

Redford's Encore: Making the Oil Patch Progressive

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Last week, Alberta Premier Alison Redford confounded expectations. Everyone thought the province was about to lurch even further to the right, yet Redford convinced Albertans to choose a progressive conservatism instead.

She may be about to surprise us all again. The premier seems to be positioning herself to pull the oil patch over to her side of the political spectrum — and they may be ready to go. If so, this would be quite an encore. How would she do it?

During the election campaign, Redford promised to [end child poverty in five years and reduce poverty](#) overall within a decade. Now, as an issue, poverty is not usually high on the corporate agenda, but Redford's use of the term "poverty reduction" suggests that she may be hoping to change this.

The term was coined by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to capture a [new way of thinking about poverty](#). It views poverty as a "holistic" issue that requires a multi-sectoral approach.

To say poverty is holistic is to say that individuals and societies can be poor for all kinds of reasons, ranging from cultural beliefs to geographical conditions. As a result, government has little or no control over many of the causes. This, in turn, means real solutions often require effort and resources from outside government.

Thus, a good poverty reduction strategy may deal with housing, food security and health care, but it may also need to address issues around social and economic inclusion, family support or self-esteem. Because government cannot fill all these gaps, the private and voluntary sectors, and even citizens, have a role to play.

This is where Redford comes in. Government is the only organization that has the legitimacy to convene and lead a process that can engage, mobilize and coordinate all these partners. While experience shows that Redford can likely count on NGOs, local governments and even citizens to come onside, the real question concerns the big corporations in the oil patch. Why would they join a collaborative process to reduce poverty? In fact, there are at least three good reasons.

First, Redford could argue that the industry has a real interest in seeing Alberta emerge as a model society for the 21st century. This would go a long way to countering international perceptions of the province as a haven for buccaneer capitalism.

Second, the oil industry needs a highly-skilled labour force. Research shows that these people are very mobile. They choose jobs in communities that have safe streets, high quality public services, and that offer them and their families an attractive life-style, from parks and bicycle paths to theatres and sports arenas. Eliminating poverty, Redford could say, is part of building such communities in Alberta.

Third, Redford's strongest argument concerns the process. She could tell industry that it has a critical stake in helping the government forge a new kind of policy process that can manage holistic issues more effectively. Poverty, after all, is not the only holistic issue on the public agenda.

Climate change, infrastructure, and aboriginal relations all require a collaborative solution, and all are critical to the long-term interests of the oil patch. Poverty reduction, Redford could say, is a model for a new kind of policy process.

Finally, while these arguments may explain how Redford could expect to get the oil patch onside, there is another, more political reason why she may be willing to put herself on the line to make poverty reduction work. A successful collaborative strategy would contrast sharply with both the laissez-faire approach of the Wildrose Party and the interventionist, big-spending approach on the left.

According to Wildrose, the PC government has become entangled in an expanding web of commitments around healthcare, economic equality, environmental regulation, and so on. Wildrose wants to return to a simpler vision of government, one that focuses on providing basic services, easing regulation on business, and keeping taxes low.

The argument from the left runs in the other direction. Taxes are not fairly distributed, services are underfunded and governments are reluctant to provide the kind of muscular regulation needed to protect the environment or ensure real fairness in the market place.

Redford could position poverty reduction as a third option that deals with holistic issues neither by retreating from the problem nor by building big new government programs. Rather, the holistic approach is to lead a coordinated effort that rallies governments, the private and voluntary sectors, communities, and even citizens.

The premier could justly claim that, if successful, this approach leads to solutions that are progressive, fiscally prudent, and effective, in a way that the other two do not. Judging by the results of the last election, Albertans would find this highly attractive, leaving the two other approaches looking unimaginative and outdated, by comparison. In short, poverty reduction would be sexy, smart politics.

In sum, none of this is to say that poverty reduction will be a cakewalk. Only that it can be done. At the moment, Redford has some real political capital to work with. She would be wise to invest some of it in challenging all Albertans — especially the oil industry — to work together to reduce poverty. The returns on such an investment may be more than a big win for her government. They may be a big win for Albertans.

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