

Martha's Monthly: February 2006

Ovenbirds and the poor forced to raise their voices in the Alberta noise-scape

In this month that celebrates love in all its glorious versions, Martha was most upset to hear about the tiny ovenbird. This wee little bird meets its mate by singing a lovely tune. But in Alberta, a researcher has found that the noise from oil compressors has interfered with the songs that the male ovenbird uses to attract the female. The University of Alberta [researcher](#) reported that mating is down and the successful males have had to *increase* the volume of their songs in order to get over the cacophony of the Alberta wilderness. The thought of lonely ovenbirds, or worse, of ovenbirds having to raise their pretty little ditties to heated heights has really touched the cold heart of Martha. In a province as lovely as ours, must we make lonely ovenbirds scream to be loved?

While Martha was worrying about the love lives of ovenbirds, she happened to read a back page story about the Alberta Government. Seems the Government of Alberta has quietly settled a 100 million dollar class action lawsuit out of court. The [lawsuit](#), filed two years ago, claims the province underpaid or illegally clawed back money from welfare recipients, severely handicapped Albertans and people receiving widow's pensions. The lawsuit charged that the Conservative government withheld allowances for some people on the programs and was unfairly punitive in the manner it tried to reclaim money it said was overpaid.

Mike Cardinal, Minister of Human Resources and Employment, estimates 15,000 Albertans will end up sharing roughly \$25-million of settlement money. Those who launched the suit say that the figure is more likely to be \$100 million, shared among 30,000 people.

The lawsuit was initiated on September, 2004 by two men with disabilities -- Curtis Roth and Donald Fitfield. Both are A.I.S.H. recipients. Martha immediately thought of the lovely ovenbird that had to raise his tiny voice. The two men who initiated the lawsuit had also had to raise their voices (in the form of a lawsuit) to be heard over the cacophony of government news releases and stories that paint our poor as undeserving of government support.

In the case of Mr. Roth, bureaucratic oversights caused him no small amount of personal suffering. Mr. Roth had been receiving disability payments, and alerted the Alberta Government to mistakes in which he demonstrated that he was being underpaid. The Government responded by increasing Mr. Roth's monthly benefits, but this time they overpaid him. The Government demanded a \$16,000.00 repayment from Mr. Roth in short order.

The Conservative government has consistently denied what recipients of Widow's Pension, A.I.S.H. (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped) and Supports for Independence (S.F.I., or Welfare) know all too well: the allowances are too small, poorly administered, and they are often accompanied by claw-backs to other sources of income.

The Government failed to offer either an apology or an opportunity to open this issue to public debate. It has simply settled the matter out of court—indicating once again that, as far as Klein’s Conservatives are concerned, the Province’s most vulnerable citizens are best kept “out of sight and out of mind.”

As part of the settlement, the Province agreed to take out newspaper ads to inform people about how they might claim the money that is owed them. In addition, Alberta's Human Resources department says letters will be sent to 100,000 people to alert them they may be entitled to this money.

In addition to your regular letter writing, make sure that you tell your friends on social assistance about this settlement, or if you were receiving **Widow’s Pension, A.I.S.H. or S.F.I.** between the years **1979 and 2004**, make sure that you look into your entitlement! Let’s find any way we can to distribute Alberta’s surplus to those who need it most.

As ever, we ask you to use the template below to let the Klein government know that you will not be silenced! Make your solidarity with the poor of this province be known!

Use our letter below or write your own. E-mail it to:

Premier Klein at premier@gov.ab.ca

Minister of Human Resources, Mike Cardinal, at donna.ballard@gov.ab.ca

Opposition leader Kevin Taft at edmonton.riverview@assembly.ab.ca

NDP leader Brian Mason at alison.crawford@assembly.ab.ca

NDP Labour critic Ray Martin at edmonton.beverlyclareview@assembly.ab.ca

and back to us at marthasmthly@yahoo.ca

(Hint: you can use your cursor to highlight and then copy all these addresses. Then open a new email message and paste them into the To: line. Easy!)

February 8, 2006

Dear Mr. Klein:

We, the Marthas, are concerned about the failure of your government to provide assured income to Alberta’s most vulnerable.

We are dismayed that two Albertan citizens with disabilities were compelled to file a lawsuit in order to make your government take notice.

We believe that it is a scandal that in richest province in Canada, recipients of Widow’s Pensions, A.I.S.H. and S.F.I. are forced to live with poorly administered and meager monthly benefits.

We also are dismayed that the out-of-court financial settlement had the effect of, once again, silencing debate in our province about poverty and social security.

We ask that your government provide an apology to those whose social assistance was withheld or who were unfairly punished due to administrative oversights.

We also ask that social assistance be increased in a way consistent with the cost of living. We ask the Government to index the benefits to cost of living increases according to a Market Basket Measure (MBM) formula, so that those on social assistance in the province might be afforded real dignity.

Yours truly,

Your name

Your address (if you leave out your address your email is not registered as "correspondence" and can be overlooked!)