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Rights under assault in Alberta

Alberta government
hardly hides its disdain
for human rights laws

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I congratulate MP Jan Brown for having the courage to take a stand against extremism in the Reform party. Extremism is not an anomaly in Alberta: we have seen cross-burnings in Provost in 1991, the sale of racist pins depicting aborigines, blacks and Sikhs in a degrading manner, and recently, a mail bomb was sent to the Calgary Jewish Centre.

Extremism masks fear and hatred of anyone who is different. In Alberta, MLAs have spoken publicly about the abolition of the human rights commission and our federal Charter of Rights. They advocated cutting funding for heritage language programming. They did not hide their anger at the commission for deciding to process complaints on the basis of sexual orientation. Instead, they placed the commission under review.

The review panel toured the province and received more than 1,700 public submissions from Albertans. The ensuing recommenda-

tions were that the commission be given its independence from the government; that sexual orientation be expressly legislated as a ground upon which persons should not be denied a job, service in a restaurant, or an apartment rental.

The current proposed amendments to the legislation, Bill 24, entirely disregard the recommendations set out in the report.

Bill 24 fails to legislate the independence of the Alberta Human Rights Commission by having it report to the legislature, akin to the reporting structure of the province's ombudsman and auditor general.

It gives the cabinet minister responsible, rather than the commission or a legislative committee, authority to allocate grant money from the new million-dollar Human Rights Citizenship and Multicultural Education Fund. Who will the money go to and why?

It does not ensure that selection of commissioners is made on the basis of merit through open competition. The review report recommended "an open public process with commissioners selected on the basis of human rights expertise, integrity and credibility."

Bill 24 fails to address systemic discrimination. It also ignores the review report's recommendation that grounds for complaints be extended to include political belief, pardoned criminal convictions and sexual orientation.

The bill's omissions are as striking as its provisions: It provides that commission members will now not only advocate, investigate, mediate and recommend that matters proceed to hearing, but also that they will conduct the hearings. This administrative procedure vio-

late principles of administrative fairness and procedural fairness. The commission will now be the advocate, investigator, and judge and jury. This inappropriate change must be rectified.

Some of the proposed amendments to Bill 24 are positive: the time limit for filing a complaint following an alleged contravention would be extended to one year from the current six months, "source of income" would become grounds for launching a complaint and multiculturalism would be reaffirmed. But it is too little, too late. Bill 24 should not be passed.

The battle for fair treatment of all Albertans is one to be fought by each and every one of us for the benefit of Alberta. Indeed, white male Albertans have used the commission extensively to deal with unfairness in religion and insurance premiums discrimination.

Supporting a strong independent human rights commission equates to ensuring that the talents of all Albertans, whether male or female, black, aboriginal, white, Jewish, or Hindu, visually or hearing impaired, homosexual or heterosexual, are allowed to develop and create the strength of the marketplace that can compete internationally and create the moral fabric of a society that can withstand the scrutiny of future generations.



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