

Democratic action and the common good

by John Reilly, Lead Organizer, Greater Edmonton Alliance-People United for Relational Leadership

We have just endured another federal election. Unlike the previous three elections, the run up to June 28th appeared to be a real horse race. There was a sense that every vote was going to count this time. In the end the federal Liberals were punished for past mistakes and some of the other parties gained their losses.

Looking at voter turnout, it appears the real loser was the Canadian electorate. Why would an election too close to call draw fewer people to the polls? Some blame the timing of the election; others blame the lack of policy platforms from the parties; while others insist that Canadians care less and less about public policy these days. We could believe the political pundits, and buy into these claims, but the root of our democratic malaise is deeper.

Instead of acting, we have been reacting. We are reacting to the interests of the market by allowing ourselves to become duped into believing the only power we have is consumer choice. We are reacting to the interests of government bureaucracy by convincing ourselves that

our only public identity is taxpayer. Market power is increasing; it is buying out our governments, and isolating us into individual consumer units. People are reacting to a market driven, government withdrawal from public services. We are losing ground – the common ground.

Conversations about interests and action on public issues used to be at the centre of public life. Mediating institutions organized around faith, labour and civic interest used to be major players in the public arena. Faith institutions helped build the foundations of our public education, health and social support programs. Labour organizations helped us get better working conditions, better wages and public goods like unemployment insurance and pensions. Civic institutions have helped organize actions to support elders, newcomers, first-time parents and to create sports clubs and other important activities for children and youth in our communities. In fact, the Edmonton Social Planning Council is an example of an organization that owes its foundation to the actions of moderate, publicly interested people from civic organizations.

So why do these institutions seem to be no longer effective in acting

In this issue we cover a number of matters, ranging from elections and civic engagement (pages 1 & 2), the changes in welfare (page 3), highlights of the Inclusive Cities Canada project so far (page 4) and an update on our organization's new direction-setting tools (page 7).

“All effective democratic action begins in conversations.”

William Greider, *Who Will Tell the People* (New York; Simon & Shuster, 1992)

FACT

24.7% of Albertans have a high level of interest in public policy issues, 58% have a moderate level of interest, 17% have a low level of interest.

Canada West Foundation, Looking West 2004 Survey

Elections and inclusive communities

by Nicola Fairbrother, *ESPC Executive Director*

Participatory Democracy

... we believe that our democracy functions best when citizens continually engage with elected representatives and parties to develop the society in which we all want to live. This participation certainly includes trying to make an informed vote in elections, but it is equally important to continuously engage with elected leaders and representatives about the issues that are important to our communities ... a citizen can influence the directions that our society chooses to develop and grow ...

Social Planning and Research Council of BC, *Canada Votes 2004*

This fall will see both civic and provincial elections in Alberta. We tend to identify voting as the most obvious and important way in which we participate as citizens in Canada. Voting is seen as the seed that Canadians plant to ensure the health and success of our community.

The recent federal election saw a voter turnout of 60.5 percent, or to frame it another way, we had a participation rate of 60.5 percent. That means the voices of 39.5 percent of citizens did not get heard; 39.5 percent of citizens (about nine million people) did not, for various reasons, participate in the actual election process.

Current wisdom would have us ask why this is so? Why did nine million citizens not vote, why did they not engage in this important activity that has been identified as a fundamental characteristic of citizenship in our democracy?

Is this a matter of self-exclusion, are people simply choosing to not be involved at this level? Is it economic and health factors? Surveys and studies show that people living in poverty and the sick have a lower turnout rate than those with higher incomes and more education.

In the last edition of the *Factivist* we provided you with information on the ESPC's work around social inclusion and why we think that inclusion is of fundamental

importance to the health and well-being of Edmonton's citizens.

Surprisingly perhaps, the findings to date on inclusive communities indicate that voting is NOT the way in which most of us experience citizenship. Citizenship, as described by the participants in ESPC's *Inclusive Cities Canada* initiative, includes activities such as: growing community gardens, pursuing alternative justice and ensuring access to social supports. These latter are emerging as important indicators in monitoring our community's inclusiveness and in fostering citizenship. So if inclusion is what we want to promote in our cities and communities, why do we still primarily define 'citizenship' as voting?

Our societal success is measured through each citizen's experiences in our community. The mechanisms we design for people to participate must adapt to meet the needs and choices of many individuals as well as diverse and marginalized groups. And so lifelong education about citizenship would include opportunities to embrace citizenship in a multitude of ways. Having citizens engaged in the electoral process is only one part of the equation.

The daily experience of belonging and citizenship cannot be exclusively defined by whether we vote every four years or not. The health of our democracy also relies on encouraging citizens to be continuously engaged in their communities and in so doing be a part of advancing the directions and goals of our society.

FACT

21.1% of those with incomes under \$30,000 have a high interest in public policy issues, compared to 42.4% of those with incomes of \$150,000 or more

Canada West Foundation, Looking West 2004 Survey

New welfare program intensifies focus on ‘getting a job’

by John Pater, ESPC Communications Coordinator

“Social and labour market policy work together,” said Clint Dunford in a news release on March 29th this year. The minister of Alberta Human Resources and Employment was introducing the new name and focus for welfare in Alberta. “With the introduction of Alberta Works, the Alberta government is confirming,” he said, “that social and labour market policy work together to create a productive society.”

For over a decade the welfare program in Alberta was known as Supports for Independence (SFI). As the name suggested, the goal was to help people move away from being dependent on government support and toward independence. It was actually a shift from previous more passive approaches of supporting people in need toward a more active employment program. “SFI provides both financial benefits and supports to help people find a job,” says one of many news releases describing the program since 1990. The new name for the welfare program – Alberta Works – makes the connection to the labour market even more blatant.

“You may qualify for Income Support,” says the Guide for the new program, “if you are doing everything you can to find a job if you are able to work.” The legislation which paved the way for Alberta Works – the Income and Employment Supports Act which came into effect on January 1, 2004 – also drives home this point about the purpose for welfare: “to provide programs for persons in need ... and in particular, to provide training and other

Highlights of some of the changes to welfare

Program name change from SFI (Supports for Independence) to Alberta Works

Income benefit name changes: from Standard Allowance to Core Essential Benefit; and from Shelter Allowance to Core Shelter Benefits

New category under Core Shelter: Living with Relatives (in addition to existing categories of Social/Public Housing and Private Housing)

- \$100 a month whether you are single or are a family with multiple children
- this benefit is not provided for singles and couples without children who are Expected to Work; they receive \$0 if living with family
- this new category could be a partial response to an Alberta Human Rights Commission ruling last summer that ruled it was discriminatory to not pay shelter allowance to individuals who were living with family.

National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS): federal money for low income families

- it is no longer listed as part of Standard Allowance (SFI portion, NCBS portion)
- it now is listed off to the side as a “supplement to core benefits.”

New category of recipient: Learners (in addition to existing categories of Expected To Work and Not Expected To Work/Assured Support)

- This category was moved from the Skills Development Program/Employment and Training Services and is now incorporated within the welfare program

Benefits are being tightened or reduced in some areas:

- Some people will be moved from Not Expected To Work to Expected to Work, even though they temporarily are still Not Expected To Work ... meaning these people will see a reduction of \$50-\$150 a month
- People in the new Learner category are seeing a reduction in income in being moved from Skills Development into the welfare program. But Clint Dunford says they are receiving “benefits in kind” meaning their income may drop but they and their families may be eligible for more health benefits and other forms of assistance such as payment of school fees for their children.
- Adults in the Expected To Work category receive less dental care benefit than others. While all others on welfare receive preventative care (as in annual check-ups, cleaning, etc.) adults who are expected to work receive “dental coverage that is primarily limited to relief from pain and oral infection.”

FACT

66.9% of Albertans say reducing poverty should be a high government priority; only 40.9% say lowering taxes should be a high priority.
Canada West Foundation, Looking West 2004 Survey

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Ideas to make Edmonton more inclusive

Here are some of the ideas that have emerged from focus groups asking how Edmonton could be a more inclusive city. Over 80 people from diverse backgrounds have shared their experiences with inclusion/exclusion in 12 sessions this spring and summer facilitated by Phil O'Hara, ESPC's Research and Policy Analysis Coordinator. (As well, 12 less formal 'local soundings' are being held this fall with specific populations, such as seniors, low-income families, and gay, lesbian and transgendered youth.)

These themes are being explored locally and nationally through Inclusive Cities Canada, a three-year initiative funded by HRDC. Five cities — Vancouver, Edmonton, Halton, Toronto and Saint John — are working with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities in this initiative to better understand how we can make our cities more inclusive.

In Edmonton, the ESPC is drafting a local report on inclusion, which will be reviewed by an eight-member Civic Panel. The panel will then present the report to Edmonton City Council in February 2005. Next spring, the reports from all five cities will be integrated into a framework for inclusion at both the national and local levels.

FACT

45.2% of Alberta minimum wage earners are 25 years of age and older; 24.5% of Alberta minimum wage earners are over 40.

Alberta Human Resources and Employment, Minimum Wage Profile, 2003 annual averages

Ideas on inclusion/exclusion from the 12 focus groups in Edmonton

- Living conditions (income/employment, housing and community safety) is the area most needing work to make Edmonton more inclusive (consistent in all five cities)
- Fear of people just 'hanging out' in public spaces; need to provide opportunities for older youth to socialize, i.e. more basketball courts
- Recognize professional credentials obtained internationally to ease shortages of doctors and other professionals
- More civic education on being a good citizen (lifelong and outside of schools)
- No coordination of services for emergencies/crisis other than health
- Focus on individualized support for people with disabilities other than residential-based/dependent services
- City Council inclusive in theory and intent, but hasn't mastered the practice
- The City of Edmonton should have an advocate to help community groups, especially multicultural groups, improve their access to the city's grant application process.
- Devaluing of public education leads to citizens who feel less vested in the community
- More use of alternative justice measures i.e., mediation, Aboriginal community justice
- Shift towards user-pay undermines universality and accessibility, i.e. arts and culture, recreation, etc.
- Umbrella community agency needed to facilitate single point of entry for early childhood education
- Community-driven process of identifying housing priorities without government intervention sets Edmonton as a model for other cities
- Racial profiling by police and community groups contribute to exclusion because they target anyone who is different as suspicious

Citizens can bring democracy to life by sharing their stories

Continued from page 1

together for the public good? In short, we aren't talking to one another. More important, we aren't listening to one another. Even deeper, we aren't listening to the stories of our own people. We are caught up in a whirlwind of busyness that distracts us from the actions essential to maintaining civil society. We've allowed the polarizing politics of left and right to isolate us into separate camps. We get tagged as "special interests" and are dismissed. We don't recognize that we have common interests, common pressures, and common ground.

We have to have the courage to create a space where we can come together and start having these conversations about the public good. We've got to challenge our own prejudices and get outside our comfort zones to talk and listen to one another. Public places such as

our churches, synagogues, mosques, union halls, workplaces and community centres where workers, people of faith and everyday citizens of local communities can struggle with our differences, share our interests, find the common ground and put together a citizen's platform of action.

Effective public action does not begin and end with a vote. It is rooted in citizens having conversations about their interests and sharing their stories of the pressures being faced by their families, households and communities. By doing so, citizens can bring democracy to life and we'll be more likely to vote next time around, and to know for what and whom we are voting.

John Reilly is lead organizer of the Greater Edmonton Alliance, a broad-based organization working with civic leaders to build a new civic power for the people of the Edmonton region.

The social benefits of poverty reduction

See a new report (June 2004) published by the United Way of Calgary and Area: *The External Costs of Poverty: A Conservative Assessment* by Alan Shiell and Jenny Zhang, Centre for Health and Policy Studies, University of Calgary and Institute of Health Economics. Here's their summary:

"We provide an estimate of the 'external' costs of poverty ... costs incurred by people other than those who live in poverty. Our findings suggest:

- Increased costs of health care in Calgary of at least \$3.35 million per year and possibly as much as \$16.3 million

- Increased costs associated with the school system of at least \$4.9 million and perhaps as much as \$7.9 million
- Costs elsewhere in the economy could amount to as much as \$32.6 million per year

The existence of these costs provides a case for a programme of poverty reduction even if one is not convinced of the need for such a programme on the grounds of social justice alone."

Report available on-line at: www.calgaryunitedway.org

Your 'newly elected' Edmonton-area Members of Parliament

Rona Ambrose (Conservative)
Edmonton-Spruce Grove
Ambrose.R@parl.gc.ca

Ken Epp (Conservative)
Edmonton-Sherwood Park
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Peter Goldring (Conservative)
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Rahim Jaffer (Conservative)
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James Rajotte (Conservative)
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John G. Williams (Conservative)
Edmonton-St. Albert
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FACT

30.2% of Alberta minimum wage earners have a post-secondary education (certificate, diploma or university degree).
Alberta Human Resources and Employment, Minimum Wage Profiles, 2003 annual averages

Mark your calendar

LOOKING AHEAD Social Policy for the Next Ten Years

A **conference** sponsored by the
Quality of Life Commission

November 12: 7:00 - 9:30 pm
November 13: 8:30 am - 4:00 pm

Grant MacEwan Community
College, City Centre Campus

Keynote Speaker:
The Honourable Landon Pearson
A Canadian Senator for
Children's Rights

Workshops on Low-Income,
Housing, Children and Seniors.

A participatory conference aimed
at sharing experience, evaluating
the present, and proposing new
directions on social policy and
human development.

Registration cost (including Friday
reception and Saturday lunch):\$80
Pre-registration by October 1:\$70
Applications for low-income
participants are welcome.

For more information contact
Louise at 426-3269 or
louisezoe@shaw.ca

FACT

26% of Edmonton children aged
12 and under live in low-income
families. Edmonton is ranked in
the bottom third of Canadian
cities.

*Federation of Canadian
Municipalities, Quality of Life
Reporting System 2004*

Alberta Works: an 'aggressive' labour policy

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measures to facilitate their movement toward independence and self-sufficiency." In his introduction of Alberta Works in the legislature this past spring, Clint Dunford said his department's main focus from now on will be on skills training. "We will be very aggressive," he said, "in moving people from a sense of reliance on the government to one of self-reliance."

Under Alberta Works people on welfare are slotted into one of three categories, each of which makes a reference to work: Expected to Work, Not Expected to Work, and a Learner (training for work). The Learner category is actually a new addition to the categories of those receiving welfare; previously people seeking training were not classified as being on welfare, but instead were in a separate program known as the Skills Development Program.

With 'jobs' being the focus, welfare cheques have not increased at all under Alberta Works, and in some cases there are decreases in income support when people are shifted from one category to another. Clint Dunford justified keeping welfare rates at the same level when he told the legislature in March that people's incomes would increase once they got the jobs they had trained for while on social assistance. "In our budget we are focused and concentrating on skills development training," he reiterated, "and through that we'll

move these people up in income levels."

And indeed it is those people who seek training while on welfare who receive the highest income benefits compared to those in the other two categories. A single person in the Learner category receives income support on top of educational support of \$718 per month, compared to \$635 for those in the Not Expected To Work category and \$402 for those Expected to Work.

"The full impact of the changes and new expectations may not be known till this fall," says Leslie Regelous, an advocate with Philia Group, a non-profit, no user fee advocacy service for people needing social assistance. That's because the Learner category is just coming into effect as of August 1st. The other two categories have been in effect since May 1st. Regelous says it's taken the summer for social workers to go through their files and reclassify people into the various categories. She says any new limitations and drops in income support will become apparent in the next month or two, but she is already seeing people who are facing drops in income support, or are finding it more difficult to qualify for various forms of assistance.

The Edmonton Social Planning Council will be watching the impact of the Alberta Works program on those needing assistance. We will have more on this in upcoming publications.

ESPC board and members approve of new direction setting tools

by Bryan Sandilands, President ESPC Board

The ESPC does not belong to its directors, its operational team members or even its funders. It belongs to you. In asking for your advice over the past year in a series of community consultations, the Council has realized its strengths and its weaknesses and is finding a balance that it has not seen for some years. One of the glaring criticisms voiced during our community consultations was that the council of late had lacked leadership in planning and direction. Easy to do, given so many problems and too few solutions, but a focus of vision was required – and, again, your feedback was essential for a correction of drift.

During the ESPC's 64th AGM in May, our new Vision & Mission (see sidebar) were debated, defended and overwhelmingly supported, not by the board of directors or staff, but by community participants and attendants of that meeting – an indicator, to us, of a meaningful foundation.

“A healthy, just and inclusive community” is your Vision and we will achieve it together by leading the address of issues and by finding

community consensus where we may influence municipal, provincial, and federal policy (e.g. Affordable & Accessible Housing, Childcare, Income and Employment Supports, and Equal Justice). The ESPC will develop this Vision into outcomes, those outcomes into indicators, and these indicators will be reported over time.

In our efforts to become an outcomes-driven organization, results will be our bottom line. While communities do not change overnight, nor the supports or spirits that keep them together, the Edmonton Social Planning Council will return to its roots by tracking the trends of poverty and reporting these indicators publicly. Moreover, as decision-makers have a responsibility to respond to these trends, so too has the ESPC to provide services and supports that respond to its members' and community stakeholders' needs.

“Tracking the trends” is an activity that you felt the council had done extremely well in the past and it is this activity that will embody our new strategic plan, providing direction and leadership into the future – a future that, unfortunately, still sees a need for the Edmonton Social Planning Council.

Former ESPC Vision

A community where all people have a commitment to social justice and shared responsibility as the foundation for community well-being.

New ESPC Vision

A healthy, just and inclusive community

Former ESPC Mission

Responding to the changing political and social environment, the Edmonton Social Planning Council will:

- identify trends and emerging social issues
- create opportunities to debate and address social issues
- initiate and support community action through research, coordination and advocacy

New ESPC Mission

The Edmonton Social Planning Council provides leadership to the community and its organizations in addressing social issues and effecting changes to social policy

ESPC Board meetings are held the 4th Tuesday of each month beginning at 5:15pm at the Sacred Heart Community Collective, 9624 - 108 Ave. Members are welcome to attend. The meeting dates scheduled for this fall are as follows: Aug. 24, Sept. 28, Oct. 26, Nov. 23.

FACT

15.4% of Edmonton families live in low income. Edmonton is ranked in the bottom third of Canadian cities.

Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Quality of Life Reporting System 2004



Vision Statement

A healthy, just and inclusive community.

Mission Statement

The Edmonton Social Planning Council provides leadership to the community and its organizations in addressing social issues and effecting changes to social policy.

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Join us! Annual Membership Fees:

Organization	\$45	Household	\$25
Associate*	\$10	Individual	\$15
Limited Income	\$5	Student	\$5

* Associate members do not receive a vote

Membership Application:

Name _____

Organization _____

Position _____

Address _____

City/Town and Postal Code _____

Phone Number with Area Code _____

Fax Number with Area Code _____

E-mail address _____

Please send completed form with a cheque or money order payable to:
Edmonton Social Planning Council

Membership form and details also available on our web page at www.edmspc.com
Donations welcome, may include with cheque or money order for membership

FACT

57.3% of Albertans say they have a strong sense of belonging to Canada, compared to 31% who say their sense of belonging to Canada is only somewhat strong, and 10.4% who say their sense of belonging to Canada is somewhat or very weak.

Statistics Canada, 2003 General Social Survey on Social Engagement

