



Election about the economy

**By Heather Douglas, President & CEO, The Calgary Chamber of Commerce
As published in The Calgary Sun, Thursday, January 31, 2008**

Confound those bickering pundits. On one side, the policy wonks argue that political reform should top Alberta's election agenda. Across the ring, the financial chatterati squabble about how consumers have managed to absorb the shock of \$100 a barrel crude oil, despite the loonie hovering at a buck (US). The environmental activists wrangle about the SUV drivers and oil sands producers and their sins of emission.

Meanwhile, laid-off natural gas workers in rural Alberta are quietly returning their leased half-ton trucks. A few hard-pressed families of idle roughnecks are solving their home heating bills by burning their soon-to-be-foreclosed houses piece-by-piece in the family room fireplaces.

Small business owners fearfully watch their retirement nest eggs scrambled by the sharp losses in global money markets. Executives of multi-nationals huddle around boardrooms weighing options: outsourcing, right sizing, and/or budget reductions.

The politicians are ignoring this – at their peril.

The Calgary Chamber of Commerce believes the next provincial election should be fought about the Alberta economy; it's restructuring, and the very real human consequences of the boom-bust cycle.

We have come through an unprecedented time of growth. The province built needed infrastructure at premium prices. It fattened the provincial administration to deal with the people flocking here to enjoy their piece of prosperity. Those days of opulence are fading.

The Chamber is confident this economic slowdown will be short-lived but painful to many low and middle-class families, entrepreneurs nurturing their start-up companies, and even big business managers trying to make their quarterly dividends.

While Alberta is better positioned to weather the American sub-prime debacle, 37% of our economy is based on exports of oil, natural gas, coal, forestry products, and manufactured products mostly going to the United States (89%).

Albertans need to elect a government willing to tighten its fiscal belt in anticipation of the inevitable economic restructuring. One that pays attention to the little expenses that can escalate into debt and deficit.

The Chamber makes these thoughtful recommendations:

- Fiscal prudence – keep spending increases between 5.8 and 6.5% (within the range of population + inflation growth and real GDP).
- Health care sustainability – empower citizens to be accountable for their health by rewarding them for their personal wellness and health efforts.



- Capital infrastructure investments – explore the possibility of public-private partnerships (P3s) to more efficiently deliver major projects and the risk of cost and schedule overruns.
- Environmental sustainability – invest in technology that will save water, be wary of the growing competition for land usage, and support the reduction of greenhouses gases while allowing the oil sands development to continue.
- Municipal financing framework – work with the municipalities to ensure they deliver sustainable, accountable and responsive services to taxpayers.

Confound those pundits. We need great ideas, a commitment to innovation, and a true partnership to reach the best economic, political, financial and environmental decisions that affect our everyday lives.

If we are going through an economic slump, Albertans need to elect a premier and politicians who will work hard to ensure that few people are harmed in the making of this downturn.

For more information on the Chamber's election issues, please visit www.calgarychamber.com.