

Province missed the boat with land bills

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It wasn't the coal, the forests or the bright lights of Lethbridge. It wasn't even the scenery that brought European settlers to Alberta a century ago.

It was the land. Land for farming, land for ranching land where they could settle down, work hard, and make a new life for all their family.

Those roots in Alberta's soil may be just as strong and deep today, as our provincial government has learned. Some Albertans may put up with a lot higher property taxes, spiking utility bills but they'll surely rebel if they feel their land titles are in jeopardy.

And that was just one of the fears that's been voiced since the Conservative government began introducing its controversial "land bills." There were actually four pieces of legislation: the Land Assembly Project Area Act (known as Bill 19), the Carbon Capture and Storage Statutes Amendment Act (Bill 24), the Alberta Land Stewardship Act (Bill 36), and Electric Statutes Amendment Act (Bill 50).

They're no longer bills. They were approved by Conservative MLAs and they're now law. But obviously, that's not the end of the story. Mel Knight, the cabinet minister at the centre of the controversy admits he heard plenty of complaints about those laws when he visited southern Alberta last month.

People in central Alberta have been even more vocal, taking part in countless "property rights" rallies over recent months. They've formed land owners' organizations, and linked with other groups which voice related concerns. Groups like the Canadian Association of Energy and Pipeline Landowner Associations. However the government decides to answer its critics, association spokesperson Keith Wilson is predicting "a long and protracted struggle with this government on the issues of property rights."

Those four laws, he says, "are without precedent in Canada, or even in the free societies of our western democracies."

"The overall impact of those bills is to usurp the role of the courts, deprive landowners of due process of law, and deny landowners access to fair compensation when a property owners holdings are taken away," he warns.

Wilson speaks as a lawyer, and we're not about to refute his claims. Neither are we in a position to say he's wrong, and the government's position is imminently justified and fair.

What we can say, this far from the capital city, is that now someone in Edmonton seems to be getting the message.

This week, Sustainable Resources Development Minister Knight tabled a series of amendments to one law, the land stewardship act. They've yet to be debated, and no doubt further changes may be made before they, too, are approved by a majority of MLAs and then proclaimed law.

But there's no guarantee they'll satisfy many landowners. Now that they're challenging the government, owners may be looking for far more answers. And with the Wildrose Alliance capitalizing on land rights as a pivotal issue, the Conservatives may have to yield much more.

What we have here, as someone once said, is "a failure to communicate."

If the government was convinced that more rural land-use planning is essential, its ministers should have gone out to rural Alberta to landowners and explained why. That should have happened long before any bills were tabled. First, the government should have brought most of those constituents on-side.

But that didn't happen. Just as it didn't when this government decided to abolish health regions, or the government before it moved to deregulate the province's electrical utilities. Albertans weren't asked, they were simply told.

In the business world, a company that fails to listen and respond to its customers could be heading to disaster. Will minister Knight's backtracking save this government from a similar fate?