

Claudia Malacrida Audio 4 Transcription:

The question “ Why do I think the law was repealed in 1972 and not earlier.” It’s an interesting question. There had been significant social discomfort expressed about the eugenics board. There had been a number of exposes in local newspapers reflecting broader discussions about the appropriateness of institutionalizing people or, you know, hiding them off from the public that occurred across north America. That said, Alberta’s political structure has been remarkably stable.

In response to this kind of public outcry, the government of the day led by Ernest Manning (Who was Preston Manning’s father, actually) had an inquiry put into place by a fellow by the name of W.W. Blair, or R.W. Blair, excuse me, to do an inquiry into the mental health system across the province. And, as I said, this was really initiated by a number of sort of media exposes, and public outcry over the conditions that were exposed in those media coverages. So, R.W Blair., as an interesting fellow, he produces in 1969 a lengthy document recommending a number of changes. One of them being that he strongly recommended the closure of what’s now known as Michener Centre, but at the time was known as the Provincial Training School for Mental defectives. He felt that the conditions in that institution were so extraordinarily dehumanizing that there was no way to rehabilitate this centre and he recommended its closure. Intriguingly though, RW Blair had actually sat for some time on the eugenics board. He left the eugenics board in order to conduct this survey at the behest of Mr. Manning. And, so, in that document, there’s no recommendation that the eugenics boards work or the sexual sterilization act be repealed. So, that comes out in 1969 and the law is repealed some three years later.

And that occurs with the change of political guard. In 1972, the progressive conservatives led by Peter Lougheed come into power, and really one of the very first acts that they perform in their new role as leaders of the province is the repeal of the sexual sterilization act, moved by the member of the legislative assembly, Dave King. This is speculative on my part, but I think it’s reasonable to mention, too, that Ernest Manning’s son was in fact a resident at Michener Center, and had what would have been called at the time “Mental Defect.” And, perhaps there may have been personal motivations to try to try to erase this kind of human possibility of potentiality due to personal feelings on the part of Premier Manning, it’s difficult to say, but I think it’s not unreasonable to speculate there may have been psychological grounds as well.

I think it’s important to note as well that the board operated as a justice Veet noted in one of the judgments against the eugenic board in the province of Alberta in the 1990s, she described the eugenics board operating in such a high- handed way as to be virtually unbelievable. And I think that this is a fair assessment. The board operated without scrutiny, and without any sort of safeguards in place, for almost 50 years. And, during that period, as they say, there was relatively little change in personnel, there was significant conflict of interest amongst the members who often were running institutions and, as Justice Veet noted, also engaging in medical research on their subjects, operating and removing tissue and using those tissue samples for personal research use, in the case of LL Levin, who was the director of the provincial training school. In sum, there was little motivation for the board to consider terminating its own actions. There were perhaps personal reasons and certainly inertia reasons for the prevailing

government to sustain its operations and their attempts, the government's attempts, to engage in any kind of evaluative self- reflection were doomed from the start when the person who was put in charge of that investigation, was someone who had himself sat on the Eugenics Board.