

T'is the Season of Blitz, not Blitzen

“Don't blink.” This was good advice if you followed the Alberta legislature after the May election of a United Conservative Party government. If you blinked, you likely missed the introduction and passage of a key government bill. By the end of November, the legislature had sat for 64 days. Twenty-nine government bills were introduced; twenty-two of those bills passed and received Royal Assent. On average, nearly every other day saw a new bill presented in the legislature during its spring and fall sitting.

Alberta hasn't seen such a torrid legislative pace set since Premier Ed Stelmach's first session in 2008. Then, after trouncing the Liberals and New Democrats in the 2008 election, the Stelmach government passed 52 bills in just 56 days. By contrast Premier Alison Redford passed just 10 pieces of legislation in the 29 days the legislature sat between her April 2012 electoral victory and Christmas 2012. Before the Notley government saw its first Christmas, it had passed nine bills over 35 days.

If you blinked, you likely missed any sustained debate or questioning of these bills. This is because this rapid fire approach to passing laws leaves little time to debate. “Brazen” was how Zain Velji, campaign manager for Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi in 2017, characterized the fall sitting of the legislature. Suggesting the government was creating “a crisis a day” he went on to say: “This doesn't allow citizens or the media to get a full dissection on what's going on because we have to cover the next thing.”

I would add my suspicion that there's a stealthy, surreptitious air to some of what the government has delivered so far. Clearly there's nothing stealthy about: firing the Elections Commissioner investigating the UCP leadership campaign; promising to cut thousands of public sector jobs; transferring billions of dollars in teachers' retirement savings from an independent board to a Crown corporation.

But, it's arguably there in other key initiatives, ones aimed at the heart of AWA's mandate. Consider the budget for Alberta Environment and Parks which has received little, if any, media coverage. There you will find some very sharp reductions in longstanding Environment and Parks functions. Spending on parks, for example, is cut by eight percent in the 2019-20 fiscal year; it's the start of a series of cuts that will leave the operating expenses for parks 26 percent lower in 2022-23 than they were last year. Integrated planning - vital to managing landscapes well - is cut by 39 percent in 2019-20. Fish and Wildlife loses 12 percent of its budget.

The passage of Bill 16 also exemplifies this stealth. This bill “modernizes” the grazing fee framework in Alberta. It promises to increase grazing fees; it promises to devote some of that money to “rangeland sustainability initiatives.”

What's my beef? First, the government only saw fit to consult with grazing associations about this public lands legislation. By defining this as agricultural legislation the Kenney government signaled to non-farm

groups like AWA that these changes were none of their business. Our decades-long interest in the stewardship of public lands didn't matter.

Second, without consulting a group like AWA there was no one at the table demanding government to collect more of the windfall that one percent of leaseholders pocket from oil and gas activity on public, leased lands (see the Oct.-Dec. 2016 WLA for more on this).

Third, to listen to the Minister talk about this bill you would think it outlines clearly what changes are coming. It doesn't. It's barren. It doesn't offer one word about the substance of the grazing fee changes.

Finally, the NDP opposition was missing in action. They didn't do their job of looking for ways to improve the bill. They didn't call for Environment and Parks to accept finally the Auditor General's 2015 recommendation. Then the Auditor General recommended the department clarify “the environmental, social and economic objectives it expects grazing leases should provide all Albertans...” (my emphasis). Perhaps that was due to the fact the NDP failed to follow the Auditor General's recommendation when they were in government.

The legislative blitz we've seen from the United Conservatives, much of it without consultation with all Albertans, is worrisome. As an organization, and as individual citizens and conservationists, we should be preparing our responses if it continues in the new year.

- Ian Urquhart

