

**RIGHTS** | RURAL WORRIES

## Bills enacted, take citizens by surprise

EDITORIAL NOTEBOOK



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**A**fter a long day in the field, barn or corrals, farmers and ranchers like nothing better than to curl up in their recliners with copies of provincial legislation.

And what about those juicy copies of Hansard? Oo-la-la.

We jest, of course. The language of government bills and of public political process make dry reading yet they are vital to good governance.

At a series of meetings in Alberta that explored the details of provincial bills 19, 36 and 50, the common questions from hundreds of attendees were these: why didn't we know about the potential impact of these bills? How did they become law?

Bill 19 is the Land Assembly Project Area Act, Bill 36 is the Alberta Land Stewardship Act and Bill 50 is the Electric Statutes Amendment Act.

The meetings featuring well-known lawyer Keith Wilson, which have been drawing crowds of 300 and 400, suggest the potential impact of these bills will be drastic reductions in property rights.

The bills' wording gives provincial cabinet the authority to extinguish land and mineral rights without providing compensation, and eliminate legal recourse if such were to occur. They can also supersede the decisions of local municipalities.

A groundswell of opposition to these bills is building, particularly in rural areas.

This hasn't escaped the attention of the Alberta government, which has promised to examine the wording. It says the bills are being misinterpreted, their intent misunderstood and that they are necessary for orderly development.

Well, the bills are public documents, as are all bills passed in any province or indeed in this country, and are available for perusal by any interested citizen.

Who, but for a few, has the time and inclination to do so? People depend on media to bring such matters to their attention, as indeed was done in this case. But with today's constant barrage of information, some stories and analyses of legislative impact will inevitably be overlooked.

And maybe the citizenry just wasn't paying enough attention.

It isn't too late. Bills can be reworded, amended or repealed, if sufficient numbers of the public dictate.

The situation illustrates the folly of taking political process for granted. As George Bernard Shaw said, "democracy is a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve."