



ORANGE CHINOOK: Politics in the New Alberta

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After Forty-Four Years: The Alberta New Democrats and the Transition to Government

Keith Brownsey

In the 5 May 2015 Alberta general election, the New Democratic Party under the leadership of Rachel Notley, won 54 of the provincial legislature's 87 seats. The New Democrats' majority ended the forty-four-year reign of the Progressive Conservative Party. In office since 1971, the Progressive Conservatives faced a sudden and unexpected defeat. Many in the media and business community expected a chaotic transition to a new government. After all, the Progressive Conservatives were the government party: they understood what needed to be done and how to do it. Any other party coming into government, it was thought, would create havoc and misery for the province. What happened, however, proved the critics of the new government wrong. New Democrats were sworn in by Alberta's lieutenant-governor as the fifth political party in the province's history to hold government.

The transition from the embedded Progressive Conservatives to the New Democrats—a move from a right-of-centre to a left-of-centre government—was much less traumatic than pundits, journalists, and many academics had expected. In fact, it has been argued that the new government brought stability to the province's parliamentary government for the first time in a decade. After a tumultuous ten-year period that saw 5 PC premiers, 8 ministers of finance, 7 ministers of energy, and over 100 assorted cabinet ministers, the Notley government set about enacting its agenda and bringing stability to a political system that had been battered

by factional rivalry within the Progressive Conservative government and party. What took place in the days before the 5 May election and until the New Democrats brought in the March 2016 budget may be defined as the party's transition to government.

Several factors explain how the transition occurred and why the province did not descend into anarchy. One is that the Alberta public service was prepared for the new government. Having seen five premiers and various cabinet changes over the previous nine years, the senior ranks of the public service had undergone three transitions, the last one as recently as September 2014. They understood the process of transition. And, as soon as it was apparent that there could be a change of party, the public service refocused its efforts to incorporate different party platforms into its planning. Second, the New Democratic leadership began to plan for the transition ten days before the election. With the real possibility of forming government, Rachel Notley and her campaign team did not want to be caught unprepared. It was at this point that individuals in other jurisdictions who had experience in government and, most importantly, in a transition, were contacted and enlisted in the transition process. A third factor in the transition was the post-election disarray of the opposition parties, especially the PCs. Reduced to nine MLAs, the PCs were not able to mount an effective opposition to the new government. The Wildrose Party—returned as the Official Opposition—could not manage a coherent response to the New Democrats, other than to declare that they had failed even before they were sworn into office.

But a common theme explains the actions of all the actors in the transition process. This is the institutional context of the parliamentary system. The parliamentary system creates a framework within which both the public service and the political parties operate. When the election was called the PCs became caretakers. By convention they were unable to access information or support from the public service. On the other hand, after it became clear that the Conservatives would not form a majority government, the public service began to closely examine the platforms of the Wildrose Party, the New Democrats, and the Alberta Party. The senior ranks of the public service modelled a series of different scenarios, involving various party configurations, from minority to majority government. In the last week of the election the public service took a much closer look at the New Democratic policy proposals. While the actors in both the public service and the NDP

made preparations, they did so in isolation from one another and with little contact between them until the election results were known on the evening of 5 May. The people involved on both the political and administrative sides were guided by the conventions and practices of the transition process found within the Westminster parliamentary system.

Types of Transitions

In liberal-democratic systems, transitions from one government to another often go unnoticed. However, transitions entail the transfer of power from one set of leaders to another. It is a time when a complex series of processes are set in motion to ensure the continuity of the state.¹ This can occur when the governing party selects a new leader, when a party is returned to office, or when the government is replaced by a different party through an election or some other device. The transition is complete when the new government takes full control over the apparatus of the state.² Governments assume office with what appears to be little effort before implementing the policy proposals outlined during the recent election campaign or leadership race. But the transitions of government in democratic systems are complex processes that involve both politicians and bureaucrats in an institutional and personnel change from one set of leaders to another.

Transitions are often defined in temporal terms, such as the time from the election or leadership victory to the formal assumption of power. This definition includes the naming of a cabinet and the appointment of senior officials in the political and administrative executive. But the act of taking power is a much more complex phenomenon. It does not account for the ability to control the institutions of the state. For example, after winning office in 1971 it took almost three years for Peter Lougheed and the PCs to put into place the processes and personnel needed to implement the government's program. This institutional definition of a transition encompasses the broad scope of government activity.

There are several different categories of transitions within the Canadian parliamentary system.³ The first is a change in the leadership of the governing party. In this situation, the party chooses a new leader, who then becomes premier. Between 2006 and 2014, Alberta had four examples of internal-party-leadership transitions. They included the leadership contest

of 2006, which was precipitated by the resignation of the premier and PC leader Ralph Klein; in 2011, when Ed Stelmach, Klein's replacement quit; and 2014, when Allison Redford stepped down and was replaced for five months by long-time cabinet minister David Hancock. Hancock made way for Jim Prentice, who was selected by a vote of party members in September 2014.

The second category of transition occurs when a government is re-elected. Although the same party is in place, there are inevitably changes in the cabinet and administrative processes. Since forming a government after the 1971 provincial election, the PCs were re-elected twelve times. A recent example of a party winning re-election under a new leader occurred in 2008, when the PCs were returned to office under Ed Stelmach. After taking over from outgoing premier Ralph Klein in December 2006, Stelmach won a majority government in the March 2008 provincial election. Under the direction of the deputy minister to Executive Council, transition material was prepared for the incoming Stelmach government in both December 2006 and again after the March 2008 election. Although the premier selected a new cabinet, most of the transition planning was conducted by the public service.

There is a third category of transition in the Westminster parliamentary system. This is when a different party wins the election. In most provinces this happens on a regular basis. Governments are defeated and replaced. The civil service as well as the winning party has experience with transitions and has prepared for a change in government. But there is a subcategory of the typical government transition model. This is when a long-serving government is defeated and replaced in office. A recent example of this is the May 2015 Alberta provincial election, in which the New Democrats defeated the PC government led by Jim Prentice. This may be the most difficult type of transition. The incoming government will be inexperienced. After the defeated party's decades-long tenure there will be few, if any, members of the new government with experience in office. The public service may be weary of the incoming party, while the new government may associate the civil service with the policies of the defeated government. Many government members will be unaware of the role of the public service. They will not understand the relationship between the political and the administrative functions found in a parliamentary system. In such a situation, inexperience, suspicion, and ignorance can derail a new government, causing it political harm.

The situation in Alberta, however, was different. The public service had expected a change of government after Alison Redford's March 2014 resignation. Throughout the spring and summer of that year, committees were struck in each department and in the Executive Council Office to prepare for a new PC leader and premier. The May 2015 election would initiate the fourth transition in eight years and the public service would be well prepared for a new government. Approximately ten days before the election, senior New Democratic staff realized their party had a very good chance of forming government. They also understood that replacing a forty-four-year-old government would be a very difficult task. These officials along with the leader began to meet on a daily basis to plan the transition. On election night the administrative and the political elements of the parliamentary system came together to initiate the first change of party government in the province of Alberta in more than four decades.

Conservative Transitions: Practice Makes Perfect

Beginning with Peter Lougheed in 1971, there have been eight premiers and thirteen transitions of government. Seven of these transitions occurred when the PCs were returned to office under a new leader. The PC transitions began with the party's victory under Peter Lougheed in 1971. The PCs defeated the thirty-six-year-old Social Credit government led by Harry Strom. When Lougheed walked into the Premier's Office in September 1971, he found the shelves bare. The only papers left behind by the outgoing Strom were the results of pre-election polling in a desk drawer. Refusing to read the material, Lougheed immediately gave the papers to an aid, Jim Seymour, who returned them to Strom. There were, moreover, no formal or informal meetings between the outgoing government and the new premier and his staff.⁴ Even William Macdonald, the secretary to cabinet and clerk of the legislature refused to return to Edmonton, choosing instead to remain in Medicine Hat.⁵ The lack of continuity between the outgoing and incoming governments illustrated the pre-institutionalized structure of Alberta governance.

When Lougheed retired in 1985 he was replaced by Don Getty, a former cabinet minister and oil company executive. Getty made few changes to the government other than replacing several cabinet members. When

Getty retired in 1992, his replacement as leader and premier was Ralph Klein. Klein took a very different approach to the transition process than his predecessor. With his advisor Rod Love, Klein made fundamental changes to the decision-making process. After winning the PC leadership race in early December 1992, Klein began his transition process by installing Love in the Premier's Office as executive director. With an understanding of the provincial government's administrative structure, Love was critical of what he perceived to be its cumbersome decision-making apparatus, and he did not consult with officials from the Getty government. As Love said in a later interview, "we didn't need any meetings, we knew what we wanted to do."⁶ With a limited agenda of reducing the provincial debt and eliminating the deficit, Love set about reorganizing government. He eliminated cabinet committees, installed communications officials in every ministerial office, and set up a series of caucus committees to engage backbench MLAs. Within a few months, the decision-making process was fundamentally altered without the advice of either the party or the public service.

When Klein left office in late 2006, the incoming premier, Ed Stelmach, a long-time cabinet member, kept the caucus committees and the much-reduced cabinet committee system. Nevertheless, transition binders were prepared by the civil service for the new premier and his cabinet ministers outlining how the various departments were organized and what issues faced the government in the immediate, medium and long term. The Stelmach government had control of the levers of power within a few weeks.

Stelmach resigned as premier and party leader in early October 2011. His successor, Allison Redford, came to office with little support from the government caucus, and her transition was less than fulsome. Redford's team, which consisted of friends and supporters, was unfamiliar with the provincial government and somewhat suspicious of the public service. While transition material had been prepared for the incoming government, Redford's group spent just two weeks putting staff in place and making adjustments to the cabinet committee system. As well, the transition group recommended the end of the standing policy committees. On the advice of her team, Redford replaced the deputy minister to Executive Council⁷ and dismissed ten deputy ministers.⁸ The transition team considered the process complete after the government was sworn into office. The Premier and her staff, however, never seemed to get control of caucus, cabinet, or the

legislature. After two and a half years Redford resigned from office in March 2014. David Hancock, a long-time PC cabinet minister, was appointed interim premier by the government caucus until the party could select a new leader. Because of Redford's surprise resignation, both the public service and the party had little time to prepare for a transition. In fact, the existing cabinet remained in place except for those members who resigned to seek the party leadership.

In September 2014, Jim Prentice, a former federal MP and cabinet minister, was selected by the party membership as the new leader and premier. Peter Watson, the deputy minister to Executive Council, and other senior public servants began to prepare for a new government immediately after Redford's resignation in March. On 13 June 2014, Watson was appointed to head the National Energy Board. He was replaced as deputy to the Executive Council by Stephen MacDonald. When Prentice was sworn into office in September 2014, he and the rest of the government received briefing binders describing the roles and responsibilities of the various departments as well as the issues the government would face in the next thirty, sixty, and ninety days. One of Prentice's first acts was to appoint Richard Dicerni as deputy minister to Executive Council, replacing MacDonald.⁹ With experience under a variety of different party governments, at both the provincial and federal levels, Dicerni was tasked with revitalizing the civil service after more than a decade of constant change. But Dicerni's efforts to rebuild the Alberta public service would be curtailed when Prentice called an election in late March 2015 for 5 May.

The civil service is supposed to treat any new government, regardless of party, the same. In Alberta, for example, the public service has prepared briefing binders containing departmental organization charts, the names of key personnel, and other administrative information for an incoming government. As well, there is usually a summary of issues facing the department. These issues are commonly broken down into three categories. The first are the thirty-day issues. These are problems that need immediate attention from the minister. The second category consists of those problems needing attention in the medium term; these are often called sixty-day issues. And third, there are the long-term, or ninety-day issues. Although the questions may vary according to the policy agenda of each new government, they are identified and categorized by the senior levels of the public service.

The 2015 Transition

Approximately ten days before the 5 May 2017 election, Brain Topp, the NDP campaign chair, and Gerry Scott, the party's campaign manager, recommended to Notley that she authorize a transition planning committee. Topp had seen the crowds for Notley's campaign tour and believed there was the possibility of an NDP victory. Moreover, signs and other campaign material had run out, and "\$1 million went through the door."¹⁰ This indicated to the campaign team that the New Democrats would do very well on election day. There was a sense that something was changing in their favour.

And yet there was some hesitation on the part of the campaign leadership to establish a transition team, who believed that transition planning might waste time and resources that would be better spent on bringing voters to their cause. As well, some senior campaign officials were concerned that if the public knew of the transition planning they would think the party was taking victory for granted. Moreover, several senior officials were superstitious: they did not want to derail the campaign through some misconceived action that could possibly anger voters. Despite these reservations, when Notley and her senior campaign staff read the party's polling data they began meeting to plan a transition to government.

The resulting transition team was chaired by Topp and it consisted of those involved at the top levels of the campaign. But within a few days, NDP organizers from other provinces were brought in to provide assistance. One of the transition group's first acts was to schedule a daily meeting. These meetings were held, for the most part, by telephone. They lasted approximately one hour. But as the election outcome became clear the calls increased in length and intensity. On the advice of party officials in other provinces and Ottawa, the transition team quickly decided to construct a timeline. The timeline was important to the extent that it put the various pieces of the transition into place. Another early decision was to meet the legislature at an early date. This would accomplish two things. First, it would demonstrate to the public that the new government was capable of presenting a legislative agenda. Second, the leader and her advisors did not want to run the province on lieutenant-governor warrants. It was decided to present the legislature with a supply bill until a budget could be introduced sometime later in the year.¹¹

As mentioned above, the transition team was led by Brian Topp, Notley's campaign strategist and a federal NDP leadership candidate in 2011–12. Both Adrienne King and Brian Stokes were part of the group as well. King, the campaign's "wagon master," was responsible for campaign events and media briefings. Before the election she had been Notley's chief of staff and she was familiar with the three incumbent caucus members, the local and provincial party organization, and the eighty-three other candidates running across the province (although it would be an exaggeration to claim that anyone in the campaign had a familiarity with all those running).

Stokes, the party secretary for the Alberta NDP, also knew the party organization, the candidates, and their backgrounds. He was able to provide the premier-designate with advice on potential cabinet picks. Several other individuals also belonged to the transition group, including Cheryl Oates, the campaign press secretary, and Kathleen Monk from caucus communications. Notley also relied on Jim Gurnett, the executive director of caucus, who was set to retire after the May election.

Of the out-of-province party functionaries brought in to help with the transition, the first was John Heaney. Originally from Edmonton, Heaney was chief of staff to BC NDP leader John Horgan when he was asked to come to Alberta. Heaney was familiar to the Alberta New Democrats and had transition experience in British Columbia in 1991, 1996, and again in 2001. Jim Rutkowski, also an advisor to Horgan, worked with the public relations firm Hill and Knowlton in Victoria. He was brought in to help with the transition in the last days of the campaign. Originally from Edmonton, Rutkowski had transition experience in British Columbia. Ann McGrath was another central figure with the transition. McGrath worked for the national party in Ottawa under both Jack Layton and Tom Mulcair. She had been in Ottawa when Jack Layton and the federal party went from 43 seats to 103 in the 2011 federal election, and she was involved with transitioning the federal New Democrats from third-party status to Official Opposition.

Notley's transition group discussed various scenarios, such as what the constitution required in the case of a tie in seats and what the opposition parties would do in this situation. Preliminary discussions around cabinet selection also occurred. Most importantly, however, they asked colleagues in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ottawa for help. With

their assistance, the Notley transition team put together a list of items thought to be essential for a transition in a Westminster system.

The proposed governing model was based on the T. C. “Tommy” Douglas government in Saskatchewan. Topp had been deputy chief of staff to Premier Roy Romanow in the 1990s, and was therefore familiar with the history of the New Democrats there. Notley and Topp were supporters of cabinet government and were determined to restore it after years of what they believed had been Conservatives neglect. They thought the Alberta NDP should govern rather than “fiddle with government.”¹² They were committed to the existing institutional structure and were determined to enact their agenda.

On the other side of the political-administrative divide was the Alberta public service. The deputy minister to Executive Council, Richard Dicerni, had directed the various departments to prepare transition binders for the new government. The media’s expectation was that the PCs would be returned for a thirteenth time. The transition started when Prentice sent a note to all ministers that the government was in a caretaker situation. At the same time Mike Percy, the premier’s chief of staff, contacted all ministerial chiefs of staff with the same message. As a result of the caretaker situation, ministers were not able to access the tools of state during the election. With the experience of the September 2014 transition behind them, the civil service began preparations for a new government.

Several weeks before the election, Dicerni tasked a group of deputy ministers with doing “a deep dive on the policy platforms of all parties.” With opinion polls showing a possibility of a minority government, Dicerni needed “to understand where the policies of all the parties converged and diverged.”¹³ But about ten days from the election the political outcome seemed to change. Dicerni asked the deputies to spend the weekend of 2–3 May reviewing all party platforms as they pertained to their departments. He wanted a notional agenda for the incoming government, regardless of partisan persuasion, but was aware that the New Democrats had a very good chance of forming the government. The public service was aware that there was a difference between an “internal transition and a new party” in office. The key question concerned the nature of the new government’s first three months in office. The 26 March 2015 budget had not been passed and supply ran out at the end of June. The government would have to pass

a budget, continue the supply measures, or operate on warrants issued by the lieutenant-governor. There was even a review of the province's fiscal situation as the "economic assumptions had changed by April."¹⁴ As well, a number of senior appointments were needed to fill vacancies in an array of provincial agencies, boards, and commissions. Any incoming government would need to fill these vacancies. The public service now looked to support NDP policies such as a royalty review on oil and natural gas, raising the minimum wage, and measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

On election night Topp telephoned Dicerni and passed the telephone to the premier-designate. Notley and Dicerni met the following day. Dicerni provided Notley with three iPads containing information on the structure of the government and other machinery-of-government issues. As well, members of the transition team were given offices in the Legislative Annex. Dicerni and other officials from the Executive Council Office came with binders. While useful, some of the briefings contained phrases such as: "Alberta is a huge province that produces oil and gas."¹⁵ It was apparent that some in the public service were unfamiliar with both Rachel Notley and the New Democrats.

All members of the newly elected NDP caucus were contacted on election night or the next morning by Brian Stokes or another party official. Stokes asked the incoming MLAs if they needed anything and then told them to be in Edmonton on Friday 8 May for meetings at Government House. At the meetings the caucus was introduced to the realities of political life. They were given some media training by political staff and briefed on the issues facing the new government. A briefing by Treasury Board and Finance Department staff indicated that the province's financial situation had changed since late January and early February, when the economic assumptions for the March budget had been locked in place. Finance officials presented the most recent data, which indicated that the province's financial situation had deteriorated.¹⁶ No decisions had been taken in cabinet, but the MLAs were told how to dress and act in public—there should be no track pants worn in the supermarket.¹⁷

Notley, along with Topp and others in her transition group, decided on a particularly small cabinet of twelve ministers plus the premier. Topp had been involved in the 1991 transitions in Saskatchewan, when the New Democrats under Roy Romanow defeated the PC government of Grant

Devine. He believed that a small cabinet could function as a coherent group. Moreover, it reduced the hiring of senior staff and the risk of mistakes. It also gave the backbench MLAs a chance to show what they could do. Another consequence of a smaller cabinet was that fewer cabinet committees would be required, as decisions could be taken in full cabinet. It was decided that ministers would have two or more portfolios. For example, veteran NDP MLA Brian Mason was given Transport and Infrastructure. Transport was considered a difficult assignment, while Infrastructure was less demanding. These dual portfolios were designed to give the premier and her staff time to judge the abilities of the other, newly elected members of the New Democratic caucus. Several new positions were also added to the Premier's Office. Topp established the position of director of issues management as well as the director of house business. These positions were borrowed from the Manitoba New Democrats.

Notley asked Topp to stay in Alberta as her chief of staff while Cheryl Oates was appointed communications director. Other positions in the Premier's Office were filled by campaign staff as well as party officials from other jurisdictions. NDP operatives and political staff were recruited to fill a number of positions across the government left vacant by the departing Conservatives. This is a common practice, not just with the New Democrats, but other parties as well when they take office. The provincial transition team sought advice from their fellow partisans in other jurisdictions such as British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, as well as the national party in Ottawa. Many of these individuals were from Alberta or had worked for New Democrats in other jurisdictions. For example, John Heaney joined the Executive Council Office in August as deputy of policy.¹⁸

Several members of the transition team were concerned about a public service that had worked for a PC government for forty-four years. But the civil service was excited about working for a new government. Many individuals in the public sector felt that the Conservatives were no longer governing. Moreover, Dicerni and the senior ranks of the public service had prepared for a change of government and had worked to calm any fears of the NDP among their colleagues. For her part, Notley moved quickly to reassure the public service. She made calls to individual deputy ministers and met them as a group at their August Deputies Council. Dicerni was able to establish a relationship of trust between the political and administrative

sides of the provincial executive. His experience in the public service, and especially with governmental transitions, allowed him to help the New Democrats to begin governing.

Dicerni had a checklist for the incoming premier and her cabinet. He discussed the premier-designate's intentions concerning the size of the cabinet, finalized changes to the cabinet committee structure, and confirmed times of meetings. These structural issues were supplemented by briefing binders requiring immediate attention; they covered such issues as the question of bills of supply and/or warrants from the lieutenant-governor to keep the province solvent. Dicerni also went through the list of deputies with the Notley transition team. Unlike the Redford transition, Notley decided to keep all the deputies. Although some adjustments needed to be made because of vacancies and approaching retirements, a decision was taken "not to fiddle with government, but to govern."¹⁹ The premier-designate was aware of the need for continuity in the civil service and wanted to put an end to the churn in the public sector.

Notley met the week after the election with the outgoing premier, Jim Prentice. Although this was a formality, it was an important symbol, one that signalled the continuity of the provincial government. Meanwhile, reports circulated that PC staff were shredding documents. Although she had no authority to do so, Notley issued instructions that the destruction should stop.

One of the first tasks of the new government was to choose a cabinet. With only four members of the new caucus with legislative experience—and who were therefore assured a place at the table—it was a difficult job to pick ministers from the remaining caucus. Brian Topp, the incoming chief of staff, Cheryl Oates, Notley's press secretary, Adrienne King, as well as the three members of the previous caucus, Darron Bilous, David Eggan, and Brian Mason, all provided input for the premier-designate. The next significant decisions concerned the timing of the swearing-in ceremony, when to recall the legislature, and what issues the New Democrats could expect when they took office. It was decided to hold the swearing-in on 24 May, nineteen days after the election. The cabinet was announced as the assembled government MLAs proceeded to the ceremony.²⁰

The new government had twelve cabinet ministers plus the premier. Four cabinet committees were named: treasury board, legislative review,

economic development policy, environment and climate change, and social policy.²¹ The caucus was divided into committees that mirrored the cabinet committees. One other major change was the creation of a Ministry of Status of Women.

The hiring of staff began almost immediately. The new ministers needed executive assistants and other staff. Thousands of applications flooded the office of the premier-designate as well as the party offices and the offices of the elected MLAs. Many PC staff made a case that they should be retained; some did not understand that they were there by political appointment. They argued that they knew the government and could be of assistance. The hiring process was tedious. It involved interviewing “many, many people.”²² Some ministerial executive assistants were pulled out of the public service, while others were taken from the private sector and even recruited from outside the province.

On 15 June 2015, forty days after the election, the Notley government met the legislature. The government’s agenda seemed to be in place. The Throne Speech was described as “unusually short, remarkably focused and historically significant.” The first piece of legislation introduced—Bill 1—aimed to reform campaign finance laws in an effort to eliminate corporate and union donations.²³ As well, a supply bill was passed to allow the province to continue operating until the government could introduce a budget during the fall sitting of the legislature.

Over the summer and early fall the New Democrats continued hiring staff for ministers and MLAs. They also began a review of the appointments, processes, and pay of the province’s 301 agencies, boards, and commissions. A commission to assess the royalty rates paid by oil and natural gas companies was established. It released its report on 16 January 2016. As part of its climate initiative, the NDP government promised to eliminate coal-generated electricity by 2030 and implement a carbon tax on the use of fossil fuels.

But while the new government had initiated a variety of new policies, they still had not fully articulated their legislative program. It was not until the 14 April 2016 provincial budget that many in the Premier’s Office and the party believed they had finally gained control of the machinery of government. The NDP leadership had learned the processes and procedures of government in a Westminster system. The operational requirements of forming a government had been met by the April 2016 budget. The New Democrats

presented a budget that was their own and not simply a rewrite of what the previous Conservative government had put forward in March 2015.

Conclusions

It was not until ten days before the provincial election that the senior ranks of the Alberta public service and the NDP campaign staff realized there was a possibility of a change in government. By election day, both the administrative and political actors had made preparations for the transition of government. The criteria by which a transition of government in Alberta could be judged successful were procedural. In this sense, the handover went smoothly. There were no major mistakes. What is missing from this account, however, is the months it took the new government to understand and adjust the machinery of government to their policies. Still, within a matter of weeks the New Democrats had been sworn into office, had presented a short “but remarkably focused” Throne Speech, and were setting about implementing their campaign manifesto.

None of this would have been possible without the co-operation of three sets of actors—the public service and the incoming and outgoing governments. Indeed, the defeated PC government of Premier Jim Prentice was in disarray. They could not act as an effective opposition to the inexperienced New Democrats. This was the result of Prentice’s resignation as party leader and MLA on election night and the loss of all but eleven seats. Almost immediately their focus turned to rebuilding their party. They needed to choose an interim leader, assess the consequences of the election defeat, and plan for the future. Although Prentice met with Notley the week after the election, this was viewed as merely a formality. The shredding of documents can be understood as the actions of ignorant political staff upset with their party’s defeat. Simply put, the outgoing PCs did not place obstacles in the way of the new government, if for no other reason than they were in disarray. This was much to the benefit of the incoming government.

The Wildrose Party, the newly re-elected Official Opposition, however, was much more aggressive in their approach to the transition. One of their spokespersons declared five days after the election that the incoming government had failed and should resign.²⁴ While the Wildrose was unalterably opposed to the social-democratic NDP, they could do little more than

make absurd statements about the incoming government having failed. The reasons for this are both institutional and personal. As an opposition party, their contacts with the bureaucracy had been limited, and they did not appear to understand how the transition process worked. As well, many in their caucus had little or no experience in provincial politics. For these reasons, they were unable to pose much of an opposition to the New Democrats.

The civil service was prepared for the transition. Peter Watson, his interim successor Steve MacDonald, and Richard Dicerni, who was appointed deputy minister to Executive Council on 15 September 2014, all had considerable experience with transitions. Dicerni, for example, had worked in both the Ontario and the federal public service and had been involved in several transitions. When Alison Redford resigned as PC leader and premier in March 2014, Watson initiated preparations for the ensuing transition. MacDonald continued this process when he was appointed deputy to Executive Council in June 2014 in preparation for a new Conservative premier.

With material from the 2011 and 2014 transitions to guide them, the public service prepared for a new government in 2015, but not for a change of party, as it was widely expected that the PCs would be returned to office. As the election campaign progressed and the results became less certain, Dicerni asked his deputy ministers to read the major parties'—the PCs, Wildrose, Liberals, and the New Democrats—election platforms and prepare for a change of party. This work was crucial for a transition from the Progressive Conservatives to the New Democrats.

The New Democrats were of course a key part of the transition. Unlike the Prentice, Redford, and Stelmach, governments, only three members of Notley's new caucus had experience in the legislature, and none had been in government. This lack of familiarity with the processes and conventions of government were part of the rationale for a small twelve member caucus. As well, Notley decided not to make any significant changes to the public service. This allowed for some continuity with previous governments and permitted the new administration, as well as the backbench members of caucus, to learn how government operates in the Westminster system. Notley also appointed the three members of her caucus with legislative experience to portfolios with which they had some experience as critics. This allowed them to move into cabinet with some familiarity of the issues facing the government.

The NDP campaign team represented another crucial set of actors in the transition process. Campaign chair Brian Topp had experience with transitions in Saskatchewan, while John Heaney and Jim Rutkowski had been through transitions in British Columbia. Ann McGrath had wide experience working with the federal party and was able to contribute to the 2015 transition process in Alberta. Moreover, the campaigning team/transition team asked New Democrats in other jurisdictions for advice and help. They contacted party officials across the country to construct a checklist of items and a timeline for a transition. Although the campaign team did not begin preparations for taking office until ten days before the election, the intensity of the transition meetings increased dramatically until election. The choice of a twelve-person cabinet minimized the risk that the new government would make serious mistakes. Calming fears in the public service of mass dismissals and in the caucus about a public service that had worked for the previous forty-four years under a series of PC governments, contributed to the ease with which the New Democrats took office. And finally, it should be recognized that after the election, there was no break for the campaign staff. It was as if nothing had changed; they were still working long days to understand and prepare for their new role as government.

It was the confluence of these various elements of the transition process that permitted the new government to meet the legislature less than a month after taking office and obtain effective control of the machinery of government within the ten months, or from May 2015 until March 2016. If the outgoing PCs, for example, had been better organized, or the civil service less familiar with the transition process, or if the campaign team had decided not to engage in transition planning, it is unlikely that the New Democrats would have been able to move as quickly and efficiently as they did on taking the levers of power.

NOTES

- 1 See David Zussman, *Off and Running: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Government Transitions in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 2013).
- 2 This definition is borrowed from Carl M. Brauer, *Presidential Transitions: Eisenhower through Reagan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xxx–xiv.

- 3 Zussman, *Off and Running*, 14–17.
- 4 Peter Lougheed, interview with author, Calgary, 9 August 2007. This story is related in a slightly different fashion in David Woods, *The Lougheed Legacy* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1985).
- 5 Ted Mills, interview with author, Calgary, 27 October 2009.
- 6 Rod Love, interview with author, Calgary, 21 November 2007.
- 7 Robert Hawkes, interview with author, Calgary, 12 June 2013.
- 8 Richard Dicerni, telephone interview with author, Calgary, 25 October 2016.
- 9 “New deputy minister line-up unveiled. Alberta Premier Jim Prentice has appointed Richard Dicerni as the new Deputy Minister of Executive Council,” press release, Government of Alberta, 15 September 2014.
- 10 Brian Topp, telephone interview with author, Calgary, 17 January 2017.
- 11 It should be noted that a budget had been presented in the provincial legislature by the Progressive Conservative government led by Jim Prentice. The budget, however, had not been passed. By the time the New Democrats came to office, the government was running out of funds and needed to pass a supply bill.
- 12 Topp interview.
- 13 Dicerni, correspondence with author, 31 July 2017.
- 14 Topp interview.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Michael Connolly, interview with author, Calgary, 17 October 2016.
- 18 For a case study of the recruitment of political staff, see Anna Lennox Esselment, “Birds of a feather? The role of partisanship in the 2003 Ontario government transition,” *Canadian Public Administration* 54, no. 4 (December 2011): 465–86.
- 19 Topp interview.
- 20 Connolly interview.
- 21 Dicerni, correspondence with author.
- 22 Anne McGrath, interview with author, Calgary, 17 January 2017.
- 23 Graham Thompson, “NDP government’s first throne speech promises a seismic shift,” *Edmonton Journal*, 16 June 2016.
- 24 Justin Giovanatti, conversation with author, Calgary, 9 May 2015.