



ORANGE CHINOOK: Politics in the New Alberta

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Out of the Blue: Goodbye Tories, Hello Jason Kenney

Anthony M. Sayers and David K. Stewart

The 2015 Alberta election ended a Progressive Conservative regime that by 25 August 2014 had continuously held power longer than any other party in Canadian history. The reign, begun in 1971, came to an end amid a declining economy and a party in disarray. The last years of the dynasty were dominated by competition between the PCs and the right-wing Wildrose opposition that had reduced the traditional left-wing opposition of Liberals and New Democrats to, respectively, third- and fourth-placed parties in the legislature. The rise of the Rachel Notley-led New Democrats from fourth to first is therefore one of the most remarkable election results in Canadian history.

Upon their defeat the Tories confronted an existential crisis, as no party that has lost power in Alberta has ever returned to government. Third in size in the Alberta legislature and lacking a permanent leader following the election-night resignation of Jim Prentice, the party struggled to be heard and to rebuild its organization. In March 2017 party members chose a leader, former Conservative MP Jason Kenney, committed to merging with the Wildrose. They then endorsed such a merger by referendum in July to establish the United Conservative Party. On 28 October Kenney, the last PC leader, was elected the first leader of the UCP. Rarely in Canada or elsewhere has a party with such a storied past been willing to vote itself into oblivion.

The lead-up to the devastating 2015 election had been a roller coaster for the Tories. The Conservative Party dynasty had long rested on its sensitivity to changing political dynamics through its use of open leadership

contests and a willingness to adjust its policies to appeal to a plurality of Albertan voters. The party moved leftward at the 2012 provincial election in response to the Wildrose threat and continued to use royalty revenues to support heavy government spending in search of electoral support. This centrist strategy collapsed in 2015 with the election of the more populist New Democrats as the governing party and the right-wing Wildrose as Official Opposition, albeit with fewer votes than the PCs.

For a party that had not experienced electoral defeat since 1967, the result was catastrophic. The notion of parties alternating in office is not part of the Alberta experience, and with no history of a defeated party returning to power, the Progressive Conservatives faced a grim situation. Kenney capitalized on this fear and along with others pressed the narrative that vote-splitting on the right had allowed Albertans to elect the NDP by mistake. A merger with Wildrose would deliver government to the new party and remove the “ideological” New Democrats from power. The previous merger of the federal Progressive Conservatives and the Canadian Alliance, which had delivered government to the new Conservative Party of Canada, was offered as a model.

A merger would require the disbanding of both parties, turning the post-Prentice leadership race into a referendum on the future of the PCs. It was widely known that Kenney supported such a move and his success is evidence of support for a merger among those who voted in the contest. The construction of the UCP ended the “big tent” strategy that had made the Tories one of the most successful political machines in Canada and confirmed Kenney’s centrality to the merger process.

We begin our analysis of the end of the Tory dynasty by describing the political attitudes of Albertans and the degree to which their values are conservative. We then move to a discussion of leadership selection within the PC Party and the factors that led to its defeat in 2015. From there we trace how electoral defeat led to the formal dissolution of the party. We conclude that the decision to disband the PCs and merge with the Wildrose was a political choice, not a requirement. Despite having received more votes than the Wildrose, the Tories catastrophized the 2015 election defeat and gave up on the option of trying to return to power on their own. Jason Kenney took full advantage of this narrative. The creation of the UCP sets the stage for more polarized party competition in Alberta.

Political Values in Alberta

It is important to understand what Albertans think about politics.¹ Many have noted there is a decidedly individualistic tinge to Alberta politics expressed as the notion of personal freedom.²

As Table 17.1 demonstrates however, Albertans are not as individualistic as some have suggested. There is solid support, for example, for the value of generalized health care and social programs that assist those in need.

Stereotypes notwithstanding, voters in Alberta appear broadly supportive of a substantial role for the state with respect to government spending. Table 17.2 shows that when asked, they take a decidedly expansionist view of the preferred extent of government activity, with overwhelming majorities favouring a role for the state in ensuring living standards, adequate housing, and rent controls. They are not as keen on the sorts of public auto-insurance schemes found in some other provinces. These attitudes are shaped in part by the strength of the economy and the royalty revenues that allow government to deliver high levels of public goods and services without having to demand matching levels of personal taxation.

An expansive view of government activity may not necessarily translate into unfettered support for spending and budget deficits, but it does suggest that the former Progressive Conservative government and its successor, the New Democrats, have read the public mood correctly. Boom times in Alberta allow governments additional room to keep spending high while maintaining the lowest tax regime of any province, but this approach creates difficulties when the good times end. Managing this shift in circumstances remains a key feature of Alberta politics.

Albertans' suspicion of overt individualism and support for robust state spending captures the peculiarity of a province with a distinctive history that favours self-reliance and yet which finds itself with a government able to collect supernormal levels of revenue through a booming resource sector. Government restraint may have little appeal, and individual preferences are shaped without the need to internalize the policy trade-offs (notably about taxes and spending) common elsewhere.

Despite its centrality to the economy, Albertans are clearly uncomfortable with the power of the energy industry. As Table 17.3 shows, about three-quarters of them believe the industry has too much political influence

Table 17.1. Individualism

ATTITUDINAL STATEMENT	2008 % SUPPORT	2012 % SUPPORT	2015 % SUPPORT
Government regulation stifles drive	48%	48%	64%
Most unemployed could find jobs	71%	60%	60%
Those willing to pay should get medical treatment sooner	43%	39%	46%
A lot of welfare and social programs unnecessary	30%	29%	41%

Sources: NRG Research and Research Now. See endnote 1 for further information.

Table 17.2. Preferred Extent of Government Activity

ATTITUDINAL STATEMENT	2008 % SUPPORT	2012 % SUPPORT	2015 % SUPPORT
Government should ensure decent living standard	73%	73%	79%
Government should ensure adequate housing	78%	76%	77%
Government should limit amount of rent increases	76%	71%	76%
Government should take over auto insurance	46%	38%	41%

Sources: NRG Research and Research Now. See endnote 1 for further information.

Table 17.3. Oil, Gas, and the Environment

	2008 % SUPPORT	2012 % SUPPORT	2015 % SUPPORT
Oil and gas companies have too much say in provincial politics	69%	68%	75%
Increase royalties on natural gas and oil	56%	59%	71%
Alberta should slow pace of oil sands development	53%	39%	40%
Alberta needs to take firm action to combat global warming	82%	75%	76%
Tough environmental standards should take precedence over employment	58%	53%	49%

Sources: NRG Research and Research Now. See endnote 1 for further information.

and that royalties are too low. The effects of the recession after 2009, which were still felt in the lead-up to the 2012 election, and then the 2014 drop in oil prices that hurt the provincial budget, can be seen in a willingness to countenance fewer controls on the growth of the oil sands in recent years. Yet this support is not without reservation: three-quarters of our respondents continue to favour action on global warming and about half want tough environmental standards.

Table 17.4 reveals that Albertans are not particularly socially conservative. Most see moral issues as largely a matter of individual choice. This tends to run counter to the view that repeatedly electing a Progressive Conservative government is evidence of a commitment to conservative social values.

Populism remains an important part of Albertan political culture (see Table 17.5). From the United Farmers of Alberta through to Social Credit, the Tories, and even the New Democrats, Alberta has been friendly to parties and leaders adept at appealing to popular sentiment against large institutional forces, whether they are business or the federal government. The strength of populism is reinforced by the royalty roller coaster, which requires taxpayers to fairly share the pain regularly inflicted by swings in government revenues. Klein's folksy charm, Stelmach's background on the farm in Northern Alberta, and Redford's ability to suggest that the Wildrose did not share the values of most Albertans were key elements in the construction of recent PC majority governments. Similarly, Notley's deep links to Alberta—her father having died in a plane crash while leader of the provincial NDP—no doubt helped her cause.

As seen in Table 17.6, Western alienation is another powerful strand in Albertan political culture. It seems that while Albertans are willing to countenance a strong provincial state that provides public goods and services at high levels, they take a dim view of the national state in Ottawa, which they see as beyond their control.

The views of Albertans might surprise many Canadians.³ Albertans are not particularly individualistic and in general they are supportive of extensive government spending, an attitude made easier by long periods in which supernormal royalty payments allow governments to avoid passing costs on to taxpayers. Provincial voters are concerned about the environment, not

Table 17.4. Social Conservatism

	2008 % SUPPORT	2012 % SUPPORT	2015 % SUPPORT
Abortion is a matter between a woman and her doctor	76%	80%	84%
Gays and lesbians should be allowed to marry	62%	75%	77%

Sources: NRG Research and Research Now. See endnote 1 for further information.

Table 17.5. Populism in Alberta

	2008 % SUPPORT	2012 % SUPPORT	2015 % SUPPORT
Trust ordinary people more than experts	58%	54%	70%
Solve problems if government is brought back to grassroots	75%	75%	73%
Need government to get things done with less red tape	86%	85%	90%

Sources: NRG Research and Research Now. See endnote 1 for further information.

Table 17.6. Western Alienation in Alberta

	2008 % SUPPORT	2012 % SUPPORT	2015 % SUPPORT
Alberta is treated unfairly by the federal government	46%	42%	56%
Alberta does not have its fair share of political power in Canada	56%	57%	65%
The economic policies of the federal government seem to help Quebec and Ontario at the expense of Alberta	65%	62%	79%
Because parties depend on Quebec and Ontario Alberta usually gets ignored in national politics	70%	66%	80%

Sources: NRG Research and Research Now. See endnote 1 for further information.

particularly attached to conservative social values, and willing to limit the rate of oil and gas development.

More deeply, the political culture of Alberta remains heavily shaped by the uncertainties and conceits that flow from the boom and bust cycles of the oil and gas sector. These cycles highlight tensions with the federal government and Central Canadian economic and political rhythms, thereby making Alberta appear distinctive. Confirmed as it is by extraordinary levels of long-term economic and population growth, this sense of distinctiveness has provided fertile ground for the development of a populist streak in provincial politics.

Albertans generally favour governments and political leaders capable of protecting an enviable quality of life by keeping taxes low, retaining high levels of government spending, and protecting the province from outside forces that might bring this magical circumstance to an end. Long-term Tory success rested on choosing leaders and policies sensitive to these underlying political realities. The post-Redford leadership race of 2014 was an opportunity to renew this dynamic to ensure continued electoral success.

Leadership

Leadership has been central to party politics in Alberta, with party leaders, especially premiers, essentially defining their parties for voters. Yet all PC leaders since Klein have struggled to connect with Albertans. At the same time, there has been intense competition within the party as to where it should locate itself on the political spectrum given rapid economic and social change along with the traditional challenges of managing the Alberta economy. This has been expressed in the character of leadership contests.

The rules for selecting leaders in 2006 and 2011 reflected a willingness to open the party to changing social forces in an effort to cement its role as the party of the people.⁴ Anyone with five dollars could attend a polling station in their local riding, purchase a membership, and have a say in choosing Alberta's next premier. Table 17.7 shows that Albertans came out by the thousands to participate in these events—and both times defeated the candidate favoured by the party establishment. The party went on to win consecutive majority governments.

Table 17.7. Voter Mobilization at Tory Leadership Contests

YEAR	VOTERS	MOBILIZATION*
2006	144,289	34.61
1992	78,251	17.80
2011	78,176	15.60
2014	23,386	4.12

* Leadership voters as a proportion of the number of Albertans who voted for the Tories at the most recent provincial election.

Sources: Data compiled by the authors from media reports of party voting, and “Election Results” reports from Elections Alberta.

Some elements of the Conservative party were unhappy with this populist approach, arguing that it allowed “two-minute-Tories,” mainly from the left, too much influence over leader selection.⁵ The 2014 leadership race doubled the price of membership, abandoned voting in local communities, and got rid of the rules that allowed both Stelmach and Redford to win. Table 17.7 records the resulting collapse in party mobilization and the lack of populist appeal in the race that selected Mr. Prentice.

The selection of Jim Prentice as party leader and effectively Alberta’s sixteenth premier on 6 September 2014 was a triumph for the party establishment and the overwhelming majority (forty-six) of MLAs who backed him. But, as seen in Table 17.8, the 2014 race lacked the competitive drive of past races that had signalled the centrality of the party to Alberta politics. It was the least dynamic of any of the post-Lougheed leadership races. Prentice dominated the contest. He raised \$2,661,201 and spent all but \$24,151 of that. Second-placed Ric McIver spent \$484,029, and third-placed Thomas Lukaszuk \$336,338. This dominance prevented growth in party membership that had attended past, competitive PC leadership contests.

The party chose to use a phone poll (cheap and plagued with technical issues) in place of in-person voting, thereby reducing the excitement—and popular engagement—generated when members vote face-to-face in their constituencies. It doubled the cost of membership and instituted a cut-off that ensured that no one could join and vote on the day of the election. Keeping the process open until the final vote had been a source of great energy and engagement in previous races. Unsurprisingly, Prentice’s strength

Table 17.8. Competitiveness of Tory Leadership Contests

	1992	2006	2011	2014
Leader's Vote Share	31%	30%	41%	77%
Number of Candidates	9	8	6	3
Party Caucus Support for Winner	63%	16%	3%	83%

Sources: Source: Data compiled by the authors from media coverage of party leadership campaigns.

in terms of support from caucus and financial resources expressed itself in an overwhelming first-round win. The number voting fell by two-thirds compared with the two previous races.

The apparent coronation of Jim Prentice meant limited disruption to the party but was also evidence of a clear retreat from the dynamic, open populism of previous leadership contests. The selection of a prominent former federal Conservative cabinet minister also complicated the traditional PC claim to be the defenders of Alberta's interests in the federation. Indeed, it highlighted the odd dynamics that resulted from dealing with a governing party in Ottawa that had strong support in Alberta. There was no easy way of playing the Western alienation card used so effectively when Liberals governed from Ottawa, or even during the latter part of the Mulroney government, which led to the formation of the Reform Party.

A Perfect Storm

The election of Jim Prentice to the Tory leadership brought apparent stability to provincial politics. The Conservatives launched a series of initiatives designed to turn the page and place the party on course for a subsequent election win. Yet the massive collapse in the price of oil across 2014 became a crisis that relentlessly drove government action and, along with continued change across the political system, threatened to overwhelm the party and its new leader.

The collapse of oil prices quickly worsened the government's fiscal situation. Along with long-term weakness in natural gas prices, Alberta's major natural resources were now selling cheaply and delivering much less in the way of royalties.⁶ Changes in the structure of the economy and royalty

revenues further complicated the fiscal situation. Whereas natural gas had accounted for up to 80 per cent of government resource royalties a decade earlier, the more volatile and complex revenues from oil production now contributed this proportion. Because of this flip, the rapid decline in the price of a barrel of oil from over \$100 to the mid-\$50-dollar range had an outsized effect on government revenues.

At his first press conference in September, Premier Prentice was at pains to talk about renewal. The main policy thrust of his speech was to highlight the need to engage the United States with other provinces to ensure market access for oil and gas. The emphasis was on improving the delivery of government services—health care and education in particular—while containing costs, with a promise of more new schools.⁷ On 27 October 2014, less than two months after winning the leadership, Prentice was able to celebrate four by-election wins, including his own in Calgary-Foothills.⁸

The \$7-billion shortfall in the 2015 budget resulting from reduced resource revenues soon came to dominate Tory strategy. In early December, Prentice and his new finance minister, Robin Campbell, announced a seven-member cabinet committee chaired by the premier to oversee the development of the 2015 provincial budget. As well, the government introduced a series of measures to reduce spending.⁹ The government seemed in full crisis mode as it came to realize the depth of the fiscal challenge and the threat that oil and gas prices posed to its future.

On 17 December, Prentice and the now former Wildrose leader Daniel Smith appeared at a press conference to announce that she and eight of her colleagues (more than half the Wildrose caucus) were crossing the floor to join the Tories—this in addition to the two other Wildrose MLAs who had crossed in November of 2014. This created a governing-party caucus numbering 72 in a chamber of 87 MLAs. Despite outward appearances, news leaked that the floor-crossing had created deep tensions among the members of the PC caucus, worn as they were by a history of fierce Wildrose criticism in the legislature.¹⁰ Anger among remaining Wildrose MLAs and ordinary party members was palpable. New NDP leader Rachel Notley, who had replaced Brian Mason on 18 October, joined Liberal leader Raj Sherman and Wildrose MLAs in characterizing the move as a “backroom deal” that amounted to a “betrayal of democracy.”¹¹

As the Prentice government attempted to come to terms with the new fiscal realities, its budget committee commissioned a survey of Albertans seeking suggestions for tax and spending changes to help manage the budget shortfall. The survey revealed that on the tax side, 71 per cent favoured raising tobacco taxes, 69 per cent corporate taxes, and 58 per cent a graduated personal tax to replace the single tax rate. Half rejected the reintroduction of health-care premiums while respondents were about evenly divided on implementation of a provincial sales tax. Given its storied place as part of the “Alberta Advantage,” this last is perhaps the most remarkable result of the survey. On the spending side, respondents wanted to protect front-line health care (75 per cent) and education (70 per cent), with around 40 per cent favouring infrastructure spending in these areas.¹²

In a radio discussion on the budget in early March, Mr. Prentice suggested that Albertans “look in the mirror” for an explanation of the dire fiscal circumstances facing the province, sparking widespread condemnation for his failure to assign any of the blame to four decades of Tory rule. Opposition parties once again blasted the government for being out of touch.¹³ At the same time, and despite the results of the survey, the government rejected the idea of raising corporate taxes, citing advice from economists that it would reduce employment. The government introduced a budget on 26 March that moved slightly away from the single tax rate on income; increased alcohol and tobacco taxes; brought in a new tax to support health care; reduced or eliminated planned increases in spending across government (with protection for some infrastructure spending in healthcare and education); and announced future changes in methods for saving resource revenue.

The wisdom of allowing Wildrose MLAs to join the party took a hit when on 28 March three of them, including Danielle Smith, lost PC nomination battles. Then the party’s decision to eliminate Jamie Lall from the nomination in Chestermere-Rocky View in favour of former Wildrose MLA Bruce McAllister caused an outcry.¹⁴ At the same time, and as if to highlight the continued vitality of the party, 55 per cent of the 8,738 voting Wildrose members elected former federal Conservative MP Brian Jean to lead the party.¹⁵ Jean promised to campaign on the Alberta Advantage of lower taxes. With David Swann having replaced the exiting Raj Sherman as

Liberal leader in early February, each of the four major parties had experienced leadership change. Alberta politics was in flux.

On 7 April the government called an early election for 5 May 2015, ignoring the fixed-election legislation that scheduled the next election between March and May 2016.¹⁶ The decision to call an early election was widely criticized, not only for ignoring the legislation but because with the non-Tory parties competing for second spot, voter turnout would be low.¹⁷ The government's introduction of a relatively tough budget gave their opponents, two with recently elected new leaders, the raw materials to argue that the four-decade-old regime was out of touch with Albertans: this set the course for the subsequent election.

The 2015 Election Campaign

Despite their long dominance, the Tories faced challenging economic conditions and rapid social and political change. Regular turnover in leadership and internal tensions, most notably in light of the success of the Wildrose to its right, threatened the party. A new leader added another element of uncertainty. Despite massively outspending its opponents, a retreat from the populism that had sustained it for four decades, coupled with a series of damaging events, undercut its support.

The Tories appeared dominant at the start of the campaign. The Liberals were on the wane, Wildrose had been decimated by floor-crossings, and the fourth-placed New Democrats led by recently elected Rachel Notley held just four seats.¹⁸ As Table 17.9 makes clear, a recovery in PC fundraising gave party members reason for optimism, although the rise of the NDP suggests donors had come to see them as a viable challenger to the Tories.

The 2015 PC budget proposed tax hikes on individuals, an additional child supplement for low-income families, and cuts to public-sector employment. It was aimed squarely at the Wildrose, which had cornered the low-tax, small-government policy terrain.¹⁹ The Liberal and New Democrat platforms both aimed leftward.²⁰ New Democrats emphasized change with stability, highlighting Notley as a leader in the mold of Peter Lougheed. Only the NDP would “fight for Alberta families.” The floor-crossing was held to be evidence that change could not be achieved by voting for a party—the Wildrose—closely aligned with the Tories.²¹

Table 17.9. Electoral Cycle Funding 2012–15 (\$)

	2012	2013	2014	Q1 2015	CAMPAIGN
PC	2,331,592	2,865,669	5,625,669	825,318	3,373,733
WR	2,793,895	3,074,072	3,085,982	355,091	1,169,470
LIB	478,795	447,826	396,796	110,764	156,048
NDP	864,046	775,152	999,834	406,883	1,635,991

Sources: “Financial Disclosure” reports from Elections Alberta.

In contrast to the Tories’ proposed budget, major NDP policies were consistent with the preferences expressed by Albertans in the government’s survey of voters.²² The NDP promised to reverse spending cuts to health care and education, fund daycare, introduce a progressive income tax aimed at the top 10 per cent of earners, raise corporate taxes, and rethink royalties. They promised to balance the budget by 2017 and to scrap a proposed Tory health levy while enhancing democratic transparency by banning union and corporate donations to political parties and strengthening oversight of government.²³

New Democrats managed to capture the populist ground vacated by the Tories and forced the PCs to fight a two-front war, the most difficult for a centrist party.²⁴ To make matters worse, the PC campaign was tarnished by scandals and interventions that only served to make the party and its supporters appear entitled and out of touch, while at the same time NDP campaign mistakes were overlooked.²⁵ The 23 April leaders’ debate confirmed Notley’s appeal, Prentice’s awkwardness, the third-place position of the Wildrose, and the irrelevance of the Liberals.²⁶

In a post-election survey conducted by Abacus Research, 93 per cent of respondents identified change rather than support for the NDP and “cooling on Jim Prentice” rather than “warming to Rachel Notley” as critical to their vote. Sixty-seven per cent felt the leaders’ debate was a crucial moment in the campaign, with 58 per cent seeing leadership as generally important.²⁷ Women favoured the NDP more than men did, as did young over older voters, patterns that were reversed for the Tories but less strongly so for Wildrose. Voters with more education and city folk also favoured the NDP, with Edmonton the heartland of the party’s victory.²⁸

The collapse of the Tory vote was key to the NDP victory. An overwhelming majority of New Democrat supporters remained loyal, but only 49 per cent of Tory voters stuck with the party, with nearly a third of defectors heading to the NDP. Nineteen per cent of those who had supported the Wildrose in 2012 moved to the NDP, as did 62 per cent of Liberals. Tellingly, 55 per cent of non-voters in 2012 chose to support the NDP in 2015.²⁹

While the arrival of Jim Prentice initially boosted the Tories, his handling of the floor-crossing, the budget process, and the decision to call an early election cast doubt on his intuitive feel for Alberta politics. This was confirmed by the election campaign. The Tories ran an underwhelming campaign that failed to reset the widespread sense among voters that it was time for a change, while the NDP managed to present a leader and a set of policies that played to the populist dynamics of Alberta politics.

The Death of a Dynasty: The End of the Progressive Conservative Association of Alberta

In Canada, and in especially Alberta, leaders are important. Alberta politics has been described as “leadership politics,”³⁰ and the race for a new leader to replace Prentice became a contest to define the party. In this contest, the party returned to the leadership convention model that had not been used in Alberta since the election of Don Getty as PC leader in 1986. The decision to return to a convention, it turned out, was consequential.

Primaries afford more opportunities for outsiders to participate. In both 2006 and 2011, the primary model had elected leaders who were not the choice of the party elite and were seen as moving the party more to the left. In reflecting on his experiences as a leadership candidate in both of those races, Ted Morton lamented that the primary “rules have facilitated the growth of a second conservative party by pushing disillusioned Blue Tories into the Wildrose party.”³¹ Essentially, the involvement of less “conservative” voters, particularly after an inconclusive first ballot, led to the election of a leader who was not reflective of the aspirations of many party activists. Former leadership candidate and deputy premier Doug Horner raised much the same point in discussing these changes to the leadership selection model. As he explained to the CBC in May of 2016, “I think it’s time

we stopped electing premiers and started electing the leader of our party.”³² For many in the party there was dissatisfaction that candidates who were not favoured by party regulars were advantaged by primary selections, and that such elections “appear to have transformed the PC party into a centre left coalition party.”³³ The easy victory of Prentice in a more closed primary model did little to diminish such concerns. One of the other elements critical to understanding the evolution of the Progressive Conservative Party is the enhanced importance of candidate organizations in the convention model. Leadership conventions place a greater premium on these organizations as campaign teams attempt to determine the outcome not by persuading voters at a convention to support them, but by electing delegates predisposed to support them. This battle has been well described as “trench warfare,” and the viciousness that accompanied such battles in 1986 was one of the reasons the PCs moved to their successful primary model in 1992.³⁴ This battle proved dramatically one-sided in 2017.

Reports in the month leading up to the March 2017 leadership race suggested that after elections in 80 of 87 constituencies, Kenny had 977 delegates and his opponents only 199.³⁵ These numbers proved quite prophetic as Jason Kenney, the only candidate favouring a union with the Wildrose, was elected with 1,113 of the 1,476 votes cast. Kenney’s organizational dominance could also be seen in candidate expenditures: he spent over \$1.5 million on the campaign while the total spent by his opponents came in under \$300,000.

The leadership contest initially attracted a wide range of people with elected experience and it appeared there would be a competitive election to decide the future of the party. The candidates ranged from PC MLA Sandra Jansen, a candidate very much associated with the progressive side of the party, and (as we have seen) former federal Conservative cabinet minister Jason Kenney, a candidate directly associated with social-conservative beliefs and a desire to lead the PCs into a merger with the Wildrose that could end the splitting of votes many Conservatives credited with electing the NDP in 2015. But the race exposed serious internal tensions as to how best to proceed. The decision to continue to pursue a centrist strategy was quickly eschewed as Kenney rode a steamroller of support into the delegate selection meetings that resulted in the election of a huge majority of pro-merger delegates and drove a number of his opponents out of the race.

Sandra Jansen not only left the leadership race, but just over a week later, after claiming to have been harassed by Kenney supporters, she crossed to the New Democrats. As Jansen departed, she strongly critiqued the direction in which she saw Kenney taking the PCs, suggesting that “I don’t believe there has been anything moderate or pragmatic being offered or even discussed by the people intent on taking over the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta.”³⁶ Barely two months later, former St. Albert MLA Stephen Khan withdrew from the race after also lamenting the desire to destroy the venerable PC Party. As he explained, he had been the target of ugly attacks; he also stated that he had “entered this race because I believed the PC army would show up. But what I’ve seen is that there are more federal Conservative/Reformers and Wildrosers who want to tear down and destroy our party than there are PCs who want to save it.”³⁷ Khan endorsed Richard Starke, another PC MLA, who continued in the race and who Khan described as a “true Progressive Conservative.”³⁸

The battle for the future of the PCs continued with some opponents of the potential merger calling on the party’s board in February to disqualify Kenney from the race because his intent was to harm the PC brand. A disqualification was not forthcoming, and the race continued to its inevitable outcome. Kenney, with the endorsement of former Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper and an incredibly well-financed organization, cruised through the delegate selection process, which utilized a first-past-the-post method to elect delegates in each constituency. Thus, even a slim plurality at the delegate selection meetings could produce a solid swath of Kenney delegates, and the two remaining candidates could not stop Kenney from turning the March convention into a virtual coronation.³⁹ Kenney scrutineers lined the registration desks at the convention, and the floor of the convention was solidly in his favour. When Starke in his speech called on the party to avoid association with the Wildrose and its social conservatism he was booed.⁴⁰ The Kenney campaign maintained its momentum as interim federal Conservative leader Rona Ambrose seconded his nomination.

With more than 75 per cent of the voting delegates opting for Kenney and his merger strategy, the PC Party seemed to be celebrating its demise. The party rejected the opportunity to return to the “big tent” politics that served it so well for so long and instead emphasized ideological similarities with Wildrose, endorsing a strategy to pursue a formal merger with their

former opponents. The elected delegates ensured that the Alberta tradition of a defeated government never returning to power continued by placing the PCs on a path to formal dissolution. A number of prominent Progressive Conservatives were uncomfortable with the decision, with former deputy premier and leadership candidate Thomas Lukaszuk tearing up his membership card and party president Katherine O'Neill stepping down from her position and speculating about the need for a more moderate option.⁴¹ Kenney's success in this race, despite perceived opposition from members of the party's executive, were described by some as a "hostile takeover" of the PCs.⁴²

The forces calling for the dissolution of the PC Party eventually fulfilled Kenney's goal, and in May they reached an agreement with the Wildrose to combine, though with the negative experience of the floor-crossings of 2014 in mind, the decision was made to allow party members to vote on the party's future. A vote was scheduled for July of 2017 with a simple majority needed to move the party along the path to merger. Wildrose rules required a 75 per cent vote in favour of the move.⁴³ Prominent federal Conservatives such as former prime minister Stephen Harper and former interim leader Rona Ambrose spoke out in favour of the merger; the move to unite subsequently proved unstoppable. Despite some initial speculation that the unity proposals might be defeated, they were overwhelmingly endorsed by members of each party. With turnouts below 60 per cent in both cases, 23,466 of the 24,598 Wildrosers who voted endorsed the merger, as did 25,692 of the 27,060 PC members.⁴⁴ With some rules for participation uncertain, it is unclear how many people participated in both parties.

The road was now clear for the final drive: the selection of a leader for the new UCP. Some dissent remained. Richard Starke, the runner up to Kenney in the March 2017 PC leadership race, refused to join the new party and another PC MLA, Rick Fraser, entered the leadership race for the up-start Alberta Party.⁴⁵ He was joined by Stephen Mandel, a former Edmonton MLA who had served as a cabinet minister under Jim Prentice. Mandel went on to win the leadership contest.⁴⁶

Former party leaders Jason Kenney and Brian Jean both entered the UCP leadership race. Reverting to a primary process, albeit one with a cut-off date a week before voting opened, Kenney demonstrated that he could win in the more open format. More than 100,000 members were eligible to

participate and almost 62,000 were registered to vote in the October contest. Kenney defeated Jean almost 2 to 1, attracting 35,623 votes to Jean's 18,336.⁴⁷ Interestingly, the votes received by Kenney fell well below the totals received by those winning the PC primaries in 1992, 2006, and 2011, suggesting the new party could not quite attract the levels of participation the Progressive Conservatives had managed through open primaries. Kenney went on to win a December by-election, becoming the first elected MLA for the new party.

Conclusion

Selecting a new leader became a choice among possible futures for the Tories. Ending the Progressive Conservative Party was not the only option available following its 2015 election defeat. The party decided not to treat the defeat as part of a normal political process, as other parties do, and attempt to return to power, but rather to catastrophize the loss. Dropping the open primary system for leader votes in 2014 and 2017 strengthened the hand of the party's unhappy right wing and weakened the Tories populist appeal. The selection of Jason Kenney was an emphatic answer in favour of the myth of the inevitable death of party regimes in Alberta and the narrative that the NDP government was an accident caused by vote-splitting on the right. The rightward turn this and the merger with the Wildrose entailed reverses the logic of the 2012 and 2015 elections. Rather than seeing the Wildrose as the major challenger, Kenney and those who voted for him fashion the New Democrats as the enemy. Losing a centrist "big tent" party such as the Tories is likely to increase the polarization of Alberta politics over the coming years.

The view that governing parties that lose office struggle to regain lost ground was facilitated by the politics that followed the 2015 election. The Tories faced challenges in raising money. The NDP government and the Wildrose opposition (still stinging from the floor-crossing) moved quickly to end the corporate donations on which the PCs had become dependent. Those on the right of the PC Party, unhappy with what they saw as its leftward drift over recent elections, viewed unification with the Wildrose as a means of recreating the voting bloc that allowed Ralph Klein to win huge

Table 17.10. Opinion Distribution by Party Supporters 2008-15

ISSUE AREA	NDP	PC	WILDROSE
Individualism	.25-.44	.41-.60	.61-.70
Active Government	.74-.87	.58-.62	.49-.62
Environment	.76-.85	.51-.57	.43-.50
Social Conservatism	.14-.19	.21-.40	.34-.60
Populism	.59-.80	.66-.79	.78-.89
Western Alienation	.42-.71	.50-.75	.74-.81

Sources: NRG Research and Research Now. See endnote 1 for further information.

electoral victories. A new party would be more right wing and skirt the historical legacy of no former governing party having ever regained office.

An examination of voter attitudes in 2008, 2012, and 2015 makes clear that moving in this direction was a political choice, not a requirement. Voter attitudes reported earlier in this chapter reveal that Albertans are not as conservative as many assume.⁴⁸ Table 17.10 uses responses to attitudinal questions reported earlier to construct a scale for six issue areas in which 1 indicates strong affinity for the matter while 0 equates to no support. It displays the clear distance between the NDP and the Wildrose and the centrality of the Tories. Only on the populism scale is there any overlap between the Wildrose and the NDP. On all other issues, the distance between the two parties is striking. Equally striking is the more centrist location of PC voters, who almost invariably fall between their two opponents. In comparison to the NDP voters, PC voters were more individualistic, less supportive of an activist government, less pro-environment, more socially conservative, more populist, and more likely to take positions associated with Western alienation. In comparison to Wildrose voters, PC supporters were less individualistic, more supportive of an activist government, more pro-environment, less socially conservative, less populist, and less likely to give responses demonstrating Western alienation. This is largely what one would expect of a “big tent” party. What this suggests is that space existed for the PCs to peel unhappy NDP voters away in a subsequent election.

In opting for the “unite the right” strategy, Tories chose to destroy the most electorally successful party in Canadian history. While there is now a clear right-wing alternative to the NDP, the strategy comes with its own

challenges. As Abacus Research found, despite the fact that the combined 2015 vote total of the PCs and the Wildrose eclipsed the NDP, 73 per cent of respondents suggested they could support the New Democrats in future elections if they performed well.⁴⁹ In 2012 the PCs secured re-election by successfully portraying the Wildrose as too far right and out of touch with Albertans.⁵⁰ They attracted a substantial number of voters who in 2008 had supported the NDP or the Liberals.⁵¹ Many of those who voted PC in 2008, 2012, and 2015 held positions closer to NDP voters than to Wildrose voters. Disillusioned NDP voters from 2015 might well have found moving to the PCs in the next election—had the party continued to exist—relatively easy, as many did in 2012. A move to the more right-wing UCP may be more difficult for these voters to contemplate, even if they are unhappy with the NDP government.

These concerns are reinforced by the refusal of some prominent former PC members and MLAs to join the UCP. Of the nine PC MLAs who took seats in the Alberta legislature following the 2015 election, one is now an NDP cabinet minister, one is a member of the Alberta Party, and another remains resolutely apart from the UCP caucus. The loss of a third of the caucus and the concerns raised about the policy choices attributed to the UCP suggest that combining the PC and Wildrose vote from 2015 is neither simple nor inevitable. The success of the UCP's polarizing strategy depends on the structure of the provincial party system, including the positioning of the NDP and whether there is a viable centrist party. It will be interesting to watch how Alberta political culture responds to these new arrangements.

The challenge for the UCP is to hold on to as many of the more moderate PC voters as possible while also attracting repentant NDP supporters. For this to succeed they will need to portray the NDP as an ideologically fixated party well out of the province's mainstream. The Prentice-led PCs were, of course, unsuccessful in this approach in 2015. The other option is to depict the NDP government as unworthy of re-election because of their management of the provincial economy and the absence of a pipeline despite the NDP's efforts to create "social licence" for oil and gas exports. This will to some degree depend on energy prices and economic recovery. Both factors are beyond the control of the UCP.

The NDP will likely respond with a campaign like that waged by the PCs against the Wildrose in 2012—that is, by portraying the UCP as promoting

values that are inconsistent with those of most Albertans. In pursuit of this goal an emphasis on identifying the UCP as the carrier of “social conservatism” will become the priority of the government. It is not clear what the outcome of the next election will be, but the party system in Alberta is likely to be more polarized if the alternative to the NDP is not a “big tent” party such as the Progressive Conservatives. There is no future for “Tories” in Alberta.

NOTES

- 1 Data for this analysis is drawn from surveys of eligible Albertan voters taken in the week following the 2008, 2012 and 2015 provincial elections. For 2008 and 2012, NRG Research conducted 1500 random phone interviews stratified by region and gender. The 2015 survey was based on an on-line panel of 1505 randomly drawn from the Research Now panel and stratified by age, gender. The same attitudinal and demographic questions were asked in each survey.
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