

**Gordon Laxer's Farewell speech as the Director of Parkland Institute.
Delivered to a gathering at the Faculty club at the University of Alberta
January 6, 2012**

Gordon is the founding Director and former head of Parkland Institute and a Political Economy professor at the University of Alberta

This is the first time I've addressed a Parkland crowd while having no official position at Parkland. Feels familiar, yet different. Thanks for the kind words. Why no barbs?

I've had a long and dear association with Parkland Institute. I can't say I've enjoyed every single moment of it – there were a few trying crises – but I've immensely enjoyed 95% of it. That's more than I can say about any other position I've ever held.

Working at and with Parkland people has never felt like a job. I always feel that staff, directors, board members and volunteers are part of a movement. We are united in purpose, not divided by hierarchy and rank.

Parkland has given my life a great deal of meaning, occasional terror and often excitement. I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to hang around with and share in common cause our goal to transform Alberta, Canada and indeed the world to social justice for all and to protect nature.

It's been a great honour and privilege to have had your trust as the Director of Parkland for 15 years.

I am drawn back to those early triumphant, chaotic days when we began – in 1996-7. We had lots of enthusiasm, intelligence and support, but little structure and no money.

Parkland started out of the gate very fast. Our first press conference, on Jan 30, 1997, announced Parkland's coming out and introduced our first book – Kevin Taft's searing and brilliant *Shredding the Public Interest*. Kevin and I were obscure figures then. There were four stories in the Edmonton Journal

the next day, but it was Ralph Klein's comments that really sent the book and Parkland over the top. "Don't read that book, the author is a communist", the premier intoned, though he had not had a chance to read it himself. A few days later I got a very nice letter from Mr. Klein thanking me for the kindness in sending him a copy of the book. I've got that letter framed and hanging on my wall.

By then the Globe and Mail had a story on page A 4 ridiculing Klein for the communist smear. CBC television news followed up with a 90 second story on Kevin Taft's Shredding book and Parkland Institute. Sales took off. Thirteen thousand copies sold in six weeks in Alberta, the last four during a provincial election. Must be a record for a political book on Alberta. Dave King, the former Minister of Education in Peter Lougheed's government told me at the time that the book turned the provincial election in Edmonton [Conservatives won no seats in the city]. If the book had had another month – it would have turned the province, King noted. Meanwhile, Premier Klein corrected his remarks about the author being a communist. No he isn't, but his publisher is. That's Parkland Institute or did he mean me. Thanks for the clarification, Premier Klein.

We were making waves, but it was all frantic effort with no back up. After an initial rush of donations, we had no money. Parkland had all the downsides of a small business and none of the upsides. We could go into debt and be put out of business, but could never turn a profit. Of course that's not what we were about. 'People and nature over profits' have been Parkland touchstones.

I remember when we were three months behind in paying Trevor Harrison, our first – in essence - Executive Director. He and Terri had a young family to support. Now I will admit to having been kept up at night with worry about this. In the end, Parkland finally paid Trevor. We have never had to delay pay to any staff since, thank God.

The episode might have been traumatic for Trevor at the time, but that didn't deter him from coming back for more punishment, now as my successor as Director at Parkland. And Terri has let him do it, although it means

commuting to Edmonton from faraway Lethbridge.

Why does Trevor do it? Not for the money. There is no money in it and he is diverted from doing other things. He does it for the same reason that all of us who have worked with and for Parkland, have done it. We fervently believe there are plenty of injustices going on right here in river city, in Alberta and in Canada. We are prepared to put all our intelligence, work and passion to shed light on them. We truly believe in democracy, the kind that assumes that the people have intelligence and wisdom, and that once they can get the information, analysis and perspectives, they will come to the right, or is that the left conclusions.

That's why Parkland focusses on taking its reports to the public, rather than meeting with government officials behind closed doors.

Or are we just making post hoc justifications for the fact that the Conservative Alberta government is not keen on meeting with us anyway?

For Parkland's first two or three years, I felt if I did not push as hard as I could everyday, Parkland would collapse. I told Bill Moore-Kilgannon, Parkland's Executive Director starting in its second year, to think of Parkland as a bicycle. If it isn't continually pushed forward, it will fall over.

Now Parkland is no longer a bicycle. I've been able to stop pedalling and Parkland is now such a beautiful machine, that it cruises along so well without me. It makes me feel good about turning leadership over to Trevor Harrison, with the back up of the incredibly talented and hard working Diana Gibson, Ricardo Acuna and the other staff.

A few stories from the past. During Parkland's 1999 Conference: 'Poverty amidst Plenty', Bill Moore-Kilgannon rushed into a supper the speakers and organizers were having after a full day of conferencing. "You won't believe the fax we just received from the Premier", he exclaimed. The letter was addressed to the President of the University of Alberta, not Parkland. The president was ultimately our boss, because Parkland is part of the university.

The first paragraph stated:

“I am dismayed to see yet another one-sided and ideologically biased attack on the generosity of Albertans by the factually challenged Parkland Institute and its apparent campaign to undermine the good work of the people of this province”. The rant continued in similar vein for 2.5 more pages. Had to have been prepared in advance.

What provoked such wrath from Premier Klein? Armine Yalnizyan, keynote speaker to the Parkland conference, had reported a conversation she had had with representatives of the poor in Calgary. They told her Albertans didn't much care about their plight. Premier Klein took great offence at such remarks from a Torontonian. [Probably alright if it was a Texan.] We later learned that Klein did a 30 minute rant on radio against Parkland.

My wife Judith thought I would lose my job. Did the Conservative government really believe in academic freedom? We never found out because the University and public rallied to Parkland's side. Good to for the University of Alberta. Nothing further came of it, except higher profile and respect for Parkland.

Story #2. CBC has a province-wide radio show called 'Wild Rose Forum'. At the start of Parkland [February 1997] I went on as the guest. The CBC used no negative Tower of Pisa adjectives - Parkland usually gets slotted by the media as leaning one way. The CBC billed us as straight up. "Toronto has its CD Howe Institute, Vancouver its Fraser Institute, now Alberta has its very own Parkland Institute", the announcer crooned. The topic for the phone in show was "Have corporate-funded institutes had too much influence on government policy?" How to be lobbed a soft ball. It sounded like an occupy question way before Zucotti park in New York.

A more recent story. Parkland started developing a green Canadian Energy security strategy in 2005. Our plan has had such an impact that Alison Redford, Alberta's new premier has stolen our language – though to support the same old hewers of wood role – dig the stuff up and send it off raw to countries with more diversified economies; spend taxpayers money to shill for giant transnationals like BP and Exxon; let them at the resources almost for free; ruin our piece of nature and the biosphere; and leave eastern

Canadians open to freezing in the dark when the next international oil supply crisis hits. Some 'Canadian' strategy.

Our strategy got their attention, when as Director of Parkland, I was invited to appear before the parliamentary committee on International Trade in May 2007. I was flown it at Parliament's expense as an expert witness. The committee's hearings were on the then Security and Prosperity Partnership between Canada, the US and Mexico [the three Amigos], a proposed agreement to further integrate America's northern and southern neighbours into the US security agenda and economy.

I had eight minutes, but was cut off after three. After my opening paragraph, the Conservative Mps, hunched in a corner, stopped listening. They whispered among themselves. This is the paragraph that so incensed them – my opening one.

'I don't understand why Canada is discussing helping to ensure American energy security when Canada has no energy policy and neither plans nor enough pipelines to get oil to eastern Canadians during an international supply crisis. Canada is the most vulnerable member of the International Energy Agency – the IEA – yet recklessly exports a higher and higher share of oil and gas to the U.S. This locks Canada into a higher share under NAFTA's proportionality clause. Instead of guaranteeing the U.S. energy security, how about a Canadian SPP, a secure petroleum plan for Canada?'

A moment later, Leon Benoit, Conservative Chair of the committee intervened. "Excuse me, Mr. Laxer. I don't very often interrupt someone making a presentation, but could you connect your presentation to the topic today, which is the study of Canada-US trade and investment issues and the security and prosperity partnership".

I replied "I'm talking about security for Canadians. Is that not relevant?"

"Mr. Laxer, I'm going to cut off your presentation."

Peter Julian, the NDP Mp on the committee challenged the chair. With the

Liberals and Bloc Quebecois members supporting Julian, the Chair lost the vote. The Conservatives did not have a majority in the House or on its committees then.

Leon Benoit stood up, threw down his pen and said the meeting is adjourned. It never met again on the SPP, which was later shelved.

We had gotten under the Conservatives' skin again, this time the federal Conservatives and their overreaction boosted Parkland's voice. My presentation, that would have otherwise passed unnoticed by the media, became a big story. A few hours later, I was on CTV national news. A story describing the encounter as 'stormy' was first section news in the Montreal Gazette, the Ottawa Citizen and the Edmonton Journal the next day. My testimony was carried in full in the Edmonton Journal and Calgary Herald six days later. The Globe and Mail published my op ed on the affair two weeks after that.

There was a follow up. Nine month's later, in February 2008, Leon Benoit wrote me a letter the day after an article on a report I wrote for Parkland Institute on Canada needing strategic petroleum reserves, was a front page story in *Le Devoir*, in Montreal.

The next day Mr. Benoit wrote me a letter:

"Dear Gordon Laxer, I would like to thank you for sending me a copy of *Freezing in the Dark: Why Canada Needs Strategic Petroleum Reserves*. I found it to be an interesting and informative piece. I look forward to the day when you again appear before a committee that I chair".

The letter shows the power of the mass media.

Parkland Institute does more than research. We take conferences, programming, and nurturing the next generation of progressive activists seriously. My philosophy has always been to include many diverse perspectives and political orientations. Respect for that broad array is what makes Parkland so effective. I have always believed that the progressive movement and the left are too small in Alberta, to allow sectarianism to

divide us. I believe in inviting in the best and most passionate people from diverse perspectives and let them debate. May the best ideas win.

What vision burns inside and drives me to devote countless hours to trying to make ours a better society? Very succinctly. I'm working on challenges around Canadian energy security and powering down at the end of the age of cheap oil. It's upon us. Why else would oil transnationals be in the deep ocean, the Arctic and Alberta's tarsands if there were enough of the easy, cheap oil left? When I go head to head with the promoters of the undeservedly wealthy and powerful oil corporations, undeserved because they didn't put the oil in the ground and are not the owners of the resource, they call me a pessimist.

Wrong, far from it. I am the optimist, not them. The world is at the brink of peak oil and many other non-renewable resources, but is nowhere near peak equality, peak social justice, and peak real-democracy, the kind that comes 'from below' when active citizens have the real power. We are nowhere near peak living in tune with nature, nor near peak in deriving happiness from what matters most. Once basic needs for all Canadians and everyone on earth are met, a goal far from being achieved yet, most of us get much more satisfaction from valuing each other and nature than from having more stuff. I believe we can develop that kind of society. That's why I'm an optimist.

Gilberto Gil summed up so well the 'new sovereignty' that is a guiding spirit for me. I heard Gil articulate it at the World Social Forum in Porte Alegre Brazil in January 2006. 750 of us were crammed into a giant tent during the midday sweltering heat to address the topic of South American integration. Luckily they had English translation. Four white men in suits spoke from the front and then it was the turn of the fifth man. He stood out in every way: no suit, is an Afro-Brazilian and he started off singing a cappella in a beautiful voice, rather than deliver a speech. Then he outlined his vision – the new sovereignty, he called it. "We must uphold two ideals at once", Gil said, "not supporting one at the expense of the other".

"We must support the popular national sovereignty of the people wherever it is found, and the interdependence on all humanity. One must not be

embraced at the cost of the other. That's the new sovereignty and it's a beautiful thing. Huge applause. I later found out that Mr. Gil is one of Brazil's most popular singers, and was Brazil's Minister of Culture then.

Parkland is a success because of team work. It's never been a matter of flying solo. It's a time for giving thanks.

A score of us co-founded parkland in 1996, but Trevor Harrson and I did most of the running around setting it up. I am very confident about leaving the leadership of Parkland in his very capable hands.

Ricardo Acuna, Parkland's Executive Director is Mr. Everything. Ricardo excels at all the things he does: great weekly articles for Vue Magazine; he is a master fund-raiser; runs Parkland's office and makes staff feel valued, researching water issues. In many ways, Ricardo is the heart and soul of Parkland.

Diana Gibson, Parkland's Research Director. We are so lucky that Diana wanted to return to her roots in Alberta. She is an outstanding researcher, writer, and speaker. She can quickly frame any issue and get to their heart in two or three sentences. She is known best for her work on health care, but is equally adept at energy and economic issues. Few are good at both the social and the economic sides.

Thanks to Cheri Harris for her long dedicated work, and to the excellent work of Laura Collison, Sharlene Oliver and Dave Campanella.

From the past: Bill Moore-Kilgannon, Lorraine Swift, Josee Johnston, and 50 or so board members who have been with us through the years. It's good to see Kevin Taft, [who later became leader of the Official Opposition] with us tonight.

Also good to see Gurston Dacks here. He was the Associate Dean of Arts who invited Parkland to join the Faculty of Arts at the U of A. I wish to thank the successive Deans of Arts, including the current one – **Lesley Cormack**. Arts provided Parkland a great, supportive home.

Many contract researchers who have done such good work. **Greg Flanagan and Dave Thompson** stand out for mention.

Duncan Cameron, friend & former President of CCPA has come all the way from Vancouver for this occasion. He was our guest speaker at Parkland's first meeting. For Parkland's first two or three years, I consulted Duncan at least once a month. Always gave sage advice.

I would like to thank my wife Jude, who put up with so much angst I unfortunately couldn't avoid bringing home.

It's great to have some of my family here: sons Damon and Daniel and daughter Kelly Ann.

Looking to what's ahead for parkland, I don't forecast a shortage of work. Given Alberta's right wing Conservative government, and the Wildrose Alliance, the second party in the opinion polls, even further to the right, I foresee no shortage of wrong-headed policies to critique. Parkland is not in danger of going out of business because its work has been done. No, I see Parkland thriving and doing great things.

As for Jude and I, we are flying Monday [January 9] to Costa Rica for 5 weeks, and then on to Cuba for another five. We'll miss Edmonton, but ...

Over the next year, Judith and I will move from Alberta to Ontario, but we will leave a large part of our hearts here. I will not only be watching from a distance, I will work with you and Parkland on issues dear to Albertans. And I will attend Parkland's fall conferences. We will fight many more battles together, and we will win some of them. You can take the boy out of Alberta, but not Alberta out of the boy.

Best wishes for a great future. Long live Parkland!