

# The Same Old Advice

## Why some things don't change.



On my very first day on the job as a national park superintendent, two managers, a resource specialist, a local environmentalist and the manager of a local tourism business dropped by. Each welcomed me to my new job, assured me of their support, and then shared a few things they felt I should know before I got in too deep.

It was natural enough for them to want to steer the new guy in their direction. It was helpful, too. I had taken on big responsibilities yet could barely find the washroom. People who had been around longer knew the history of various issues, what had been tried before, where the hidden traps were—all the bits that could help me fail or succeed. Their advice was a godsend.

Of course, some of those helpful advisers were running agendas. They weren't there to help me so much as to keep me from messing with their ambitions. They wanted things to go their way and needed to bend me in their direction.

That's okay too. If one is doing something one believes in, it's only logical to try and sway those with power and authority to your way of thinking. Buyer beware, though.

If a new manager in the public service gets a flood of free advice, imagine how much deeper is the flood that spills in the door of a new cabinet minister. Career bureaucrats, as I was, usually have a good foundation of organizational knowledge and went through a competitive selection process for their specific job. New cabinet ministers rarely have those advantages. They are even more dependent on the advice and support of staff and knowledgeable stakeholders. Senior staff must loyally implement government policy, but they are also expected to provide advice. Sometimes their advice is accepted. It then becomes policy.

Governments get elected on the basis of their policy promises. Most actually mean to keep those promises. But soon the quiet bureaucrats are in their offices, briefing books in hand, explaining why change just won't be that easy. And it isn't long before a baffled public begins asking why this government, which promised to be different, looks increasingly like the previous one. The politicians changed, certainly. But the advice-givers in the bureaucracy didn't. Nor did their advice.

We may be seeing some of this in Alberta. Our NDP government was swept into power in protest against an arrogant and entitled political elite who seemed concerned more about their well-heeled corporate friends than the broader public interest. The new government promised to be different. And indeed they are, in some important ways. But not in others.

On the environment front, the NDP made climate change and social licence for Alberta oil into policy priorities. They almost certainly were told that change was risky, things couldn't be done, here be dragons... but regardless of any negative advice, they brought in a carbon pricing regime, soft diplomacy, more credible environmental oversight and other changes. The message to bureaucrats: "Thanks for your fearless advice, but on this file we prefer loyal implementation."

Public lands, on the other hand, appear to have been a lower priority. Where our forests, streams and prairie grasslands are concerned, the new government had no policy agenda to push. If change isn't a priority, the easiest path is simply to act on the advice of senior bureaucrats and status-quo stakeholders.

A couple of years ago I met with then-Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development Diana McQueen to make the case for better protection of Alberta's headwater forests. She brought along a guy in a suit: an Assistant Deputy Minister. He looked bitter at having to be there; his contempt for my side of the table was palpable. It seemed clear he saw any request for change as an insult.

Needless to say, my concerns went nowhere. He had already counselled the minister on why it was important to keep managing forests the

way the old boys had been doing for years.

We have a new minister now, of course. But we don't have a new ADM. It's unlikely the new minister is getting new advice. When residents of the Cochrane area recently queried their MLA about aggressive clear-cutting in the Ghost River valley, they got a response from that same forestry bureaucrat saying the same things I had heard from him two years earlier.

The tendency of government ministers to defer to senior bureaucrats may explain why the clear-cutting of our headwater forests continues under new NDP ministers in spite of public concern over flooding, lost groundwater, damaged trout streams and degraded scenery.

Politically, we have a new government. At the senior bureaucrat level, we have the same old government. The status quo sticks to bureaucracy like gum to a shoe. ■

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