



**ORANGE CHINOOK: Politics in the New Alberta**

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# Introduction: Out of an Orange-Coloured Sky

*Richard Sutherland*

Perhaps we should not have been that surprised. For instance, Ernest Manning was right. In the late stages of the 1971 Alberta election, Manning came out of retirement to campaign on behalf of the Social Credit Party he had led from 1944 to 1968. According to historian David Watts, Manning warned, “Elect the Conservatives now and you’ll have the NDP next!”<sup>1</sup> Sure enough, Albertans did elect the Progressive Conservatives that year, and, although it would take another forty-four years for Manning’s prediction to come to pass, the PCs have indeed been succeeded by a majority NDP government. Notwithstanding Manning’s prescience, the election of a left-of-centre government in 2015 (with a majority, no less) came as a shock to Canadians, including many Albertans. The province has been the ideological heartland for Canadian conservative politics for decades, the birthplace of the Reform Party and the incubator for Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s political career. The Progressive Conservatives had ruled Alberta uninterrupted for forty-four years and twelve elections, always with majority governments—an unparalleled feat in Canadian politics. How could Alberta, of all places, elect an NDP government? Certainly the polls leading up to the 5 May vote had shown this might be a possibility. But the previous election, in 2012, had also seen predictions of a change of government, and the ruling Progressive Conservatives had still managed to beat the right-wing Wildrose Party at the last minute. Even then, a victory by a small-*c* conservative party such as the Wildrose would have been far less surprising than the election of an NDP government.

This book is about that succession. It brings together the work of scholars, journalists, and others involved in public and political life in Alberta and beyond, who discuss a range of subjects from the 2015 campaign, through subsequent government policy, to the prospects for the future of Alberta politics. The contributors also bring to bear an equally wide range of methodologies, from close reading of texts and visuals, to interviews with key actors, to survey data and statistical analysis. The book is divided into several parts, including a discussion of the 2015 campaign and an assessment of the NDP government since taking power, and it features sections focusing on energy policies, an examination of Rachel Notley's governing style, and, finally, an analysis of the future of Alberta politics in light of the NDP's rise and other recent developments. The aim is to take stock of Alberta politics at a critical juncture in its history, to understand how these changes came about and to assess what they mean for the province both now and in the future.

*Orange Chinook* is the first scholarly appraisal of this critical moment in the history of Alberta politics. Some measure of the significance of the book's contribution is directly a result of the pivotal nature of the events it examines: the 2015 Alberta election and its most important immediate consequence, the transfer of power from the Progressive Conservatives to the New Democrats. This collection joins a select literature dealing with transitions in government in Canada, such as *Cycling into Saigon* by David Cameron and Graham White (the latter a contributor to this volume).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Cameron and White's book remains one of the few studies of this phenomenon. Most Canadian provinces have received little scholarly attention in this respect, and Alberta less than most. The reason is that such moments of transition are extremely rare in Alberta, which has opted for a change in governing party only four times in its 110 years as a province, making the 2015 transition a relatively unique event. Further, as Duane Bratt has argued in this volume, the NDP's victory ended a run of small-c conservative governments dating back to 1935, making the switch to a social democratic government even more remarkable.

In light of this considerable change, an assessment of the continuities and breaks in policy from the previous government is even more worthy of examination. This is particularly notable in the analysis of the new government's energy policies, where one would expect considerable change with

the succession of a pro-industry conservative government by a social democratic government whose platform includes a much more prominent environmental focus. This book provides one of the first examinations of the considerable change in tone in Alberta's energy policy as the government grapples with issues such as climate change and other aspects of environmental stewardship.

A substantial portion of the book deals with the 2015 election that brought about this change in Alberta's provincial government. Despite the continuing work of Clarke and his various collaborators,<sup>3</sup> among others, the literature on Canadian elections is not large, and as Cross, Malloy, Small, and Stephenson note in their recent book *Fighting for Votes*, studies of sub-national elections in Canada are even rarer.<sup>4</sup> *Orange Chinook* marks a contribution to this literature by allowing for a comparison between Alberta's 2015 election and elections at both the federal level and the subnational level in other Canadian provinces. Further, it contextualizes the importance of the 2015 campaign by examining the events leading up to it, and assessing what its consequences for Alberta have actually been in the first years of the NDP government.

## The Tory Fall and NDP Victory

The first section of this book examines the campaign and the events leading up to it. As its title suggests, this is not just about the election of the NDP; it is also, necessarily, about the end of the longest-running political dynasty in Canadian history. In his chapter "Politics, Alberta Style: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Conservatives, 1971–2015," David Taras looks at the fortuitous political and economic circumstances that kept the PCs in power for so long, and at how the unravelling of these conditions exposed the party's vulnerabilities and failures in the years prior to the 2015 election. Taras's analysis of the forty-four years of Tory government alerts us to just how dependent the party's compact with Albertans was on a healthy energy industry. Indeed, the sharp downturn in the world price for oil in 2015 provided the backdrop for that year's provincial election. In June of 2014, West Texas Intermediate crude was trading at nearly \$110 a barrel. By the time Jim Prentice called the provincial election in March of 2015, the price had dropped by more than 50 per cent to below \$50. The effect on

Alberta's economy was staggering. Companies quickly went from having very healthy balance sheets to sharp losses, and a wave of layoffs in the sector began, driving the province's unemployment rate from one of the lowest in Canada to among the highest in a matter of months.

The first polls indicating that Albertans might end up with an NDP government came in the wake of the April 23 leader's debate, and in this they were proven correct. Yet Albertans could be forgiven for being skeptical. The PCs had been nothing if not resilient in their years in office, and the previous election, in 2012, had suggested, right up to the last minute, that the Tories were bound for defeat. In their chapter "Marginally Better," Janet Brown, an experienced pollster in her own right, with her co-author John Santos, examines some of the problems that beset pollsters trying to accurately predict not only winners, but shares of the vote—difficult but a vital task in our multi-party system. When one examines a number of recent elections in Canada, it is obvious that, in some cases, even the best pollsters can be wrong. Brown and Santos identify what seem to be some systemic biases in polling, particularly the overestimating of Albertans' desire for change in government. As the public becomes increasingly difficult for pollsters to reach or unwilling to participate in polls, critical methodological concerns have arisen around areas such as sample construction and persistence in contacting respondents.

Duane Bratt offers an analysis of the Progressive Conservatives' 2015 campaign in his chapter "Death of a Dynasty: The Tories and the 2015 Election." While much of the anger directed at the late Jim Prentice and the PCs stemmed from the sudden decline in the province's economy, the party's internal tumult from 2006 to 2015 was clearly an indication of trouble. Even so, the campaign itself showed a number of missteps and miscalculations that sealed the PCs' fate. As important as the mistakes and weakness of the Progressive Conservatives were in their downfall, had they been succeeded by the Wildrose Party this would have been a very different book. The Wildrose would have been a continuation of the right-leaning governments in Alberta that, as both Bratt and Taras note, date back to the beginning of Social Credit rule in 1935.

Bratt notes that the PCs' campaign failures do not by itself explain the NDP's success in 2015. It is apparent that the NDP benefitted from other circumstances, including the governing party's rightward turn under

Prentice, the disorganization of the Liberals, and the Alberta Party's lack of experience. However, as Melanee Thomas points out in her chapter "Ready for Rachel: The 2015 Alberta NDP Campaign," the NDP also did a lot of things right when it came to preparing and executing the campaign that brought them to power. It is clear that the party had the ambition and strategy to form a government, even if this happened sooner than they expected. As Thomas argues, much of this comes down to the skills of Rachel Notley, who had assumed leadership of the party late in 2014. Already blessed with a last name famous in Alberta politics (her father, Grant Notley, had been the well-liked and respected leader of the Alberta NDP from 1968 until his death in 1984), Rachel Notley also proved to be a more than capable campaigner. This was especially apparent in the April 23 leader's debate, which took place midway through the campaign. Whether or not this was the decisive moment, the debate was certainly a microcosm of the larger campaign—replete with stumbles by Premier Jim Prentice, particularly the "math is hard" quip directed at Notley, and Notley's adroit handling of the situation, which turned the dismissive insult to her advantage. Notley's persona was also effectively projected through the NDP's online campaign, as Peter Malachy Ryan shows in his chapter "Alberta Politics Online: Digital Retail Politics and Grassroots Growth, 2006–2016." Ryan makes the case for the continuing relevance of retail politics over social media, and examines the evolution of online campaigns and risks over the last several elections in the province.

## Oil Sands, Carbon Tax, and Pipelines

No book on Alberta politics can ignore the central role of the oil and gas sector in the province's economy, and the third section focuses on this area of policy. In fact the Alberta energy sector's influence is so pervasive that there is almost no chapter in this book that does not refer, at least in passing, to some aspect of the industry and the issues it faces in respect to low commodity prices, access to markets, and both local and global environmental impact.

The NDP inherited these issues and the challenges that go with them. One of the key questions as the party assumed office was its level of continuity with or departure from the Progressive Conservatives' energy policy.

In her chapter “Betting on Bitumen: Lougheed, Klein, and Notley,” Gillian Steward focuses specifically on the previous government’s policies regarding the development of Alberta’s oil sands, noting that the PCs’ policies were by no means consistent throughout their time in power. In the 1970s, Peter Lougheed’s government placed itself at the centre of the emerging oil sands industry by offering various means of support, but taking a measured approach to the development of the resource while emphasizing provincial control. In contrast, Premier Ralph Klein’s hands-off approach sought to remove any and all regulatory barriers to industry in an effort to encourage rapid and unfettered development. If the Notley government’s policies constitute a break with the previous government’s approach, this is by no means unprecedented, and may even mark a return to the policies of the early days of Progressive Conservative government.

With regard to the energy industry and the provincial government, most attention has focused on two specific policy areas: pipelines and the carbon tax. Two chapters in this section provide an assessment of these issues, giving us a sense of precisely where we can find both change and continuity in Alberta’s energy policy. The NDP’s major departure from previous energy policy has been its Climate Leadership Plan, the centrepiece of which is an economy-wide carbon tax, which has served as a lightning rod for much opposition to the NDP government. One-time Alberta Liberal leader Kevin Taft offers an examination of the tax as a response to environmental concerns, and he includes an assessment of the considerable opposition it has met within the province. Taft makes a strong case for the tax, but he notes that this may not be as radical a change as it is often presented. Apparently, Jim Prentice might have contemplated a similar measure had he been re-elected, particularly with the federal government’s introduction of a federal carbon tax for those provinces that did not introduce similar measures of their own.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to pipelines, there is a necessary bargain to be struck, as business columnist Deborah Yedlin points out in her chapter “Notley: The Accidental Pipeline Advocate.” One of the NDP’s stated aims with the carbon tax was to demonstrate to environmental groups and other governments Alberta’s commitment to environmental stewardship. In exchange, it is hoped that pipelines bringing oil from land-locked Alberta to tidewater might be easier for these other governments to approve or support. This

approach has been successful to some extent, helping to bring the federal government onside, although it has not been enough to win over the NDP-Green coalition elected in British Columbia in 2017. But the commitment to the necessity of pipelines remains, and this shows one respect in which the NDP is not significantly different from previous governments in Alberta. Even if the party attempted, at least initially, to pursue these aims in a more collaborative style, resistance from the BC government has been met with a more confrontational style, one that is highly reminiscent of the Progressive Conservatives under Lougheed, and even Klein. Nonetheless, Yedlin suggests that a pragmatic approach will continue to be necessary to ensure co-operation from other governments and regions.

## The NDP in Power

In the third section we turn to the NDP's exercise of power in other policy areas over its first few years in office. This begins with the transfer of power from the Progressive Conservatives to the NDP immediately following the 5 May election. Precisely how long this transition process lasted is perhaps less straightforward than it might appear. Keith Brownsey presents a close examination of this transition and offers insights into what governmental transition consists of and how we might assess its successes or failures. Brownsey notes the considerable role of the civil service in preparing for a new government, as well as the careful planning done by Notley's senior political staff. He also notes the ineffectiveness of both the Wildrose and Progressive Conservative Parties in the immediate aftermath of the election.

It is not only businesses and jobs that have suffered as a result of the drop in oil prices; government finances in Alberta have also taken an enormous hit. Although they may be dubbed the "royalty rollercoaster," the ups and downs occasioned by price swings in volatile commodities are not nearly so pleasurable as an amusement park ride. For one thing, the fortunes of Alberta's economy and its government finances are tied to these price swings. Ron Kneebone and Jennifer Zwicker examine the difficulties this has posed for Alberta governments' fiscal situation over decades of reliance on fossil fuel royalties. This historical perspective shows that Alberta governments have long been over-reliant on the revenue from non-renewable resources. This has precluded introducing other, perhaps more sustainable



revenue sources, such as a sales tax. It has also meant that little of this revenue has been saved, and that when royalties decline, these governments run substantial deficits. On the spending side, Kneebone and Zwicker assess the growth in health spending, the government's single largest area of expenditure, and they offer some ways of addressing this growth.

Expectations were high for the NDP among many communities. A new governing party unaccustomed to winning elections led many to anticipate that some long-standing areas of neglect on the part of the Progressive Conservatives might now be addressed. According to Brad Clark, much of the NDP's support in rural Alberta came from Indigenous communities. The party appears to have cultivated more dialogue with these communities, and this has been repaid with more electoral support and a more positive relationship with Indigenous media outlets, both before and after the election. However, while the NDP have a much more developed Aboriginal platform than their predecessors, its engagement with issues around environmental impacts and revenue sharing remain as problematic as ever.

It was also clear on election night that the basis of the NDP's strength was largely in urban areas. Indeed, in his chapter "Alberta's Cities under the NDP," James Wilt starts with the assumption that the NDP can be seen as "the party of cities." Yet here, again, there has been less change than many municipal governments would have liked. The NDP's record on municipal issues involving regional planning and conflicts between rural and urban governments at the local level remains a point of frustration for local leaders, despite the imminent introduction of big-city charters for Calgary and Edmonton. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties of crafting a new relationship between the province and its municipalities, the election of an NDP government can be seen as a continuation of the shift in the province's centre of gravity from the rural to the urban population. Roger Epp refers to a "post-rural politics" in his chapter, a strong claim that suggests that rural Alberta has become less of a physical place and more of a political idea, a way of referring back to the province's historical, predominantly rural past.

## Notley's Governing Style

Deborah Yedlin's is clearly not the only chapter to mark Notley's political persona and style as an asset. While Melanee Thomas examined Notley's

success as a campaigner, the two chapters that comprise the fourth section of this book look at how that style has influenced her performance as premier. In her chapter “A League of Their Own: Women Leaders in Alberta Politics,” Lori Williams looks at Notley’s persona through the lens of gender, drawing attention to the particular barriers and challenges women face in a political system that has traditionally been a masculine preserve. Drawing comparisons to two other recent provincial leaders in Alberta, Alison Redford and Danielle Smith, Williams suggests that Notley has been more successful in developing a public persona and a governing style that have allowed her to negotiate a path between the often incompatible stereotypes of femininity and political leadership.

In “Notley and the Beast,” Chaseten Remillard and Sheridan McVean give us a picture of that style in action—and under duress—as they focus on Notley’s performance communicating with Albertans during the Fort McMurray wildfire in the Spring of 2016. Here, too, we can find useful comparisons with other Alberta politicians during other times of crisis, notably Alison Redford and Naheed Nenshi in the wake of the floods that devastated much of Southern Alberta, particularly Calgary and High River, in 2013.

## Alberta’s Future Political System

In his chapter “What’s Past is Prologue: Ontario 1990 and Alberta 2015,” Graham White takes up a number of points that have been discussed in earlier chapters, reminding us that this is not the first time in Canadian history that an NDP government has come to power rather unexpectedly. The 1990 Ontario election delivered that province’s first (and, so far, only) NDP government. The fate of the Ontario NDP under Bob Rae’s leadership (one term in office) might stand as a warning to Rachel Notley and her government in Alberta, but White’s aim here is not so much to find similarities (much less to suggest that Ontario has already been there and done that) than it is to alert us to the differences between the two cases, both in terms of the circumstances that brought them to power and even more the steps each government has taken during the transition. While White is rightly reticent to predict the Notley government’s fortunes in relation to the Ontario example, he does suggest that Alberta has seen a surprisingly smooth transition from the Progressive Conservatives to the NDP.

Finally, one of the biggest questions that any analysis of the current NDP government must ask is what will happen in 2019 and after. Will the 2015 election mark the start of the long reign of the NDP, as happened in 1935 with Social Credit or in 1971 with the Progressive Conservatives? Alberta's history of long periods of rule by one party punctuated by sudden change is worth remembering, but in this case it is not clear whether it will offer us much of a guide to the future. Alberta seems less cohesive and monolithic than it did under the Progressive Conservatives. On top of this, a redistribution of seats will see more power for urban areas, particularly those outside of Edmonton and Calgary, and less for those rural communities that have generally been a reliable base for right-of-centre governments in the province.

Whatever party wins in 2019, we need to ask whether the dynamics of Alberta politics have shifted. We do know that the Progressive Conservatives will not be returning to power, as that party no longer exists. As Duane Bratt notes, electoral defeat has in most cases dealt a fatal blow to the fortunes of governing parties, and that is once again the case. Over the summer of 2017, the Progressive Conservatives and the Wildrose Party voted to merge, forming the United Conservative Party, and in October 2018, the party selected former federal cabinet minister Jason Kenney as leader. In their chapter "Out of the Blue? Goodbye Tories, Hello Jason Kenney," Anthony Sayers and David Stewart look at the new party's prospects under Kenney's leadership. While vote shares from the last election might suggest that the future looks positive for the United Conservatives, there is some dispute over whether unity on the right will allow the party to hold on to the centrist vote going forward. Certainly Jim Prentice's attempt to incorporate the Wildrose caucus into the Progressive Conservative Party through a secretly negotiated mass floor crossing in 2014 is widely cited as a factor that led to disillusion with his leadership and his party.

There is the possibility that the eponymous Orange Chinook will, like its namesake, fade quickly back into a Tory winter. On the other hand it could be a harbinger of a real change of season in Alberta politics. Will the centre or left-of-centre vote continue to coalesce around the NDP as it did in 2015? Or will the Liberals and the Alberta Party erode that support? If the NDP remains the alternative to the right in Alberta politics, this raises the possibility of a two-party situation in the province, different from the

three-party split seen in the last election, or the tremendous gap between the Progressive Conservatives and everybody else that obtained through most of the last four decades. Some would suggest that the NDP's victory was a fluke, and that the chances of their maintaining a hold on power are slim in a province that maintains a strong conservative consensus. However, the occasion for this book, the party's victory in 2015, would have seemed even more unlikely just weeks before it happened. In what follows, we hope to offer a more informed basis for assessing both the significance of the NDP's assumption of power and what the party has done while in government.

## NOTES

- 1 David W. Watts, "Prophecy may be coming true; 'You'll have the NDP next' said Ernest Manning," *Edmonton Journal*, 27 April 2015, A15.
- 2 David Cameron and Graham White, *Cycling into Saigon: The Conservative Transition in Ontario* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2001).
- 3 See, for instance, Harold, D. Clarke, Allan Kornberg, John MacLeod, and Thomas Scotto, "Too Close to Call: Political Choice in Canada, 2004," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 38, no. 2 (April 2005): 247–53.
- 4 William P. Cross, Jonathan Malloy, Tamara A. Small, and Laura B. Stephenson, *Fighting for Votes: Parties, the Media, and Voters in an Ontario Election* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015).
- 5 Jim Prentice with Jean-Sebastien Rioux, *Triple Crown: Winning Canada's Energy Future* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2017), 187–90.

