

ORANGE CHINOOK: Politics in the New Alberta

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Death of a Dynasty: The Tories and the 2015 Election

Duane Bratt

The 2015 provincial election was a watershed moment in Alberta and Canadian politics. In fact, the election was news around the world, for several reasons. First, the longest-serving democratic government in Canada and one of the longest-serving in the world was defeated. The governing Progressive Conservatives had been in power since 1971. (David Taras described the history of the PC dynasty in more detail in chapter 1.) Second, the party that defeated them, Alberta's New Democratic Party, had been in fourth place when the election was called. The NDP, even according to their own people, were not planning on winning the election when it started. Instead they hoped to increase their seat total from four to perhaps ten or twelve. Third, the election saw a major ideological swing on the part of the electorate, from a centre-right conservative party to a leftist social democratic party. Alberta had been governed by conservative parties since 1935: the Social Credit Party (1935–71)¹ and the PCs (1971–2015). The province's conservative tradition, along with its vast oil and gas resources, had many national and international observers calling Alberta the Texas of Canada. And now it was headed by a social democratic party that was often at odds with the oil sector's dominance of Alberta politics and the development of the oil sands.²

In designing this book, the editors determined that two different questions needed to be answered about the 2015 election. First, how and why did a political dynasty that had won twelve straight majority governments suddenly lose? Second, why did the NDP, rather than the Official Opposition

Wildrose, or another party, win? While Melanee Thomas addresses the second question in chapter 3, I will try to answer the first below.

My principal argument is that under the Ed Stelmach–led government, the PCs had been suffering from internal trouble since about 2008. This internal trouble spilled over into a negative public image. The PCs were seen as arrogant, entitled, and out of touch. This had almost led to the party being defeated in the 2012 election. It intensified under Premier Redford and ultimately led to her resignation. When Premier Prentice took over, the PCs were in trouble, but he added to the downfall through a series of missteps.

Methodology

This chapter adopts a narrative structure, and it is supported by my close observation of Alberta politics for well over a decade. During this time I have appeared as a TV analyst during the live broadcasts of the 2008, 2012, and 2015 elections. In addition to providing frequent analysis for the media, I have also written numerous blogs and op-eds on Alberta politics. Material from semi-structured interviews with PC candidates (successful and unsuccessful) and volunteers (both from the executive and constituency levels) from the 2015 campaign have also been incorporated. Some of the interviewees agreed to be quoted on the record, but others requested anonymity. This distinction is contained in the citations.

The Splintering of the PCs and the Rise of Wildrose

Many observers trace the PCs' slow decline to the party's 2006 leadership race. Jim Dinning, Ralph Klein's finance minister in the 1990s, was seen as the heir apparent. He had the highest name recognition, had acquired the most endorsements, and raised the most money. But he was challenged on the right by Ted Morton. Morton was a former University of Calgary political scientist who had been active in conservative politics at the federal level and was first elected as an MLA in 2004. The leadership race was conducted according to a runoff format. If no individual won a majority of the votes on the first ballot, then a second runoff ballot would be held a week later with the top three candidates. But the second ballot was a ranked ballot with voters selecting both a first and a second choice. If there was nobody with a

majority on the second ballot, then this third ranked ballot would be used. With eight candidates, it was tough for anyone to win on the first ballot. Dinning won the first ballot with Morton finishing second. Ed Stelmach, who had served in a number of cabinet posts under Klein, was a distant third. The runoff ballot was seen as a battle between the centrist Dinning and the conservative Morton, but Stelmach was everybody's—including Dinning's and Morton's supporters—second choice. This allowed Stelmach to sneak up the middle on the third ballot using the ranked system. It was a surprising result. Both the heir apparent (Dinning) and the strong conservative (Morton) lost to the friendly, unassuming, steady, but not particularly distinguished Stelmach. Stelmach also benefited from a perceived PC tradition of alternating between leaders from Southern and Northern Alberta. Peter Lougheed was from Calgary, Don Getty from Edmonton, and Klein from Calgary. Both Dinning and Morton were from Calgary, but Stelmach lived in Vegreville, a farming community about an hour east of Edmonton. Thus the Southern vote was split between Dinning and Morton, and the Northern vote went to Stelmach.

As premier, Stelmach had a few stumbles in his initial years. He formed a cabinet that largely ignored Calgary, the city that had long been the party's power centre. More significantly, however, he was a poor communicator. Although he ran a lacklustre campaign, Stelmach and the PCs won an overwhelming majority in the provincial election of 2008—seventy-two of eighty-three seats, which was a larger margin of victory than even Klein had ever achieved. Stelmach should have been at the peak of his powers after an election victory as large as that, but there were storm clouds on the horizon.

The PCs had long been a big-tent party, one largely made up of fiscal conservatives and social liberals. This made them a centrist party that could tack left (as seen in some of the early policies of the Lougheed government in the early 1970s) or right (as with the Klein revolution of 1993–7). But there had always been a rump opposition of social conservatives who opposed the PCs. This constituency was strongest in rural Alberta. Although Social Credit had been defeated in 1971, it continued to win seats in rural Alberta until the early 1980s. Then there was the Western Canada Concept, a separatist party that won a seat in a 1982 by-election. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a strong fear from provincial PCs that the Reform Party led by Preston Manning (formed by ex-federal Progressive Conservatives)

would run provincially. However, the Reform Party decided to focus on federal politics. In 2004, Paul Hinman won a seat in rural Southern Alberta as leader of the Alberta Alliance (the name was a spinoff of the Canadian Alliance, the successor to the Reform Party). But the PCs, despite some periodic individual constituency losses, were always able to defeat its socially conservative rivals. But what would happen if fiscal conservatives left the PCs to join a new party aligned with these social conservatives? This was the threat that PCs had always feared, and in 2008–9 it started to happen under Ed Stelmach.

The erosion of the party's fiscal conservatism started to occur when, soon after becoming premier, Stelmach decided to initiate a review of oil and gas royalties in the province.³ When the final report—called *Our Fair Share*—was released in the fall of 2007, Stelmach announced that he would be increasing royalties to acquire an additional \$1.4 billion a year. This decision created quite a backlash from the oil and gas sector. This manifested itself in many ways, but at least initially it led many Tories to stay home during the March 2008 election. This did not seem too important at the time, as the PCs still won an overwhelming majority. Nevertheless, it did provide an indication that something was amiss among the PC rank and file.

More significantly, the royalty review was the trigger for the rise of the Wildrose Party as a major player on the Alberta political stage. The Wildrose Party had formed just prior to the 2008 election with the merger of two small conservative parties, the Alberta Alliance and Wildrose Parties.⁴ But it was Stelmach's royalty review that gave the new entity a political shot in the arm. There were a growing number of individuals, some of them with a high profile (e.g., Rod Love, who had been Ralph Klein's chief of staff and best friend), who defected from the PCs to the Wildrose. The royalty review then set the stage for Paul Hinman's stunning victory in the Calgary-Glenmore by-election in the fall of 2009. Hinman successfully campaigned on the slogan "Send Ed a Message." The PC candidate, a local Calgary councillor, finished a poor third. Much more importantly, Wildrose started to receive some large donations from individuals and corporations within the oil and gas sector. While the big players continued to donate to the PCs, it was the junior companies who started to move their money to the Wildrose Party. In 2008, Wildrose raised \$233,000. This tripled to \$700,000 in 2009, in 2010 it increased again to \$1.8 million, and by 2011 it was \$2.7 million.⁵

Eventually, Stelmach began to reverse the royalty policy, almost coming full circle by the end. You can debate the merits of increasing resource royalty rates, or talk about the timing of the increase, which occurred just as natural gas prices started to fall. However, what is beyond debate is the degree of political damage that this single decision had on the Progressive Conservative brand, and indeed, the future of Alberta politics.

There were other key events in the rapid rise of the Wildrose Party. Danielle Smith, a smart, young, and telegenic former broadcaster, became leader in October 2009, thereby increasing the party's public profile. Then, in January 2010, Rob Anderson and Heather Forsythe made the stunning decision to cross the floor from the PCs to the Wildrose. Anderson was a cabinet minister from Airdrie (a Calgary suburb) and Forsythe was a former cabinet minister from Calgary. It is rare in Canada for someone to leave the governing party to join an opposition party (especially a party with only one seat), and it had never happened to the Alberta PCs before. Soon after, Guy Boutiller, another disgruntled former PC cabinet minister from Fort McMurray, crossed the floor to the Wildrose. This gave the Wildrose official party status in the legislature, which in turn allowed it more resources. The party was riding a political wave and was leading in public opinion polls.

Not only was Stelmach facing the challenge of the rise of the Wildrose, but he was beset with internal strife. Three PC MLAs had joined the Wildrose, and there were ongoing rumours of even more defections. This led to a show-down with Finance Minister Ted Morton (who led the conservative wing of the PC Party) over the 2011 budget and the size of the deficit. The result saw Stelmach announce in January 2011 that he would not seek re-election and that the PCs needed to undergo a new leadership race.

The 2012 Election

The resignation of Ed Stelmach threw the PCs into another long leadership race. The perceived frontrunner was former health minister Gary Mar. Alison Redford, a first-term MLA who had been justice minister in Stelmach's cabinet, also decided to run. Redford's campaign seemed a longshot because she lacked caucus support and had few endorsements. But Redford and her campaign manager Stephen Carter (who had helped another longshot candidate—Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi—get elected in

2010) devised an outsider strategy of assembling a new progressive coalition. They recruited “two-minute Tories” from groups (teachers, public-sector union members, nurses, etc.) that, historically, had never been part of the party. Redford made one substantial campaign promise—to immediately provide local school boards with an additional \$107 million in funding—that crystalized her as the progressive candidate within the PC leadership race. This promise was combined with a brilliant debate performance in the immediate aftermath of her mother’s death. The outsider strategy worked and Redford won a come-from-behind victory over Mar and Doug Horner on the third ballot in October 2011. It was a similar victory, using the same party leadership rules, as Stelmach’s in 2006.

While Redford savoured her leadership victory, she knew that she had to go to the polls in a few months. Prior to the 2012 election, the PCs had only faced two tough campaigns: in 1971, when Peter Lougheed defeated the incumbent Social Credit Party to form his first government, and in 1993, when Ralph Klein led the “miracle on the Prairies” defeat of Laurence Decore’s Liberals. Now the PCs would be facing a well-financed Opposition. The Wildrose Party’s large campaign war chest allowed them to have a tour bus, professionally made advertisements, TV time, and a paid staff.

Initially, the campaign did not go well for the PCs. There were a series of financial scandals that gave the party an air of entitlement. These included a “no-meet committee” for which MLAs were paid despite never meeting; a patronage appointment to Gary Mar, which came back to haunt the party; and illegal donations from public-sector authorities.⁶ The Wildrose took an immediate lead in public opinion polls—a lead that they would maintain throughout the rest of the campaign.

Eventually the PCs recovered; this was largely due to the strategy that Redford and Carter adopted, a duplication of their successful PC leadership race: run as a centrist party and attract progressive voters. For example, Redford promised to build 50 new schools and renovate another 70 schools, bring in full-day kindergarten, and create 140 family care clinics.⁷ More importantly, they portrayed the Wildrose Party as right-wing extremists. This line of attack worked, as the Wildrose found itself entangled in a series of its own scandals. For example, during an online leaders’ forum sponsored by the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal*, Wildrose leader Danielle Smith appeared to doubt the existence of climate change, saying that “we’ve

always said the science isn't settled and we need to continue to monitor the debate."⁸ While there may have been many Albertans who believed the same thing, they did not want their premier professing those sentiments. More damaging was the "lake of fire" episode.

Allan Hunsperger was a Wildrose candidate in Edmonton. He was also a Pentecostal pastor. A year before the election, Hunsperger wrote a blog post attacking Lady Gaga's pro-gay-rights song "Born this Way." In the post, Hunsperger wrote that gays and lesbians would "suffer the rest of eternity in the lake of fire, hell, a place of eternal suffering."⁹ This blog post became a mainstream media and social media sensation a week before Albertans went to the ballot boxes. There were demands that Danielle Smith censure Hunsperger and remove him as a Wildrose candidate. In fact, that is what Tom Flanagan, the Wildrose's campaign manager, along with other senior Wildrose officials, also advised.¹⁰ But Smith, a libertarian, refused, defending the freedom of speech of social conservatives. All she would say is that Hunsperger did not speak for the party.¹¹ The "lake of fire" episode and other "bozo eruptions" from Wildrose candidates "allowed the PCs," as Flanagan later wrote, "to run an effective campaign of fear in the final week."¹²

The result was a surprise Redford victory. The PCs would end up winning 61 seats with 44 per cent of the vote, compared with the Wildrose's 17 seats and 34.3 per cent of the vote. As Janet Brown and John Santos show in chapter 4, the polls, which turned out to be wrong, had been predicting a Wildrose majority government. Instead, progressives decided to stay with the PCs and Redford was able to attract people who normally voted Liberal. Indeed, the Liberals saw their support collapse. In 2008, the party had won 9 seats with 26.4 per cent of the vote, but in 2012 they ended up with only 5 seats and 9.89 per cent of the vote. The fear of a Wildrose government drove many Liberal supporters into the arms of Redford's PCs. Moreover, soft PC voters "who had considered switching to the Wildrose during the campaign . . . drew back at the end" because their anger at the PCs was trumped by their fear of the Wildrose.¹³

The Fall of Alison Redford

The victory in the 2012 election was the last high point for the Redford government. Gradually the premier, her government, and her party started to

disintegrate. This was true both in terms of public policy and individual scandals. In the case of policy, the coalition that Redford had used to win both the 2011 leadership race and the 2012 election was purposefully and systematically dismantled. The best evidence of this was seen in Redford's very first budget, which made deep cuts to education. According to Thomas Lukaszuk, the policy reversal outlined in the budget came directly from Redford: "Three days before I left (for Vietnam for a previously scheduled charity mission), Redford appointed me advanced education minister. There was a 7 per cent cut to advanced education in the budget. I got stuck with it! The previous minister, Stephen Khan, didn't support it, the cabinet didn't support it, it came directly from the Premier's office."¹⁴ Redford later tried to bring in draconian legislation that attacked the collective bargaining rights of public-sector unions. As Lori Williams shows in chapter 14, the contempt with which these policy reversals were met was magnified by Redford's gender. Simply put, though male politicians flip-flop all the time, the public was harder on a female premier who campaigned as a progressive and governed as a conservative.

This policy collapse was surpassed by the personal scandals in which Redford became involved. There had been periodic concerns about Redford's "culture of entitlement": her high-paid staff, large security detail, her stays in the largest suites in the most expensive hotels, her bullying of staff, and so on.¹⁵ But there were three specific scandals that crystallized this impression in the minds of Albertans. First, there was an expense scandal over the \$45,000 cost of her trip to South Africa to attend Nelson Mandela's funeral in November 2013. Then the discovery that Redford had been using the government's fleet of planes for personal purposes. The auditor general later showed that Redford had used fake passenger manifests to ensure that only the premier, her family, and her close entourage were on these flights. And finally, the issue of the "Sky Palace"—the renovation of the penthouse in a government building as a special premier's residence.

But there was a third factor in Redford's downfall. As mentioned earlier, Redford became leader with no support in caucus; her supporters had come from outside the party. This meant that from day one, Redford was leader of a caucus that never really accepted her as leader. In fact, it was members of the caucus, as well as other PC officials, that fed the media the very leaks that damaged Redford. But along with in-fighting, these leaks greatly

damaged the party brand. As Sydney Sharpe and Don Braid wrote, “PC loyalists, caucus members, Cabinet ministers, and government confidants were all in open conflict. Ministers were routinely arrogant toward party volunteers. They wouldn’t listen to the advice of campaigners and those on the ground. They shared a fundamental delusion that no matter how open and bitter their own fights became, no matter how vigorously ministers stabbed each other in the back in almost full public view, the public would still continue to accept them because the PCs were the natural governing party.”¹⁶ Redford resigned as premier on 19 March 2014, less than two years after winning a majority government in the 2012 provincial election, but the damage to her party would linger. In interviews, PC members admitted that the public was “greatly disappointed by Redford’s personal behaviour,” and still faced anger towards her during the 2015 election.¹⁷

The Rise of Jim Prentice

After Redford’s downfall, the PCs were desperate for a high-profile leader, and they quickly identified Jim Prentice as their dream candidate. Prentice had many desirable qualities. He had been a highly competent former federal minister in Stephen Harper’s cabinet, serving as Aboriginal affairs minister, industry minister, and deputy prime minister while representing a Calgary riding. These experiences meant that he was unusually respected in the oil sector, among environmentalists, and in Aboriginal communities. After stepping down from federal politics in 2010, Prentice became a senior vice-president at CIBC. He was also widely seen as both ideologically progressive and conservative. Prentice was also a man of personal integrity, which was important after the Redford scandals. Most importantly, he had no connection with the provincial PCs during the Redford and Stelmach years. The party brass (officials and key donors) wanted someone from the outside. The leadership race was a rout, with Prentice easily beating Ric McIver and Thomas Lukaszuk. But there were some warning sounds as the turnout was substantially lower than the previous PC leadership races in 2011, 2006, and 1992 (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Number of Votes Cast in Recent PC Leadership Races

YEAR	NUMBER OF VOTES
2014	23,386
2011	78,176
2006	144,289
1992	78,251

Sources: Data compiled by the author.

When Jim Prentice took over in September 2014, the PCs were in deep trouble. They were trailing the Wildrose Party badly in the polls and were demoralized from the events that led to Redford’s resignation. Prentice had an opportunity for a course correction. This was not the first time the PCs had successfully managed to change leaders at just the right moment to snatch victory from defeat. For example, Don Getty was extremely unpopular before being replaced by Ralph Klein in 1992, as was Ed Stelmach before being replaced by Alison Redford in 2011. Likewise, Prentice, with his slogan of “Under New Management,” had some initial successes by reversing many of Redford’s most unpopular policies. He announced that Alberta would sell its fleet of government aircraft. He also reversed the decision to get rid of the slogan “Wildrose Country” on Alberta’s licence plates. (The Redford government had made this ridiculous decision because they believed that Alberta motorists were unwittingly endorsing the Wildrose Party!) Throughout these early weeks, Prentice gave off an air of high competence—something that had been lacking in the end days of the Redford regime.

Prentice did not just change the policies of the Redford government, he also undertook a number of personnel changes. His first major move in this direction was naming Mike Percy his chief of staff. This was an inspired choice because Percy was an Edmontonian while Prentice was a Calgarian. Given the enduring rivalry between the two cities, no previous government had the premier and chief of staff from these different cities. In addition, Percy had been a prominent Liberal MLA in the 1990s, so the appointment was bi-partisan. Prentice also recruited retired senior federal civil servant

Table 2.2. List of Ministers in Redford/Hancock’s Cabinet, but not in Prentice’s

MINISTER	REASON
Alison Redford—Premier	Retired
Dave Hancock—Premier	Retired
Doug Horner—Finance	Retired
Fred Horne—Health	Retired
Doug Griffiths—Service Alberta	Retired
Cal Dallas—International and Intergovernmental Relations	Retired
Ken Hughes—Municipal Affairs	Retired
Mary-Anne Jablonski—Seniors	Retired
Thomas Lukaszuk—Labour	Ran in 2015

Sources: Data compiled by the author.

Richard Dicerni to be the deputy minister for executive council. Prentice then formed a new cabinet that left out many of Redford’s ministers (see Table 2.2). He also recruited two new ministers from outside caucus: former Edmonton mayor Stephen Mandel and former Saskatchewan MLA and Calgary Board of Education chair Gordon Dirks. This set the stage for four simultaneous, and very significant, by-elections in October 2014.

Between 1995 and 2009, Alberta held only nine by-elections. Moreover, it is rare to have even two simultaneous by-elections, let alone four. You have to go back to 9 December 1921, when there were seven simultaneous by-elections, to find more than two at once in Alberta’s history. To add to the drama, these races also involved several high-profile candidates: the newly chosen leader of the Progressive Conservative Party and consequently Premier of Alberta Jim Prentice (Calgary-Foothills) and two recently appointed, but unelected, ministers, Health Minister Stephen Mandel (Edmonton-Whitemud) and Education Minister Gordon Dirks (Calgary-Elbow). Finally, two of the ridings were home to the previous two Alberta

Table 2.3. List of MLAs Who Did Not Run in 2015

Retirement	21*
Death	0
Run Federally	3
Becoming a Judge	0
Lose Party Nomination	4*
Cross Floor and Run for Another Party/Independent	12

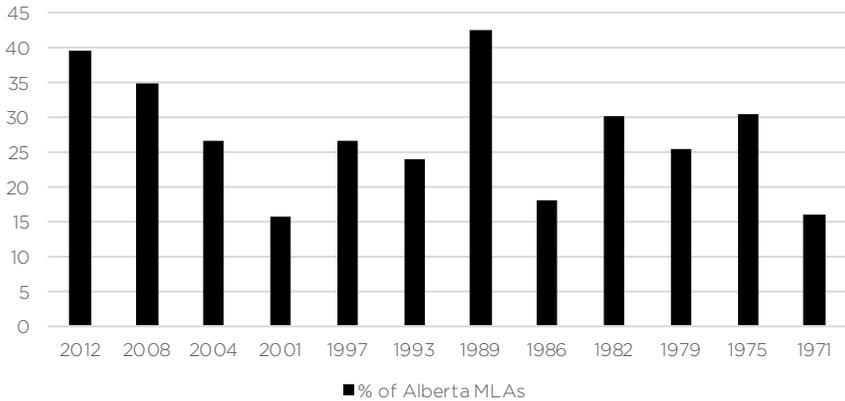
Sources: Data compiled by the author.

Note: *There is some double-counting. For example, a person who crossed the floor and lost the party nomination (ie., Danielle Smith). In total, there were 34 MLAs (from all parties) who were elected in 2012, but did not run again in 2015.

premiers: Alison Redford (Calgary-Elbow) and Dave Hancock (Edmonton-Whitemud). The scale of the election, which included massive amounts of media coverage and unprecedented (for a by-election) television ads by the Progressive Conservative and Wildrose Parties, meant that this was more of a mini-election than an ordinary by-election. That the PCs swept all four of those by-elections represented the high-water mark for Prentice. Moreover, it demoralized the Wildrose Opposition, who failed to win even one seat despite the resources that the party had committed.

Prentice also encouraged many other existing PC MLAs to retire, which allowed him to present a new slate of candidates for the 2015 election (see Table 2.3). It is normal for there to be turnover with MLAs deciding for a variety of reasons not to run in the next election (see Figure 2.1). But the number of MLAs bowing out before the 2015 election was the second-highest since 1971. Only those elected in 1989 and declined to run in 1993 was higher. In both of those instances, there was a significant change of leadership (Klein replacing Getty and Prentice replacing Redford), which spurred the desire to bring in a fresh crop of candidates to gain a distance from the previous government (even though it was the same PC party).

Figure 2.1. Percentage of Alberta MLAs Retiring/Running with Another Party



Sources: Data compiled by the author.

The Decline of Jim Prentice

As the previous section showed, Prentice enjoyed a honeymoon after becoming PC leader, but, as Janet Brown and John Santos show in chapter 4, it would soon become clear that this was to be a shorter honeymoon compared to other new Alberta leaders. This was caused by three major mistakes that Prentice made. Ironically, the first and biggest of these errors initially looked like a major victory for the PCs. In December 2014 (a week before Christmas), Prentice orchestrated an unprecedented floor-crossing. The prelude to this event came in November 2014, when two Wildrose MLAs (Kerry Towle and Ian Donovan) joined the PCs. While this was surprising—especially in the case of Towle, who was considered a close ally of Wildrose leader Danielle Smith—floor-crossing from opposition parties to the PCs were not uncommon. What was shocking was that, a month later, Smith and eight of her colleagues, after some secret high-level negotiations, also joined the PCs. Never before in Canadian history, either federally or provincially, had the leader of the Opposition joined the government. (Not even Liberal leader Wilfrid Laurier had joined Conservative prime minister

Robert Borden’s “Unity Government” during the First World War!) And it was not just Smith, it was the majority of the Wildrose caucus; only five MLAs remained. Making the situation even more bizarre was the case of Rob Anderson, who had, in the immortal words of Winston Churchill, “re-ratted”: Anderson had been a PC, crossed the floor to Wildrose, and then crossed back to rejoin the PCs. Smith explained that she respected Prentice (unlike Stelmach and Redford) and that all conservatives needed to unite to deal with Alberta’s emerging fiscal challenges. Others suspected that Smith felt that she could never beat Prentice due to his sweep of the November 2014 by-elections and the defections of Towle and Donovan. If you can’t beat them, the saying goes, join them.

Prentice, as Sydney Sharpe and Don Braid have argued, thought that “he had folded the right-wing under his wing and decimated Wildrose as a viable opposition party.”¹⁸ But he was too clever by half, because the floor-crossing generated a large feeling of betrayal. The remaining Wildrose MLAs, party officials, volunteers, donors, and supporters loudly expressed their feelings of betrayal. Four years later, there remains great anger towards the ringleaders Smith and Anderson. The PC caucus, more quietly, felt betrayed by the fact that their fiercest adversaries had been invited into their tent. And more ominously for Prentice, Albertans also felt betrayed. They found it undemocratic that the governing party would try and destroy, for partisan purposes, their political opposition. Thomas Lukaszuk, who had been Redford’s deputy premier and later one of Prentice’s strongest PC critics, called the floor-crossing a “hostile takeover” of the Opposition. “It was offensive to Albertans and their sense of decency, fair play, and democracy. Prentice had power but wanted absolute power.”¹⁹

The second error was the pre-election budget released in March 2015. For months, Prentice had been signalling that he was about to deliver a transformative budget. In press conferences, speeches, and a rare televised address to the province, Prentice said that due to the precipitous drop in oil prices since August 2014, and the decades-long overreliance on resource revenue, a fundamental change to government finances was necessary. Prentice promised to present a budget that would be so transformative that he required an electoral mandate (a year ahead of the fixed-election legislation date of March–May 2016) with which to proceed. But in reality, Prentice’s budget was not really transformative. Prentice had been signalling for months that

the expected \$7-billion hole in the budget caused by a drop in oil prices would be addressed in a relatively balanced way: a third through tax and fee increases; a third through spending cuts; and a third through a deficit. But the budget numbers were wildly different: \$1.5-billion in tax and fee increases (22 per cent of the \$7-billion), \$323-million in spending cuts (7 per cent), and a \$5-billion deficit (72 per cent) financed through the existing contingency fund.

More damaging for Prentice and the PCs was the fact that the budget upset most Albertans and satisfied few. The Wildrose set its sights on the largest deficit in Alberta history and the biggest tax increases since the late 1980s. During the subsequent leaders' debate, the Wildrose's new leader, Brian Jean, kept to a simple mantra, "we will not raise your taxes." Meanwhile, the NDP targeted cuts to health care and the introduction of a new health-care levy that Rachel Notley coined "the waiting room tax." Notley also zeroed in on the fact that while taxes and user fees went up across the board, there was no corresponding increase in corporate taxes. In fact, Prentice specifically ignored the results of a government budget survey that recommended a small increase in corporate taxes.

The third error was when Prentice decided to hold the election in May 2015 instead of in the spring of 2016. Prentice felt that, despite his leadership win and his by-election victory, he needed a complete mandate from Albertans, especially since he realized that he needed to take drastic action to deal with economic crisis in the province caused by the precipitous drop in oil prices. Prentice also believed that the economy was going to get a lot worse before it got better, and he preferred to face the electorate before the full impact of low oil prices hit the economy.

Critics argued that the early election call was illegal because it violated the fixed-election legislation that Redford had brought in soon after she became premier. But an analysis of the legislation showed that the early election call was perfectly legal in the context of the Westminster parliamentary system.²⁰ However, that degree of nuance was lost on most Albertans; to them, the PCs were simply violating the law—a law that they themselves had written. It was also seen as opportunistic. The Wildrose had been severely weakened by the mass floor-crossings of December 2014. Moreover, they did not have a leader at the time of the election call. Neither did the Liberals. As Richard Gotfried, a PC candidate in Calgary who ran (successfully) for

the first time in 2015, said, voters on the doorstep were clearly linking the floor-crossing with the early election call. They said, “first you decimated the Opposition,” then “you kicked them when they were down” with the early election call.²¹ Other criticisms of the early election call included the view that Prentice needed to establish a record before he went to the voters and that the early election was a waste of money.

The 2015 Election Campaign

The three errors identified above meant that Prentice was not starting the 2015 campaign off on a good foot. In addition, the economy was spiralling downwards with the price of oil plummeting from \$107 in June 2014 to just above \$40 by April 2015. This meant a drop in royalty and tax revenue for the government plus increased unemployment among Albertans. Not surprisingly, as Janet Brown and John Santos show, the PCs were trailing in the polls as the campaign began. While Prentice had tried to distance himself from many of Redford’s actions, in this case, he needed one of her come-from-behind wins. Unfortunately, he did not run a good campaign and the result was the defeat of the PCs and the upset victory by the NDP.

The leaders’ debate was the opportunity for Prentice to shine. Unfortunately, he made the poor choice of targeting NDP leader Rachel Notley during the debate. Never before had a PC premier focused on an NDP leader during a debate. By doing so, Prentice helped to legitimize Notley as a potential premier. Not only that, but during one of their exchanges, Prentice told Notley that “math is difficult.” Prentice was referring to an incident a week before, in which the NDP had made a billion-dollar error in its campaign platform. But most Albertans were unaware of this subtext. Instead, Prentice’s comment showed him belittling, demeaning, and mansplaining to Notley. Voters found it sexist. As Sydney Sharpe and Don Braid wrote, “post-debate polls showed Notley was the clear winner. The premier and his advisors had grossly underestimated her.”²²

The “math is difficult” comment also brought back memories of Prentice’s “look in the mirror” comment. Back in March, Prentice was being interviewed on the radio when he said, “we all want to blame somebody for the circumstance we’re in. In terms of who is responsible, we all need to only look in the mirror. Basically, all of us have had the best of everything and have

not had to pay for what it costs.”²³ As Ron Kneebone and Jennifer Zwicker demonstrate in chapter 10, there was a lot of truth in what Prentice said. After all, for decades Albertans were able to have a high degree of government spending while enjoying low tax rate because of the province’s reliance on non-renewable-resource revenue. Unfortunately for Prentice, the public interpreted this comment as blaming Albertans for the economic mess that the province was currently in. Both the “math is difficult” and the “look in the mirror” comments therefore made Prentice look arrogant and elitist.

After Prentice’s poor debate performance, and with the NDP clearly gathering momentum, the PCs tried to stage a comeback in the last week of the campaign. But Prentice was put off message due to problems with some of the PCs’ nomination races. Internal party nomination races are often the dirtiest of political contests. Rules are often broken through the marshalling of ineligible voters (non-Canadians, non-constituency residents, even dead voters), the improper usage of party records, and the introduction of financial irregularities, among other things. In some cases, these rule violations are ignored, but in others (minor or serious infractions) candidates are disqualified by their parties. Party leaders have also disqualified winning candidates (for a variety of reasons) and appointed candidates in other cases. In addition, no independent arbiter, such as Elections Alberta, monitors internal party elections. But in the PCs’ 2015 party nominations, there was an inordinate amount of problems.²⁴ Taken as a whole, it appeared that the internal strife within the party that had been seen in the Stelmach and Redford years was still at play under Prentice. One contentious nomination saw Jamie Lall, who had been disqualified days before the PC nomination election in Chestermere-Rockyview, allowing Bruce McAllister, a former Wildrose MLA who crossed the floor to join the PCs in December 2014, to be acclaimed. This caused the most disruption because Lall decided to go public with his complaints, which included embarrassing text messages from senior members of the party: Executive Director Kelley Charlebois and Justice Minister Jonathan Denis. Prentice had to spend time on the campaign trail explaining why Lall had been disqualified as a candidate, but Mike Allen, a PC MLA from Fort McMurray who had been convicted of soliciting prostitutes while on government business in the United States, was not.

Making matters worse, Prentice also had to answer questions about Justice Minister Denis, who had been forced to resign his cabinet post midway through the campaign over legal issues involving his estranged wife. Denis continued to be the candidate, with the full support of Jim Prentice, for Calgary-Acadia. This legal dispute was under a publication ban, but the ban was lifted the day before the election. This resulted in front-page news containing salacious details about Denis's legal proceedings just as Albertans were preparing to vote. The back-and-forth accusations about the PCs' inner workings took them off message in the last week of a tightly contested campaign. Prentice was being asked at media events about Lall, Charlebois, and Denis—not his budget or ten-year fiscal plan.

In the waning days of the campaign, the Alberta business community launched attacks against the NDP, citing job losses, disinvestment, and threatening to move corporate head offices outside the province if the NDP was elected. For example, on the Saturday before the election, a group of five businessmen with deep ties to the PCs held a press conference in a downtown Edmonton office building at which they warned about “amateur” policies from an NDP that “do not understand how economies work.”²⁵ This desperate attempt backfired badly.

Conclusion

Alberta's PC dynasty ended in 2015 because of a combination of factors. Clearly, Prentice made major mistakes. However, to blame the defeat solely on Prentice is unfair. As this chapter demonstrates, the PC decline began under Stelmach when the Wildrose Opposition first emerged. This decline accelerated during the Redford years. Redford had cobbled together a new electoral coalition to defeat the Wildrose, but then proceeded to alienate her new supporters. This was compounded by the series of personal scandals that drove Redford to resign, and which severely tainted the PC brand. Using the analogy of a car crash, this resulted from a combination of bad steering by the driver (Prentice), but also bad steering by previous drivers (Stelmach and Redford), compounded by backseat driving (PC caucus/officials), and the deteriorating alignment of a forty-four-year-old car.

Anthony Sayers and David Stewart discuss the future of the Alberta conservative movement in more detail in chapter 17. But some initial words

need to be included here. I wrote the day after the election that we might have seen the end of the Progressive Conservative Party.²⁶ Historically, Alberta has been governed by successive political dynasties who ruled for a long time and then never formed government again: the Liberals (1905–21); the United Farmers of Alberta (1921–35); Social Credit (1935–71); and the PCs (1971–2015). A further complication for the PCs was that in Alberta there were two conservative parties. Even though the PCs won more votes in 2015, the Wildrose won twice as many seats. I was criticized in May 2015 for claiming that the PCs could disappear. And yet, by March 2017 (less than two years later) they were gone. So the 2015 election was not just the defeat of a government, or even the end of a political dynasty, it was the end of the Progressive Conservatives as a political entity.

Ironically, the man most responsible for killing off the demoralized, post-2015 PCs was a fellow conservative. Former federal Conservative cabinet minister Jason Kenney arrived in Calgary days before the start of the 2016 Calgary Stampede with an audacious plan to unite the right in Alberta by winning the leadership of the PCs and merging them with the Wildrose Party. The timing was not accidental, and, in fact, revealed Kenney's political acumen. It ensured that his announcement would be the political topic of conversation around the multitude of pancake breakfasts and beef-on-a-bun BBQs for the next week and a half. Other aspects of Kenney's speech—a packed hotel conference room, music, people props, his twenty-minute speech—also showed his significant political skills.

Kenney unveiled a highly unorthodox five-step plan for how he would unite Alberta's political right. Step one was to become leader of the PCs. The once-proud PCs had gone through four leaders in two years and by July 2016 held a measly nine seats in the legislature, making it the third-place party. The PCs had previously announced a leadership race commencing in October 2016 and concluding in March 2017. Step two was to open up merger talks with the Wildrose Party to create a brand new conservative party. Step three was a referendum of existing PC and Wildrose members to ratify the merger. Step four was a leadership race for the new Alberta conservative party, a race that Kenney would contest and which he expected to win. Step five was to defeat what Kenney referred to as the “accidental government” of Rachel Notley and her band of “radical ideologues” in the NDP.²⁷ The plan was a clear echo of the process to merge the Canadian Alliance and the

Progressive Conservative Party at the federal level in 2003–4. Kenney knew this because he had been part of that process.

As of November 2018, Jason Kenney has achieved the first four steps of his plan, and he is well on his way to step five. Step one was achieved at the March 2017 PC leadership convention, where Kenney won on the first ballot with the support of over 75 per cent of the delegates.²⁸ Step two, a merger agreement between the PCs and the Wildrose, occurred in May 2017. This agreement also established a new name for the party—the United Conservative Party.²⁹ Step three was to get the grassroots members of both the PC and Wildrose Parties to ratify the merger agreement. This was an important promise given the bad taste from the backroom deal in December 2014 that led then Wildrose leader Danielle Smith and Premier Jim Prentice to orchestrate a mass floor-crossing from the Wildrose caucus to the PC caucus. Both Kenney and Wildrose leader Brian Jean campaigned for ratification of the UCP. Again, the result was an overwhelming victory, with 95 per cent of members in both parties approving the creation of the UCP.³⁰ Now that the UCP had been ratified, it was time for step four, winning the new UCP leadership. As expected, Jean also ran, but so did Calgary lawyer Doug Schweitzer and former Wildrose president Jeff Callaway. Once again, Kenney won a first ballot victory with 61.1 per cent of the vote.³¹ Step five will of course depend on the UCP's ability to win the 2019 election, which, according to Alberta's fixed-election law, will be held between March and May 2019.³² It will be a stark choice between Rachel Notley and her NDP government and Jason Kenney and the new UCP.

NOTES

- 1 Although the Social Credit Party first formed government in 1935, it wasn't until the 1944 election under its new leader Earnest Manning that the party started to adopt conservative principles.
- 2 Ian Austin, "Leftist Party's Win in Alberta May Affect Future of Oil Sands," *New York Times*, 6 May 2015.
- 3 Duane Bratt, "Stelmach's Royalty Review and the Rise of Wildrose," *Calgary Herald*, 4 April 2012.
- 4 The party was originally called the Wildrose Alliance Party, but then changed its name to simply the Wildrose Party.

- 5 Figures from Elections Alberta's financial disclosure for political parties, http://efpublic.elections.ab.ca/efParty.cfm?MID=FP_1&PID=1 (accessed 2 April 2012).
- 6 Tom Flanagan, *Winning Power: Canadian Campaigning in the 21st Century* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 170–2.
- 7 Licia Corbella, “Posh Promises and Bad Budgeting Lead to a Mess,” *Calgary Herald*, 20 February 2013.
- 8 Darcy Henton, “Alta. Wildrose leader has doubts about science on climate change,” *Calgary Herald*, 16 April 2012.
- 9 The full text of Hunsperger's blog post was reprinted in David Staples, “Wildrose candidate Allan Hunsperger on gays: ‘You will suffer the rest of eternity in the lake of fire, hell;’” *Edmonton Journal*, 15 April 2012).
- 10 Flanagan, *Winning Power*, 182–4.
- 11 James Wood, “Wildrose Candidate Tells Gays in Lady Gag-Inspired Blog Post: ‘You Will Suffer the Rest of Eternity in the Lake of Fire, Hell;’” *Calgary Herald*, 15 April 2012.
- 12 Flanagan, *Winning Power*, 177–8.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 14 Thomas Lukaszuk, interview with author, 26 October 2016.
- 15 A long-time PC volunteer claimed that Redford was “a bullying woman who demeaned staff, cabinet, caucus in public. Shouting, swearing, throwing things. It was very belittling behaviour.” While Len Webber and Donna Kennedy-Glans's decision to quit caucus received the most attention, Redford's behaviour also led many PC volunteers to quit too. This would cause them damage in the 2015 election. Confidential interview with author, 4 November 2016.
- 16 Sydney Sharpe and Don Braid, *Notley Nation: How Alberta's Political Upheaval Swept the Country* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2015), 81.
- 17 Confidential interviews with author, 4 November 2016.
- 18 Sharpe and Braid, *Notley Nation*, 25.
- 19 Thomas Lukaszuk, interview with author, 26 October 2016.
- 20 Duane Bratt, “Alberta election may be unethical, but it's not illegal,” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 11 April 2015.
- 21 Richard Gotfried, interview with author, 4 November 2016.
- 22 Sharpe and Braid, *Notley Nation*, 36.
- 23 Jim Prentice to Donna McElligot, “Alberta at Noon,” *CBC Radio*, 4 March 2015.
- 24 Duane Bratt, “‘Buddy, you are being set up’ could be the PCs ‘Lake of Fire’ moment,” *Calgary Herald*, 29 April 2015.
- 25 Karen Kleiss, “Tory Backers Rip ‘Amateur’ NDP Policies,” *Edmonton Journal*, 2 May 2016.

- 26 Duane Bratt, “Why we may have seen the last of the Alberta PCs,” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 6 May 2015.
- 27 Michael Franklin, “Tory MP Jason Kenney seeks Alberta PC leadership,” *CTV News*, 6 July 2016, <https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/tory-mp-jason-kenney-seeks-alberta-pc-leadership-1.2974931> (accessed 7 September 2016).
- 28 James Wood, “Kenney sweeps to victory at PC leadership convention,” *Calgary Herald*, 19 March 2017.
- 29 Brian Jean and Jason Kenney, “Agreement in principle on the establishment of the United Conservative Party,” 18 May 2017, <https://unitedconservative.ca/Content/UnityAgreementInPrinciple.pdf> (accessed 19 May 2017).
- 30 Michelle Bellefontaine, “Alberta’s new United Conservative Party is a go. What happens next?” *CBC News*, 23 July 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/united-conservative-party-next-steps-1.4217922> (accessed 20 September 2017).
- 31 James Wood, “Kenney wins big in UCP leadership race, fires warning shot at NDP,” *Calgary Herald*, 29 October 2017.
- 32 The relevant passage from Alberta’s Election Act is as follows:
- 38.1(1) Nothing in this section affects the powers of the Lieutenant Governor, including the power to dissolve the Legislature, in Her Majesty’s name, when the Lieutenant Governor sees fit. (2) Subject to subsection (1), a general election shall be held within the 3-month period beginning on March 1, 2012 and ending on May 31, 2012, and afterwards, general elections shall be held within the 3-month period beginning on March 1 and ending on May 31 in the 4th calendar year following polling day in the most recent general election.