

## How To Make Friends and Influence Government (At Least the 87 MLAs in the Alberta Legislature)

Remarks by Lorne Calvert  
To the Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta  
November 30, 2013  
Edmonton, Alberta

Thank you for the kind introduction and the warm welcome last evening and this morning. Given the result of the CFL Western Division final and the Grey Cup last weekend, I wasn't sure how warmly I would be greeted this weekend! Because of the Grey Cup, for this week Saskatchewan has been officially renamed Riderville and so I bring greetings from Riderville.

Our provinces share so much in common: this great western region of Canada; a common history of first nations and Métis peoples; common patterns of immigration; common resource based economies; some common successes and some common problems.

However there are at least two things that make our provinces very different. In Saskatchewan our mountain removal project was completed many years ago. You have some work yet to do.

But in Saskatchewan we do not have the model of Family and Community Support Services, and preventative services that Alberta has pioneered and matured. In this regard, I believe we have some work yet to do.

I come to you this morning as a former member of the Saskatchewan Legislature, a former Leader of the Opposition, a former Cabinet Minister and former Premier with the hope of sharing with you a few observations on how I think governments and particularly elected members are best influenced.

During my public life I worked most closely with Lyle Oberg, Stockwell Day, Shirley McClellan and Ed Stelmach... and for most of my years as Premier, Ralph Klein.

Premier Klein and I shared many platforms, many meetings, many travels together, many gatherings of Premiers and Prime Ministers. For the seven years we worked together we were the "odd couple" of Western Canadian politics... he the right wing Conservative, I the left wing New Democrat. I have lost track of the number of times we debated health care, Medicare, social policy, energy and environmental policy. When I was out looking for the nearest United Church Ralph was out looking for nearest casino. In public we were political foes; in private Ralph was one of my best friends at the table. And Ralph taught me a lot about this province and about politics.

Since receiving your invitation, I have come to learn a great deal about FCSS, about your roots in preventive social services and evolution into Family and Community Support Services. I have come to understand the unique partnership between the province and your municipalities in service delivery. I have observed the powerful effect of your model and your work, arguably occupying a place of leadership in Canada and North America. I have come to deeply admire your model and your work.

But I also have to admire your courage.

As you may have seen in my bio, you have not only invited a former politician, you have also handed the podium to a former preacher, and that takes courage! (You know, another Saskatchewan Premier was also a preacher before being elected... his name was Tommy Douglas. He was a Baptist preacher. And Tommy used to say, "I was a printer and then I became a preacher. And then I became a politician. And then I became a Premier. And that, my friends, is the true descent of man.")

When I was Premier I was always being asked the question, "Calvert, why would you give up the pulpit for politics?" I developed a quick answer to the question, "Why would you give up the pulpit for politics? Well, when you've committed your life to the fighting of sin, you might as well go where the action is!"

Before I turn to my one page handout, perhaps I can tell you one little story from my preaching days as a prelude. I enjoy this story because in my case is almost literally true.

While studying for the ministry, my first student pastoral charge was in Perdue Saskatchewan. One of the congregations on my charge met for church Sunday afternoons in a little one room school house that had survived on the prairie. They called the little church "Hope Hall".

I went out one Sunday afternoon to conduct the service and on that particular Sunday only one person showed up for church. He was an elderly man who had been a farmer/rancher all his life. I said to him, "I guess we'll just call it off and try again next week." He said to me, "Son, I don't know much about religion but I know about cattle. And if I went out to feed my cattle, and only one cow showed up, I'd still give her something to eat."

That made sense to me so I went ahead with the service. I read all of the prescribed readings; prayed all the prescribed prayers. I preached my whole twenty minute sermon. I even made the old fellow sing a hymn with me. I took the offering. At the close of the service I did a benediction and then, as student ministers are prone to do, I asked him what he thought of the service.

He said to me, "Son, I don't know much about religion but I know about cattle. And if I went out to feed my cattle, and only one cow showed up, I wouldn't give her the whole load!"

Well, it's not my intention to give you the whole load but hopefully to leave you with a few useful observations when it comes to the task of influencing government.

First of all let me say, for the purposes of our thinking this morning, I am defining government as the **elected**: the 87 elected members of the Alberta Legislature.

I intend to focus on those who, at the end of the day, will make the final decisions and make the final determinations of law, regulation and budget.

My question is, "How to make friends and how to influence the elected?" - in our case, the Alberta Legislature.

And I want to begin with a premise - a premise upon which much of which I have to say will rest.

I make this observation with the deepest of respect for all of those who seek and occupy elected office; with the deepest of respect for those are willing to submit to the slings and arrows of politics and public office. When I say this of the elected, I say this of friends, of colleagues, of myself.

**Friends, remember there is no IQ test given before your name can go on a ballot.**  
(You may have figured that out by yourselves!)

Our elected are no more intelligent, or less intelligent; no wiser, or less; no more knowledgeable - and often less knowledgeable than any of us who are in this room. I have met and worked with dozens and dozens of MLAs, Ministers of the Crown, Premiers and Prime Ministers. **I don't want to disappoint but for the most part they are just ordinary people.** They are ordinary people drawn out of our communities. They are ordinary people who ought not to be either elevated or denigrated.

**They are ordinary people who through the miracle of democracy are given extraordinary power and responsibility. They are ordinary people who have extraordinary ability to shape this province and our lives for good or for ill.** But at the end of the day they are just folks like us. They will be influenced just as we are influenced.

With this premise in mind, from my own experience, let me offer you a few 'do's and don'ts' in efforts to make friends and influence government.

On my list of don'ts:

**#1. Avoid what I call the '2x4' approach.** Very often groups or individuals would approach our caucus or cabinet, or myself as an MLA, Minister or Premier with a barrage of criticism, a tirade of what we had done wrong or failed to do... of how we had ruined the economy, or destroyed the social fabric, or had brought about moral collapse... In a thirty minute meeting they would spend twenty minutes hammering on us and then make a plea for money or make legislative change.

In a meeting I had with a ministerial group one of the pastors told me that I was an agent of the devil and that I was surely on the road to hell. I have to say that I was not highly motivated to provide the grant he wanted for his church.

Let there be no mistake... on occasion truth must be spoken to government and that truth may be unpleasant; on occasion truth must be spoken from the street in loud and aggressive voice beyond the ballot box.

But in the ordinary course of governing, the '2x4' approach in my experience is the least effective. And a word of warning - threats are not the best tool either.

The most frequent threat I would hear was the threat "Unless you do this, I'll never vote for you... or... I'll never vote for you again." Well, every day that I was Premier, I'd get up in the morning knowing that at least 50% of the people of Saskatchewan did not want me to have the job I had. I was never surprised to meet some of them. And those who said they'd never vote for me I knew had never voted for me in the first place... so it wasn't much of a threat.

The elected are human... ordinary folks. None of us tend to respond well to '2x4's and threats. I would say if you want to make friends with the elected, leave the threats and the '2x4's at home.

**#2. Do not assume knowledge.** Do not assume that your elected member, your elected caucus and government members have the knowledge, or even a portion of the knowledge, that you have.

Do not assume that your elected has knowledge of family and community support services, knowledge or social policy, knowledge of the history of preventive services, knowledge of what's actually happening

in your communities and neighbours. They may have some acquaintance with issues, some knowledge. But never assume they know what you know. It is most likely they do not.

The highway contractor comes in thinking that the MLAs know all about asphalt. The medical association thinks they know all about cardio-vascular disease. The farmers think they know all about zero tillage. The insurance broker thinks they know all about insurance. The community worker thinks they know all about community services.

The fact of the matter is that the elected may have knowledge of issues spread a kilometer wide, but only a centimeter deep. This is not a criticism of the elected. But, do not assume that the elected have the knowledge that you have. They almost certainly do not.

**#3. On the other hand, don't try and provide them all of your knowledge.** They don't need to know everything!

About a decade ago we built at the University of Saskatchewan the Canadian Light Source Synchrotron. It is one of four of its generation on the globe; at the time it was the largest scientific project undertaken in Canada. In essence it creates a beam of light so intense that the light can probe the molecular and atomic structure of matter.

I was toured through the Synchrotron by a group of engineers; on a separate occasion I was toured by physicists; on a third occasion by the administration all of whom were seeking greater public research dollars and all of whom provided me reams of scientific documentation. They made the mistake of thinking I knew what they were talking about. They made the mistake of thinking I could actually understand the materials they gave me if I did choose to read them. If there were any gaps in my knowledge they were going to fill them for me. My fourth tour of the Synchrotron was with Sandra... a young woman who frequently toured elementary and high school students. Sandra assumed I knew nothing; Sandra was able to explain in language that I could understand, how it works; Sandra helped me understand its role in medical, scientific, environmental and industrial research. Sandra was a great lobbyist for the Canadian Light Source.

In your relationships with the public service, with those who work in government and will advise the elected... here is where full knowledge and information must be provided and shared. The elected don't need to know everything that you know. They need what is salient and important for their decision making.

**The success of a brief to the elected will sometimes be in inverse proportion to its thickness.**

**#4.** Fourth on my list of don'ts, is **never ask the MLA you seek to influence, or the caucus, or the government to do that which is alien to who they are, what they have stood for, or is foreign to that which they fundamentally believe.**

I don't think this is a high risk with FCSS.

But let me just illustrate. I was first elected in 1986. Up until a month before the election I was the senior minister in a large, downtown United Church in Moose Jaw. I was elected to the opposition in the Saskatchewan Legislature. A week after my election I had a delegation from the Kinsmen Club in my office asking me to lobby government on their behalf.

They had planned a "Ladies Night Out" fundraiser with male dancers. They had discovered that the liquor regulations prevented alcohol from being served in the same venue as the dancers. Without the ability to sell drinks they were going to lose money. My Kinsmen buddies wanted me to lobby government for a change in the regulation or at least an exemption for them. They wanted me to do a press release. They wanted me to raise it in the Legislature.

In essence they wanted me to parade in front of the Legislature with a placard reading: "Let the men strip while the women drink". And this was supposed to be the first political cause taken up by the newly elected United Church minister... not very likely.

It is important to remember who it is that you seek to influence and don't put them in an impossible situation. **Do not ask the impossible.**

#### **#5. My final point on the list of don'ts, again is not one that I think is of high risk for FCSS.**

**Do not accompany your approach to elected members with any suggestion or offer of personal gain for the elected.** In the vast majority of cases such an offer should and will end the conversation. Avoid even the perception of such an offer.

If you do choose this route and happen to find a receptive audience then be prepared to read all about it on the front page of the Edmonton Journal. If you do not believe me just ask Senator Mike Duffy and Mr. Nigel Wright. Don't try and buy.

So in brief, remember that in relating to the elected you are dealing with very human individuals, ordinary folks with extraordinary responsibility and power to decide and therefore: as tempting as it may be sometimes, avoid the '2x4' approach; don't threaten; do not assume knowledge of your issue or cause; on the other hand, do not overburden with information; know who it is that you seek to influence and don't put them in an impossible position; and never suggest personal gain as a motivation of influence.

Now let me turn to the do's in making friends and influencing the elected. Like Letterman I have my top ten list:

#### **#10. Make friends with everyone in the Legislature.**

I found that many groups approaching the Saskatchewan Legislature and the Saskatchewan government would make a significant error in judgement. They thought they only needed to get the Premier to agree to something or the Minister and that would do the trick. That is a mistake.

Most every significant decision in government is made in the context of the Cabinet or government caucus and ultimately all decisions are subject to the attention of the Legislature.

Opposition members, from all political parties, need to be informed and influenced.

Now not so much in Alberta, but believe it or not, governments in some provinces do actually change! Opposition members can become government members and you want them informed and understanding should that be the case. In Opposition you want members equipped to ask the right

questions, to probe the right areas and make the arguments that government and the public need to hear.

Backbench government MLAs are crucial to keep informed and engaged. Internally they will ask the toughest questions of their Cabinet colleagues and Premier. I've always argued that the MLA with the greatest ability to push a change is the backbench government MLA who is gripped with a passion for a cause. The backbench MLA, unconstrained by Cabinet solidarity, can be your greatest advocate. Every Cabinet minister should have a fundamental understanding of your issues. Remember that the member who is the minister of highways, or energy, or finance today might be the minister guiding social policy tomorrow. And remember that significant decisions are ultimately made at the Cabinet Table, where at least in my shop, ministers were told to choose for the good of the whole and not for the good of their department.

And do not neglect the Premier. Premiers need to know what's going on in their own constituency; what's going on in their province. They need to hear from the front lines because often they are surrounded with the highest walls of bureaucracy and advisors. And, to be fair, Premiers do have an edge in setting direction and tone and decision making.

The point is **make friends with every elected member**. If there are 87 members in the Alberta Legislature, you need 87 strategies to influence them.

#### **#9. Remember, these folks who we seek to influence are political folks.**

In only the rarest of circumstances they were not elected by their name. They were elected by their Party. They are Conservatives. They are Wild Rose. They are Liberals. They are New Democrats. Sometimes they become Independent... but they are rarely elected as Independents.

Those who will have the greatest influence on their thinking and understanding will often be their political Party colleagues... members of their constituency organizations; members of their election team. And the elected will be deeply influenced by their political Party's policies and platform... and so they should be.

Jean Chrétien once said to me, "Some guys you know, some guys you don't know. I hire the guys I know."

So join the Party! Now I don't mean that everyone needs to run out and get a membership in a political Party (although I wouldn't oppose it and I could recommend one). What I mean, is understand the role of the political Party; understand how its policies do influence government; understand the role of the Party in the life of the elected.

Be sure that your influence and information is available in every political Party; help shape Party policy and be sure that Party members are communicating with their elected the things you want communicated.

#### **#8. Provide the right fit of information.**

MLAs need information and knowledge but as we've agreed not an information overload. MLAs need information that is concise... if you hand an MLA a sixty page document count on only a very few of

them reading it. Always produce an executive summary. (Remember your brief is one of dozens.) Pictures are good! Accompany it with supporting documentation and ensure that a full package of information and documentation is in the hands of the civil service. Ensure that your information focuses on supporting the goal you seek to achieve. Focus the information. And above all else ensure that your information is plainly spoken and understandably written.

In Saskatchewan the story is told of Tommy Douglas when he was Premier, receiving a letter from an angry constituent who wrote to complain that a Sask Power truck, from the electrical utility, had backed over and destroyed his fence.

In the letter to the Premier the constituent expressed his issue in one sentence: "Some bugger bust my fence."

Apparently Douglas brought in his own speech writers, showed them the letter and said to them: "Look. The noun is bugger. The verb is bust. And the object is fence. Now why can't you folks write like that?"

We all have our technical language, our academic language, our jargon, or acronyms. And they may be a foreign language to the MLAs. Avoid the jargon, avoid the acronyms. Before submitting to an MLA have a total stranger to your organization read the material to see if it makes sense to them.

On this point I would recommend that your Association **never use FCSS** in a document to a MLA. Always use Family and Community Support Services... a constant reminder throughout of your purpose and contribution to the health of Alberta.

#### **#7. My grandmother was right, honesty is the best policy.**

Let me tell you a story of an effort to influence me. In North Battleford Saskatchewan, we have a large and old institution called the Saskatchewan Hospital where we have met mental health needs since way back in the last century. The facility is beyond old. As Minister of Health in the late nineties I was invited to tour the facility by the administration. Getting me to tour was smart. What they did was not.

Not long into the tour it became clear to me that I was on a very structured and guided tour. I was told that staff had been brought in and were told to look busy. I was being shown only the rooms and areas in the facility that had been renovated, only the areas that were somewhere close to par.

The managers somehow wanted to impress me. They didn't show me the areas in collapse. They didn't want to show me the third floor where there had been a fire and nothing had been restored. Had I simply taken the tour they planned I would have returned to Regina with the view that there was nothing we needed to do at the Saskatchewan Hospital.

If there are problems, if there are challenges, if you know there are weaknesses... don't try and hide them. The elected need to see the good; they need to see the bad; and they need to see the ugly.

If as an elected member I felt hoodwinked, or misinformed or misled by an individual or group, it was the kiss of death. Be honest with your elected. They will respect you for it!

## **#6. Offer hospitality.**

Whenever and wherever you can provide invitations and opportunities for the elected to visit your agencies... meet your people... see first-hand the work you are engaged. For the MLA one afternoon of experience might be ten times as valuable as all of the factual and printed information you provide.

In Saskatchewan potash mining is a huge industry... a huge contributor to the GDP. I didn't understand the industry until I tasted the salt on my tongue deep underground in a potash mine.

In my view there is nothing better to inform the elected than first-hand experience. It makes everything tangible and real.

And in the case of FCSS you have such rich opportunities to share with MLAs, such beautiful examples to experience first-hand. The experiences will move people in ways that a power point presentation never will. Offer hospitality.

## **#5. Put a human face on your work.**

In influencing government statistics, facts, balance sheets, accountability mechanisms... these are essential. But they don't hold a candle to the power of the individual story.

In August of 2012 a young woman, eighteen years old, from New Brunswick, working as a flag person on a highway construction site near Midale, engaged to be married and pregnant, was struck and killed by a speeding motorist through the construction zone. Her boyfriend and fiancé was working beside her and held her as she and baby died.

That human tragedy caused immediate response from the elected and no one in the public complained when fines were tripled; when Mounties went undercover as construction workers; when photo radar in construction zones was suggested. This young woman's death caused immediate government response.

There is nothing more powerful in influencing government than the human story.

For those of us in community and social services, this is a challenge. In preventive social services, we seek to make our miracles invisible... to ensure as best we can that individuals and families and groups in our community never attract tragic attention.

We want to ensure the privacy of those whose lives have been made better; who have succeeded; who have risen above their challenges and circumstance. We don't want to hold them out for scrutiny.

But the fact is that nothing has greater influence on the public and therefore on the elected than the human story... be it tragedy, be it miracle, be it success.

On this point I think you have done some amazing work as an Association in the publication of the story books... telling the personal stories of clients and communities. The use of real life examples, narrated and illustrated with photos are powerful images of the broad work you are doing in this province.

I would ensure that every MLA whose community is featured in the storybook receives a hand-delivered copy. I would ensure that the copy be delivered by someone who can tell the featured story. Let your MLAs see the human face of your work in the province. It is a powerful tool to make friends and influence government.

#### **#4. Engage the public and wider community.**

It is important that your work be known by the wider public. It is important that your work be known by those who elect the MLAs. It is important that you are supported by public opinion.

Remember you are endeavouring to influence politicians. Most of us politicians like the jobs we have. Most want to keep our jobs - which tends to make us particularly sensitive to public opinion. And if we are doing our jobs we should be sensitive to public opinion, representing that which is important to our public.

You know, Ralph Klein used to say to me: "Calvert, politics is simple. Find a parade and get in front of it."

You want the parade of public opinion to be on the side of FCSS because, mark my words, there will be the elected who want to get in front of it.

#### **Therefore, #3. Make friends with the media.**

Public opinion is shaped by our media... shaped by the TV clip, shaped by the interview, shaped by the printed article, shaped by the photo. Therefore, make it a high priority to inform the media; share with the journalists the same information you share with government, again in manageable pieces; offer the same hospitality to the reporters and journalists that you offer to the elected. Let them see your work; create opportunities that make it easy to report your work. Make friends with the media; make them your allies.

Be a close friend of your local media, the weekly newspapers and small market radio stations. Remember they are often looking for local good news and human interest stories. Make friends with the provincial media.

Every daily paper, most radio and television news rooms will have an editorial board. Invite yourselves to meet with the editorial board with whom you can have an off record, in depth discussion of your goals, your plans, your programs, your needs and the issues that you will be taking to government. When it comes then to reporting your engagement with government to the wider public they will then be better informed, better equipped and generally more positive and sympathetic.

Engage members of the media in your events. Invite a reporter to serve as your MC in a fundraising. Honour a journalist who provided good coverage of your issues. Invite media outlets to co-sponsor public events with you. Never have a public event without a news release and an invitation to the media.

And I can almost guarantee you that over at the Legislature, every day that the house is sitting, every MLA will have on his or her desk a summary of the day's newspaper clippings and reports from every newscast in the province. And those MLAs, Premier to opposition backbencher, are paying attention.

It is through our media that public opinion is shaped. If you're not shaping it, someone else will. Making friends in the media, building allies in the media, are essential tools in making friends and influencing government.

**#2. There is no way around it. Successfully making friends and influencing government requires a lot of work and persistence. It means organizing, organizing and organizing year after year after year.**

Let me share with you a model that in my experience worked better than most in influencing my government and the members of our Legislature. A number of groups used a similar model. I'll illustrate with the Saskatchewan Professional Firefighters Association.

Every year I was in government we were approached by the Firefighters. The Firefighters would establish their wish list for change. It never seemed to exceed three items on an annual basis and even the two or three were put in priority. One year it might be a worker's compensation issue. One year it might be a funding issue. One year it might be a scope of practice issue.

Concise printed materials were prepared for every MLA... usually two pages. Supporting documentation was always made available.

Prior the sitting of the Legislature, two firefighters from each MLA's community were assigned to meet their MLA in the local office to present the material. The presentation always began with acknowledgment and thanks, if something from the previous year had been achieved. The new material was then presented... with any particularly local implications or illustrations.

During the following session of the Legislature a Firefighters Day was chosen when a large group of the Firefighters would come to the Legislature, be present in the gallery, be introduced and welcomed by Government and Opposition members and then, in twos or threes, again meet individually with members to discuss their issues. Again members were thanked for any goals accomplished. Again the materials were worked through. They held an informal reception for all members where we got to know each other. The model repeated year after year.

When a formal presentation to the Cabinet followed later in the session or in the year we were meeting friends and folks whose issues we understood. And for the most part they had the caucus and the opposition on side. It generally resulted in positive change.

This model of approach to the elected takes a lot of work... a lot of organization... a lot of people and lot of persistence. It means carefully honed materials; it takes a longer term plan; it takes a lot of meetings; it weaves local and provincial; it creates acquaintances and friendships; it really builds the base for making friends and influencing governments. It works.

But it takes work. It takes persistence. It takes organization.

Finally **#1. Passion above polish!**

In my view, what often will tip the scales is the passion you bring to the table of government.

A polished presentation is important and helpful; a professional approach to the elected is important and helpful. But what will tip the balance is your passion... your passion for what you are doing; your passion for others, your passion for the community and for this Province.

Polish is not contagious. Passion is. Professionalism is not infectious. Passion is.

Bring your passion for family and community support services to the table of government. Don't leave your passion at home.

**Inspire your elected as you have been inspired and you will make friends and influence government!**

And so on that note let me close with this.

I would not presume to advise the government of Alberta. I tried to advise Ralph Klein and it didn't work anyway.

But if I had the chance to speak to your elected, here's about what I would say:

"In this Province you have pioneered and matured a model of preventive services, a model of municipal and provincial partnership, a model of family and community support services that I think **far exceeds any other model I've seen in Canada, including in my own Province under my own government.**

Through this model, as a provincial government you have made **immeasurable difference** in the lives of individuals, families and communities. You have been leading in Canada and North America in preventive services and community based services. **Do not let this go. Do not let your leadership diminish.**

You've been doing this work with about two-tenths of one percent of the Alberta budget. You've held the funding at 78.5 million for that last several years. The province is growing; communities are growing and the needs of individuals and families and communities are growing as well. **Funding must grow as well.** You can double the budget, to arguably where it should be, and still not reach one half of one percent of the Provincial budget. There must room in that budget to maintain Alberta's leadership and maintain the difference you are making in our neighbours lives."

That's about what I would say. But you can say it with passion and with knowledge. You have both the right and the responsibility on behalf of those you serve to make friends and influence those 87 MLAs... those ordinary folks who like you have extraordinary responsibility.

For seven years I had Ralph Klein telling me about the Alberta Advantage and Ed Stelmach telling me about the Freedom to Create and the Spirit to Achieve.

With what I have learned about FCSS, your work is the freedom to create and the spirit of achieve; **you are truly the Alberta Advantage!**

Godspeed your efforts!

Thank you very much.