

Bill Rea ? Government different from business

It seemed to be a major story last week. Actually, it was a couple of stories.

In the first one, Business mogul and media personality Kevin O'Leary announced he would make a personal investment of \$1 million into Alberta's oil industry if Premier Rachel Notley, a New Democrat, would resign. Then he dropped very broad hints that he might be thinking of running for the leadership of the federal Conservative party, since Stephen Harper has vacated that position. As a result, I've heard plenty of people comparing O'Leary to Donald Trump, who seeks to be the next President of the United States.

For sure, both men know how to grab the attention of the media, and both would attract the support of certain members of the electorate in their respective countries.

No matter how smart or charismatic Trump might be, politically I regard him as essentially a clown. I doubt he will get the Republican nomination later this year, and even if he somehow gets that far, I can't see the electorate putting him in charge. But I have also been following elections, on both sides of the border, for a lot of years. There's always room for surprises, and I also know the wisdom of the electorate is not always wise.

When it comes to the first story, while it might have drawn attention, I can't believe anyone, including O'Leary, seriously thought Notley would take him up on the offer. I am no New Democrat, but I had to applaud the premier for the way she responded to the approach.

?The last time a group of wealthy businessmen tried to tell Alberta voters how to vote, I ended up becoming premier,? she's quoted as saying.

It is clear, from all the accounts we've been hearing, that the economy in Alberta is suffering. The price of oil has been dropping a lot of late, which makes my life a lot easier every time I pump gas into my car, but it also means a lack of revenue that people out west have come to depend on. There could be other problems out there that I might not be aware of. Apart from about 20 minutes I spent sitting on a plane in Calgary during a refueling stop on my way to Vancouver almost 30 years ago, I have never been to Alberta. Notley has been on the job less than a year, so I don't think it's fair to blame her for all the woes impacting on her province. It's obvious things had been heading the wrong way there for a while. Voters in what was once probably the most secure conservative area in the country voted NDP in May 2015 for a reason. And if Notley and company had been handed a big mess by the previous regime, they are entitled to a reasonable amount of time to clean it up, and I don't think nine months is reasonable.

Besides, can officials in Alberta be held responsible for the price of oil going south? There are global considerations at work there. While that \$1 million that's been mentioned is O'Leary's money, meaning he can do with it as he pleases, I think it was tacky to try and use money to get a duly-elected government to step aside. Whether we like the NDP or not, the voters in Alberta put them in charge, and that's the way things are. That's the way things work in a democracy.

But then again, the stunt was done for the publicity, and he got what he was after, so good for him.

As for him getting into politics, it is a fact that this is a democracy, so anyone should have the right to run for office. And if the Conservatives want to put him up against Justin Trudeau in 2019, that's up to them. I might even vote for him.

I have read and heard a lot about his business smarts, and how that is needed in government. While I haven't heard it yet, there is that well-known saying that goes roughly, ?If I managed my business the way government runs things, I would be out of business.? If O'Leary takes his political ambitions much farther, I think we'll be sure to hear that.

I get upset when I hear that saying, because I think it's irrelevant.

Government is not a business, nor is it meant to be one.

Businesses are meant to make a profit, at least in this capitalist system in which we live. That sometimes means getting rid of employees if the books say that's needed. Government can't dismiss or lay-off citizens because the economy is in the tank.

In my youth, more than 30 years ago, I spent some time working in a hotel (actually, it was a small chain of hotels). The guy who ran the operation was not a nice man. He was notorious for being a tightwad. He could also be tough.

There was a stage show that had been operating for some weeks on one of the banquet halls, and it was not a financial success. The fellow running the show was obliged to go to the boss and tell him he couldn't pay the rent.

?Close the doors,? was the reply, according to the accounts that made it down to the lower echelon people like me, meaning the show was done.

A lot of my colleagues were angry with the man at the top, and the harsh way he dealt with the situation. I made few friends by pointing out to people that we all had paycheques riding on this skinflint making sure the required revenue kept coming in.

People in business have to make decisions based on what makes business sense.

A government trying to apply strict business practices to the way they run things are very likely to have a lot of very angry constituents to answer to.

For example, I'm hard-pressed to think of a good business case for having a welfare system, publicly-funded health care, an education system that caters to non-achievers and environmental policies. Let me know when you hear of a candidate who advocates getting rid of any of those government programs. I predict it will be a very brief, but entertaining, political career.

I am essentially a conservative. That means I expect government to use the tax dollars I fork over to them wisely, and not waste the money on frivolous things.

Of course, that means some one has to define frivolous.

Successful business people of course know something about managing money, and that could be a benefit in tough economic times. Are we in such tough times now?

The price of gas might be hurting Alberta's economy, but it's leaving more of my disposable income to spend at places other than the pumps. On the other hand, the TSX sure hasn't been doing well, although I'm not sure if there's much the government can do about that.

Besides, isn't it business people in charge of the TSX. If it's hit a rough patch, maybe it's a sign that good business sense isn't always right

