

Opinion: Let's unwind Alberta's complicated history of misogyny

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For many women, boom times means 'booze, boobs and wildly inappropriate workplace behaviour'

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EXCERPTS

Jason Kenney has released his plans to reboot Alberta's economy. He is doubling down on his tax cut strategy and is reinstating a previously discarded commitment to the tech and innovation sectors in his attempt to restore the Alberta Advantage.

He continues to make attempts to fight hard for the province's beleaguered energy sector and bring the province back to the good old days — irrespective of how much the world is changing all around him.

But for 50 per cent of Alberta's population (more or less), the message of the reboot was tired and uninspired.

If you need a really quick look at what's missing — like, physically missing from the plan — the symbol was accidentally delivered in Jason Kenney's reboot video.

While capturing the energy and excitement of what's ahead, the video featured basically no female-centric workplaces, and almost no women. And the premier's promise of re-energizing our focus on, well, energy, reflects no appreciation of how the work lives of women have been materially altered by COVID-19.

This is no surprise for a single-note premier whose three-year campaign that culminated in the UCP's 2019 election victory inspired sepia-toned assurances that a return to the early 2000s — when oil money flowed freely through the streets and you could take your Maserati out for a spin without feeling vague pangs of guilt — was indeed possible.

Memories linger a little more painfully

Those were the days when you didn't need to worry about environmental concerns and where the annual Calgary Stampede was a microcosm of the province's high-riding spirit: an excess-driven spectacle.

But I, and many women in Alberta, also remember excess in terms of the booze, boobs and wildly inappropriate workplace behaviour. Memories therefore linger a little more painfully and affect our feelings about that decade of supposed glory.

As we consider how to shape Alberta's future, it is important to deconstruct the sins and omissions of the past.

It's true that the early 2000s, and other periods of Alberta's history before, were a time of economic prosperity. But booms and busts in Alberta have always been heavily gendered, and the glory days weren't so glorious for many women.

I suspect that my personal experiences, even as an incredibly privileged white woman, reflect many of the challenges women in Alberta have faced.

And right now women across this province, country and world are facing even more pressing challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We could choose to tackle those challenges as we consider how to overcome the immense difficulties of the current moment in Alberta. But we won't if we obsess on the reinstitution of a past that isn't coming back.

When I was a young law student, 20 some years ago, I got a plum summer job at a midsize law firm. But my excitement with this incredible opportunity quickly waned when I was invited to be the shooter girl at the annual Stampede office party.

I learned that wining and dining boorish executives was a valuable skill in securing good legal work, and that telling clients to go stuff it when they "casually" brushed up against your backside was frowned upon.

I didn't know then, but I know now, that my experience with this form of sexual harassment and demeaning behaviour was very common. It was something I was rarely able to escape throughout my professional career.

While I expected things to shift as I got older and as I took on roles with more responsibility, things didn't actually get better.

I recall being invited to a policy lunch discussion with an executive of a major corporation. When I arrived at our lunch meeting, I was informed he had booked us a room in the hotel, so we could have a more intimate experience. He seemed taken aback when I said "not happening" and invited him to join me in the large public restaurant so we could actually discuss the issue at hand. Which we did.

Even being a high-level staffer in the province's top political office, serving as executive director of the Office of the Premier for the late Jim Prentice, a paragon of respectability and a strong advocate for women, didn't make me immune from the creepy glances of some of the senior former MPs who staffed the same halls I did.

While serving in this role, another powerful executive pinched my ass while we sat beside each other at a Chamber of Commerce event.

Just another day, just another meeting spent slapping hands away.

Enough is enough

Like many women in Alberta, the only way to escape this culture of male entitlement was by creating my own company and my own job. But even there I have had a client push me up against a wall while his wife was across the hall. No whining. No complaints. Just get the job done.

But enough is enough.

Alberta's economy has been driven by energy for many years. The leaders in the energy sector have almost always been men, and that hasn't meaningfully changed.

In 2018, the Energy Council reported that Alberta has the lowest percentage of women in senior officer roles in Canada. Only 7.2 per cent of board members are women, and women make up less than 19.4 per cent of the labour force in Calgary's energy businesses.

"Most sobering," the report said, "is the fact that only one per cent of all CEOs and presidents are women."

As the energy industry doubles down on its tired approaches and narratives, backed by our provincial government, I can't help but think how different and better things might be if there were more women leaders.

I note, for example, that the inspiring leadership team of the Energy Futures Lab, which is helping shape a new narrative and direction for energy in Alberta, is largely made up of women. This is an exception to the dominant pattern, and it is long past time for us to move forward, not remain stuck in the past.

Even with the industry struggling and with fresh approaches worth their weight in gold, our corporate culture remains one of male entitlement.

The old frustrations women face are even more pronounced today, as the pandemic has meant that child care and work must co-exist in the home.

On top of a cultural legacy of widespread misogyny, we are now facing a child-care crisis that is driving women out of the workforce every single day.

Women are bearing the brunt of this COVID-induced recession, and every statistic proves it. More women have lost their jobs than men and more women are struggling to keep up with the child-care/schooling crunch.

There is opportunity before us

But as with every problem we face — there is opportunity before us. This is our chance to change Alberta's narrative and bring women to the starting line of the race to revitalize our economy.

Women start small businesses at a higher rate than men. Did you also know that Alberta women are outpacing women across Canada in terms of raising money for tech startups?

We have at our fingertips this incredible force of talent that we have largely not unleashed. But in order to do so we need to first acknowledge the barriers that have prevented women's full participation in the economy.

The current Alberta government's attitude toward women in the workplace is on full policy and symbolic display. There are no specific plans in place to address the crisis that women are facing in terms of returning to work.

The No. 1 policy change that would make a difference is affordable and accessible child care for all.

The Kenney government has chosen to revisit supports for the tech industry, it should also look at revisiting the \$25/day child-care program that the previous government was championing.

Providing families with guaranteed, safe, standardized and affordable child care could change Alberta's prospects.

We could send a message to women across Canada that we value their participation and see them as key participants in the new economy. This could drive an influx of families from across this country.

I think this message is much more powerful than yet another lower than lowest-already corporate tax cut.

Alberta thrived in the past because we were a place of opportunity. But many were left out of that equation. If we can harness the full

economic potential of the other 50 per cent of the population, imagine what we could do.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

Tags: gender equity ^[4]

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