

Schalkenbach represented at ALEC meeting

by Dr. William Batt, Albany, NY

I'm sitting in the Nashville airport having just left the ALEC conference here August 10-13. ALEC is the American Legislative Exchange Council, the association of state legislators which Ted Gwartney and I have been exhibiting to for the past three days for the Schalkenbach Foundation. Some 3,900 state legislators assembled here to discuss various issues of concern, tax policy being one prime topic of discussion. ALEC claims to be a non-partisan organization but I doubt if there was a Democrat there. For many of these people, government was not just suspect; it was the enemy. It was fitting, perhaps that the meeting was held at the Opryland Hotel here on the edge of Nashville, out on the beltway near the airport.

Opryland, like Disneyland perhaps, is a place one might want to have seen but probably not return to. It is caricature and parody on top of kitsch, over 5,000 hotel rooms spread over dozens of acres, all under one roof. Between the over twenty buildings are about twelve acres of gardens, all with waterfalls and lush foliage. Indeed the tropical foliage is probably the most tasteful and interesting part of the site. Maps are distributed to help people find their way around, but most still get lost, several times a day! Looking over the dozens of restaurants and collectible shops are dozens of railed bridges so that one can enjoy the waterfalls, the fountains, the plant life, the other people, and of course one's maps! At 9 PM every night one of the gardens entertains hundred of people by dancing water fountains, lit by colored lights and lasers, and all to a medley of electronic music, everything from classical to show tunes, to current and classic pop hits, and, of course, country music.

The after-dinner speakers and plenary sessions amplified the views of the true believers, people call themselves conservatives even though it isn't quite clear what that means these days. Many keynoters were of course Ten-

nessee natives, U.S. Senator Fred Thompson, Governor Sundquist, its GOP legislative leaders, and other local notables. But Governor Tom Ridge from Pennsylvania came in, as did Senator Paul Coverdell from Georgia. Other keynoters were a representative from Philip Morris to explain how it was working hard to keep cigarettes away from children and developing an apparatus that will help keep indoor air clear of smoke. Another speaker talked about his company's "service" to people temporarily caught short between paychecks, and the short-term loans it offers that they can get to tide them over at 18% interest per month! Insurance executives, medical companies and automobile companies all had prominent places as speakers, all to emphasize the joint "public private cooperation" advanced by this organization. Rush Limbaugh's picture graced lots of exhibits but he was not present, although Armstrong Williams broadcast his show from the lobby of the convention center for two days. Seeing an opportunity, I buttonholed him and told him about a "freemarket approach to reversing the centrifugal forces of sprawl." (One has to get one's soundbites down right for these people.) It perked his interest enough that I got onto his show, and spent about half an hour expounding on the virtues of taxing natural resources and land rather than income and sales. He was rather intrigued with the idea. Unfortunately, former Virginia Governor George Allen came along and we were pre-empted for what otherwise would have been a longer time. Media and political celebs work together, you know.

Ted and I spent over two days talking with legislators strolling by, looking to find interesting ideas and material. Many others coming by were their spouses and children, and everyone had to get a star pasted to their exhibit program in order to be eligible for the door prizes to be awarded at the end of the conference. Ted wonders whether we "made any sales." What constitutes a sale is unclear, but certainly several people understood a bit of

what were are arguing for, and I doubt if as many others had as "original" an idea to offer. Representative Dick Noyes, our own committed Georgist from New Hampshire was present with his wife Joan, as was Senator Owen Johnson from New York, who has on several occasions introduced a two-rate bill there. There were other legislators who had a vague notion of what we were talking about and several had even heard of Henry George. We exchanged dozens, perhaps hundreds of business cards, and collected a large bag of literature from other exhibitors, some of whom might be potential allies, some environmental groups and the homebuilders, for example.

We can hope that some of these contacts may bear fruit, particularly after a follow up letter and perhaps a bit of information about the applicability to their respective states. We have yet to realize any immediate impact from this effort, the third year now in which we've attended, but there are at least several who know who were are and what we stand for.