

# An Open Letter to Minister Nixon...About That Townhall

*November 26, 2020*



## Dear Minister Nixon...About That Townhall

Hey Minister, I'm back. You probably haven't read any of the *Wild Lands Advocate* articles I've written before. There was my 2016 piece about the Notley government's plan to put a "modern take" on provincial [parks](#). Then, a lifetime ago, I [wrote](#) about the decision to feature Banff National Park as the setting for the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*.

### Plus ça Change?

Some things have changed a lot since those days. Like...it really was a lifetime ago for me. I'm writing this from the Pet Resort in the Great Beyond where annoying owners don't tell you to stop snoring or to get off the couch.

Some things though haven't changed a lot. All you Alberta politicians seem to love the idea of being "modern." The NDP had their "modern take" on parks and your government "committed to review Environment and Parks

legislation to modernize it for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including the Alberta Parks system."

I remember looking in on Ian's thoughts back in March (although I never was much for doing tricks, this trick you can do from up here is awesome). He was concerned about your news release called "Optimizing Alberta Parks." He was fretting Mr. Minister. He was concerned .you hadn't consulted Albertans about your decision and that you were going to gut the parks system.

I know, I know...he worries too much. Sometimes he exaggerates. Knowing how much you love to be out hunting in the West Country I approached St. Peter asking if I could help set Ian straight. He let me put the thought in Ian's head that he didn't have to worry, that the Parks system was in good hands with you at the helm.

It didn't really work.

### **Reincarnating Scuttlebutt Lodge? A Bad Version of Question Period? Say it Ain't So.**

But, then I heard that you held a townhall meeting. Great news. What could have led the usual band of negative thinkers to complain about your effort to consult, a truly admirable goal.

Time isn't a big deal up here. So shame on them for saying it came months too late, that it should have happened before you made your decision about the parks system last February.

Still, Ian's spent some fretful nights stewing about the townhall and what was said – and wasn't said – there. The reassuring thoughts I'm giving him don't seem to be working. So, although I know how busy you must be, I'm hoping you can address some of his concerns.

First, he thought the townhall was a bit like the Red Fisher [show](#). When you were a kid you probably watched Red welcome his guests to "Scuttlebutt Lodge: The Tall Tale Capital of the World." Ian claims that the organizers, like Red, handpicked who would be on the show to tell tall tales. He believes you didn't reach out to anybody other than UCP colleagues in the Legislature to be a guest. He said it sounded like all the guests were singing from the same hymn book (Why would that be a bad thing? The Big Guy really appreciates it when people do that).

Ian also said the evening went like a bad example of Question period. Since Question Period is a forum where the Opposition holds the government accountable, it's always bothered him when government members are set up by Ministers to ask them easy questions. Surely though your fellow UCP MLAs didn't do that in the townhall did they?

I put the idea in his head that you didn't just want to hear from people

who agreed with you. The proof of that? Well, you used Zoom and Facebook Live to ensure that people from all political persuasions could participate in your townhall. Newspapers told their readers that features like chat didn't work and that a lot of questions weren't answered. Those failings must have been due to technical glitches, right? The townhall organizers wouldn't have tried to avoid answering questions deliberately, would they?

### **Myths and the 164**

I found it very illuminating to listen to you and your UCP colleagues talk about all the myths and misinformation that negative thinkers are responsible for. Amen to that. But, there are a couple of points where maybe you could improve your messaging to bring people like Ian over to your side of the issue.

For example, what about "the 164?" The 164 refers to the sites the negative thinkers claim will be taken out of the parks system. During the townhall, you called the suggestion that you were going to delist the 164 "a myth that has been put forward by certain groups and by the official opposition."

I don't want to be impertinent but I'm afraid your government is one of those "certain groups." At the end of February your department published a document on its website called "Optimizing Parks." I'd offer you a link to the document but it doesn't appear to be on the Government of Alberta website anymore. Strange.

Anyways, that document says that 164 proposed sites for partnership(s) fall into the category of "Remove from Park System." Also, your February 29th news release said you had identified the 164 "for proposed removal from the system."

I know you told people in the townhall that these sites will "remain fully within the provincial park system." So, clearly you're not going to follow through on the removal you committed to on February 29th. A simple, straightforward press release telling Albertans the 164 will remain within the provincial parks system and, as such, will be governed by the *Provincial Parks Act* will show those negative thinkers what the UCP's true colours are on this question.

### **Myths and Putting Parks Up For Sale**

Then there's that other myth, the myth about possible future sales of sites in the provincial parks system. Again, I'm thrilled you said: "To be clear no parks are for sale inside this province, at all." But, again, if certain groups put that idea out there you need to recognize that your government is one of those groups. Why should people think a sale of parks is a myth when you approve a news release saying this about the 164: "Through prospective sale or transfer

to First Nations or entities such as a municipality or non-profit, these sites could continue to provide important economic and recreational benefits to local communities.”

As Louis Nizer, a famous American trial lawyer, told me as I wrote this letter: “When a man points a finger at someone else, he should remember that four of his fingers are pointing at himself.”

## More Myths

While we’re talking about myths, Ian thinks he knows something about the history of the department you lead: Environment and Parks. I heard him muttering in his sleep that what you said about its history at the townhall wasn’t quite right. You told your listeners that the NDP combined environmental protection and parks into one department. You’re right. But, you were wrong to suggest that this was a first. I asked former Premier Ralph Klein and Halvar Jonson, a former Minister of Environment, if your interpretation was right. They disagree with you. When Halvar was Minister of Environment in Ralph’s government, Parks were part of the Department of Environment. Parks also was part of Environment when Ty Lund, your compatriot from the West Country, was Environment Minister during the Ralph years.

Halvar also thought you may have misspoke when you were talking about the various protections under and purposes of the *Provincial Parks Act* and the *Public Lands Act*. First, he couldn’t figure out why you seemed to think it was so hard to administer two separate pieces of legislation in one department. He certainly didn’t have any problems coping with that challenge. It didn’t seem like Ty Lund had many problems either.

He wondered if maybe your officials didn’t do a good job of explaining the purposes of the Acts to you. You argued that, in some cases, the *Public Lands Act* offers more protection to landscapes “because parks, at the end of the day, is about creating recreation opportunities within the department which is important but not necessarily the number one way to do conservation of large landscapes...”

Did you mean to say “provincial recreation areas” instead of “parks?” I ask because it’s pretty clear that Section 3 of the *Provincial Parks Act* sets landscape preservation and conservation as the primary purposes of [parks](#).

My provincial political gang up here also was puzzled by the problems you seem to be having with the fact that provincial recreation areas are mentioned in those two pieces of legislation. The *Provincial Parks Act* establishes these areas and sets the purposes for their management. While the *Public Lands Act* talks about public land and forest recreation areas it doesn’t mention “provincial recreation areas.” The *Public Lands Administration*

*Regulation*, however, does mention provincial recreation in two ways. First, it says you can't camp or have a fire on public lands within one kilometre of a provincial recreation area. Second, Schedule 4 of the Regulation seems to exclude all provincial recreation areas from areas/lands in a public land use zone.

Provincial recreation areas are essentially islands within public land use zones. I wonder why your Conservative predecessors might have done that. Any ideas? I wonder if they made the distinction because they thought lands in provincial recreation areas demanded more protection than what could be the norm for public lands more generally. Just a thought.

So, I think the townhall was a brilliant idea. Now, if you just correct the few minor glitches noted above I'm sure your next townhall will listen to all of the people a government is elected to represent.

### For More Information:

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