You can't wait for an election

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On Nov. 25, Alberta's new premier will be chosen, and every eligible voter in this province should cast a ballot.

Many would claim that anything to do with the Conservative Party of Alberta, including the leadership race, has little connection with democratic principles. However, strangely enough, the competition for the next leader comes pretty close to the ideal setup for democracy. Unlike most other political contests in Canada, this is a one-person, one-vote process for a candidate who most closely espouses a vision the electorate can identify with. In this time of momentous change, such an opportunity should not be ignored, even by those who are politically far left of left.

pcAlberta
RACE TO BE LEADER

Just look at what is coming. After being at the helm for 14 years, Ralph Klein announced his resignation as discontent over his government's lack of direction became overwhelming.

The goodwill Klein had built early in his mandate by eliminating the provincial deficit, and by fostering the province's economic development had all but disappeared. Left was the image of a government that preferred to hand every citizen a $400 cheque, rather than deal with an aging infrastructure, inadequate health care, crowded universities, and with a host of adverse consequences from the uncontrolled boom in oilsands development.

It's obvious the next premier will have his work cut out for him. The only way he will succeed will be to tackle each of these subjects showing insight, care, and more importantly, vision. But there are also much thornier issues. Among them: rampant municipal growth and labour shortages; with the need for changes in the oilsands royalty regime, environmental stewardship and the hot potato of water use.

The new premier must address Albertans' increased concern and dissatisfaction with the perception the province's resources are being developed without regard for long-term sustainability, and just as important, without receiving their fair share of financial benefits. Changes must be made cautiously, without dealing such a blow to the energy industry that investment comes to a halt.

There are also challenges in federal-provincial relations, in our relationship with the U.S., our biggest customer; and in positioning the province for the future world of knowledge providers, alternative fuels and nanotechnology.

With new leadership, Alberta will take a new direction. Labour unions and other interest groups have figured this out already. They are buying thousands of Conservative Party memberships to distribute to their members as an incentive to vote for a candidate who promises to address their concerns.

The implications of such a move are profound. The election is at risk of becoming hijacked by special interest groups capable of mobilizing large numbers of voters. The majority's interests are in jeopardy.

There is only one way to ensure we get the premier we want. If we think we can wait until the next provincial election, we are living in a fool's paradise. Massive participation is the only answer. It's time to look past party affiliation to what is best for the future of this province.

Fortunately, the rules of the game are pretty straightforward. Any Canadian citizen, resident of Alberta for more than six months, 16 years of age or older and a party member is eligible to vote. Each member has the right to one direct vote for the new leader. Memberships can be bought on line at www.albertapc.ab.ca, or at the party's offices in Calgary or Edmonton, or through your constituency association, or from your candidate of choice.

Memberships will also be sold at the polling stations on election day or on advance poll days. That's all there is to it.

Unlike membership requirements for both the Liberal Party of Alberta and the Alberta New Democratic Party, there are no requests to subscribe to the principles, aims or objectives of the party. You can buy a membership, vote for the leader, and once that has taken place, you can resign your membership.

Better yet, you can stay there and work for the revitalization of a party that desperately needs it. Either way, you have taken the bull by the horns.

In the end, it is important to keep the final objective in mind. The issue here is to ensure the new premier understands Albertans are concerned and watching his every move. We must send a message that although he was elected leader of the Conservative Party of Alberta, it was the people of this province who made the choice, and who will hold him accountable to his promises.

ANNETTE HESTER WRITES ON ECONOMIC ISSUES THAT AFFECT ALBERTA.