



ORANGE CHINOOK: Politics in the New Alberta

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The End of Exceptionalism: Post-rural Politics in Alberta

Roger Epp

By the political standards of a province jolted in one election from what had seemed like two long generations of single-party somnolence, the events of late 2015 stand as extraordinary. Farmers drove trucks and tractors in highway convoys. Protestors hoisted posters on pitchforks at mass rallies at the legislature and in cities throughout the province. Thousands signed petitions, one of which (“Save Alberta Farms”) was circulated by an online “Rebel” broadcaster with a sharp ideological agenda. On social media platforms, anonymous thugs threatened all manner of violence, angry prophets warned of jackbooted safety inspectors about to smash through the barn door, and a well-known country singer, in more conciliatory tones, asked the new premier for respect, time, and honest conversation with farmers and ranchers, who “feel like you are trying to tell them how they have to live.”¹

Premier Notley—just returned from a very different stage, the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, where she had other balances to strike in defence of the province’s flagship energy industry—responded in early December with an open letter to Albertans. It, too, was posted on social media platforms. The premier was unapologetic about the intent of her government’s contentious Bill 6, the Enhanced Protection for Farm and Ranch Workers Act, which would extend the workplace injury and occupational safety provisions in existing provincial labour standards to agriculture. She could not accept that farm fatalities and injuries were “simply a fact of life.” Family farms were “thriving” and farmworkers were safer in other provinces, where similar provisions were already in place;

such legislation, the premier argued, was overdue in Alberta. But Notley also apologized and accepted responsibility for the mistake of introducing a bare-bones bill without being clear that it would apply only to paid farmworkers—not to neighbours helping out, not to farm children working with their parents, doing chores, or participating in 4-H activities. In keeping with the coded language of those who had protested against the bill, she affirmed that farming in Alberta was “a way of life,” and promised a “common sense framework” of regulation that “protects paid farmworkers while allowing for the day-to-day realities of life on a family farm.”² Before the end of the year, an amended version of Bill 6 was passed into law.

Journalistic interpretations of the controversy tended to view it through the lens of the next election: on one hand, an inexperienced New Democratic Party government, acting on a long-standing policy commitment, and possibly learning a lesson about communication and consultation in the process; on the other, an opportunistic opposition finding an issue on which to portray the government as ideologically driven, out of touch with Alberta values, and not to be trusted with a second term in office. In subsequent months, the government appointed stakeholder working groups, chaired by experienced mediators and populated by farm, labour, and professional members, to work out technical details. Over the course of 2016, injury compensation claims from farmworkers more than doubled—a measure of expanded eligibility under the new legislation. One mainstream farm leader declared that the mandatory coverage was “far better” than the private liability insurance most employers had carried before.³

Meanwhile, the wildfire of outrage fanned by talk radio and social media moved onto bigger issues like the carbon tax introduced into an economy hit hard by a prolonged oil price slump. In style and sometimes in content, the protests echoed the politics that helped elect Donald Trump as US president in 2016; but they were also reminiscent of the home-grown pockets of public anger seen in the early 1980s in the wake of the National Energy Program, when the separatist Western Canada Concept held raucous rallies in places like Edmonton’s Jubilee Auditorium, and elected an MLA in a by-election in Olds-Didsbury.⁴ Alberta is a province, as a long-time observer has noted, that is “wracked by crankiness and fear”⁵—despite, and sometimes because of, its boom-and-bust prosperity.

The Bill 6 episode, however, did expose something old and something new. What was old was a rural-urban divide. Culturally, that divide had opened earlier in fall 2015, when three sisters aged eleven and thirteen were killed in a farm accident near Rocky Mountain House after being buried in canola seed in the box of a truck while it was filled from a hopper. The accident—and one that followed involving the death of a ten-year-old Hutterite boy driving a forklift that overturned⁶—helped to shape urban political support for the government’s farm safety legislation on the assumption that it would also restrict child labour, which seemed indefensibly dangerous. The labour minister said nothing at the time to dispel this impression. The father of the girls, as if to anticipate the larger political issue, posted a family photograph on his Facebook page in which he is wearing a T-shirt with the message “Born to farm”; the image is accompanied by a caption that reads, “This is our life. It is not sterile like city life.”⁷

The political side of that rural-urban divide had required skillful political management in recent decades, while the population of Alberta’s cities grew rapidly—a trajectory that was only belatedly reflected in the provincial electoral map—and especially whenever volatile energy revenues did not allow governments the freedom to spend visibly on public infrastructure in all parts of the province. In some ways, the divide had become increasingly evident by the end of the Klein era (1992–2006), when a deeply entrenched patron-client exchange of government generosity for political support in the countryside was eroded gradually by spending cuts.⁸ Rural people lived increasingly on the defensive. They experienced the consolidation of schools, hospitals, and other services, the loss of population, especially young people, as well as the negative impacts of intense resource development; and they had begun to imagine that the benefits of the so-called Alberta Advantage were concentrated in the Highway 2 corridor, between Calgary and Edmonton. Indeed, an internal government study in 2003 confirmed significant regional disparities—not just in age, but also in measures having to do with wealth, education, and health.⁹

Ed Stelmach became Ralph Klein’s surprise successor late in 2006, thanks to a final-ballot groundswell of rural voters under the Conservative Party’s one-member, one-vote leadership-selection rules. When the new premier appointed a cabinet that seemed top-heavy with rural lieutenants—many of them, like him, former municipal politicians—the response from

Calgary in particular was visceral. Much of it came from within the governing party. One columnist observed that the new premier had “reawakened” a “slumbering contempt” informed by “cartoon images of rural hicks.”¹⁰ Another, more sympathetic to the critics, wrote: “The political, economic, social and cultural core of power will remain outside Alberta’s two major cities”—and in the hands of “a lot of farmers”—“as long as Team Stelmach remains in power.”¹¹ Stelmach’s government may have quietly reinvested in rural Alberta, but it also consolidated regional health divisions into a single provincial authority. Most of all, it provoked a property-rights backlash in the countryside by its centralized approach to the approval of new electricity corridors, ostensibly to meet increasing demand for power in the cities.

When Stelmach resigned after one election and was replaced by his justice minister, Alison Redford—a Calgary lawyer, female, urbane, at home in international circles—the party barely survived the 2012 election. It was dislodged from rural seats in the southern half of the province by its conservative rivals, the Wildrose—the first time in living memory that so many rural voters were represented on the Opposition side of the legislature, though the party made no such inroads in the cities. The Wildrose leader, Danielle Smith, would later concede the challenge of building a successful party in a province where “Calgary and Edmonton are far more progressive on social issues than the rural areas.”¹² How much of that is true and how much is a matter of self-justification is not the point here; rural Alberta is a much less monolithic place than any of its caricatures would have us believe, and it was, after all, candidates in Calgary and Edmonton whose comments with respect to race and homosexuality caused the party the most political harm in 2012. Still, the lingering political recognition and reproduction of a rural-urban fault line is worth noting.

What was exposed for the first time in the Bill 6 episode—and what this chapter proposes to explore—goes beyond that fault line: it is the prospect of a post-rural politics. By that I mean something different than the historic balancing of rural and urban in a governing coalition or in public policy, and different again from the kind of raw resentments sometimes expressed across that divide. Post-rural does not mean anti-rural. Instead it describes something closer to a politics where rural, whether as a *coherent idea*, a *policy lens*, a *standing exception*, a “*heartland*,” or *rhetorical touchstone*, no longer figures prominently—not in the way the government imagines and

speaks to Albertans, not in the kind of economy it proposes to build, nor in the way it approaches its own re-election. Tellingly, the NDP government assigned Bill 6 to the minister of labour, not the minister of agriculture. In the first instance, this was a bill about workers and workplaces; it removed a farm *exception*. The post-rural shift in language and orientation may or may not be detrimental for rural people, especially those for whom the older political scripts were too confining or condescending or else turned them into “salt-of-the-earth cover” for someone else’s agenda.¹³ But a post-rural government comes without old-style champions or self-styled protectors; even in good times, the shift would take some adjustment. In Alberta’s chastened economic circumstances, it has invited a backlash. But as I will argue, appeals to the rural in this context signify not so much a precise geography or a farm-based economy as a sense of grievance or outsider status that is readily mobilized in a politics of resentment.

The Eclipse of Rural Alberta, in Stages

One of the myths shattered by the NDP election victory was that rural voters have an unfair and unbreakable stranglehold on political power in Alberta. The 2012 election had already strained that logic. And while the NDP in 2015 won some rural seats in northwestern and mountain regions, and in communities around Edmonton, it did so without a dedicated rural campaign or a serious policy platform. The post-election government caucus of fifty-four MLAs contained only one person with an active farm background,¹⁴ and not a single former county reeve.

Two days after Bill 6 was tabled in the legislature, Rachel Notley gave her first speech as premier to the annual fall convention of the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties (AAMDC). This event has a venerable place in the calendars of cabinet ministers and in the stories told about how power worked in the old Alberta of single-party dominance. It was where loyalty was cemented, influence exercised, and the right measure of intimidation applied as needed. Notley recalled her own roots in the northern community of Fairview—“Heart of the Peace”—and she assured her audience that “communities like yours are extremely well-represented in our government.”¹⁵ Though Bill 6 had come up in an earlier open session with government ministers, she did not mention it in her speech. Instead,

she focused on the climate change and budget files. She asked for delegates' support as community leaders for her government's made-in-Alberta approach to environmental protection and climate change, which was intended to provide the province's energy industry with the social licence to answer its critics. She promised that communities directly affected by the controversial phase-out of coal-generated power would not be abandoned. She spoke reassuringly about provincial budget plans. She said that her government was committed in difficult times to maintain public services, planned capital projects like rural hospitals, and infrastructure grants in support of roads, bridges, and water treatment. Most notably, she promised that the pending review of the Municipal Government Act would "not compromise the ability of rural municipalities to serve their residents" by redistributing revenues from the taxes they collect on linear assessment (pipelines, power lines, oil and gas installations)—a continuing sore point for cities, as James Wilt's chapter in this volume points out, and a curious no-go file for the NDP in power.

Successful or not, Notley's speech demonstrated her willingness to speak in the idiom of rural politicians and communities. It stands as possibly the most rural speech she has given as premier. By comparison, the government's first two Throne Speeches were more circumspect. The first, in June 2015, struck an inclusive note for a new government. It described Alberta as a "province of indigenous peoples" and a "province built by wave after wave of pioneers and settlers, farmers and oil workers, researchers and students, job seekers and job creators." There are still rural builders, even farmers, in the first Throne Speech, but they do not get first or exclusive billing. When the speech addressed the goal of a "sustainable, diversified and prosperous economy," it moved from education ("the single best investment our province can make"), to energy and the environment, a new relationship with Indigenous peoples and fair pay for workers, and, then, to the "need to ensure this province's rural and resource communities have the tools they need to keep contributing to the prosperity of Alberta."¹⁶ Not lead it, just keep contributing. The 2016 Throne Speech, by comparison, made no reference to the rural at all.

Previous Conservative governments were seldom so circumspect. While Throne Speeches may not be good measures of public policy initiatives actually delivered, and while they are likely to be read by only a

fraction of voters, they are nonetheless carefully crafted political communications. They imagine the province at a particular moment in time; they reflect choices about what to say and not to say; and invariably they will be cited by government MLAs as proof of a commitment to act on a set of priorities.

In 2003, the Klein government's Throne Speech began with its own panorama of Albertans, in a different order: "farmers, public servants, homemakers, oil field workers, doctors, students, volunteers." When it came around to the economy, it began with agricultural producers and rural communities—"the *backbone* of this province's economy"—who would not be abandoned by the government while they struggled with the effect of drought and spiralling farm input costs.¹⁷ A year later the Klein government promised a "new rural development strategy to help ensure that the people and businesses in rural Alberta enjoy every opportunity to reach their full potential."¹⁸ The 2005 and 2006 Throne Speeches returned to that same priority of rural prosperity, noting specific new support in areas like housing, highways, health, education, apprenticeships, and water systems: "Vibrant rural communities are vital to this province."¹⁹

The Klein government had not always offered this kind of rhetorical recognition and reassurance. Nor had it always defined the government's role in such positive, activist terms. The ground shifted noticeably after a 2002 by-election in a bedrock rural constituency, Battle River-Wainwright, where turnout was so low that the Conservative candidate won with the support of about one in seven eligible voters. The new MLA was quickly appointed co-chair of a task force whose 2004 report, *Rural Alberta: Land of Opportunity*,²⁰ introduced the language of "vibrant" communities and led to a fuller rural development strategy, *A Place to Grow* (2005), which began with the declaration that the government "officially recognizes the importance of rural Alberta and its contributions to the Alberta Advantage."²¹ The strategy conceded that government cuts had hurt rural communities, and it recommended reinvestment in public services, adaptation of programs to fit rural circumstances, and support for rural innovation. In effect, the strategy announced a retreat from the textbook neo-liberal policies that, for the previous decade, sought to attract global capital by positioning the province and its resources as a low-tax, low-regulation environment. By the end of the Klein era, the government had accepted in successive Throne Speeches

that it was the government's job to "sustain and strengthen the rural economy" (2005) and to "help rural communities become more prosperous" (2006). The latter hinted at stable, long-term funding to support rural development—what was announced in that spring's budget as a \$100-million fund to support model community and regional projects.²²

The Stelmach government picked up this mission with enthusiasm. It asked ministries to incorporate elements of the rural development strategy into their planning processes and struck an inter-departmental committee at the level of assistant deputy ministers to coordinate rural initiatives. It issued progress reports, one of which, in 2009, gave a thirteen-page, small-print inventory of government actions: \$1.87 million in funding for rural artists and arts organizations; \$268 million in loans to rural businesses; 89 affordable housing units for seniors; \$2.3 million to support rural rotations for medicine students; 465 new post-secondary spaces, and so on.²³ In advance of the 2008 election, the Stelmach government's Throne Speech declared agriculture in particular to be an economic and cultural "cornerstone"; after the election, it inaugurated the new legislative session with a pledge: "While Alberta towns and cities continue to grow and flourish, this government will never take for granted the cultural and economic importance of vibrant rural communities and competitive agriculture, food, and forestry sectors."²⁴

The rhetorical reassurances—rural as backbone, as cornerstone—masked the difficulties of rural development that have confronted provincial and state governments across North America. In some ways, *A Place to Grow* did at least challenge traditional thinking. For example, it defined rural Alberta broadly enough to include Indigenous communities; and it put altogether more emphasis on arts and culture, public services, municipal infrastructure, and education than it did on agriculture when it came to ensuring future vibrancy and prosperity. In 2011, and not for the last time, a Throne Speech mentioned the government's commitment to achieving last-mile broadband internet access in homes across the province, an increasingly significant point of urban-rural disparity. But rural remained very much a political concept; for that reason, its borders were flexible. The MLA Task Force report, *Rural Alberta: Land of Opportunity*, had conjured a common-sense "picture" of rural as "farms and small towns and villages," to which it added the qualifier that rural municipalities had a population

below 10,000 and were located “beyond the commuting zones of larger urban centres.”²⁵ In 2006, by contrast, the Conservative government introduced an incentive bursary for rural students of \$1,000 for each of the first two years of a post-secondary program. The bursary was meant to improve the chronically low rural participation rates in post-secondary education by offsetting the financial costs for those who needed to leave home to do it—a real structural inequality. The program, however, defined rural as “any community outside of Edmonton, Calgary, Sherwood Park and St. Albert,”²⁶ which essentially meant everywhere beyond a metropolitan transit route to a full set of post-secondary options. A more restrictive definition would have had a rougher ride in the government caucus.

What is clear is that a preferential option for the rural was politically difficult to sustain beyond the Stelmach era; moreover, the case for its practical success was difficult to make. The annual progress reports on the rural development strategy were apparently discontinued before Stelmach’s departure. A subsequent report by the Conference Board of Canada, commissioned by the government, concluded that in the 2006–11 period, economic growth in rural Alberta “decelerated noticeably.” The rural share of the population continued to decline. Though rural Alberta grew in absolute numbers—here again, definitions of rural matter—that growth did not keep pace with the province as a whole and was not evenly distributed; some communities and regions experienced a decline. Per-capita income levels remained “well below” those in urban centres.²⁷

While the Redford government prepared for its first election in 2012 with a Throne Speech that contained some of the standard reassurances about the importance of rural communities and the values left by the “settlers and farmers who founded this province,”²⁸ its post-election Throne Speech to a new legislature, three months later, was silent on rural Alberta, where it had lost seats. Instead, it promised to “treat all Albertans with fairness and respect *no matter where they live*,” and, “most importantly . . . [to] get out of Albertans’ way so they can unleash their creative potential and build a prosperous province.”²⁹ Indicatively, in post-secondary education, the government softened the previous emphasis on accessibility and transferability, so that more students could complete at least part of their programs close to home, in favour of reducing program duplication in the name of system efficiency.

The Conservatives under Redford's leadership had proven the political possibility of winning an election without winning the countryside, but as a party they were not ready to relinquish their hold on rural seats permanently. After Redford's surprise resignation in 2014, followed by the selection of a replacement, former federal cabinet minister Jim Prentice, and then the spectacular floor-crossing of the Opposition leader and half of her remaining Wildrose caucus, the government set about repairing its relationship to rural Alberta.

The Prentice government's only Throne Speech, in November 2014, began by striking some general notes about sound fiscal management in difficult economic times, an end to entitlements, and the restoration of public trust—distancing itself, in other words, from its predecessor. It described a prosaic assortment of new commitments to rural Alberta: a Rural Business Centre, highway and bridge maintenance, and health. But it also contained a more important political signal, Bill 1, introduced that same day, which aimed to put to rest lingering rural discontent over property rights: "Private ownership of land is a fundamental and essential principle of our democracy and our economy. This government respects the property rights of Albertans. . . . Bill 1 signals the beginning of government's commitment to rebuild relationships with property owners in Alberta."³⁰ At the same time, the government released a new Rural Economic Development Action Plan—the work of another task force of government MLAs.³¹

Against this history, the Notley government's post-rural orientation stands in sharp relief. Rural is no longer a backbone or cornerstone. In a challenging economy, it is a heritage on which to draw—hard work, ingenuity, and perseverance—but it is not the only one.³² Certainly rural is not the engine of the current or future economy. The premier's state-of-the-province speeches in spring and fall of 2016 canvassed a long list of themes: families, resilience, job creation, competitiveness, infrastructure, public services, fiscal restraint, new markets and value-added production for energy, climate leadership, diversification, and the knowledge economy.³³ The 2016 budget stressed the same themes.³⁴ Both documents avoided rural-urban spatial differentiations; they referred instead to families, workers, communities, and sectors of the economy. They contained none of the traditional rural pieties, only brief references to renewable resources and agri-food innovation in the context of diversification.

The government's defence of energy *as a sector*, including the oil sands, new petrochemical plants in the Heartland industrial region northeast of Edmonton, and planned pipelines to take bitumen to international refiners, is instructive in this context. That defence is not mere posturing. Given the importance of energy to the provincial economy, employment, and the government's own fiscal capacity, it might not be a surprise. But it still has come at the cost of open conflict with environmental activists, Indigenous communities, and New Democrats, both nationally and in British Columbia. In the case of the Alberta NDP, what is seldom remembered is that the party's origins were in organized labour—not in the older agrarian socialism of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation—and, in particular, in the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW). Neil Reimer, the party's first leader, had come to Edmonton in 1951 as the union's Canadian director to organize workers in the new refineries and petrochemical plants; Reg Basken, also out of the OCAW, was party treasurer in the 1960s. Confronted with politically protected company unions, their organizing efforts had met with only partial success in Alberta, mostly in the petrochemical industry and the heavy-oil plant at Lloydminster; but over time a significant union presence developed in the oil sands, construction, and refining sectors of the energy industry. In the early 1960s, Reimer indeed had encouraged development of the Athabasca oil sands, albeit under public ownership.³⁵ The fact that the NDP won its first seats in rural constituencies of Pincher Creek (1966) and Spirit River-Fairview (1971) was an anomaly, as was the fact that Grant Notley, Reimer's successor, was a farm boy from Didsbury who "firmly believed that Neil did not understand rural Alberta" and disagreed with his strategic focus on urban ridings.³⁶ When the party became the Official Opposition after the 1986 election, all but two of its seats came from metropolitan Edmonton and Calgary; but at the time there were still enough members of that caucus with connections to the countryside to generate a substantial task force report on "the family farm and the future of rural Alberta."³⁷

A generation later, however, that rural sensibility is much harder to locate in the government caucus—which, in part, may simply reflect the reality of an increasingly urban province. The lack of a rural instinct and or informal rural network was apparent, for example, when the government rolled out details of its carbon tax in late 2016 without any adaptation to

places like Foremost or Tulliby Lake, places where driving and distances and long school-bus rides are daily realities. In particular, the tax tied carbon rebates to income, not location. It did, though, make an exemption for farm fuels in its initial announcement, and later committed energy efficiency grants specifically to livestock and greenhouse operators. Days before the tax took effect, the government hinted that further offsets might be coming for agricultural producers.³⁸ But those measures seemed an afterthought. A re-elected Conservative government might well have been forced to introduce its own carbon tax out of a similar instrumental concern to secure social licence and protect energy markets, but safe to say it would have done so differently; from the start it would have wrapped any such measures in the language of protecting and exempting rural Albertans.

Redrawing the Electoral Map

The most significant and immediate next step towards a post-rural politics in Alberta involved the redrawing of the electoral map. This exercise has been a point of contention given the province's dramatic demographic shifts in recent decades, especially since 1989, when the Supreme Court set legal limits around the maximum deviation from the average constituency population, and 1994, when the provincial appeals court ruled unambiguously that the electoral map could not be drawn again, as it had been, by a committee consisting solely of government MLAs, "if Alberta wishes to call itself a democracy."³⁹ Since then, there have been four electoral boundaries commissions, reporting in 1996, 2003, 2010, and 2017—typically after two elections. The appointment of the most recent commission required a legislative amendment to allow for a review earlier than the mandatory eight years, since the Prentice government had called an election ahead of the fixed calendar range, so that redistribution could occur in time for the next scheduled election in 2019.

The outcome of the previous reviews has been a modest redistribution in favour of cities, but each time the process has brought to the surface deep rural anxieties about declining political representation and influence. Alberta's allowable variance in riding population—25 per cent—is as large as any in Canada, and much larger than most provinces (in Saskatchewan, for example, it is only 5 per cent). In addition, the Electoral Boundaries

Commission Act allows for as many as four designated low-population constituencies on the perimeter of the province with a variance of as much as 50 per cent. In advance of the previous review, the Stelmach government introduced legislation to add four constituencies—increasing the provincial total from 83 to 87—so as to diminish the possibility that rural seats would actually be taken away. The 2010 commission, however, recommended that the legislature would in future have to think differently about the representation of large rural and northern ridings before the next review. Its final report included the dissenting position of one member who essentially said that difficult decisions should not have been deferred, that the commission had heard many concerns over the differential value of rural and urban votes, and that “the preservation of representation in sparsely-populated rural constituencies when urban constituencies are ballooning continues to be controversial.”⁴⁰ According to the minority position, the practice of thinking about the electoral map in terms of three blocks—Edmonton, Calgary, and rural—was increasingly problematic. Not only did it mask population decline in some regions, since the “rest of Alberta” category included several fast-growing, mid-sized cities; it also neglected the increasing dissatisfaction in those cities with the practice of being fragmented into hybrid rural-urban ridings—a means of containing their size—as if they constituted communities of interest.

The 2016–17 boundaries review was established amid expectations and rural fears of a more dramatic redistribution of seats in favour of cities and, presumably, the NDP’s political interests. Curiously, that speculation overlooked the fact that after the 2015 election the NDP held five of the seven ridings identified in the 2010 review as having the greatest negative deviation from the average constituency population, including the two large, northern “special consideration” ridings (Dunvegan-Central Peace and Lesser Slave Lake), as well as the next smallest (West Yellowhead). The party, in other words, did not have an unqualified interest in more urban seats.

The question of rural representation did preoccupy the commission, which was headed by an Edmonton judge and contained four other members, two each nominated by the NDP and Wildrose Opposition. Rural municipalities immediately began making their public case about the need to maintain reasonably scaled rural seats and a rural political voice in what looked like a zero-sum redistribution.⁴¹ In the end, the commission’s

recommended changes were relatively incremental and measured: new seats in Edmonton, Calgary, and Airdrie-Cochrane, at the expense of southeast, west-central, and northeastern rural regions. But its justification was blunt: “Alberta is no longer entirely or primarily rural in nature.” Accordingly, the “disproportionate preservation of the rural voice” was not a justifiable consideration under legislation; to treat it as such would “defeat the principle of representation by population.”⁴² The commission made parity of voting power its first principle and began, by way of methodology, with the cities—though, as it also noted, even under its recommendations a vote in the most populous Calgary riding would carry about one-third the weight of a vote in the special-consideration northern ridings. Nonetheless, one of the Wildrose-appointed commission members chose to submit a minority report that echoed the language of rural exceptionalism: “If Alberta continues to grow at such a rate, a critical part of our history, culture, and primary economic voice will be lost.”⁴³ The idea that a boundaries commission would somehow have the mandate to restore rural Alberta’s mythic unity and influence suggests that exceptionalism dies hard. But the reality is that in the next election, a smaller number of seats outside the cities will matter less to all parties.

Rural Identity and Grievance in a Post-rural Alberta

Those who study politics are well advised never to make bold claims about inevitable trajectories, tidy historical divisions, and the certainty of a post-*anything* era. That caution certainly holds for a chapter about the prospect of a post-rural politics in Alberta—one in which “rural,” whether as a coherent idea, a policy lens, a standing exception, a heartland, or rhetorical touchstone, is less-and-less central to the full spectrum of politics from elections to government policy.

The most obvious objection to the claim advanced here is that it reads too much into the NDP’s 2015 electoral victory: a post-rural government is not evidence of a post-rural politics, especially if that government’s prospects of re-election are uncertain. That the NDP has a post-rural orientation is clear enough. The government thinks and speaks most comfortably in terms of families, workers, communities, and economic sectors—even entrepreneurs and educators. It does not start from the assumption that “rural

Alberta” is a singular place, substantially different from “urban Alberta,” and that it therefore requires special consideration in public policy or deference in political speech. When Premier Notley got past the opening pleasantries in her second appearance at the AAMDC (“a great advocate,” “our partner”), she presented her government’s priorities in terms that would have fit a downtown Calgary audience without much alteration: fiscal restraint, stable public services for communities, infrastructure investment, climate leadership, and new markets for key sectors of the economy beyond energy alone. She noted that agriculture as a sector meant \$10 billion in annual exports and 89,000 *jobs*. That’s not the way that farmers regard themselves, but it was an implicit reminder that the sector itself is bigger than farmers, and not only rural in its location.⁴⁴

The post-rural shift did not start with the NDP. In some ways it was prefigured by the Redford Conservatives, who might be dismissed as being another aberration, not a “real” Alberta government, except that such so-called political anomalies also reflect and add up to real change. They point to demographic, economic, and electoral dynamics at work over a generation. The idea of a homogeneous rural Alberta, set within a simple rural-urban binary, strains increasingly against the realities in which people live and make a living. The idea may have a certain coherence in the realm of municipal politics, so that the AAMDC can represent a shared set of rural interests, say, in taxation, infrastructure (from roads to digital connectivity), and public services (from schools to hospitals). But the organization’s members find common ground mostly in a defensive posture—that is, in securing the status quo against the threat of consolidation or redeployment to other government priorities (or cities).

Beyond that, member municipalities are increasingly differentiated by demographic trajectories and economic futures, which are determined by factors like proximity to larger population centres or major resource developments. When rural is defined more generously, as it sometimes has been in policy, to mean everything outside of metropolitan Calgary and Edmonton, that sense of coherence is further diminished. The emergence of a caucus of twenty-two mid-sized cities representing close to a million people complicates the political math that once divided the province neatly into thirds: the two big cities plus rural Alberta, each entitled to its share. The best evidence for the success of previous governments’ rural development

initiatives, if credit is due, might be found in the flourishing of regional centres, with their own big-box retailers, new hospitals, and post-secondary campuses that can hold their own against the lure of Calgary and Edmonton. The irony is that they have done so in part by drawing shoppers, young people, medical professionals, and especially retirees out of smaller communities within their catchment areas. Increasingly, it is difficult to say where is rural and where is not.

In one important sense, though, the word “rural” is not about to disappear from the political lexicon. What it lacks in conceptual coherence it retains in its power to define an outsider identity and a set of grievances. Katherine Cramer has explored what she describes as “rural consciousness” in her book *The Politics of Resentment*, which focuses on Wisconsin, and in her response to the election of Donald Trump. Cramer’s book is the result of extended conversations with rural people—often, she acknowledges, the older white men who are the ones who tend to gather in public—in communities across the state. She is not wholly unsympathetic to her subjects. By consciousness, Cramer means “a strong sense of identity as a rural person combined with a strong sense that rural areas are the victims of injustice: the sense that rural areas do not get their fair share of power, respect, or resources and that rural folks prefer lifestyles that differ fundamentally from those of city people.”⁴⁵

Such rural consciousness is inherently oppositional. It is rooted in a sharp sense of dichotomy, but it affords plenty of room for people to define rural and urban for themselves. It distinguishes between the deserving and undeserving—the latter defined as “others,” not like them, who are “eating their share of the pie.”⁴⁶ They might be public servants and university professors in Madison with good jobs or the urban poor in Milwaukee who are supported by government welfare. In a politics where issues and direct economic interests become secondary to identity, Cramer argues, a rural consciousness is ripe for mobilization by politicians who can present themselves as either “like us” or at least likely to “understand us.”

There are recognizable echoes of Cramer’s Wisconsin in Alberta, particularly in the angry Bill 6 rallies and the Main Street truck parades against a carbon tax, and indeed in an undercurrent of Alberta politics with a much longer history. If it is increasingly difficult to draw definitive lines around what is rural, it is possible to map remarkable disparities across the province

on measures like income, age, education, and access to government services. Rural resentment has simmered for at least as long as people figured out that the Alberta Advantage was mostly for those living inside the Highway 2 corridor.

What has changed fundamentally with an NDP government is that people are less afraid to express that resentment in public; they no longer need to be polite about it. They imagine that the government is “alien” to them, and that those Albertans who supported Bill 6, to quote another country singer, “likely haven’t had to go out after a full day of work and help a mama cow safely deliver her calf in a cold, snowy night.”⁴⁷ In the same unrestrained spirit, municipal councillors at the AAMDC’s 2016 fall convention booed the deputy premier for her comments on the carbon tax and the phase-out of coal power.⁴⁸ Not long ago, such an open show of defiance would have been unthinkable. But the sense that the government’s climate plan will singularly disadvantage rural Alberta is a powerful one, whether it is expressed in convention halls or coffee shops.

The NDP government may not win a second term, but if that is the result the reason will be that it failed to hold seats in Calgary. By itself, that does not refute the idea of a post-rural shift. At the same time, the sense of rural grievance will be available for political mobilization even if the number of rural ridings has shrunk. It will serve as evidence with some audiences that the NDP is too incompetent, ideological, or just plain un-Albertan to be trusted with the levers of government. And if such a mobilization helps to produce a change in government, more rural voters will find themselves represented on the government side of the legislature; they will feel like insiders once again. Bill 6 will be repealed, good policy or not, as the leader of the United Conservative Party has pledged. But such a result would scarcely amount to either a restoration of political power or a reversal of the underlying trends. It would not change the fact, for example, that more than four in five Albertans live in what Statistics Canada calls urban population centres—more by far than in every province except Ontario and British Columbia.⁴⁹ It would not be enough to allay anxieties around the viability of rural communities and land-based livelihoods. It would not overcome the real political limits that have confronted the case for rural exceptionalism, valid or not, on a range of policy fronts for the past quarter-century. For that

matter, it would not make rural Alberta a single place with a single voice and a single, distinctive set of political interests—as if it ever was.

The Orange Chinook, in other words, has been the occasion but not the cause for the rise in political temperatures in the countryside. The NDP government's handling of files like farm safety might have been less awkward, its rural instincts might have been stronger, and it might then not have made such a ready target for outrage, manufactured or real, so early in its term. But the geographic centre of gravity in Alberta politics shifted some time ago. That reality presents choices, and risks, both for the government and for people living in the *outer* Alberta.

The latter can pursue a politics of grievance and hope that it is rewarded. Such a politics is curiously fixated on what happens in Edmonton and on the need for a strong champion, a patron, who can protect against perceived threats, ensure that the rural gets its share, and otherwise keep government out of people's lives. There is a recognizable path dependency in such a politics. But a politics of grievance can easily make rural people the kindling in someone else's fire. Not only that, it can overwhelm the alternative forms of political action that have been generated in recent times in the countryside. Those forms are invariably more local and regional in scope. They are often conservative in their own way. They might be about protecting a foothills ecology against the prospect of intensive resource exploitation, or monitoring downwind air quality, or saving a short-line railway that corporate interests would have sold for scrap.⁵⁰ They might be about building something new: a theatre, a co-operative, a municipal solar installation, a relationship with a neighbouring First Nations community. Invariably they take time, energy, effective leadership, and practices of citizenship. Though they may require provincial funding or favourable legislation, they do not rely wholly on what a provincial government in Edmonton decides to do.

For the NDP government, political realism alone might dictate that the votes are too scarce to spend much time in rural Alberta before the next election. A post-rural politics can readily become disengagement; it can mean never having to go *there*. In hard times, and in the face of imagined hostility, it justifies a preference for large-scale solutions applied from the centre. But a post-rural politics can also represent a different form of engagement with its own points of connection. There is room within the NDP's focus on communities to work creatively with local authorities to tackle problems such as

those having to do with housing and homelessness, affordable child care, small schools, transportation, and digital connectivity. Those problems may manifest differently than they do in the core neighbourhoods of Edmonton and Calgary, but they are no less corrosive in rural and remote communities. Likewise the focus on jobs and innovation. There is good reason to pay attention to the community-level initiatives through which people in places like Westlock and Flagstaff County continue to learn about enterprise, resilience, and their own surprising civic power. The reason is not that they are rural; it's that they might be able to help imagine the next Alberta.

The promise of the Orange Chinook is still that it might blow a fresh, warm wind across old spatial-cultural divides, power relationships, and economic disparities. The risk is that it will blow through quickly, only to be replaced by the kind of cold air mass that settles in for a long time and freezes everything it touches in place—including, in this case, a politics of grievance, a strange reliance on government, and an industrial countryside whose resources are extracted without restraint for as long as markets can be found for them.

NOTES

- 1 Some of the most thorough and balanced news coverage of the Bill 6 controversy can be found in the *Western Producer* (Saskatoon). See, for example, Mary MacArthur, "Bill 6 passes: Anger 'out of all proportion,'" 17 December 2015, <http://www.producer.com/2015/12/bill-6-passes-anger-all-out-of-proportion/> (accessed 21 January 2017). See, for comparison, Sheila Gunn Reid, "Sign the petition: Stop Bill 6 and save Alberta farms," *Rebel Media*, n.d., <http://www.therebel.media/savealbertafarms> (accessed 21 January 2017). Singer Paul Brandt's "An Open Letter to Premier Notley," posted on 4 December 2015, is at <https://www.facebook.com/331522040635/posts/10153162177670636/> (accessed 21 January 2017).
- 2 Rachel Notley, "An Open Letter to Alberta," posted 6 December 2015, at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/rachel-notley/an-open-letter-to-albertans/10153682598741427> (accessed 21 January 2017).
- 3 James Wood, "WCB claims soar under farm safety bill," *Edmonton Journal*, 6 December 2016, A2. For background, see Shirley McDonald and Bob Barnettson, eds., *Farm Workers in Western Canada* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2016).
- 4 I was present as a journalist at the Jubilee Auditorium in Edmonton on the night in 1980 when the crowd chanted "Free the West, Free the West!" People wore hats that read "Republic of Western Canada." One chanted "Sieg Heil." At least one spat on an Edmonton city councillor who stood outside the auditorium holding a Canadian

- flag. See my description, “Christie feeds eager flock of separatist converts,” *Lethbridge Herald*, 21 November 1980.
- 5 Mark Lisac, *Alberta Politics Uncovered* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2004), 2.
 - 6 Canadian Press, “Farm death of boy shocks members of Alberta Hutterite colony,” *CBC News*, 23 November 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/farm-death-of-boy-shocks-members-of-alberta-hutterite-colony-1.3331336> (accessed 21 January 2017).
 - 7 “Three sisters dead after farm accident in central Alberta,” *Edmonton Journal*, 15 October 2015, <http://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/two-children-dead-one-in-critical-condition-after-farming-accident-in-central-alberta> (accessed 21 January 2017). Though farming is increasingly practised with large, expensive machinery and farm knowledge is increasingly held by technology, agriculture, in its defence, is still a rare form of livelihood in which children work with their parents and learning is intergenerational and experiential. In this, it has few remaining cognates; the closest might be traditional land-based practices in Indigenous communities.
 - 8 I have explored this relationship in “The Political Deskilling of Rural Communities,” in *Writing Off the Rural West: Globalization, Governments, and the Transformation of Rural Communities*, ed. Roger Epp and Dave Whitson, 301–24 (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), and *We Are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008), ch. 9: “Two Albertas: Rural and Urban Trajectories.”
 - 9 Government of Alberta, Economic Development, Business Information and Research, “Regional Disparities in Alberta: Resource Package,” 4 March 2002. This document was retrieved at the time by a journalist’s access-to-information request.
 - 10 Fred Stenson, “Urban v. Rural,” *Alberta Views*, May 2008, 30–5.
 - 11 Todd Babiak, “Crop the vote: Urban centres will continue to suffer as long as voter apathy reigns,” *Edmonton Journal*, 16 June 2007, H5. See also Les Brost, “Hey, Ed, rope in that rural excess,” *Calgary Herald*, 18 February 2008, A10.
 - 12 Lauren Krugel, “Jason Kenney will face ‘uphill battle’ in bid for Alberta PC leadership: Smith,” *Global News*, 5 July 2016, <http://globalnews.ca/news/2805263/jason-kenney-will-face-uphill-battle-in-bid-for-alberta-pc-leadership-smith/> (accessed 21 January 2017).
 - 13 Lisac, *Alberta Politics Uncovered*, 79.
 - 14 That farmer is Energy Minister Margaret McCuaig-Boyd, a long-time teacher and educational administrator who has also been involved in a cow-calf operation with her husband on their farm outside of Fairview.
 - 15 Rachel Notley, speech to the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties Annual Convention, 19 November 2015, <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=38870513B27D5-9389-47A7-6D5B664DFEAF3197> (accessed 21 January 2017); quotations at 2 and 5.
 - 16 These quotes are from “Speech from the Throne,” *Alberta Hansard*, 29th Legislature, First Session, 15 June 2015, 7, 8.
 - 17 “Speech from the Throne,” *Alberta Hansard*, 25th Legislature, Third Session, 18 February 2003, 1, 2 (my italics).

- 18 “Speech from the Throne,” *Alberta Hansard*, 25th Legislature, Fourth Session, 17 February 2004, 4.
- 19 “Speech from the Throne,” *Alberta Hansard*, 26th Legislature, First Session, 2 March 2005, 9.
- 20 *Rural Alberta: Land of Opportunity*, Report of an MLA Steering Committee, March 2004.
- 21 Government of Alberta, *A Place To Grow: Alberta’s Rural Development Strategy*, February 2005, 1.
- 22 Government of Alberta, “\$100-million development fund will help kickstart innovative rural projects,” Media Release, 22 March 2006, <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=19611233BBA9A-BA09-4BF7-59F3E0CDD62E9D71> (accessed 21 January 2017).
- 23 Government of Alberta, Agriculture, “Report on Progress, Alberta’s Rural Development Strategy,” 2007, [http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$Department/deptdocs.nsf/all/csi12110/\\$FILE/progressreport.pdf](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$Department/deptdocs.nsf/all/csi12110/$FILE/progressreport.pdf) (accessed 21 January 2017); see also “Update Report,” 2009, at [http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$Department/deptdocs.nsf/all/csi12110/\\$FILE/2009-Rural-Development-Strategy-Update.pdf](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$Department/deptdocs.nsf/all/csi12110/$FILE/2009-Rural-Development-Strategy-Update.pdf) (accessed 21 January 2017).
- 24 “Speech from the Throne,” *Alberta Hansard*, 26th Legislature, Fourth Session, 4 February 2008, 4; “Speech from the Throne,” *Alberta Hansard*, 27th Legislature, First Session, 15 April 2008, 6.
- 25 *Rural Alberta: Land of Opportunity*, 3.
- 26 The Millennium Alberta Rural Incentive Bursary was created with funds from the Canada Millennium Scholarship Fund, established by Parliament in 1998 with a \$2-billion endowment, to reduce barriers to post-secondary education over ten years. It was Alberta’s choice to designate rural students as the targeted beneficiaries.
- 27 Conference Board of Canada, “Alberta’s Rural Communities: Their Economic Contribution to Alberta and Canada,” prepared for Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, November 2013, [http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$Department/deptdocs.nsf/all/csi12085/\\$FILE/Alberta-Rural-Update.pdf](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$Department/deptdocs.nsf/all/csi12085/$FILE/Alberta-Rural-Update.pdf) (accessed 21 January 2017).
- 28 “Speech from the Throne,” *Alberta Hansard*, 27th Legislature, Fifth Session, 7 February 2012, 3.
- 29 “Speech from the Throne,” *Alberta Hansard*, 28th Legislature, First Session, 24 May 2012, 7 (my italics).
- 30 “Speech from the Throne,” *Alberta Hansard*, 28th Legislature, Third Session, 17 November 2014, 4.
- 31 Government of Alberta, Agriculture and Rural Development, *Rural Economic Development Action Plan: An Economic Pathway for Rural Alberta*, 2014, <http://open.alberta.ca/dataset/e7b93667-e6eb-43e2-a9f3-4c726b316ef6/resource/f7ff3b47-3b6e-42b2-ba04-83d0a2e06db5/download/6734329-2014-Rural-Economic-Development-Action-Plan-2014-11-03.pdf> (accessed 21 January 2017).

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- 34 Government of Alberta, *Budget 2016, The Alberta Jobs Plan*, 14 April 2016, <https://www.alberta.ca/budget-highlights.aspx> (accessed 21 January 2017).
- 35 One good account of the “bitter” conflict between the CCF and the New Party in Alberta—the former more rural and ideological, the latter more urban, labour-based, and interested in electability—is found in Howard Leeson, *Grant Notley: The Social Conscience of Alberta*, 2nd ed. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2015), ch. 3. See also Alvin Finkel, *Working People in Alberta: A History* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2012), 163–7; Warren Caragata, *Alberta Labour: A Heritage Untold* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1979), 134–6; Anthony Mardiros, *William Irvine: The Life of a Prairie Radical* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1979), 251–2; and Winston Gereluk’s interview with Reg Basken (2003) in the Alberta Labour History Institute’s oral history project, at <http://albertalabourhistory.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Basken.pdf> (accessed 21 January 2017).
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- 40 Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission, *Proposed Electoral Division Areas, Boundaries, and Names for Alberta: Final Report to the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta*, June 2010; quotations from the minority position by member Allyson Jeffs at p. 29.
- 41 See the AAMDC Submission to the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission, January 2017, <http://www.aamdc.com/archive/miscellaneous/1583-aamdc-submission-to-aebc/file> (accessed 21 January 2017); James Wood, “Concern in rural Alberta as electoral boundary commission starts hearings,” *Calgary Herald*, 9 January 2017, <http://calgaryherald.com/news/politics/concern-in-rural-alberta-as-electoral-boundary-commission-starts-hearings> (accessed 21 January 2017); Elise Stolte, “Edmonton angles for one more seat in the legislature,” *Edmonton Journal*, 20 January 2017, <http://>

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