AN INTERVIEW WITH RALPH KLEIN

Premier of Alberta



What do you remember from your schooling in history and how were you affected by it?

I wasn't the best student but I have always been interested in modern history. I was fascinated by airplanes when I was young, which led to a brief stint in the Canadian Air Force. I still enjoy learning about the history of aviation, and I find Alberta's role in that history particularly interesting. I have a good friend who served as a pilot in World War II and who has been very involved in the preservation of Alberta's aviation history and the role the province played in the war effort. His stories, and the stories of other veterans, are a valuable way for us all to experience history.

What is the event or personality in Canadian history that most inspired you or what is your favorite history book?

Alberta's centennial has encouraged me, and all Albertans, to think about the people who built our province. It would be hard to choose just one story from Alberta's history as a personal favorite. I'm inspired by the story of Alexander Decouteau, who was Alberta's and Canada's first Aboriginal police officer. The story of Premier John E. Brownlee going to Ottawa in 1929 to secure Alberta's resource rights is also a highlight.

This year, Alberta gave a special centennial medallion to everyone in the province 100 years of age and older. We plan on handing out some 500 medallions, and each of those pioneers has a fascinating and inspiring story to tell. In one way or another, they all helped to shape Alberta's history.

What kind of balance should there be between provincial and national history? Between Canadian history and world history? Given the reality that we forget what we are taught in school, what should students carry away from their history class?

It's important for young Albertans to understand and be proud of where they came from, but they also need to understand how their province fits into the bigger national and international picture. Many political and economic realities we face today are rooted in history. Once you understand that history, you can begin to make decisions about the future.

Students may not remember specific dates and names from their history lessons, but I hope they carry away the ability to think critically about the events of history. It's important to think past who, what, where and when to consider why things happened. From there, you can begin to think about how past mistakes can be avoided in the future. That's a skill you learn when you study history.