

Ghitter: thoroughly conservative

by Bill Doskoch

Progressive Conservative leadership candidate Ron Ghitter is thoroughly Albertan and espouses policies that are definitely conservative.

He is outspoken, having opposed the government purchase of Pacific Western Airlines and the administration of the Heritage Trust Fund while he was representing his riding of Calgary Buffalo from 1971 to 1979.

He recently chaired the Committee on Tolerance and Understanding (CTU). His recommendations on private religious schools have led fundamentalist Christians to actively campaign for his rival, Don Getty.

He says he values freedom of thought and expression and promises new directions for the province if he is elected leader.

He was gracious enough to give *The Gateway* an interview last Wednesday.

Because he is a politician, some of his answers tended to be roundabout and in some cases, for questions other than those actually asked. In those instances his answers have been paraphrased. In other cases, his answers had to be edited for length; however, in both cases, every effort was made to preserve both accuracy and context.

Gateway: How does it feel to be back in the political business?

Ghitter: Well it's an adjustment. Nothing ever really prepares you for a leadership race. What's going to happen is when we get to the convention next month, they'll just take the pulses of Don, Julian and I and whoever has the strongest will win! (laughs). It really is quite a process and I've enjoyed it.

You talk a lot about the future of Alberta in your campaign literature. What do you see as Alberta's future?

I think we have the basis here to create the best future of anywhere in Canada, if not North America.

We have all the resources, talents and the structural foundations here to really build upon. But, what we must do is start planning on a longer term agenda and not just on a day-to-day basis.

... We must build and diversify our strengths. I'd like to see a world-class agricultural school here doing world-class research.

Agriculture ranks right up there with the energy industry in terms of its importance to Alberta. We do it well and we should be leading the world in that area.

What roles do you see universities playing in fulfilling Alberta's future?

I start off with the premise that universities shouldn't be job training centres. They should be places of learning, understanding and developing critical thinking skills. The humanities should be encouraged and so should excellence.

Once a person acquires those skills, one can move towards more specific (training).

As I read the futurist books, they seem to say the same thing: that employers are looking for people with good communicative, thinking and experiential skills, so they can take those skills and hone them in specific areas.

The Alberta White Paper talked in terms of directing funding towards programs such as applied science, international trade and so on. I take it by the above statement that you don't support that philosophy.

I don't say that I don't support it (but) I think that if one takes it to mean the detriment of the humanities then I don't support it... In this rush of rhetoric of back to the basics and applied science, we forget to smell the roses. We neglect the importance of the arts and reading. We must not do that because they are fundamental in assisting people enjoy life. Life is more than working nine to five, or nine to nine or, if you're a politician, the 24 hour day!

Ghitter was then asked why education did not appear to be an important issue in this campaign.

Actually, private education has been an issue. That's been raised and thrown at me dozens of times.

Actually, it's been to your detriment. An article in the Aug. 18 Edmonton Journal has Wayne Webster, pastor of Grace Bible Church saying: "We're anti-Ghitter. Mr. Ghitter doesn't belong in the Conservative Party."

Yeah. The fundamentalists who want their own schools without accredited teachers or curriculum take issue with the position of the CTU, which said every child in Alberta should receive a minimum standard of education.

I'm not opposed to private schools at all... But there are 22 schools in the province that don't supply even that minimum standard.

There was an un-named MLA quoted in the June 17 Alberta Report who said you screwed up, made a lot of bad judgement calls which caused the government



Tory leadership hopeful Ghitter: "I'm not into discussions of wealth distribution. That's what socialism is about and I'm far from being a socialist."

problems and so cost you a lot of support in caucus.

Well, I didn't write the report with 12 other people to gain support in caucus. We wrote it in honesty.

The caucus didn't like it when we said the state of native education in the province was deplorable and we had no native education policy. Since the report came out they are now working on one, the only province that previously didn't have one.

... Anyway, anything you read in the *Alberta Report*, I'd divide in half and divide in half again because as far as I'm concerned, it's a trash publication.

Is post-secondary education a right or a privilege?

(chuckles) That's an old question.

Has the answer changed?

I think it's both. Everyone in Alberta has a right to have an education and financing available to them and it's the obligation of the government to provide it. Once you get there, though, it really is a privilege.

You and Don Getty advocate the establishment of an Advisory Council for Women and you support equal pay for equal work. Some feminist groups advocate equal pay for work of equal value. What is your response?

I'm very much opposed. It's an insidious intervention into the right of someone to conduct their own business.

It would be very detrimental to small business if some third party is going to come into my business and tell me the person who cleans the floors is as valuable as the saleslady and pay accordingly. How could I conduct my business?

I don't think the answer for women lies (in that concept).

There is a conflict between southern Alberta's need for water and the tourism industry's need to preserve wild rivers. How do you reconcile that impossible situation?

That's a tough area. Aside from tourism though, there are irreconcilable differences north and south on the use of water.

Some, Mr. Getty included, have espoused the idea of interbasin transfer of water. This would be very expensive and would make people in northern Alberta rather discontent.

I think we should invest in the facilities already in place and learn

to be more efficient in our water utilization.

Ghitter said we should be more active in cleaning up polluted rivers that pass through our municipalities (ie. the North Saskatchewan and the Bow) and that such cleanup should be a provincial responsibility. He wants more research into acid rain and said quality of life is as important a consideration as tourism.

On the subject of tourism, Ghitter said: "Tourism is an untapped resource. We're not expending enough time on our tourism industry. I'm saying that from the viewpoint of a long-time skier who would like to see a lot of things happen, including improving our apres-ski life and hospitality industry to stop me from going down to Aspen and Vail.

He supports development of private dwellings within designated townsites, in Kananaskis country, saying it would make for an interesting townsite.

Wouldn't that be making it a playground for the elite and thus reducing accessibility for others?

That's one of the concerns of the province, but on the other hand, it's just a matter of zoning.

You should have some areas where people who have money can come in and put up nice homes. Why not? That's the blend, that's what causes nice restaurants and shopping centres to come in.

I've visited some of the world-class ski resorts in Europe and the United States and they have both. They're wonderful places to visit and I don't look upon them as elitist.

Speaking of elitism, you are quoted in the Aug. 22 Edmonton Journal as saying: "Let us never become a party of elitists." Do you feel that danger is now present?

Yes. If we are seen to espouse just the interests of the Websters, which are very much a minority position, or if we are just seen as the representatives of Big Oil or Big Business, then we can easily fall out of favor with the electorate.

My approach is one of trying at all times to represent all people in an even-handed way and becoming a people-oriented government.

You dislike being called a maverick or the conscience of the Conservative Party and you say certain principles are important to you. I would assume those principles

might be different from mainstream conservative thought if people having been hanging those labels on you.

Good question. There were only a couple of issues where I took a position that was somewhat different than the government.

I didn't like the purchase of Pacific Western Airlines. I didn't think it was a conservative principle and I didn't think it was necessary.

I also thought when we set up the Heritage Savings Trust Fund that it wasn't accountable enough to people in that the money could be spent in advance of any approval.

I think governments should always put forward a budget for approval because that is a normal democratic safeguard.

There is nothing wrong with that (sort of criticism) and I would certainly welcome it in my government.

So I assume you would encourage a bit more vigorous internal debate than is currently the case?

I very much would, and not just internal but external too.

I don't think it's harmful, in many cases we should just let the debate flow, strike a consensus and carry on from there. I don't think we should have the whips out all the time, telling people how to think.

Freedom of thought and expression are very important principles of mine throughout my public life and will continue to be so.

Conservatives talk a lot about wealth creation. Some people are more talented at creating wealth than others. How do you reconcile wealth creation with wealth distribution?

I don't worry about wealth distribution.

I think government's responsibility is to get everyone in society to the starting line and then let their own excellence, commitment and hard work bring them to wherever it does. If it rewards them financially, so be it.

If people fall by the wayside and need assistance, fine, that's our responsibility too.

But I'm not in to discussions of re-distribution of wealth, that's what socialism is all about and I'm far from being a socialist.

The Don Getty and Julian Koziak campaigns have also been approached for interviews but at press time there had been no response from them.

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