deficits, Alberta is improving its competitiveness and looking forward with confidence.

Alberta Capital Bonds will be introduced later this month, available only in Alberta and only to Albertans. Albertans are proud of our province, and want to invest in its future. Backed by our province's Triple A credit rating, the bonds will be one of the safest investments possible in today's economic climate, and offer Albertans a way to invest directly in our province.

Proceeds raised through this sale of bonds will go toward building accommodations for Alberta seniors, including continuing care and supportive living facilities.

Alberta's fiscal strength has allowed the government to keep taxes low and maintain support for health and education. As we work to be back in the black in three years, Albertans will continue to enjoy the highest incomes, the lowest taxes and the most advanced public infrastructure in Canada.

The Sustainability Fund is a great backstop in difficult times, just as this government planned, but we can't rely on it alone to carry us through. Government must live within its means. We must and will carefully manage spending, with a focus on key priorities such as health, education and supports for vulnerable Albertans.

With a shared effort over the next two years, this year's budget will bridge the recession and position Alberta to take full advantage of the recovery.

Improving Health Care

Alberta ranks near the top in Canada on health spending per capita. Yet the results are not what Albertans expect. Your government believes Albertans deserve better results for their health care dollars.

The Minister's Advisory Committee on Health has recently proposed improvements to the publicly funded health system to make it more patient-focused.

Your government will act on these recommendations, including creating a new Alberta Health Act this fall, and setting principles for the development of legislation, policy and program delivery changes across the system. This work will be guided by Albertans themselves, who will be engaged in the evolution of the health system from its first steps.

Part of this evolution will be predictable funding. Budget 2010 will provide stable, five-year funding to Alberta Health Services. This will give our health care partners the security of knowing that growing cost pressures will be addressed.

At the same time, we will share the challenge of focusing ever more vigorously on better performance in key areas such as wait times and access, so Albertans will proudly be able to say that their health care system is the best in the country.

The health system must be accountable to Albertans. Your government will go beyond statistical measures of the health system's performance and seek input from Albertans themselves on whether the system is performing to their expectations. We will report back to Albertans on action taken and progress made.

Building Safe, Caring Communities

Albertans believe that safe, strong and caring communities are important to our quality of life. Government actions will continue to support these values.

The Alberta Gang Reduction Strategy will provide a comprehensive, long-term approach to suppress gang crime in Alberta. Civil forfeiture legislation is already in place, and witness protection legislation will be tabled this session. We will bolster the front lines of Alberta police forces with 100 new officers — the fulfillment of a three-year, 300-officer commitment.

Government's goal of creating 14,000 new child care spaces will be met and surpassed this year, allowing us to focus on maintaining existing spaces and supporting the creation of new spaces in the areas of most need.

Your government will continue working with its partners to deliver on the pledge to develop 11,000 affordable housing units by 2012, and on the Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness.

Social programs for Albertans will become better integrated and more focused on the people they were created to serve. These improvements will make it easier for Albertans in need to access information and assistance, as well as transition between programs as they move from childhood to adulthood to their senior years.

This government is concerned that only one-third of Albertans belong to workplace pension plans. We will continue to push the national agenda for reforms that help people plan for a financially sound retirement.

A pan-Canadian solution is preferable, but if an agreement cannot be reached, we are prepared to join with British Columbia and Saskatchewan to develop options for a regional plan to improve retirement income prospects for future retirees.

Increasingly Competitive in a Global Economy

The global economy is undergoing profound changes, with significant impacts on the lives of Albertans. Our people are naturally entrepreneurial, and government has supported their drive to succeed with training, information, services and counselling, but we can do better.

Albertans know that a good education is an essential foundation to prepare for the future, and that our thinking in this area must constantly evolve. In the coming months, we will launch a new vision for education, making the improvements needed to ensure that learning in Alberta is flexible and ready to meet the needs of the next generation.

Your government will strengthen the province's research and innovation system under the "Alberta Innovates" umbrella. The new system will be more responsive to the needs of researchers and entrepreneurs, and help Alberta maintain a leadership role in the global economy. Our great Alberta spirit of competition will do the rest.

Our province must be a magnet for the talented individuals and businesses its economy needs. Your government will ensure that the workforce has the right skills to keep Alberta strong.

As Alberta's profile increases in the global economy, our trading partners will expect greater contact and the ability to travel directly to Alberta. We will continue to work with the federal government to expand direct air access between Alberta and its key markets — this is what business, trade and tourism need to be competitive.

Much of Alberta's economic growth will occur in the North, and we will invest in new transportation infrastructure to support this growth.

We are working toward a Western Economic Partnership with British Columbia and Saskatchewan to create Canada's largest boundary-free trade and investment market. The three provinces will also work together on a joint trade mission to China and Japan to market western Canada to the growing Asian market.

Government regulation must accomplish our collective goals, while at the same time promoting business entrepreneurship, individual liberty, and creativity. Your government will aggressively pursue improvements to ensure we have effective regulations that are both clear and practical.

For example, with respect to conventional oil and gas development, government's approach will put more focus on assuring compliance with environmental outcomes, rather than creating hurdles at the approval stage for companies accessing the land.

We will complete the review of the First Nations Consultation Policy and Guidelines on Land Management and Resource Development this year, which will give us another tool to improve competitiveness.

Alberta's agriculture and agri-food industries are key and sustainable economic drivers of our province. We are a responsible producer of safe, high-quality food products that are in demand all over the world. But we need to break into new markets and beat the competition from other countries that export agricultural products, including the United States and Australia.

To this end, we will continue efforts to increase our competitive edge, foster value-added opportunities and increase access to important international markets.

Alberta is now a major global energy player with enormous untapped potential. This sector is vitally important to all Alberta communities, with 50 percent of our province's gross domestic product tied to energy in some way.

Energy development is a partnership between Albertans, who own the resources, and industry, which develops them on Albertans' behalf. It's a partnership that has yielded tremendous benefits in economic activity that touches every corner of our province.

The best days in Alberta's energy story are yet to come. Your government is committed to ensuring that this industry remains vibrant, and continues to attract investment and create new technologies. We have the resources the world needs, including renewable forms of energy, and the know-how to develop them responsibly.

The review of Alberta's competitiveness will point the way and ensure that Alberta is an attractive place to do business. Your government will partner with industry to design the right model to encourage the investment in technology Albertans are known for.

All of these initiatives are part of the government's plan to enhance competitiveness. As we lead the way out of the recession, we know there will be tough competition for investment and jobs. Those economies that offer speed, controlled costs, superior innovation and extraordinary talent will flourish.

We must succeed in maintaining and growing our markets, and attracting and developing people and innovation. This is the route to the strong communities, healthy environment, quality of life and prosperity we want to pass on to future generations.

Bill One of this legislative session, the Alberta Competitiveness Act, will signal our government's resolve to make Alberta the most competitive jurisdiction in North America. To do this, we must minimize the cost of doing business here, including the cost of regulation, while at the same time providing the world-class services that are the hallmark of competitive jurisdictions.

Alberta's next generation economy will see emphasis on attracting new industries in new sectors, serving the world's expanding need for safe food and sustainably produced minerals, forest products and energy.

We will continue to work on a world-class, integrated petrochemical hub, drawing on the raw materials from the oil sands and adding value before they reach our markets, not afterward. The bitumen royalty-in-kind policy will accelerate this effort to promote new upgrading opportunities in Alberta.

A Clean Energy Future

Albertans value our province's environment. To protect our eastern slopes and boreal forest, we will continue to fight the mountain pine beetle.

Alberta's oil sands are the focus of a great deal of world attention. Your government recognizes that customers of our energy are looking for a better understanding of our environmental values and improvements in our environmental management.

This is what Albertans want too. We take great pride in our environment. And we are committed to ensuring that the right policies are in place to address the challenges of being a global energy provider.

Alberta's energy industry has met and exceeded every challenge to limit the impact of oil sands extraction and return the land to a natural state. Our history of technological breakthroughs and engineering excellence will go even further in the future toward shrinking our environmental footprint.

Around the world, the drive toward cleaner energy is a fact of our times, and a welcome one. The Alberta government and Alberta business leaders have chosen to lead by example in developing the cleaner fuels and clean energy know-how our customers are seeking.

As a result of the international agreement in Copenhagen, we will work with the federal government to reach a thoughtful, continental approach to controlling greenhouse gas emissions — one that spurs Alberta-based investment in new technologies and the next generation economy.

While we must develop new opportunities to participate in markets like China and India, our economy will be seriously harmed if access to the US energy market is impaired. Alberta fought hard for free trade, which has proven a boon for our people. We cannot lose those hard-fought advantages, and must secure access to the emerging clean energy market south of the border.

To be competitive in the new global marketplace, we must take a hard look at our own backyard. Albertans value a clean and sustainable environment, but that is not always the perception beyond our borders.

Your government will continue to promote Alberta and the amazing technological advances our industries have made in environmental management, such as their work on carbon capture and storage.

And we will act to improve environmental performance in the oil sands. We will continue to invest in research and technology solutions to the significant environmental challenges posed by oil sands development, including the eventual elimination of tailings ponds.

Energy conservation and renewable sources of energy will become popular economic choices for consumers in the 21st century. Our province has what it takes to succeed in this economic environment — the freedom to create and the spirit to achieve.

These qualities were illustrated recently when 110 Albertans participated in the Solar Decathlon, an international competition hosted by the US Department of Energy, in which 20 selected teams of university and college students from around the globe competed to design, build and operate the most attractive, practical and energy efficient solar-powered home.

Team Alberta's home reflected not only the natural landscape of our province, but also our values — innovation, excellence in education and the willingness to meet the energy challenges our world faces head-on. Team Alberta placed sixth against the best in the world, an outstanding achievement for its first time in this competition.

Alberta's Place in Canada

Albertans have always been committed Canadians. Our province's economic success has provided benefits across the country, and our economic renewal will be an essential part of the nation's economic recovery.

Albertans are proud contributors to the well-being of our country, and we have a right to be treated fairly under universal federal programs like health care or unemployment insurance. If a person is sick or out of work, the challenge to that family is no less difficult in Alberta than in any other province.

Whenever Alberta receives less than other provinces for basic transfers, your government will work with the federal government to provide options to address that fiscal imbalance and close the gap. Equality is a matter of principle, and basic fairness — the very hallmark of our nation.

A strong economic recovery requires an Alberta that is constantly striving to be better, stronger and smarter.

We will use expert advice from the Premier's Council on Economic Strategy to set a path to a secure and prosperous future for Albertans.

We will proudly share Alberta's story at the Olympics, and elsewhere on the global stage to make the world more aware of our unique talents, products and capabilities.

We will be a leader in clean energy production.

We will help the forestry and agricultural sectors adapt to new market realities and seize new opportunities.

We will continue to build world-class universities of the 21st century.

We will foster a competitive and innovative economy.

And we will build public services and transportation systems that unite our communities in commerce and culture.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and may God bless you all.

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