

Canada: Alberta Premier berates homeless in visit to shelter

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Ralph Klein, the premier of Alberta and darling of Canada's right, made a disgusting display of his contempt for the poor in a drunken, midnight visit to a homeless shelter in Edmonton last week.

At around 1am December 12, a visibly intoxicated Klein had his chauffeur drive him to the Herb Jamieson Centre, a government-supported shelter for homeless men. Witnesses say that soon after entering the 249-bed Centre, Klein began shouting and swearing at a number of the homeless. Slurring his words, the Tory premier yelled repeatedly at them to get jobs, then threw money on the lobby floor and stormed out.

Tammy Tuttle, a woman who happened to be at the shelter at the time with her boyfriend reported that Klein "put them down like they're worthless. They do what they can to help themselves and maybe if he'd help them a little instead of cutting back on everything, they wouldn't be here."

Mark Shea, who recently moved to Alberta from Nova Scotia, told the *Edmonton Journal*, that he walked into the confrontation after finishing a work-shift at a gas station. "Lo and behold, there he [Klein] was in the middle of six or seven guys, yelling at them at the top of his lungs."

"I don't drink or do drugs and he's telling me to get a job when I already have one. If I wouldn't have gotten arrested, I would have slugged him."

Initially, the premier's office made a feeble attempt to gloss over the incident, offering its own implausible version of events. Klein's chief of staff, Peter Elzinga, said the Premier was not drunk and "out of the goodness of his heart" had stopped at the shelter on his way home from a private dinner. Elzinga added that Klein had merely asked the men if they had jobs, then handed out some \$70 to them.

Later Klein made a public apology for the

"commotion" he caused at the shelter, but denied he had been drunk. He said his interest had been piqued by recent reports of a rise in the number of homeless in Edmonton. (Alberta's capital has a vacancy rate of less than 1 percent and many of the homeless are people who have jobs, but cannot find accommodation.)

"The purpose of my visit," claimed Klein, "was to chat with residents and find out what their situations are like. During my time in politics, I have periodically made such unscheduled visits because they give me the opportunity to chat privately and honestly with people from different walks of life."

Klein's bizarre and callous behaviour was at first treated by the media as little more than an embarrassment, and one that might even enhance the premier's reputation as a straight shooter. This attitude is itself politically significant, for it reveals the extent to which the establishment now accepts homelessness as inevitable and views the abuse of the poor with indifference. "It's hard not to have at least a sneaking admiration for Alberta Premier Ralph Klein," began a *Globe and Mail* piece on Klein's escapade. Opined another journalist in the country's largest national daily, "When the dust settles... the now-infamous trip seems destined to become the stuff of political legend in the province rather than scorn."

And what would have happened had the roles been reversed? Had a drunken homeless man invaded the premier's home late at night and verbally abused Klein, he would in all likelihood have been set upon by police and at the very least now face home invasion charges.

With Klein making a public confession that he does indeed have a drinking problem at a press conference this past Tuesday, the media focus has again shifted. Any discussion of what happened at the shelter and what it says about Klein and the politics of his

government has been dropped. Klein is now being praised for having the “courage to confront his demons.” Canada’s Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien and several provincial premiers have reportedly phoned Klein to voice their support. According to the Alberta Premier, Chretien told him to “keep your chin up, hang in there, and gave” him “words of encouragement.”

The truth is Klein’s verbal tirade against the clients of the Jamieson Centre was only a cruder rendition of the anti-working class politics his government delivers on a daily basis. Oil-rich Alberta is Canada’s wealthiest province, but the Klein Tory government has spearheaded the downsizing of public and social services across Canada, winning praise from the likes of the *Wall Street Journal*. Under Klein, Alberta became the first province to drastically cut welfare rates and embark on a systematic campaign to drive people off welfare. In a 16-month period in 1993-94, the province’s welfare rolls were cut almost in half. One tactic used was to offer recipients a one-way bus ticket to leave Alberta. During the course of the 1990s, the province’s housing budget was reduced by some two-thirds. Having made Alberta the first jurisdiction in North America to replace a progressive income tax with a flat tax, Klein is now pushing for the dismantling of Medicare, the universal public health insurance scheme.

Klein’s actions at the Jamieson shelter are a measure of the man. What the big business media has passed off as Klein’s popular touch is demagoguery, anti-intellectualism, and an appeal to people’s baser instincts. What the media has characterized as his strong leadership is his craven adherence to the reactionary agenda of big business and penchant for bullying the poor and the vulnerable.



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