



## ORANGE CHINOOK: Politics in the New Alberta

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# Politics, Alberta Style: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Conservatives, 1971–2015

*David Taras*

Alberta is unique in many ways. It is the only place in North America where prairies, mountains, and boreal forests meet. Few realize, in fact, that over half the province is covered by forests. Its diversity is such that one can traverse over 300 square kilometres of glacier ice, visit badlands that are so desolate and eerie that they look as if they are on another planet, plunge down ski runs that are among the most famous and challenging in the world, and look up at skies that are deeply and often endlessly majestic. There is hardly a day that goes by without a post on Reddit from someone who has photographed some aspect of Alberta's beauty and wants to share it with the world.

Until the 1960s, Alberta was Canada's most rural province. Today, it is the country's most urbanized, with almost two-thirds of the population hemmed in to the narrow and burgeoning Calgary–Edmonton corridor. Alberta is home to Canada's oil and gas industry, which until recently accounted for the highest standard of living in Canada, but also for the brutal and often unpredictable convulsions that have distorted the province's economy and can be felt in almost every pore of its political life. It is also the province that, with the exception of Quebec, has been the most alienated from and suspicious of the federal government. Indeed, Alberta's politics have been defined in no small way by a series of dramatic and painful battles for control over its natural resources and how they would be used. What also makes Alberta unique is that it is home to the political party that

remained in power longer than any other in Canadian history—a party, in fact, that came close to setting the record for longevity among democratic governments across the globe.

Alberta's Progressive Conservative Party came to power in 1971 and governed Alberta with what Geo Takach has described as “King Kong” sized majorities until it was defeated by the New Democrats in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Only the Progressive Conservatives in Ontario, the famed “Big Blue Machine,” which formed governments in that province from 1943 to 1985, has come close to matching the longevity of Alberta's Conservatives. The key to the Ontario Tories' success was a series of formidable leaders—George Drew, Leslie Frost, John Robarts, and William Grenville Davis—a growing economy, and an opposition divided between the Liberals and the NDP. As I hope to show in this chapter, the Alberta Conservatives, by contrast, were able to remain in office for so long because unlike the Conservatives in Ontario they were not a Big Blue Machine. Instead, the party maintained its hold on power by governing from the political centre. The party tent was large enough to include many shades of blue as well as those who in other places and circumstances would have been Liberals. Moreover, unlike Ontario's Progressive Conservatives, which built a formidable political apparatus, the Alberta Tories were relatively weak on the ground, and they were able to maintain a hold on government, I argue, because of identity politics on one hand and voter apathy on the other.

What makes the Alberta story even more unique is that every government in Alberta's history has been elected by an overwhelming majority. While the pendulum has swung from the Liberals (1905–21) to the United Farmers of Alberta (1921–35) to Social Credit (1935–71), and then to the Tories and finally the NDP, Albertans as a whole have never voted by half measures. Public opinion has always moved decisively from one party to another, so that, remarkably, the province has never elected a minority government.

It should also be noted that in some ways the reign of conservative politics in Alberta lasted even longer than the forty-four years of Progressive Conservative governments. This is because the Social Credit government that preceded it was also in a sense a conservative government. While Ernest Manning famously mixed religion and politics (continuing to preach on Sunday-morning radio as part of *Canada's National Bible Hour* even after he became premier), his premiership was characterized by budgetary

frugality, a belief in small government, a close relationship with the oil industry, the notion that individual struggle was the road to redemption, and a strict moral code that included harsh film censorship and a prohibition against men and women drinking together in bars. Arguably, Social Credit was overturned by the Progressive Conservatives in 1971 because it was if anything too conservative for the changing times.

This chapter describes the economic and social forces that allowed the PCs to dominate Alberta politics for two generations. My argument is that the Tories remained in power because of a confluence of factors: identity politics, economic prosperity, the weakness of the opposition parties, and a largely conservative provincial political culture. Each of these forces reinforced the others, resulting in an almost unbreakable chain-link fence. Elections would be decided within minutes of the polls closing, with almost no need for people to watch the results for longer than half an hour at the most. The party won so easily that it almost didn't have to campaign. But while the end of this remarkable reign came suddenly and caught many observers by surprise—including Premier Jim Prentice and his team, who were convinced until the very end that they would win another majority—the Progressive Conservative dynasty had begun to unravel years earlier. Most critically, the foundations on which the party's power rested had begun to crumble. While the chapter will concentrate on the forces and strategies that allowed the Conservatives to remain in power for so long, it will also examine some of reasons for their defeat in 2015. While the end would appear to come suddenly, a slow-motion collapse has been underway for quite some time.

## The Foundations of Progressive Conservative Power

Tory power in Alberta was built on a number of historic and strategic foundations. As the American frontier was closing at the turn of the nineteenth century, Alberta was seen as the “Last Best West,” the final opportunity for open ranges, homesteading, and good land. Between 1898 and 1914, some 600,000 American immigrants would arrive mostly from the Midwest. By 1911, roughly a quarter of the Alberta population was born in the United States.<sup>2</sup> They brought with them different religious values from those held by those of British and Ontario heritage, including an adherence to smaller

and more populist religious sects over established churches. The evangelical streak in Alberta politics that helped produce Social Credit governments under “Bible Bill” Aberhart and his disciple Ernest Manning arguably had its origins in the fundamentalist churches that took root in Alberta during this period.

The American influence in late-nineteenth-century Calgary was so great that what is now Mount Royal, one of the city’s more elite and most posh areas, was once called American Hill. Its name was changed to Mount Royal and its streets given Canadian place names in order to Canadianize the city. A second wave of American immigrants came in the 1950s, when the oil industry began to take off. The culture subtly changed as cowboy hats, football, and Texas accents became prominent.<sup>3</sup> Just as crucial was the fact that Houston became as important a financial centre as Toronto—perhaps even more important—when it came to financing large oil projects. American immigration might also explain why the cowboy culture that is showcased during the Calgary Stampede, as well as in the rodeos that are so popular in small towns across Central and Southern Alberta, came to overshadow other aspects of Alberta’s history, such as the northern fur trade and the traditions brought by immigrants from Eastern Canada and the British Isles. The consequences of immigration were felt in another critical way. In the province’s mythology, in its songs and its literature, Alberta is always the place of coming and never the place of leaving. The “four strong winds” made famous by singer Ian Tyson always brought people *to* Alberta rather than away from it; if they did leave, it was assumed that they did so with regret. The province’s population surged from a little over 1.5 million when the Progressive Conservatives came to power in 1971 to over 4 million when they were ousted by the NDP in 2015. This meant that new Canadians as well as immigrants from other provinces had enough electoral power to tilt the political scales in any direction they chose.

The popular wisdom is that immigrants who came with different political traditions and who had voted for liberal or socialist parties in their home societies would transplant those beliefs to Alberta, and that they would eventually by sheer force of numbers change the province’s political life. The effects of immigration, however, seemed to have been counterintuitive in that they reinforced rather than altered prevailing political beliefs. And yet this is in keeping with a larger trend. Through much of Canadian history,

immigrants have been attracted to the party that was in power when they first came to Canada. While the Liberals have benefited from this phenomenon at the federal level, the Alberta Tories benefited at the provincial level. In addition, as Tamara and Howard Palmer have pointed out, immigrants often self-selected; in other words, they came to Alberta precisely because of its conservative values and its much-celebrated individualistic and rugged spirit.<sup>4</sup> For at least some immigrants, voting for the Progressive Conservatives was a way of integrating into the larger society, part of being accepted. It was also the surest route to political power and influence.

The province is roughly divided into three separate political universes: Calgary, Edmonton, and rural Alberta. The basic math of Alberta politics has long been that the Tories would go into any election with an almost automatic majority because they could always count on winning thirty to thirty-five seats in rural and small-town Alberta. This was bloc voting par excellence. Even in the hotly contested 1993 election, when public opinion in the cities had turned against the PCs, and the Liberals under former Edmonton mayor Lawrence Decore seemed close to winning, rural Alberta remained loyal to the Progressive Conservatives. For their part, the PCs always ensured that rural Alberta was overrepresented on the electoral map, even as the cities exploded in population. They understood that keeping rural Alberta onside was the hinge on which power rested.

In chapter 13 of this volume, University of Alberta political scientist Roger Epp mourns the end of rural Alberta and the emergence of what he calls a “post-rural” province. His argument is that with a declining population, the increasing encroachments of urban life, and the loss of health and education services, the rural way of life is quickly fading or has already past. Epp claims that the NDP has added to the disenfranchisement of rural voters by failing to see this constituency through a separate and distinctive lens. This was a mistake that Premiers Peter Lougheed (1971–85) and Ralph Klein (1992–2006) never made. As rural Alberta clung to the PCs in order to ensure that it got its share of government spoils—a relationship that became ever more important as the farm economy weakened—rural party lieutenants such as Hugh Horner, Marv Moore, Ken Kowalski, and Ed Stelmach became major power brokers. When the Wildrose Party broke with the Progressive Conservatives in 2012 and 2015, the guaranteed rural majority that had sustained the PCs for close to two generations came to an end.

The party could also count on sweeping Calgary, which was Peter Lougheed and Ralph Klein's political fiefdoms. While the Liberals would always win a sprinkling of seats in the city, usually in the urban core, suburban Calgary was an impregnable Tory fortress. While the Liberals could sometimes also do well in Edmonton—winning some eighteen seats in the 1993 and 1997 elections, for instance—Edmonton would always hedge its bets by electing a sizeable number of Tories. It was simply too dangerous for the city to be seen as an opposition stronghold when the PCs had held power for so long.

## The Politics of Western Alienation

In their incisive book on voting, *Democracy for Realists*, political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels contend that in the end almost all voting is based on identity.<sup>5</sup> While other schools of thought argue that people vote based on chequebook politics—that is, on how the economy is performing—Achen and Bartels believe that issue voting is often an illusion because it masks deeper issues of identity. In the case of Alberta, economic fortunes and identity politics have often been one in the same. This is because the politics of Western grievance has always been deeply woven into Alberta's political DNA.

Historian Doug Francis has argued that “the crucible out of which Western regional consciousness was forged was one of failure, depression and disappointed dreams. It became a defensive identity, seeking to locate blame in institutions and individuals outside the region, namely federal politicians, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, and the people of Ontario.”<sup>6</sup> While natural resources were given to the provinces under the British North America Act, Ottawa did not relinquish control over natural resources in the Western provinces until 1930. Thus, from the time that Alberta became a province in 1905 until 1930, Ottawa acted largely as a colonial power. In the 1920s, Calgarians could, much to their anger, turn to the night sky to see flares in nearby Turner Valley burn off and waste valuable gas.

The federal government's control over Alberta's natural resources was emblematic of the unequal economic relationship that had been imposed on the province. For many decades, high tariffs on US imports forced Westerners to buy manufactured goods from Ontario at prices far higher

than those of manufactured products from the United States. At the same time, they had to sell their agricultural produce at the discounted Crow Rate, far below its real market value. In this “rigged” system, Albertans rightly felt powerless and exploited. These inequalities were compounded by the despair and agony of the dirty thirties. Waves of bankruptcies, mass foreclosures, and evictions produced bitter recriminations against the Eastern banks and the mythical “50 big shots” that William Aberhart claimed were controlling the economy. This explosive cauldron of festering resentment brought the Social Credit Party to power at the height of the depression, in 1935. Promises to fight the banks and control the supply of money brought the Social Credit government into headlong and continued confrontations with the federal government and with the Supreme Court of Canada, which disallowed much of Aberhart’s legislation.

All of this set the stage for the energy wars fought by Peter Lougheed against the Trudeau government in the early 1980s. Lougheed believed that Pierre Trudeau’s National Energy Program was an attempt to dismantle Alberta’s control over natural resources and with it the very existence of the Alberta state. Ottawa’s *coup de force* included an export tax on Alberta oil, changes to the tax code that would infringe on Alberta’s right to set the royalty regime, incentives for companies to shift exploration away from Alberta to Canada Lands in the North, and the setting of a Canadian price instead of a global price for oil. One estimate, based on the differential between the Canadian and global price for oil, puts the cost of Ottawa’s policies for Alberta at close to \$70 billion between 1973 and 1985.<sup>7</sup> Lougheed responded by launching court actions and cutting back oil production. At one point he took to the airwaves to tell Albertans that their choice was either to see more of their lives “directed and controlled” by Ottawa or to opt for “decision-making determined by Albertans in Alberta.” Even after the National Energy Policy was repealed by the Mulroney government in 1986, its memory haunted Alberta politics for at least a generation.

The Alberta Conservatives’ defensive approach to the rest of Canada could be seen in a number of policy arenas. Lougheed was a principal architect of article 33 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the so-called “notwithstanding clause,” which allowed provinces to opt out of federal legislation. Premier Don Getty (1985–92) pushed Senate reform onto the constitutional agenda by sponsoring and instituting elections to the



Senate. Getty believed that a revitalized Senate would enhance the power of the regions and act as a buffer against the unbridled power of the House of Commons. Ralph Klein, who as mayor of Calgary had lashed out at the Eastern “creeps and bums” that had arrived during the boom years of the early 1980s, told Quebecers during the 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty, that while Canada was a “safe harbour” for Quebec, Alberta would be an ally and kindred spirit in standing up to Ottawa.

Klein was also the recipient of the famous “firewall” letter penned by, among others, future prime minister Stephen Harper, future Alberta cabinet minister Ted Morton, and campaign strategist Tom Flanagan. The letter proposed that Alberta insulate itself from “an increasingly hostile government in Ottawa” by creating its own pension plan, collecting its own income tax, replacing the RCMP with its own police force, fighting for Senate reform, and assuming exclusive jurisdiction over health care. While this was never acted on by Klein, it can be argued that as prime minister, Stephen Harper did erect a firewall of sorts. He gave the provinces wide discretion in formulating and carrying out policies and largely stepped away from a leadership role in federal-provincial relations.

There can be little doubt that one of the keys to the Tories’ popularity was that they came to be seen as the great protector of Alberta’s rights against encroachments by the federal government. The logic for many voters was that the province had to be unified, had to speak with a single voice, in order to stand up to Ottawa. The best way to do that was to give the Tories a strong majority. Economic interests were therefore merged with identity politics so that, for many, being a strong Albertan also meant being a strong Tory. Interestingly, Jim Prentice never played the alienation card. And in fact, as a former federal cabinet minister and then as an executive vice-president of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce who also sat on a myriad of powerful corporate boards, he seemed to some the very picture of satisfied Eastern power; put simply, many Albertans may not have been sure on which team he was playing. Interestingly, Jason Kenney, the leader of the new United Conservative Party, has been more than eager to play the anti-Ottawa card. His criticism of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau have been bitter and personal and he has railed against the federal government’s equalization as well climate change policies.

The Alberta Liberals, for their part, were on the wrong side of identity politics. Amid the boiling emotions that simmered and overflowed during the energy wars, the party stood little chance since most Albertans who were disgruntled with the PCs preferred to stay at home rather than vote Liberal. In some ridings, in fact, Liberal signs were virtually non-existent at election time. While, as mentioned above, the party came close to winning in 1993, they have been distant challengers in every other election. Their very weakness bred further weakness. Being far from power meant that, except in a handful of inner-city ridings in Calgary and Edmonton, the Liberals rarely attracted large donations, top candidates, or sizable numbers of volunteers.

The Liberals, along with the NDP, also received surprisingly little media coverage. Indeed, the opposition parties played such a minor role in the legislature and appeared to be so far from the decision-making process that the news media treated them as little more than an afterthought. To make matters worse, ambitious opposition politicians, realizing that they were unlikely to have careers at the provincial level, tended to vacate provincial politics entirely, with many migrating to municipal politics. In fact, one can argue that the progressive nature of city politics in Alberta owes much to politicians whose careers had been blocked at the provincial level.

## Governing from the Centre

Another key to power for the PCs was that they were a big-tent party. While the political centre may be further to the right in Alberta than elsewhere, the Tories always had a keen sense of where public opinion was on any particular issue, such that the party was rarely caught on the wrong side of the public mood. Ralph Klein in particular was so adept at changing positions according to shifts in public opinion that he seemed at times to be a kind of political contortionist. One only has to recall his sensational back flip when it came to compensating the victims of government sterilization programs, his many zigs and zags on the privatization of health care, his epic reversal on electing representatives to regional health authorities, and his change of mind on government support for kindergartens, to name just a few.

Like Klein, the party itself was in reality only partially blue. The tent it constructed was wide enough to include people who in other settings

would vote Liberal. In his 2009 biography of Klein, Rich Vivone, a long-time observer of Alberta politics, described this phenomenon as follows: “the Conservatives were ideologically flexible. In one era, they were social activists who interfere in the private sector; in another era they dismantle the foundations of everything done by the same party in the previous 15 years; and in yet another era, they go on another wild spending spree. In 35 years, the Conservative Government under three leaders covered the entire political spectrum.”<sup>8</sup> Or, to put it differently, PC cabinets usually contained enough right wingers to suppress the emergence of more powerful alternatives on the right and enough moderates to dissuade Liberals from throwing in their lot with the provincial Liberal Party. This “blocking” strategy worked well until the PCs lost control of the right with the rise of the Wildrose Party.

Peter Lougheed, who began the Tory dynasty, believed that Alberta needed a “supersized” (my description) government in order to offset Ottawa’s power, manage and diversify the economy, and build a strong Alberta identity. Far from viewing the economy from the sidelines, government was to be a main player. Lougheed tried to alter the economic balance in the province and indeed the country by creating the Alberta Energy Company, half of which was owned by the province and half by individual Alberta shareholders; by renegotiating royalty agreements with oil and gas producers to wring more money for the provincial coffers; by buying the country’s second-largest airline, Pacific Western Airlines; by making the Alberta government a partner in oil sands development through Syncrude; and by brokering deals to ensure increased petrochemical production in the province, among other actions. Most dramatically, the Lougheed government established the Alberta Heritage Trust Fund in order to create a large pool of capital with which to diversify the economy and build infrastructure. Following an initial endowment of \$1.5 billion, 30 per cent of the revenue from natural resources was to be plowed into the fund annually. Famously, the Lougheed government also invested \$300 million in the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research with the goal of making Alberta a world leader in medical research.

In short, Lougheed’s interventionist style mimicked federal Liberal policies far more than they did those of right-wing politicians. In fact, Allan Tupper has argued that in ideological terms there was little to distinguish

Peter Lougheed from then NDP leader Grant Notley (Rachel Notley's father), who also believed in public ownership of natural resources.<sup>9</sup> While his policies of government ownership and intervention worried more than a few conservatives, Lougheed made sure that right wingers in the party, such as Edmonton MLA Keith Alexander, were treated respectfully and even warmly. He liked to point out that his cabinet was made up of practical rather than ideological politicians—"doers rather than knockers." In his view, a growing Alberta, a province in a hurry to catch up, had no time for exercises in ideological purity.

Attempts to diversify the economy away from its dependency on oil and gas reached a fever pitch under Premier Don Getty. Getty had the bad fortune to be in power during a deep global recession, a severe downturn in energy prices, the disrepair brought by the federal government's National Energy Program, and a financial crisis that included the collapse of two Alberta-based banks. To make matters worse, as Mark Lisac notes, Getty was a shy person who had little interest in public relations or even in telling his side of the story, which made governing during a perfect political storm all the more difficult.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Getty led an activist government that bailed out dozens of credit unions, offered loan guarantees to fund the expansion of the Syncrude oil sands plant, the giant Husky upgrader near Lloydminster, and pulp and paper mills in the north; he also poured hundreds of millions of dollars into a series of dubious enterprises, including the Gainers meat-packing plant, the Swan Hills waste-treatment plant, and Novatel, which manufactured cell phones. As its finances crumbled, the Getty government lurched from crisis to crisis, nearly bringing the Tory dynasty to an end.

When Getty recruited Calgary mayor Ralph Klein to join his government in 1989, some speculated that Klein had first toyed with the idea of running as a Liberal, and that Getty had shrewdly brought him into the government in order to shore up the government's centre-left credentials. While Klein would soon be venerated as a rock star of the right because of his drastic cuts to government spending, a wave of privatizations and sell-offs, and his desire to see government run like a business, by the end of his third term the government was again spending heavily. Right wingers such as Lorne Taylor, Lyle Oberg, and Steve West wielded considerable power, to be sure, but Klein also surrounded himself with centrist politicians such as

Peter Elzinga, David Hancock, Gary Mar, Iris Evans, and Ron Stevens. He was also friendly with Liberal MLA Sheldon Chumir, after whom his government named a medical centre in Calgary. Perhaps most crucially, Klein chose ex-Liberal MLA Mike Percy to chair his government's 1997 Growth Summit, which was charged with recommending new policy directions for the government's second term. While choosing Percy gave the exercise a patina of neutrality, the fact that Klein didn't choose someone from the Tory brain trust sent a signal.

As described above, Klein would often change political course with little notice. He had an instinctive sense for how "Martha and Henry"—two fictional characters that stood in his mind for ordinary Albertans, and to whom he referred in many of his speeches—were reacting to events and would like a cat on a hot tin roof know when and where to jump to avoid political disaster.

The way that leadership races were conducted also ensured that the party was open to people of different ideological stripes. The process used for the 1992, 2006, and 2011 leadership races allowed for so-called "instant Tories" to join the party right up to the last day of voting. In 2006, Ted Morton came close to pulling a first ballot upset after an extraordinary recruiting drive that mobilized tens of thousands of ultra-conservative voters. The eventual winner, Ed Stelmach, benefited from a recruiting drive among more moderate voters in Edmonton in the week leading up to the second and last ballot. In 2011, Alison Redford won the leadership by appealing to nurses and teachers, many of whom had no previous connection to the party. While this selection process would be criticized for distorting democracy and producing "surprise" leaders, it also ensured that the party remained a big tent open to diverse influences.

One can argue that one of the crucial errors that led to the Tories' downfall was that Premier Jim Prentice moved the party dramatically to the right—first by uniting the Progressive Conservatives with the Wildrose Party, and then by taking an almost fiendish delight in describing the deep cuts that he intended to make to health, education, and the size of the civil service. He also announced that the government would not match charitable donations made by companies or individuals. While he eventually reversed this decision, he sent the message to the non-profit sector that he

was not its friend. Simply put, by abandoning the political centre, he gave Rachel Notley the opening that she needed to claim that territory.

In evaluating the foundations of Tory electoral success, one has to consider Kevin Taft's argument about what he calls "Oil's Deep State."<sup>11</sup> Taft, a former leader of the Alberta Liberal Party and a contributor to this volume, argues in a 2017 book that, at least under Klein, the government had for all intents and purposes been captured by the oil industry. According to Taft, the Tories and Big Oil enjoyed an *entente cordial*, with each supporting and acting on behalf of the other. While this certainly was not the case under Peter Lougheed, who often fought with the energy sector and squeezed it for higher royalties, the Klein government seemed to fall in line with barely a murmur or protest. Patricia Black, who was energy minister from 1992 to 1997 before being promoted to finance minister, operated through a "kitchen cabinet" that consisted of representatives of "every aspect of the [energy] industry."<sup>12</sup> Major oil sands projects were approved with little thought to long-term environmental impacts and few efforts were made to pressure the industry into upgrading raw bitumen before it left the province. Most critically, under Klein the royalties paid by oil sands producers were famously the lowest in the world; only 1 per cent of gross revenue was paid to the government until companies had recovered the full costs of their investment. After this period, the royalty rate rose to 25 per cent of net revenue.

In some ways, the partnership between the government in Edmonton and Big Oil paid off handsomely. In exchange for policies that did little more than allow companies to "rip and strip," hundreds of billions of dollars were invested in the province, and bitumen royalties—even at a giveaway royalty rate—created sizable surpluses for the government, especially during the Klein years. The province's prosperity was apparent. Gleaming new office towers sprung up in downtown Calgary and jobs became so plentiful that workers clambered to come to Alberta from all over Canada, and even from overseas. To complete the circle of mutual co-operation, for years energy companies gave generously to the PCs and largely ignored the opposition parties.

Interestingly, after Premier Ed Stelmach (2006–11) increased the royalty rate by roughly 20 per cent in the wake of an extraordinary and vociferous public debate, he quickly retreated, rolling the rate back to close to where it had been before the hike. His action was largely a response to the global economic crisis that began in 2008: the province wanted to help

companies weather the storm. But another reason for the retreat may have been that some industry players upset with the Tories had begun to funnel donations to the new Wildrose Party. This tentative alliance between Wildrose and some players in the oil patch, combined with that party's growing war chest, may have been one reason why Prentice was so eager to merge with the Wildrose after he assumed office. The war chest would be his. As discussed elsewhere in this volume, the merger proved to be a disaster, as many Albertans saw the move as utterly cynical and manipulative, the very embodiment of old-style politics.

The problem for the PCs was that they became increasingly dependent on Big Oil. Although Lougheed was reluctant to attack Klein, by 2006—after a visit to the oil sands—the old lion had had enough. The former premier observed that, “It is just a moonscape. It is wrong in my judgment, a major wrong, and I keep trying to see who the beneficiaries are. . . . It is not the people of the province, because they are not getting the royalty return they should be getting.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Allan Warrack, a former Lougheed cabinet minister, saw the non-stop development of the oil sands as “reckless” and “disorderly.”<sup>14</sup> Other critics argued that Tory energy policies were preventing Alberta from taking the steps needed to diversify its economy; were distorting fiscal policy by creating the illusion that taxes could remain low indefinitely; and were making the province into an international environmental pariah and the oil sands a *cause célèbre* for activists.

The fact that the Progressive Conservatives held power for so long created its own gravitational pull. As the Tories controlled appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, as well as lucrative consulting and business contracts, being a member of the winning team had tangible rewards. The same was true for ambitious politicians. For those wishing to move up the political ladder, the Tories were the only game in town, the only gateway to governmental power. Companies and individuals would donate to the party simply because failing to do so would send a potentially damaging message to those at the top.

Media coverage was also tilted toward the government. Studies show that reporters are nervous about criticizing governments that are widely popular for fear of offending their readers and viewers.<sup>15</sup> Both Lougheed and Klein were masters at setting the journalistic agenda and in rewarding and punishing journalists who didn't play by their rules. The tradition of

“Prairie boosterism,” which made critical coverage of local institutions into a kind of sin, unabashedly right-wing newspapers such as the *Suns*, and a bevy of talk-radio hosts who served as cheerleaders for Lougheed and Klein in particular, added to the lopsided coverage. One study of the *Calgary Herald*’s coverage of the Klein government’s rejection of the 1997 Kyoto Accords found that not only did the *Herald* provide positive coverage of the government’s policies, but that the public’s support for these policies increased dramatically as a result of the *Herald*’s reporting.<sup>16</sup> Another study of media coverage of the Supreme Court of Canada’s decision on gay rights in *Vriend v. Alberta* (1998) revealed very different coverage on the part of the the national and Alberta press. The national press framed this as a “province-as-deviant” story because Alberta had refused to recognize gay rights and had violated the national consensus on the issue that had emerged. The provincial press, however, framed the story as a federal-provincial issue and portrayed the Klein government as a victim of federal power.<sup>17</sup>

While Lougheed and Klein generally benefited from favourable coverage, the media tiger would often show its teeth. Through its many difficulties, the Getty government could not avoid heavy doses of negative coverage. By Klein’s fourth and last term, both the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal*’s coverage had also turned sour. The established press treated every misstep, scandal, and foible with often sharp and incisive coverage. Premier Alison Redford’s media honeymoon was short-lived. Lacking the political skills needed to hold her government together, she was devoured by negative reporting.

Rich Vivone believes that fear also played a role in keeping the Tories in power. As Vivone put it, in so many venues, “the fear was palpable and the silence pervasive.”<sup>18</sup> Much like Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s well-known theory of the “spiral of silence,” which argues that people tend to keep silent when they know that their opinions are not widely shared for fear of being ostracized or being laughed at, people in Alberta knew how to navigate their own entrenched political culture.<sup>19</sup> The danger in any one-party state is that ideas are suppressed as people come to fear a government that can operate seemingly without limits. In what writer Aritha van Herk has described as a society of “mavericks,” it was sometimes difficult to avoid conformity.<sup>20</sup> And therein lies a paradox of politics in Alberta: as Mark Lisac has observed, the “thing about calling Albertans mavericks is it ignores a huge streak of



conformism in the province, which is there often for very good reasons. Usually it's a method of meeting all sorts of outside pressures. You can see it in the way that people approach community life and politics, where there's strong pressure to all belong to the same party and vote the same way, and even sometimes believing that Albertans are mavericks—that's a method of conformism too."<sup>21</sup>

Apathy also played a part, as voter turnouts were stunningly low during the PC reign. From a high-water mark of 60 per cent in the close 1993 election, turnout plummeted to 54 per cent in 2012, this after dipping to below 50 per cent in 1986 and 2004. And in 2008, turnout barely topped 40 per cent—an all-time low for Canadian provincial elections. For many Albertans the logic was simple: Why go to the game if you already know the score? Majorities were so large that it seemed to make no difference if you voted or stayed home.

## The Seeds of Defeat

While in chapter 2 of this volume my colleague Duane Bratt skillfully describes the failures and miscalculations that led to the Tories' defeat in the 2015 election campaign, the Progressive Conservative dynasty had been in trouble for quite some time before the election was called. While elections do make a difference—and one can certainly argue that a better campaign, with a more appealing message and a more compelling leader might have altered the Tories' fortunes—the harsh reality is that the PCs had gotten the big things wrong for many years. As mentioned previously, one prominent school of thought argues that people vote based on the state of the economy.<sup>22</sup> During prosperous times, governmental foibles and mistakes are easily forgiven and forgotten. During difficult economic times, there is not only little forgiveness, but politicians become targets for pent-up anger, and for every and all sins.

For much of the Tory dynasty, the party had the good fortune to govern during prosperous times. This was certainly the case through most of the Lougheed and Klein years. High energy prices, the growth brought by immigration, a talented workforce, and low taxes gave the Tory government a veneer of success. But when the music slowed with the sharp global economic downturn that began in 2008, followed by the crash in global

energy prices that hit with devastating force in 2014, party fortunes began to sink. The government's much-vaunted achievements seemed to dissolve like quick sand. By the time Stelmach became premier, the government's agenda was clouded by deficits, cutbacks to government services, rising unemployment, grim lineups at emergency rooms and for operations, a massive infrastructure debt, a worrying shortage of schools, electricity rate hikes, an environmental mess, and the spectre of a monster provincial debt lurking behind what for the moment were balanced budgets. Tough times were taking the bloom off the Tory rose.

Interestingly, before the 2015 election, the only times the PCs found themselves in trouble was in 1993 when during an economic downturn the Tories came close to losing to Lawrence Decore's Liberals, and in 2012, when in the midst of the global recession Alison Redford pulled out a surprising victory in the last week of the campaign against the Wildrose Party. These near-death experiences remind us that the Tories were most likely saved from the fate of most other parties by the good fortune of having governed in mostly prosperous times.

With the energy industry cascading into disaster with the global collapse in oil prices in 2014, it became glaringly obvious that the PCs had done little to diversify the economy. Unlike governments in Norway and Alaska, which had used savings strategies to create enormous pools of capital, the Alberta Heritage Trust Fund created under Lougheed was largely abandoned by subsequent Tory governments. While policy experts had for years recommended that the government build up the fund in order to create new industries and economic strategies, the pull of immediate needs and short-term goals proved irresistible. The fund has been effectively frozen since the mid-1980s; as of 2018 its value is roughly \$17.5 billion, a figure that includes so-called "deemed" assets that no longer have any real value. According to at least one estimate, had the government continued to invest in the ways that Peter Lougheed had envisioned, the fund would be worth close to \$200 billion today, and possibly a lot more.<sup>23</sup> Norway, which funnels 100 per cent of its annual resource revenue into its Oil Fund, has watched it balloon to well over \$1 trillion and it has invested in over nine thousand businesses. The Alaska Permanent Fund, which collects 25 per cent of that state's annual resource revenue annually, has a war chest of some \$65 billion, from which generous dividends are handed out to individual Alaskans every year

(over \$1,100 per person in 2018). Unfortunately for Albertans, when the rains finally came, Alberta's famous rainy day fund offered little protection.

For years, economists and leading business executives tried to convince the PCs to bring in some form of sales tax. As Ron Kneebone and Jennifer Zwicker demonstrate in chapter 10, provincial budgets would expand and contract like an accordion due to rising and falling energy prices. Not only did this make annual planning difficult, as budgets were based on (almost always wrong) predictions about what prices for oil and gas would be, but it fed the illusion that taxes could be kept low indefinitely. Despite the fact that a sales tax might have avoided a long trail of deficits, no leader wanted to risk their political skin by instituting, or even calling for, a sales tax. The absence of a sales tax had taken on symbolic meaning. It was part of the "Alberta Advantage" the Tories had promised Albertans. Much like Kryptonite, touching it was thought to bring instant political death. Running deficits and cutting services seemed a safer idea.

The party also began to disintegrate from within. From the time that Ed Stelmach took the helm in 2006 until Alison Redford's departure in 2014, the party was effectively locked in a brutal civil war. To some degree, the race for a new leader began almost from the moment that Stelmach became premier. Dull and uninspiring the premier's popularity plummeted to the point where members began to worry that he would drive the entire party over the cliff with him. An endless barrage of threats, intrigues, attempted coups, and open displays of disloyalty and disrespect from his internal rivals ultimately pushed Stelmach from office. Redford fared no better. Elected with only minimal support from the caucus, and having tried to pull the party to the political centre even as her caucus was trying to pull the party to the right, Redford was quickly deposed. Of course, one can argue that she effectively deposed herself with her inept political style and questionable use of government funds.

While these fierce battles and the almost daily media soap opera that they created took a toll on party fortunes, perhaps the deepest self-inflicted wound came from the fact that the party's election machine had fallen into disrepair. Klein needed little in the way of organization to win elections. Stelmach's and Redford's lacklustre leadership not only divided the party but also left a dwindling membership and a rotting organization. Most critically, the party failed to renew itself by attracting star candidates. To many

Albertans, the party had become an “old boys” network—even if some of the players were women—that was increasingly out of touch with Alberta’s changing social landscape. Arguably, Prentice attempted to renew the party by recruiting new people, but by then, one can argue, it was too late.

A last point to consider is that Alberta was Canada’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases, and therefore its largest polluter, at a time when the international environmental movement began to make real inroads in global consciousness, and indeed in politics. The energy industry and the Alberta government seemed to be caught by surprise as the oil sands became an object of global controversy and derision. Where Alberta had once been viewed as the “last best West,” images of dirty Alberta were now carried around the world. Many if not most Albertans resented this characterization, but the fact that the provincial government became a villain on the global stage did little to inspire confidence. In fact, many Albertans wondered if the Tories even had an environmental policy.

Two images can serve as bookends for the Progressive Conservatives’ years in power. One, perhaps the most well-known photo in Alberta politics, was taken in 1967 and shows Peter Lougheed running arm in arm up the steps of the legislature with five other recently elected Conservative MLA’s, including Don Getty, Hugh Horner, and David Russell. The photo was taken when the party was just establishing itself as a force in Alberta politics, and it portrays the unbridled vigour and determination that would carry Lougheed and his team to victory four years later, in 1971. The newly elected MLAs appear unstoppable. When the end came in 2015, another poignant moment was captured on camera. It shows the crowd at the Tory’s election-night gathering at Calgary’s Metropolitan Centre, and it is notable for how sparse it was. What had once been one of Canada’s great political dynasties could barely muster an audience. Appearing deeply shaken, Jim Prentice announced that he was resigning from the leadership and from the seat that he had just won in the legislature. Not long after that, both the stage and the room were empty.

## NOTES

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- 13 Ibid., 164.
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