



ORANGE CHINOOK: Politics in the New Alberta

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What's Past is Prologue: Ontario 1990 and Alberta 2015

Graham White

Commentary on the results of the 5 May 2015 Alberta election often began with words like “stunning upset,” “totally unexpected,” and “unprecedented.” Indeed, anyone who predicted, even a few weeks earlier, that Rachel Notley’s New Democrats would form a majority government would have been dismissed as seriously delusional. Yet an NDP majority it was. And “totally unexpected” certainly applied to a convincing majority victory by a party which in the previous election hadn’t even managed 10 per cent of the vote, electing fewer than a handful of MLAs.

But as for unprecedented . . . Was it?

The 2015 election was by no means the first in Alberta to see a third party come out of nowhere to claim a smashing electoral victory. In 1921, the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) ousted the Liberal government, going from 3 seats to 38, a majority in the 61-seat House. In turn the UFA suffered a similar—in fact worse—fate in the 1935 election, losing every one of its seats as the Social Credit Party, which hadn’t existed until a few months before the election, took all but 7 of the legislature’s 63 seats.

Given the social, economic, and demographic changes that have transformed the province since the Great Depression, 1921 and 1935 rate as close to prehistoric so far as contemporary Alberta is concerned. Surely the surprise accession to power in modern-day Alberta of a (to be sure, moderate) left-wing NDP, when the party had never come remotely close to winning power in the province, was truly unprecedented.

In Alberta it was, but a generation earlier an eerily similar election brought an equally surprised and unprepared NDP government to power—in Ontario, of all places. In recent decades the NDP has formed the government in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Yukon, and Nova Scotia, but in each instance the NDP had already been a major contender for power, so while its electoral victories in those provinces may have been noteworthy, they were not unexpected. By contrast, the 1990 Ontario election brought to power a provincial NDP that had never come close to winning an election, though its vote share was consistently higher than that garnered by its Alberta brethren.¹

This chapter is an exercise in comparison, on the presumption that even unique political developments are better understood in comparison with similar situations. Given my limited expertise in Alberta politics, the object of the chapter is not to make pronouncements about the early days of the Notley government. My hope, rather, is that juxtaposing the early experiences of the Notley-led NDP government with those of the Ontario NDP a generation before will generate questions and insights that will enhance the understanding of those who study and participate in Alberta politics. It may even be of wider relevance to the study of newly elected social democratic governments in Canada, regardless of whether their ascent to power was unexpected.

The focus here is not on the policy directions adopted or avoided by the Notley government, in large part because it will be some time before the political and substantive success of the NDP's policy decisions can be evaluated (including their staying power under subsequent governments of different stripes). Instead, significant emphasis is placed on transition, the oft-times mysterious process by which newly elected political parties take over the reins of power and prepare themselves to govern. The chapter employs a broad understanding of "transition," one that encompasses not just the brief period between election and swearing in (when the formal transition team typically disbands), but also the early political and administrative decisions taken by the new government. Transitions can be done well or badly, but either way they are critically important in rendering a neophyte government into an effective one. Arguably, the Ontario NDP government never fully recovered from its rocky transition.

Alberta is not Ontario

Lest it be thought that this chapter is little more than an exercise in Central Canadian hubris—the implicit message being that Ontario had done it all before so that there was nothing new or interesting about the Alberta NDP’s ascension to power—let me make it clear that while striking similarities are evident, the two cases also exhibit extensive, significant differences. And that intriguing as the Ontario comparison may be, what transpired in Alberta in 2015 was very much *sui generis* and worthy of study of its own accord, as indeed this book demonstrates. In addition, of course, there is value in knowing what the Notley government learned from the experiences of the Ontario NDP—especially their mistakes—as it took power.

First and foremost, of course, Alberta in 2015 was a very different place than Ontario in 1990, not just in the context of politics but also in terms of the two provinces’ economics and of socio-demographic profiles. Both economies were in serious decline when the NDP came to power, but the depth of the Ontario recession did not become clear for some time after the election, whereas Alberta’s economic woes had been obvious for some time prior to the election. As well, the economic downturn in Alberta was almost entirely due to a precipitous decline in world prices for oil and gas and was far more severe than what Ontario experienced in 1990 (though, to be sure, it was that province’s worst economic slump since the Depression), which was primarily a function of problems in the manufacturing sector, compounded by high interest rates.

Politically, substantial differences are evident as well. Leaving aside the conceptual and empirical morass into which comparisons of provincial political cultures often fall, sharp contrasts mark the two provinces’ party systems. While the 2015 Alberta election saw the end of forty-four years of Conservative rule, and while it was only five years before the Ontario election of 1990 that forty-three years of Conservative rule came to an end, it would be a mistake to assume too much similarity. For much of their time in office the Alberta Tories enjoyed massive, overwhelming majorities in the legislature, often with a small, enfeebled opposition. Alberta was a classic one-party dominant system, with support for other parties, including distinctively Albertan parties such as Wildrose, constantly waxing and waning. In Ontario, the Conservatives were clearly in control during their

long reign but (other than in the 1950s) had to contend with numerically and politically strong opposition parties. This reflects the primal reality that since the early 1960s Ontario has had a stable three-party system. Relatedly, in recent decades, including during the long Conservative period, Ontario has experienced repeated episodes of minority government. Alberta, by contrast, has never known a minority government.²

When Bob Rae's New Democrats came to power in 1990, some may have thought that a new political balance among the parties would ensue, but no one expected either the Liberals or the Conservatives to disappear. Otherwise put, the essential stability of the three-party system was not in doubt. By contrast, if the highly fluid political situation faced by the Notley government in its early days has solidified for the next election, the medium- and long-term future for the Alberta party system is opaque. This topic is discussed in the next chapter by Anthony Sayers and David Stewart.

Among the political imponderables—and this is yet another contrast with the earlier Ontario situation—are the prospects that the Alberta NDP can maintain the level of support it received in May 2015. The more than four-fold jump in the party's vote share—from under 10 per cent to more than 40 per cent—was nothing less than remarkable, but can the party retain it, let alone build on it? To be sure, the Ontario New Democrats came to power in 1990 by virtue of a substantial boost in their electoral fortunes, but the increase they enjoyed was far less dramatic: from about 25 per cent in 1987 to just under 38 per cent.

In the legislative realm, an important difference is the nature and effectiveness of the opposition faced by the two NDP cabinets. The Rae government in Ontario faced some fifty-six members of the opposition, many of whom were able, experienced ex-ministers. Although Rachel Notley's cabinet looked across the chamber at thirty-three opposition MLAs, only a handful of the Progressive Conservative members had experience in government.³

Of the good many further political differences that could be explored, two deserve at least passing mention. First, the substance and the tenor of federal-provincial relations have long been starkly different, with of course correspondingly different and important implications for provincial politics. Second, nothing that occurred during Bob Rae's premiership (or that of any other Ontario premier for that matter) approaches in

scale and significance—including in the political realm—the catastrophic Fort McMurray fire (see the previous chapter by Chaseten Remillard and Sheridan McVean), which kept Premier Notley front and centre for the duration of the most destructive episode in provincial history.

A final difference: Rachel Notley is unlikely to be a candidate for the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada.

Surprised and Unprepared

The Alberta NDP under Rachel Notley had aspirations to win power, but this was expected to take some time. As Melanee Thomas describes in her chapter, the NDP plan built on its small but effective four-MLA caucus. For the 2015 election the party had identified a small number of ridings it believed it could win; in turn, this broader base would serve as the springboard to victory one or two elections down the road. Even the most optimistic party operatives could hardly conceive of an election outcome producing dozens of NDP MLAs and a majority government. From the outset it was clear that the election was going badly for the ruling Conservatives, that the Wildrose Party was struggling to recover from the devastating mass defection of nine of its MLAs—including its leader, Danielle Smith—just five months earlier, and that Notley and the NDP were attracting widespread support. Still, according to journalists Sydney Sharpe and Don Braid, it was just over a week before voting day that the party's internal polling convinced an astounded Notley that the NDP would win. Notley immediately realized that nothing had been done by way of transition planning, and so she directed that top priority be devoted to it.⁴

If the Alberta New Democrats had barely a week of pre-election transition planning, at least they had begun the process before the votes were counted. As in Alberta in 2015, the Ontario election of 1990 began badly for the governing party—in this instance the Liberals—and it continued downhill as the campaign progressed. Nor were the Progressive Conservatives doing much better; they had a new, inexperienced leader and the party was still in disarray after its humbling fall from power in 1985. By contrast, the NDP was attracting big and supportive crowds in ridings where it had previously been all but irrelevant. Although the NDP had formed the Official Opposition following the 1987 Ontario election, unlike in Alberta, little

optimism existed in the party about a possible path to power. Bob Rae had privately decided to resign after the election and leading MPPs did not run.⁵ Although things were going remarkably well for the NDP, and despite internal poll numbers pointing to an NDP victory, top party officials seemed unable to contemplate forming a government.⁶ According to Rae's memoirs, even on election day "we began to prepare for the *possibility* of a transition to government."⁷

That the Ontario NDP experienced a difficult transition owed a good deal to the party's lack of attention to the possibility that it would be called on to govern. The NDP was hardly unusual in this regard; in Canada parties that see themselves far from power typically pay little heed to transition planning, in part because it can seem a poor use of scarce organizational resources and in part because they fear being portrayed as arrogant or out of touch in media accounts that fail to appreciate the importance of transition planning. Indeed, the Rae government's predecessor, the Liberal government of David Peterson, had come to power five years earlier having done no transition planning whatsoever before the election.⁸

At the same time, the bureaucracy also bore significant responsibility for the inadequacies of the NDP transition. In terms of preparation for a possible change in government, the bureaucracy was caught almost as flat-footed as the NDP. Very little work had been done in anticipation of a transfer of power from the Liberals to the NDP or Progressive Conservatives. Moreover, once the results were in, significant elements in the senior ranks of the Ontario bureaucracy failed not only to appreciate that the NDP's goals and approaches differed substantially from those of the Liberals, but also to accommodate the needs of the new government.⁹

A Good Time or a Long Time?

At the first meeting of the BC NDP cabinet following the 1972 provincial election, which brought the party to power for the first time, Premier Dave Barrett put a key question to his ministers:

Were we there for a good time or a long time? Under that umbrella, we discussed whether we were really going to make fundamental changes in British Columbia, or whether we

should try to hang on for another term, rationalizing that we'd get the job done next time around. We agreed unanimously to strike while the iron was hot. Our government represented the first real break from the traditional power base in the province. We were free and unfettered to roam in new directions. We were impatient to do something decent and honest and human. It was going to be a good time for the ordinary people of British Columbia.¹⁰

No political party wins power and immediately plans on being defeated in the next election. At the same time, a party that comes to office with an agenda significantly outside the mainstream needs to address the issue of whether it will be a one-term government, especially if an unusual confluence of political circumstances contributed substantially to its electoral victory. And if the probabilities suggest that it will indeed be a one-term government, what can it do to produce, in Barrett's apt phrase, a "good time"—substantial, lasting political and policy change?

To be sure, nothing—neither victory nor defeat—is assured in politics. If, as Harold Wilson famously put it, a week is a long time in politics, five years is an eternity. Incumbency at the local level and control of the machinery and financial clout of government have served many parties seeking re-election well. Nonetheless, the very strong likelihood was that the Ontario NDP was destined to be a one-term government. This is not a retrospective judgement based on the dire economic straights Ontario faced in the early 1990s, much of which was unfairly blamed on the NDP. Rather, it should have been clear from the outset that the Ontario NDP victory in the 1990 election owed a great deal to an unlikely-to-be-repeated alignment of political factors. The NDP benefitted extensively from favourable vote splits, which allowed them to win a comfortable majority—74 of 130 seats—on less than 38 per cent of the vote. The potential for growth was very limited; in the next election, the New Democrats might hope to win at most 3 or 4 of the seats that had escaped them in 1990. By contrast, the party had managed to win between a dozen and a score of rural or semi-rural ridings (depending on how one counted them), often by slim margins, that it had no business winning, having never been competitive in them and lacking all

but the most rudimentary campaign organization. Many, if not all, of these ridings were unlikely to return to the NDP fold come the next election.¹¹

The Ontario NDP leadership, both government and party, would have been keenly aware of these hard political realities, and they would have known that this pointed to the likelihood of a one-term NDP government (the deep animosity between the NDP and both the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives, as well as the ideological gap between them, rendered improbable the prospect of a minority NDP government). However, it seems that the Rae government never seriously confronted the practical questions of only holding power for one term.

What about their compatriots in Alberta twenty-five years later? As Anthony Sayers and David Stewart indicate in the next chapter, the future of Alberta politics would entail either long-term consolidation of the right or continued division, each with very different electoral implications for the NDP. Duane Bratt writes in his chapter that he would not be surprised to see the complete demise of the Progressive Conservative Party.

According to Brian Topp, chair of the Alberta NDP's transition team and subsequently Premier Notley's chief of staff, Barrett's challenge to his cabinet—"a famous exchange in Western NDP history"—was directly addressed by the new Alberta government. Notley's conclusion was that the way Barrett had framed the issue was "a false choice"—that it was important to do what the party had been elected to do (noting "we're condemned to be ourselves") and that this was the key to re-election.¹²

Of course, no government can guarantee that its capstone policies won't be reversed by its successors. Many of the principal policy initiatives of the Barrett NDP remained in place throughout the long tenure of the right-wing Social Credit Party, but most of the Ontario NDP's signature policies did not survive long under the Mike Harris Progressive Conservatives.

The Alberta Transition

Keith Brownsey's chapter provides a far more detailed account of the NDP transition in Alberta than is offered here. Still, in contrasting the Alberta experience with what happened in Ontario twenty-five years earlier, a few points warrant attention.

The Alberta transition team enjoyed a significant advantage over its Ontario predecessor in terms of its key members' previous government experience. Chair Brian Topp had served as deputy chief of staff to Saskatchewan premier Roy Romanow, and he had worked with other NDP governments so he knew the governmental ropes. Another member, John Heaney, had similar experience working for BC premier Mike Harcourt, and still others knew their way around government (as opposed to politics more generally). In contrast, while the members of the Ontario NDP transition team were all highly experienced politicians, not one had significant experience in government; as a result, they not only faced a steep learning curve but also lacked understanding and appreciation of the role of the public service.¹³

Topp points out that "the Alberta transition team did not have the luxury that some other Western NDP transitions had of thinking about its work for a year or more." Paradoxically, this turned out to be a blessing in that the transition "had the virtue of not being overthought." Especially in light of the premier's decision, in part to secure "supply" (i.e., authorize spending) to meet the legislature only six weeks after the election, "the brutal lack of time" forced the transition team to focus only on urgent tasks. Policy issues, for example, would be addressed by the premier and the new cabinet rather than in the transition process.¹⁴

The transition team relied heavily on the often substantial briefing books prepared by previous Western NDP transition teams. No attempt was made to duplicate their detailed analyses, however; rather the Alberta team distilled their contents into a "to do" list—a checklist of essential tasks. As this suggests, the Alberta transition was firmly located within the rich traditions of the Western Canadian NDP; the transition team did not seek out documentation on either the Ontario NDP transition or the much more recent NDP transition in Nova Scotia. Indeed, the Notley government sought to emulate not only Western NDP traditions but also prominent elements of Alberta history. In this vein, the first Throne Speech explicitly linked the government's aspirations and approaches to those of governments and parties in earlier eras—the founding Liberal government, the United Farmers of Alberta, the Socreds, and even, in their early days, the Progressive Conservatives.¹⁵

The transition team did touch base with most former NDP premiers, including Bob Rae, as well as other senior party officials, primarily from

the West. Topp's former colleagues in the Romanow-era Premier's Office provided significant advice and encouragement, as did Romanow himself. Former Saskatchewan deputy premier Pat Atkinson provided mentoring and counsel to newly appointed ministers and to government MLAs.

The Ontario experience had little if any direct influence on the work of the transition team. The need to focus on the "irreducible minimum" left no time for academic sources on transitions, such as David Zussman's *Off and Running*¹⁶ or the book that David Cameron and I wrote about transitions in Ontario, *Cycling into Saigon*, which examined what went wrong with the 1990 NDP transition and why the 1995 Progressive Conservative transition was so successful.¹⁷ However, once in office, the Rae experience, in Topp's words, "did colour some of what we did in Alberta."¹⁸ According to Topp, this influence could be seen in three different ways. (As discussed below, in political terms the Alberta NDP handled its first budget more adroitly than did the Ontario NDP, but this does not seem to have been as a result of a conscious decision to proceed differently.)

First, the Notley government had "a much lighter touch in shaking up the public service" than was the case in Ontario, since it was "less inclined to see them as opponents."¹⁹ (The crucial topic of relations with the bureaucracy is examined in the next section of this chapter.) Second, Notley and her government understood that it was essential that the public saw them keeping their promises. The Alberta NDP government would avoid fundamental policy reverses, such as the Rae government's decision to abandon one of their central policy commitments, public auto insurance, which not only engendered a serious public credibility gap but also enraged party activists.²⁰ Third, noble as it may have been in the early 1990s to devote significant time and energy to constitutional issues, the political lesson was the need to "stick to your knitting"—that is, to give prime attention to dealing with the economic shocks that had rocked Alberta as a result of the decline in natural resource prices. Here Notley enjoyed an advantage not open to Rae. As premier of Ontario, Rae had to play a central role in the Meech Lake and Charlottetown processes, but Notley has not had to deal with such mega-constitutional issues, with their potential to create divisiveness on the home front. She has of course been deeply engaged in pipeline politics marked by bitter conflict with British Columbia and sometimes uncertain relations with Ottawa, but her strong advocacy of Alberta's resource

industries carries substantial political benefits. (See Deborah Yedlin's chapter in this volume for analysis of this contentious issue.)

An important early decision for Notley concerned the size of her cabinet, and in this she took a very different approach than Rae in 1990. Against advice from NDP elder statesman and former Saskatchewan premier Allan Blakeney, who advocated beginning with a very small cabinet, Rae's initial cabinet numbered twenty-seven. In retrospect, Rae recognized that "I should have followed [Blakeney's advice]. . . . I listened instead to others who encouraged me to make the cabinet as inclusive as possible, and give people a chance to learn on the job."²¹ For her part, Notley chose to heed the political advice of both her transition team and Roy Romanow, who favoured a small cabinet.

Beginning with a small cabinet brought significant political advantages: it permitted Notley to appoint people she knew, it sent a message to the rest of caucus that they were being given the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities, and it limited the challenges of staffing ministers' offices. In addition, according to Brian Topp, it made for a cabinet that was small enough to actually deliberate on decisions and thereby, in line with Notley's predisposition, establish a culture of deliberation in cabinet that would persist even when cabinet would expand.²² Partly on the basis of his experience as a deputy minister in Ontario, Cabinet Secretary Richard Dicerri also recommended that Notley keep her first cabinet small for administrative reasons: the caucus included few experienced decision-makers and she faced too many unknowns when it came to prospective ministers.²³ Notley did not repeat Rae's mistake; her first cabinet consisted of only a dozen, including herself. (Three years later, the cabinet had grown substantially, to twenty, though this was still significantly fewer than the numbers in some Progressive Conservative cabinets; when she resigned Alison Redford, for example, had twenty-nine ministers.)

Whether a new government's first budget marks the end of the transition process is a question that need not concern us here. What is of interest is the significant contrast between the first budgets put forward by the Ontario and Alberta parties.²⁴ Overall, the numbers were similar: both entailed deficits of roughly \$10 billion on spending of a little over \$51 billion; in both cases, these were record high deficits.²⁵ Both budgets elicited severe criticism from the business community, though nothing in Alberta

matched the spectacle of stock brokers and accountants screaming in protest on the lawn of the Ontario legislative building. Indeed, the Alberta NDP handled the politics of its first budget far more adroitly than had their Ontario counterparts in 1991.

Ontario treasurer Floyd Laughren inherited a structural deficit of roughly \$8 billion from his Liberal predecessors, so that in some ways his first budget was less radical than status quo.²⁶ It did not of course appear that way at the time, given that the Liberals had claimed (quite wrongly) that they had delivered a balanced budget the previous year and the New Democrats were projecting a \$10 billion deficit. The Ontario NDP government naively assumed that the budget's positive features, which were obvious to them, would be equally obvious to the public. They weren't, and the NDP immediately plunged 20 to 25 per cent in the polls, a reverse from which they never recovered.²⁷

In Alberta the NDP brought in former Bank of Canada governor David Dodge—surely the antithesis of a wild-eyed economic radical—to review the province's infrastructure needs and financing. Not surprisingly in light of the pervasive infrastructure deficit that had plagued Alberta for some time, Dodge recommended a substantial increase in capital spending.²⁸ Citing his advice, when Minister of Finance Joe Ceci brought down his 2016 budget he boosted infrastructure spending by 15 per cent, which amounted to an additional \$4.5 billion (front-end loaded) over the course of a five-year capital plan.²⁹ The budget pledged to avoid public sector layoffs and it projected 10,000 new infrastructure-based jobs in each of the first two years of the capital plan. Overall, although his budget was palpably more of a departure from previous fiscal policy than was Laughren's, Ceci avoided saying anything as inflammatory as Laughren's well-intentioned boast that, faced with a choice between fighting the deficit and fighting the recession, he was proud to fight the recession.³⁰ To be sure, Ceci's first budget engendered significant criticism, but the party did not experience anything like the drop in popularity that beset the Ontario NDP in the wake of its first budget.³¹

The public-relations disaster that accompanied their first budget was an important but was by no means the only instance of a phenomenon the Ontario NDP government experienced to a far greater degree than its later Alberta counterpart. Having come to office largely because of the negative reaction against its Liberal predecessor, the Rae government lacked a broad

base of popular support for even its modestly left-wing policies. At the same time, pent-up demand for thoroughgoing change among the party faithful led to unrealistic expectations as to what an NDP government could and should achieve. When those expectations weren't met, the extra-parliamentary wing of the party was not shy about expressing its dissatisfaction. The sense among party activists that the Rae government was betraying its *raison d'être* was evident in the title of a book that two long-time NDP militants published while the Rae government was still in office: *Giving Away a Miracle: Lost Dreams and Broken Promises and the Ontario NDP*.³² Rae may have been indulging in hyperbole but he conveyed the contradictory pressures his government faced when he reflected that "the left felt my brain had been captured by Bay Street and Bay Street thought I was some kind of Maoist."³³

Tension, oft-times serious tension, between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary wings of the NDP (and the CCF before it) has been a perennial theme of Canadian politics. While the Alberta NDP has not been immune to criticism from party activists about the pace and scope of change, it has not had to endure anything like the internal party dissension that hamstrung the Ontario NDP government, perhaps because the Alberta party's base is so much smaller and less militant than that of the Ontario NDP. As well, despite facing as bleak a fiscal situation as Rae, Notley has not repeated his probably fatal mistake of enraging previously supportive public-sector unions by breaking collective agreements and imposing wage and salary cuts on public servants. Criticisms from Alberta NDP supporters have been muted, even in instances where Notley reversed previous party positions on the oil sands and pipelines.

Relations with the Bureaucracy

As mentioned above, lack of preparation on the part of the bureaucracy and its failure to understand the NDP's aspirations and approaches contributed to the party's problematic transition in Ontario in 1990. However, a good deal more than inadequate bureaucratic preparation and understanding marked the transition and subsequent developments. Few if any of the New Democrats in the new government—or the transition team for that matter—had more than a rudimentary knowledge of how government worked. Bob

Rae himself remarked that “there is probably no worse training in the world for becoming premier than spending a career in opposition”—in large part because of the reluctance of senior bureaucrats to share information with opposition politicians, especially NDP politicians.³⁴ Many NDP ministers and political staff had considerable policy expertise but a common attitude among them, at least at the outset, was that policy was all and that once policy was developed and decided, administrative issues were just “plumbing.”

Ignorance was of course a problem, but far more intractable was the deeply rooted negative attitudes toward the bureaucracy among many in the Ontario NDP. A reasonable expectation might be that the NDP and the bureaucrats would be natural allies, in that both believe in activist, interventionist government. However, profound mistrust often trumped such potential affinities. Many in the NDP saw the senior bureaucracy as an integral part of “the establishment” that they had been fighting for so long, and they expressed concern that their policies and priorities would be sabotaged by hostile civil servants. “We all have copies of *A Very British Coup*” was how one senior NDP figure put it.³⁵

Not everyone in the new government harboured such dark views about the bureaucracy. Some understood and accepted the division of responsibilities between politicians and bureaucrats, while others, if wary of bureaucratic foibles (they had all watched *Yes Minister*), recognized that they needed the bureaucrats more than the bureaucrats needed them.³⁶ Rae himself early on sought to signal that his government respected the bureaucracy, telling the press “I’ve been called the son of many things, but I’m the son of a professional civil servant. And I understand well their sense of professionalism and their sense of public service.”³⁷

Accordingly, the NDP did not begin their term with a purge of deputy ministers, though Rae found himself under pressure to remove Cabinet Secretary Peter Barnes.³⁸ Over time, however, Rae’s views of the bureaucracy became less sanguine, and changes were made to the senior mandarin, generating disquiet in the bureaucracy.³⁹ In particular, two years into the mandate Rae replaced Barnes with his key political advisor, Principal Secretary David Agnew, a move widely criticized as politicizing the public service. Thus the New Democrats were not the only ones expressing mistrust and ill feeling; it was not so much that some senior public servants

spoke disrespectfully of their political masters, but rather that many in the bureaucracy were uneasy with the NDP's style and approach.⁴⁰

From the outset, a far different tenor characterized relations between the Notley government and its senior officials. Several factors were at play. First, the Progressive Conservatives had not endeared themselves to the bureaucrats. According to veteran legislative reporter Graham Thomson, years of politicization and intimidation had taken a toll on public service morale. Noting that one of Alison Redford's first acts as premier had been to sack nine deputy ministers, Thomson quotes Premier Jim Prentice on his frustration at finding "shockingly high" turnover and widespread demoralization among senior bureaucrats: "I was surprised when I stepped in as premier the extent to which [the civil service] needed repair work. . . . People had been cowed. . . . [My weekend briefing material was] five or six hundred pages of basically information and no advice. People were fearful of providing advice" (Thomson 2016: 310).⁴¹ Prentice moved to address the problem, making some progress before his defeat, but for many in the bureaucracy the Progressive Conservative defeat and the arrival of the NDP was a welcome event. Second, Prentice's key move in attempting to revive the public service was to bring in as cabinet secretary Richard Dicteri, who had been his deputy when he was industry minister in Ottawa. As a highly experienced and well-respected bureaucrat, Dicteri was a good choice. And in terms of working with the new NDP government he was a fortuitous choice, for he had been a deputy minister under Bob Rae and was known and respected by senior New Democrats.

Third, whereas the Ontario bureaucracy was as unprepared for a transition to an NDP administration as was the NDP itself, the Alberta public service, under Dicteri's direction, had engaged in serious transition planning and was able to move quickly and effectively to support the new government. Finally, a great many of the newly elected NDP MLAs—ministers included—had so little experience of government that they had few preconceived ideas about the public service, positive or negative. Few exhibited the jaded attitudes and overt hostility towards the bureaucracy that characterized so many in Rae's caucus and cabinet.

With so much churn in the senior levels of the Alberta bureaucracy, none of the deputy ministers had gone through a transition-planning exercise as deputies (given the strong possibility of a Wildrose victory in the

2012 election, extensive transition planning had taken place but few of those involved at a senior level remained). Dicerni assigned key deputies to analyze the platforms of both the Wildrose and the NDP, and he shared the analysis with the entire deputy cadre. He also mapped out a calendar of activities and decisions that the new government would face in its first six to eight weeks and a personal transition schedule for meetings that would be necessary with the new premier and his or her team.

Dicerni did not specifically ask Premier Prentice for permission to engage in dialogue with the opposition parties, though he believes it would have been granted had he done so, considering Prentice's understanding of the need for strong, professional government administration. He did, however, let it be known that he would be receptive to phone calls from opposition representatives and did engage in what he terms "constructive dialogue" with them. Ground rules for these discussions included an agreement that there would be no exchange of documents—indeed, there would be nothing on paper—and that discussions would be limited to "framework matters."⁴²

Within minutes of the TV networks declaring an NDP majority, Dicerni received a phone call from Topp to set up a meeting the following day. Dicerni also spoke with the premier-elect. Early meetings between Dicerni and Topp concentrated on "fundamentals" such as the size of cabinet, decision-making processes, and the like. As well, overview discussions were held on the platform commitments the government wished to pursue. (As was the case with "Agenda for People," the platform of the Ontario NDP in 1990, Notley's manifesto, "Leadership for What Matters," was not developed with any sense that it might actually need to be implemented. However, at least "Leadership" was a coherent platform of policy initiatives. By contrast, "Agenda for People" was, according to two NDP insiders, no blueprint for governing; rather it was "mostly a compilation of demands that had been articulated in the daily Question Period over the previous year . . . little more than an election ploy".⁴³)

Three main briefing sessions were organized for Notley: on the overall budgetary/financial situation, on climate change and possible policy responses to it, and on health issues, in terms of both policy and financing. The transition process also included a review of the deputy minister cadre. Notley and Topp made it clear that they supported continuity in the public

service—one of the party’s campaign pitches had been to vote NDP for a stable government—and no deputies were fired. The NDP believed, with good reason given their strong showing in Edmonton, that, overall, the public service welcomed the advent of the new government. Still, it was recognized that not all those in the senior ranks of the public service would be comfortable with the policies and approaches of their new political masters or appropriate for implementing their agenda. Dealing with such officials, however, was left in the non-partisan hands of Cabinet Secretary Dicerni. Subsequently, as in Ontario, some deputies who were found not to be up to the job were reassigned.

As mentioned, although Rae kept Cabinet Secretary Peter Barnes in place for two years, when he did eventually replace him, he generated widespread criticism within the bureaucracy and elsewhere for appointing his key political aide to the top position in the public service.⁴⁴ To avoid a similar situation by ensuring a smooth, non-partisan transition when he left (and also to lighten his load), Dicerni brought in as associate cabinet secretary Marcia Nelson, a career bureaucrat who had served as deputy minister in three Alberta departments, following more than a dozen years in the Ontario public service, including during the Rae administration. When Dicerni retired in April 2016, Notley confirmed her faith in the bureaucracy by appointing Nelson cabinet secretary.

Conclusion

To repeat: Alberta is not Ontario. It should therefore not be surprising that beyond some striking similarities in their unexpected electoral victories (and the dire economic conditions they inherited) significant differences are evident in the early days of the first NDP governments to rule the two provinces. The Alberta transition went far more smoothly and proved far more effective than its Ontario predecessor, reflecting better bureaucratic planning and a significantly higher level of government experience among members of the transition team. Both during and after the transition, the Alberta public service had more positive perceptions of the politicians, while the politicians were more trusting of the public service.

In other areas, such as the size of the first cabinet and the “good time/long time” question, the government of Rachel Notley chose a different path

than the Rae government followed. To a limited extent this was because the Alberta NDP consciously applied the lessons that had emerged from the Ontario experience, but for the most part it was because the context in which the Alberta party operated, such as the influence of Western-Canadian NDP tradition, differed significantly from that of its Ontario predecessor.

Occasional superheated rhetoric aside, neither the election of Bob Rae's New Democrats nor their time in office marked anything like a major turning point for Ontario. If anything, it was the 1995 election of Mike Harris and his "Common Sense Revolutionaries"—in large measure a reaction against the NDP government—that set Ontario politics on a new, neo-conservative course. Even though, save in labour legislation, the policies adopted by the Rae government were close to, if not within, the Ontario mainstream, precious few survived more than briefly after the Harris Conservatives came to power. Perhaps the one lasting legacy of the Rae government—evident to this day—has been the widespread perception that it was simply incompetent and hence that successive NDP leaders and teams lack the ability to govern.

Jim Morrison warned that "the future's uncertain but the end is always near." Even if, as currently seems likely, the Notley government goes down to defeat at the approaching election, it will be some time before its legacy is clear. Will a stable, competitive, polarized party system emerge in Alberta? Whether the Alberta NDP establishes itself as a long-term, credible contender for power will depend to a substantial degree on the right's ability to remain unified. However, the NDP in Alberta will not have to deal with the image of ineptitude that burdens the Ontario NDP. Opposition to the Notley government has largely focused on policy and ideology; attacks on its competence have been no more frequent or effective than those encountered by other governments.

The Bard of Avon was undoubtedly right that the past is prologue, yet he would never claim that stories beginning in a similar fashion necessarily end in similar ways. Twenty-five years on, the Rae government appears as an intriguing but essentially minor blip in the course of Ontario history. While the Notley government may suffer the same short-term fate as its Ontario predecessor, the remarkable outcome of the 2015 election and the NDP's record in office suggest a substantial, long-lasting impact on Alberta politics.

NOTES

In addition to the secondary sources cited below, this chapter draws on not-for-attribution interviews conducted by David Cameron and myself for our 2000 book *Cycling into Saigon*, and on a small number of not-for-attribution interviews I conducted with political figures in Alberta. In addition, I wish to record my thanks to former Alberta cabinet secretary Richard Dicerni and to Brian Topp, former chief of staff to Premier Notley, for agreeing to on-the-record interviews. All direct quotations and paraphrases of their observations are taken from these interviews, which are cited below. The judgements about Alberta politics reflect information and opinion gleaned from the editors and contributors to this book, but they are not responsible for my interpretations.

- 1 In 1943 the NDP's predecessor, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, won thirty-four seats, only four fewer than the victorious Conservatives. Within two years, however, the CCF had fallen to a poor third place; by the late 1960s through to the 1980s, the Ontario NDP was garnering a respectable 20 to 29 per cent of the vote but, save in the minds of its most optimistic supporters, remained far distant from power.
- 2 A comparison of the provinces' political cultures, party systems, and voting tendencies can be made by contrasting Cameron D. Anderson, "Ontario," with Anthony M. Sayers and David Stewart, "Alberta," both in *Big Worlds: Politics and Elections in the Canadian Provinces and Territories*, ed. Jared J. Wesley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016). For an analysis of the Ontario party system in the Rae era, see Robert Williams, "Ontario Party Politics in the 1990s: Comfort Meets Conviction," in *The Government and Politics of Ontario*, ed. Graham White, 5th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).
- 3 Rae's caucus had seventeen MPPs who had previously sat in the legislature (almost all of whom became ministers), whereas Notley had but three returning MLAs plus herself. However, while Rae's caucus had more legislative experience, it had the same experience in government as Notley's: zero.
- 4 Sydney Sharpe and Don Braid, *Notley Nation: How Alberta's Political Upheaval Swept the Country* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2016), 45–6.
- 5 Bob Rae, *From Protest to Power: Personal Reflections on a Life in Politics* (Toronto: Viking, 1996), 120.
- 6 To some extent this may have reflected the quite reasonable concern that the NDP might win a plurality but not a majority of seats and find itself out in the cold as the Liberals and the Conservatives formed a governing alliance or coalition.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 125 (emphasis added).
- 8 See David R. Cameron and Graham White, *Cycling into Saigon: The Conservative Transition in Ontario* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 20. The 1985 election produced an ambiguous result: 52 Conservatives, 48 Liberals, and 25 New Democrats. Several weeks of negotiations among the parties produced a Liberal-NDP alliance that led to a Liberal government. It was thus only three weeks after the election (but more than a month before the Liberals were sworn in) that a Liberal transition team was assembled.

- 9 Ibid., 33–7.
- 10 Dave Barrett and William Miller, *Barrett: A Passionate Political Life* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1995), 61.
- 11 Some of the MPPs elected from rural and semi-rural Ontario, such as Elmer Buchanan, who proved an extraordinarily able minister of agriculture, were first-rate members; others, however, were barely adequate local representatives. This further reduced the likelihood that the party would retake their ridings.
- 12 Brian Topp, interview with author, 3 February 2017.
- 13 Cameron and White, *Cycling into Saigon*, 28.
- 14 Topp interview.
- 15 “Speech from the Throne,” *Alberta Hansard*, 29th Legislature, First Session, 15 June 2015, 7–8.
- 16 David Zussman, *Off and Running: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Government Transitions in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).
- 17 Cabinet Secretary Richard Dicerni suggested to the deputy ministers that they read both Zussman’s *Off and Running*, which focuses on transitions at the federal level, and *Cycling into Saigon*. How widely these tomes were read and what, if any, influence they may have had is impossible to gauge.
- 18 Topp interview.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 See Thomas Walkom, *Rae Days: The Rise and Follies of the NDP* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1994), ch. 5.
- 21 Rae, *From Protest to Power*, 134.
- 22 Topp interview.
- 23 Richard Dicerni, interview with author, 23 January 2017.
- 24 October 2015 saw an interim budget, with some holdovers from the (unpassed) final Prentice budget; this discussion refers to the first budget with the full NDP stamp on it, released in April 2016.
- 25 The deficit of at least one budget during the Conservative government of Bill Davis was of similar magnitude to that of the first Rae budget in percentage terms, but the dollar figure was much lower.
- 26 Walkom, *Rae Days*, 99.
- 27 See Chuck Rachlis and David Wolfe, “An Insiders’ View of the NDP Government of Ontario: The Politics of Permanent Oppositions Meets the Economics of Permanent Recession,” in *The Government and Politics of Ontario*, ed. Graham White, 5th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 344. On the first Ontario NDP budget, see Walkom, *Rae Days*, 98–104. Walkom was a Queen’s Park reporter with a doctorate in economics.

- 28 David A. Dodge, "Report to the Government of Alberta on the Development, Renewal and Financing of the Government's plan for Spending on Capital Projects to 2019," Bennett Jones LLP, 19 October 2015.
- 29 Alberta Department of Finance, *Fiscal Plan* (Edmonton: Department of Finance, 2016), 43–56.
- 30 Walkom, *Rae Days*, 98.
- 31 A survey of 900 Albertans conducted shortly after its release found that 40 per cent of respondents approved ("strongly" or "somewhat") the budget, with 43 per cent disapproving; the balance were "not sure." This was substantially better than the response to the last Redford budget (24 per cent approving; 57 per cent disapproving). Data from "Janet Brown Opinion Research/Trend Research". My thanks to Melanee Thomas, John Santos, and Janet Brown for these data.
- 32 George Ehring and Wayne Roberts, *Giving Away a Miracle: Lost Dreams and Broken Promises and the Ontario NDP* (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1993).
- 33 Rae, *From Protest to Power*, 197.
- 34 Ibid., 130.
- 35 See Cameron and White, *Cycling into Saigon*, 34. *A Very British Coup* was a television drama about a decidedly leftist British government destroyed by the establishment through illegal and underhanded means with the connivance of the civil service.
- 36 *Yes Minister* was a British comedy of the 1980s, closely based on real-life situations, in which a hapless minister repeatedly fell victim to the stalling and obfuscation of his bureaucrats.
- 37 Quoted in Cameron and White, *Cycling into Saigon*, 33.
- 38 Rae, *From Protest to Power*, 129.
- 39 As Rae put it in his memoirs, "my views about the government and civil service changed dramatically as a result of my experience. There were, in fact, layers upon layers of internal politics and cronyism within the public service. It was impossible for much of the bureaucracy to escape the inevitable consequences of having been an integral part of forty-two years of Tory governments." This from Rae, *From Protest to Power*, 130.
- 40 Cameron and White, *Cycling into Saigon*, 36.
- 41 Graham Thomson, "The Civil Service: Can it Adapt?" *Alberta Views* 19, no. 1, (January/February 2016): 31.
- 42 Dicerri interview.
- 43 Rachlis and Wolfe, "An Insiders' View," 360n8.
- 44 Many in the Ontario public service who worked with Agnew found him to be highly professional and non-partisan, but in politics perception routinely trumps reality.

