

LAIRD - Homeless in Alberta
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One of the fascinating things about Ralph Klein is that he could have been a textbook homeless guy. Raised in a broken working-class family, he dropped out of school early in favour of menial jobs, all the while developing an alcoholic thirst that would come to haunt him. It's often those who hail from the margins -- the undereducated, the drunken, the rebellious, the unlucky -- who find themselves on the streets. Klein instead blazed one of the most successful and unlikely careers known in Canadian politics.

This is one of many reasons why last week's benefit for the Calgary Homeless Foundation -- billed as a no-holds barred roast of Ralph Klein -- turned out to be such a love-in for the rough-edged politician. The truth is that Albertans can't help but to celebrate the unlikely ascent of their premier, even when they disagree with his government.

Take, for example, Bob the street newspaper vendor, who stationed himself just inside the entrance to the \$150-a-plate event. Trained as an actuary, Bob now sells copies of Calgary Street Talk around the downtown core. Unlike members of the Alberta Coalition Against Poverty (ACAP) who are protesting outside, he's here purely for business reasons -- there's no ill will for years of Klein cutbacks that hit hard people like himself. "You'd think this audience might buy a few newspapers," he explains. "Ralph could buy one too." And although Bob has more formal education than the premier, he only recently moved from emergency shelters to a rental room at the St. Louis Hotel, the infamous flophouse where Klein held court in the bar as Calgary mayor and provincial MLA. Klein's

political career has long been defined by close encounters with the destitute. From his days as a regular at the St. Louis, to his bizarre and drunken altercation at an Edmonton homeless shelter in 2001, the premier has cultivated an intense but complicated relationship with the unemployed and the working poor. As a co-founder of the Calgary Homeless Foundation in 1998, now responsible for some \$52 million in direct and indirect funding, the premier is not without some credibility on the issue. Tonight, instead of throwing money at street people, as per his Edmonton fiasco, Ralph will net \$100,000 for the Calgary foundation.

What's remarkable isn't the pile of money the premier can conjure from a single public appearance, but the sheer scale of an affordable housing shortage that, amazingly enough, makes \$100,000 look puny. Despite the best efforts of Alberta's agencies and foundations, the growing tide of homeless -- Calgary shelters served an estimated 11,000 different people during 2001 alone -- raises the question of whether Canada's fastest-growing province is witnessing a full-blown crisis, the kind of acute urban decay on display in Vancouver and Toronto.

It didn't happen overnight. Rates of homelessness have been rising double digits in Alberta since the mid-1990s, leaving many social services, shelters and low-income housing stretched to the limit. Like many Canadian provincial governments, Klein's Tories cut housing and social programs in line with a federal freeze on social housing. But Alberta kept growing and its cities became more expensive and, consequently, vacancy rates for affordable housing dropped between zero and one per cent.

Back at the party, cheerleaders, football players, television crews and assorted guests file past Bob and his newspapers, enroute to the sports-themed benefit. Finally, Klein arrives to greet 800 close friends, all

in the name of the homeless cause. And despite the good-natured barbs launched at Ralph during the roast, there will be no mention of the fact that homeless rates exploded during Klein's tenure as premier -- a 61 per cent increase between 1996 and 1998 in Calgary alone -- and that the province has yet to draft a comprehensive plan to address the issue.

In other words, Alberta is running headlong into a homeless crisis fuelled by a booming economy and almost a decade of federal-provincial inaction. And although it would be too simple to blame any one department or jurisdiction, Klein stands out not merely because he's leader of an affluent province prone to social service cuts, but because he himself seems continually drawn to the homeless, sometimes to lend a hand and sometimes, like last December, to hurl insults.

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Even at a benefit to support the good work of the Calgary Homeless Foundation, Ralph Klein still knows is that a good defence is all about launching a great offense. Asked if his government's cutbacks betrayed the denizens of the St. Louis Hotel, the premier bares his teeth. "If you can afford to drink, I guess you're really not that poor," he quips to the assembled media.

Of course, Klein and his advisors know better, thanks to the research work of the foundation and other Alberta agencies. Surveys indicate that roughly half of Alberta's core homeless population struggle with substance abuse, not to mention a lesser percentage who regularly consider suicide. And, according to a 2002 study, half of Calgary's homeless already have jobs -- answering Klein's taunts about welfare bums that have perennially surfaced during his tenure as premier.

Back at the scrum of microphones and TV cameras, Ralph lists off the good deeds done by his government, mainly the \$3 million in annual funds allocated to emergency housing and homeless programs across Alberta. The real bottleneck is permanent and supportive housing, say many housing advocates, not short-term crisis management.

And what about the 34 per cent increase in Calgary homeless since 2000 and an similar expected increase for Edmonton? "That's why we have a Homeless Foundation. And that's why we are making concerted efforts to address the problem. Probably more than any other jurisdiction in the country." Considering that Alberta has spent almost nothing on affordable housing since 1993, excluding some recent projects for seniors, it's an astonishing claim.

Upstairs in the lobby of the Glenbow Museum, ACAP co-founder Dan Dufrense walks by. Is he barging into the benefit to shout slogans at Calgary's A-list? No, the protest is long over -- he's here looking for a washroom. After living homeless in Calgary for four years, he settled into a downtown rooming house just last year.

Dufrense is the anti-Ralph: skinny, French-Canadian and radical. And he doesn't hide his anger about what he claims is the gross hypocrisy of Alberta's ruling class. "One of the sponsors tonight is the Calgary Stampede," he says. "What are they doing there? They are tearing down houses where I live, in Victoria Park, putting people out on the street."

Alberta is one of those places that has been relatively well-insulated from the obvious effects of a nation-wide housing shortage. Dufrense argues that it's becoming a real crisis, like Toronto's mean streets and full shelters, with each passing month. Yet the Klein government would rather

spend new money on an anti-Kyoto campaign or another Heritage Trust fund survey -- and leave homeless issues to charities and foundations.

There are signs of hope. Following another announcement last June, the federal government gave Alberta \$65 million in matching funds for new housing -- along with a \$1.7 million grant for special homeless initiatives earlier this month. But the province has yet to commit to the matching funds deal, indicating an ongoing reluctance to become directly involved in housing issues.

And so street people have taken to the streets. "Shelters are often full to capacity," Dufrense says, with a tired look. " We're Canada's richest province -- where does the money go?"

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