

Tough times in Alberta for opposition

by K. Graham Bowers

Two guest speakers referred to Tory MLA Walter Szwender as a "doorknob" Tuesday at a seminar entitled, "The Opposition in Alberta," sponsored by the Political Science Undergraduate Association.

In an apparent reference to Szwender's recent remarks criticizing the Edmonton Food Bank, Don Braid and Mark Byington both called the MLA "Doorknob Szwender". Braid is a columnist with the *Edmonton Journal* and Byington is MLA Walter Buck's executive assistant.

The third speaker, MLA Jim Gurnett (New Democrat - Spirit River-Fairview), did not mention Szwender, but did say the Progressive Conservative "government is so unbalanced", then paused before adding that he meant numerically.

Gurnett said he thought the next election "will be for us what 1967 was for the Tories". 1967 was the last election the Tories lost. Gurnett stressed that his statements reflected his own views, and not necessarily the official views of the New Democrats.

Gurnett's view is that an opposi-

The next election "will be for us what 1967 was for the Tories" -- Jim Gurnett

tion is essential to democracy. He said the role of the opposition is to monitor government actions and new bills, to propose alternatives, and to act as an ombudsman or "a freelance roving MLA."

He mentioned that the official opposition has some advantages over third parties, such as \$130,000 in extra funding, a higher profile, and greater media coverage.

However, the official opposition still has a smaller budget than some cabinet ministers have, and there are thirty cabinet ministers. "I'm the critic for fifteen ministers," said Gurnett, so the New Democrats must set priorities on what issues to concentrate on.

They do this according to the number of people an issue will affect and the level of public interest. When he feels an issue needs more attention, Gurnett admits, "Sometimes I have trouble convincing the rest of my caucus."

The opposition also must do background research on alternatives to government policy proposals, constantly write and talk to ministers, and hold regular news conferences.

This last task is not an easy one, according to Byington. He said, "We try to put out one news release every week, but there are thirty cabinet ministers, they can each put out one a week and they do!"

Byington then recounted his experiences in forming a new political party, the Representative Party of Alberta (RPA).

Three-tenths of one percent of the voting population must sign a petition to register a new political party, and that amounted to 1307 signatures in 1984.

The priorities that the RPA try to stress are the current agriculture crisis, the style of government, and the role of the MLA. The RPA would like to see more free votes.

Usually the MLA's must vote along party lines, and the party whip enforces party discipline, but in a free vote MLA's may vote according to their own conscience, and the government does not fall if it loses the vote.

The RPA also demands that all party MLA's must officially report to their constituency before and after each legislative sitting.

However, the government has

not sat in the legislative assembly since last July and, according to Braid, this makes the media more dependent on the government for news. Braid feels the Alberta media are already too dependent on the government for news, and is therefore part of the problem.

Because the opposition is so small, it gets very little coverage, says Braid. He feels that the opposition only gets fair coverage during an election campaign.

If the media looked at the opposition's popularity in election results, rather than its representation in the legislature, then the opposition might get a fair representation in the media, according to Braid. He recently vowed to try to give the opposition more coverage in his own writing.

One example that Braid gave was a comparison of two recent delegate selection meetings. Approximately 700 people, including federal New Democrat leader Ed Broadbent, came to provincial party leader Ray Martin's nomination meeting, which got no coverage in the *Journal*. That same night, only 100 people showed up to see Szwender win the PC nomination by acclamation. That story was on page B-1 in the *Journal*.

Abortion laws cruel

by Emma Sadgrove

The Canadian abortion law was found guilty of "causing needless hardship and suffering" to women at a mock trial organized by the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee (ASWAC) and Abortion by Choice, a division of the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League (CARAL).

On trial was Section 251 of the Canadian Criminal Code which prohibits abortion unless performed in an approved or accredited hospital. It also requires approval by a therapeutic abortion committee of three doctors on the basis of danger to the woman's health or life.

Testimony was heard from ten unidentified women who related their abortion experiences. They emphasized the lengthy process to obtain an abortion and the lack of sympathy from medical staff. Some women described vicious internal examinations and clumsy procedures. The women were not given follow-up care or information, with the exception of one woman who obtained an abortion in the United States. She reported quick, efficient and compassionate service.

A nurse testified to having watched a woman die as a result of a backstreet abortion because a safe, legal abortion was not available. One of the pro-choice movement's concerns is that if abortion were prohibited, women would turn to unsafe backstreet abortions as many did prior to the 1969 legalization of abortion.

One of the witnesses was a Calgary gynecologist who regularly performs abortions. She testified that women are rarely turned down by the committee. The occasional exceptions are married, financially secure women. In these cases they can obtain approval by having a social worker act as their advocate.

The doctor suggested that the committees should be eliminated since they "perform a rubber stamp function." She would prefer to see the legalization of clinics, like the ones in the States.

Such clinics are also the goal of Abortion by Choice and ASWAC. They feel that abortion would be best performed in these clinics with a sympathetic staff, and counselling and information services. Clinics could also offer a variety of reproductive related services.

In summing up, Sheila Greckol, the prosecuting attorney, argued that the law is vague, arbitrary, and discriminates against women. The minority, she said, "does not have the right to impose its views upon women."

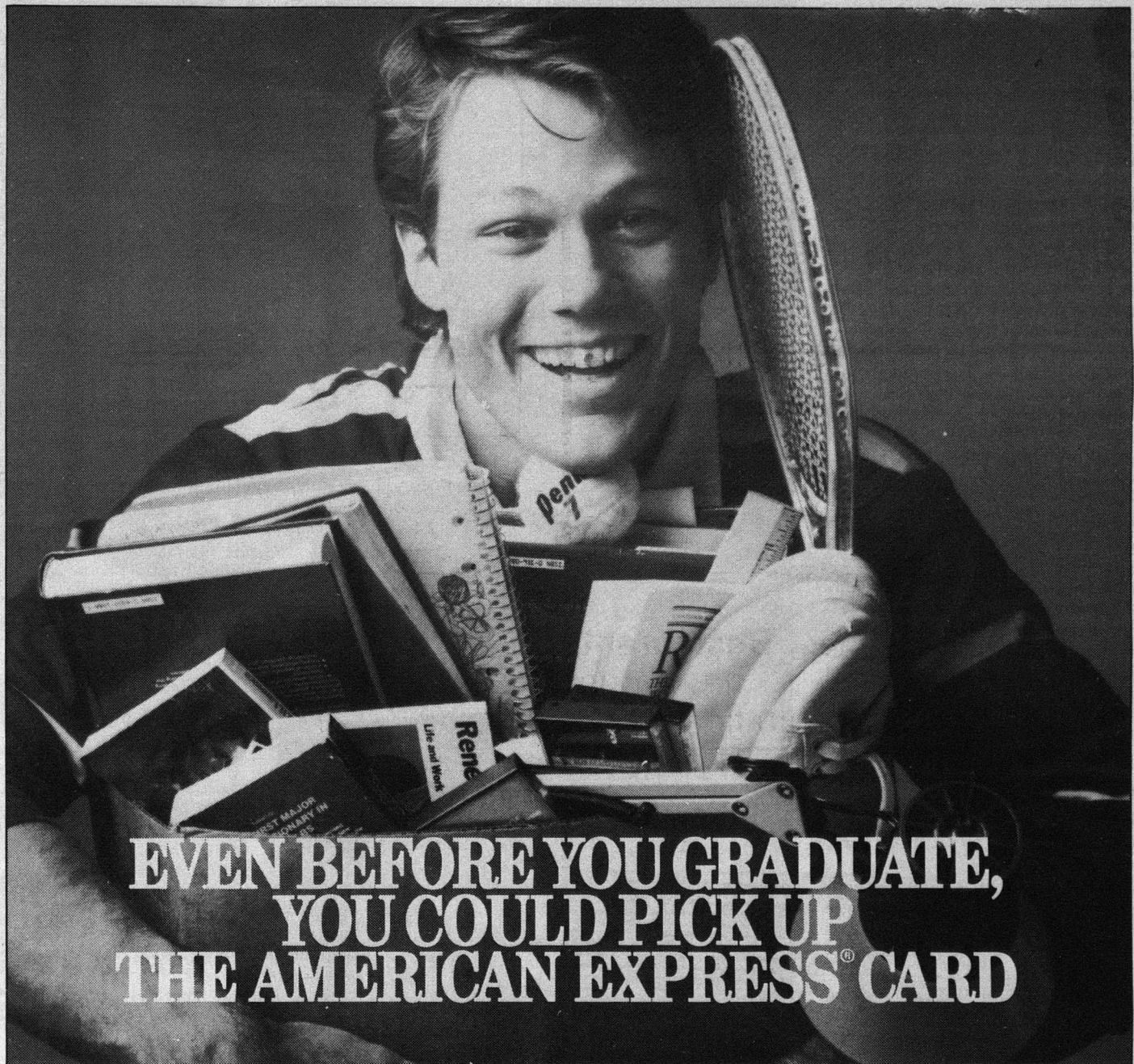
Defense attorney, Alan Munro, told the jury that it does not have "the right to strike down the law". He asserted that "the law is moral and just."

The jury, representatives of the pro-choice community, reached a verdict of guilty. The judge, Marilyn Assheton-Smith, concluded that the law is indeed unfair and creates suffering for women.

Jane Haggerty of Campus pro-life said, "the pro-life organization

in Edmonton has not taken notice of this event." She sees the event as "a way of creating new interest in the issue" because people have become apathetic.

CARAL is organizing similar tribunals in various cities across Canada in order "to expose the injustice of Canada's abortion law." In late spring, women will deliver the guilty verdict to Prime Minister Mulroney and demand that the abortion law be repealed.



**EVEN BEFORE YOU GRADUATE,
YOU COULD PICK UP
THE AMERICAN EXPRESS® CARD**

If you're graduating this year and you've accepted career-oriented employment at an annual salary of \$10,000 or more and have a clean credit record, you can get the American Express Card.

That's it. No strings. No gimmicks. (And even if you don't have a job right now, don't worry. This offer is still good up to 12 months after you graduate.)

Why is American Express making it easier for you to get the Card right now? Well, simply stated, we recognize your achievement and we

believe in your future. And as you go up the ladder, we can help—in a lot of ways.

The Card can help you begin to establish a credit reference. And, for business, the Card is invaluable for travel and restaurants. As well as shopping for yourself.

Of course, the American Express Card is recognized around the world. So you are too.

So call 1-800-387-9666 and ask to have a Special Student Application sent to you. Or look for one on campus.

The American Express Card. Don't leave school without it™



American Express Canada, Inc. is a registered user of the trade marks owned by American Express Company ©Copyright American Express Canada, Inc. 1986. All Rights Reserved.