



BLUE STORM: THE RISE AND FALL OF JASON KENNEY

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Two Combative Leaders, Two Disparate Parties, and One Bitter Campaign: The 2019 Alberta Election

Graham Thomson

It was a campaign seemingly unlike any in Alberta's history: more vicious, more personal, and more divisive. Alberta's 2019 general election was less like a political horse race and more like the chariot clash in Ben-Hur, but with less "civility."

This was not just a battle of political ideologies, but a personal confrontation between two very different politicians that had begun two years prior when former federal cabinet minister Jason Kenney became leader of the Progressive Conservatives (PC), beginning his remarkable journey to unite forces with the Wildrose to form the United Conservative Party (UCP). In that sense the campaign wasn't twenty-eight days long, or even twenty-eight weeks, but more like twenty-eight months.

Albertans who had been paying attention to the escalating confrontation were likely exhausted before the campaign even began. Premier Rachel Notley officially launched Alberta's thirtieth general election campaign on 19 March with election day set for 16 April, but the date that would prove most significant for Notley and her New Democratic Party (NDP) had already occurred on 31 August 2018. On that day, the Federal Court of Appeal quashed approval for plans to expand the Trans Mountain

pipeline to ship more Alberta energy products to the West Coast. “Alberta has done everything right and we have been let down,” said a frustrated Notley at the time. “It is a crisis.”¹ A crisis not only for Alberta’s battered economy, but a catastrophe for Notley’s embattled NDP government that, in 2015, had had the misfortune of becoming government just in time for Alberta to sink into a four-years-and-counting oil-price recession.

Notley desperately needed at least a photo-op’s worth of Trans Mountain pipe in the ground before the 2019 election to demonstrate to Albertans that their first-ever NDP government had not been an economic jinx. Instead, Notley was heading into the election campaign on a hobbled horse. On 18 March 2019, literally the eve of the election campaign, Notley unveiled a Speech from the Throne designed to defend her record while pointing the finger of blame at others: “Your government has fought to get new pipelines built, but, due to the failures of successive federal governments, Alberta’s resources remain landlocked.”² That same day, she tried to manufacture a fight with the UCP over health care by introducing a piece of legislation entitled Bill 1: The Protection of Public Health Care Act. Notley said the bill was about “defending Albertans from American-style health care.”³ Kenney refused to take the bait and the tactic fizzled.

Notley would instead campaign on her social justice victories: instituting \$15 minimum wage, providing workplace protection for paid farmer workers, keeping anti-abortion protesters away from clinics, and safeguarding gay-straight alliances in schools. But not on her Climate Leadership Plan (CLP), which was arguably the signature achievement of her government.

Jason Kenney, leader of the two-year-old UCP, was facing troubles of his own on 18 March as he stoically endured an hour-long barrage from journalists about the renewed accusations of wrongdoing in the UCP’s 2017 leadership race. Kenney denied doing anything wrong, or that he had unfairly colluded with another campaign candidate, Jeff Callaway, to defeat rival Brian Jean. But the news media and NDP were all atwitter with news that the RCMP had been called in to investigate by Alberta’s election commissioner who continued to levy fines against several people associated with the Callaway campaign.⁴

Notley had likely wanted to see if the investigations led anywhere—and if the Trans Mountain pipeline project could be restarted—before

calling an election, but she was hamstrung by Alberta's legislated electoral "window" that stipulated an election date be set between 1 March and 31 May every four years. This window was not legally binding, but Notley realized that delaying the election until later in 2019 would have unpleasant echoes of the PC's disastrous decision under Jim Prentice to call an election one year early in 2015. Notley therefore had the campaign thrust upon her at an inopportune time.

She entered the arena armed with a weak economic record that placed her on the defensive. So, to create an offensive narrative, she targeted what she thought were the UCP's weakest links: its socially conservative ideals and the socially conservative history of its leader. She focused on the character, history, and ethics of its candidates—but mostly the character, history, and ethics of Kenney. "It's a choice about who is going to be the premier of Alberta and who is fit to be the premier of Alberta," declared Notley on 19 March as she kicked off her campaign at Calgary's National Music Centre surrounded by a diverse audience of supporters. "Two days ago, we learned Mr. Kenney cheated to win his party's leadership. And when he was caught, he didn't tell the truth. Mr. Kenney looked Albertans in the eye and very casually and very comfortably lied to us, which in many ways goes to the heart of this issue: how comfortable Mr. Kenney is with lying."⁵

Shredding Kenney's character would become a major theme in the NDP campaign, but the party realized Notley should not be the one wielding the knife day after day, especially not after she declared on the opening day that "the politics of love and hope and optimism always trump the politics of anger, division, and fear, and that's why I'm running to be premier."⁶ Instead, the NDP would have veteran politician Sarah Hoffman take charge of anger, division, and fear. "I believe Jason Kenney's unfit to be premier of Alberta and that Albertans deserve to know who the real Jason Kenney is," declared Hoffman, who on the third day of the campaign unveiled a ten-minute attack "documentary" against Kenney pointing, among other things, to his views against same-sex marriage while a university student in California decades before.⁷

Using Hoffman to aggressively attack Kenney would keep Notley insulated from the worst of the mud-slinging that, although damaging the

target, often hurts the mud-slinger, too. Going negative hard and early in the campaign was a risk for the whole NDP campaign.

In keeping with his focus on the energy industry, Kenney launched his campaign in the lot of a Leduc-based drilling company, where he arrived in a blue Dodge Ram truck, the same prop he had used in the leadership race for the PCs and then later for the UCP. He accused the NDP of mis-managing the economy and blamed the Notley government's carbon tax for undermining Alberta's growth. "Tens of thousands of Albertans have given up looking for work," said Kenney. "Albertans are poorer because of NDP policy."⁸ His message was simple, blunt, and easily articulated in three words: economy, jobs, pipelines.

Then Kenney introduced another character into the campaign, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who was disliked by many Albertans and happened to be a personal and professional nemesis of Kenney's. Kenney used the spectre of Trudeau to diminish the reputation of Notley who, according to opinion polls, was well liked by many Albertans but had worked closely with Trudeau over energy issues and climate plans. "This campaign is not about politics, it's about people, the people who have been damaged by the ideological job-killing policies of the NDP and their alliance with the Trudeau Liberals," declared Kenney.⁹

Not surprisingly, when the campaign began the news media focused on Kenney and Notley, and their respective parties. They were the front-runners by far according to just about every public opinion poll over the previous eighteen months. An Ipsos-Reid poll released on the opening day indicated the UCP enjoyed a large lead over the NDP: 52 per cent to 35. The other parties, including the Alberta Liberals, the Alberta Party, and the Freedom Conservative Party had a combined total of seven per cent¹⁰ (see chapter by Brooks DeCillia). "For those that think that this is a multi-party race, it's not," said Mount Royal political scientist Duane Bratt. "I mean you add up all the smaller parties and it doesn't even reach double digits."¹¹

Even though the UCP was far ahead, Kenney stumbled on the first day thanks to a strategically placed hurdle by the NDP-friendly website Press Progress, which published a story about controversial statements involving white supremacists made two years previously by one of Kenney's star candidates, Caylan Ford in Calgary-Mountain View. The story reinforced

a narrative that had plagued the UCP for months: a string of “bozo eruptions” by UCP members running to be candidates who were subsequently tossed from the party, or at least prevented from carrying the party banner, because of racist or homophobic views posted online. Eruptions can kill campaigns as Albertans had learned during the province’s 2012 election after the Wildrose suffered the Mount Vesuvius of bozo eruptions when a candidate’s homophobic “lake of fire” comment helped sink the party’s election chances.

Ford angrily disputed the context of the quotes but abruptly resigned nonetheless, perhaps realizing if she didn’t voluntarily jump, she might be pushed out by her party. When asked about Ford’s resignation, Kenney expressed shock and disappointment over her comments, but said she did the right thing by tossing herself overboard.¹² Ford was just the latest embarrassment for the UCP, but Notley and her supporters hoped it wouldn’t be the last as they tried to trip up the social conservatives in the UCP ranks. Kenney’s challenge was to keep his candidates in line, on message, and under control. And if they created a “distraction,” he had to jettison them overboard without a second thought, even if they were, like Ford, star material destined for the cabinet. “It’s really a fear versus loathing campaign: Do you fear Jason Kenney more than you loathe the New Democrats, or vice versa,” said Faron Ellis, a political science professor at Lethbridge College.¹³ By having Ford leave the campaign quietly, Kenney managed to defuse the controversy relatively quickly.

The UCP’s campaign turned out to have no fatal “bozo eruptions,” though one did surface that created a political headache for Kenney. On 2 April, UCP candidate Mark Smith was confronted by an audio recording of comments he had made during a sermon five years previously where he suggested that love between a same-sex couple was not love, and then he went on to mention pedophilia. “You don’t have to watch any TV for any length of time today where you don’t see on the TV programs them trying to tell you that homosexuality and homosexual love is good love,”¹⁴ said Smith who was running for re-election in Drayton Valley-Devon, having originally won the seat as a Wildrose candidate in 2015.

The audio recording was broadcast by a University of Alberta-based radio station as part of a program dealing with 2SLGBTQA+ issues. When questioned by reporters on the campaign trail, Smith said he couldn’t

recall making the comment but he issued an apology of sorts by saying he was sorry if he had upset anyone: “Of course I do not believe that homosexuality is akin to pedophilia. I unequivocally apologize if anyone was offended or hurt. Obviously that would never be my intention.”¹⁵

Kenney said he found Smith’s comments offensive but stuck by his candidate, pointing out that Smith had apologized and Kenney had not heard Smith repeat similar comments in his four years as an MLA. The issue eventually dissipated but not before Kenney endured a headline-grabbing grilling from someone who considered himself an old friend of Kenney’s: national radio broadcaster Charles Adler.

In a heated interview on 3 April that would turn out to be a foreshadowing of Kenney’s troubled future as premier and his difficult relationship with once-sympathetic journalists, Adler pressed Kenney on the Smith affair, pointing out that even though Kenney had said the UCP was inclusive, it had no openly gay candidates. “I’ve considered you a friend for a long time and I know you’re an intelligent person and you’re politically astute,” said Adler. “Don’t you realize that right now, people are screaming back at the radio and they’re saying, ‘People who hate LGBT people are highly attracted to the (United Conservative) party and running for the party, but the people who are LGBT people—the targets of the hatred—they’re not running for the party.’”¹⁶ When Kenney argued that some openly gay Albertans had sought UCP nominations, Adler pointed out, “none of them are up for election right now as members of the UCP. Not a single one.”¹⁷

Adler also took aim at Kenney’s problematic personal history—raised repeatedly by the NDP during the campaign—where Kenney, as a university student in San Francisco in the 1980s, had championed an initiative removing the rights of same-sex partners to visit their loved ones suffering from AIDS in hospital.

“AIDs patients were dying alone, no visitors, no visitation allowed and in many cases, they couldn’t even visit them at funerals,” said Adler. “Mr. Kenney, we could put this to bed immediately if you could only offer a genuine, fulsome apology—I’ll move on from San Francisco—have you ever offered a genuine, remorseful apology for the many people that you and your colleagues hurt with that initiative?”¹⁸

“Charles, I’ve said that I regret many things I did when I was a young man and I wouldn’t take the same position,” replied Kenney.

“That’s not an apology, Mr. Kenney, that’s not an apology,” said Adler.¹⁹ The interview made news across the country but it didn’t knock Kenney off stride.

He was off and running with nary a glance backward as he renewed his attack on the NDP for introducing a carbon tax, for not getting a pipeline built, for running a record provincial debt, and for not creating more jobs. Kenney honed his “fight back” strategy designed to inflame anger at the federal Liberal government while positioning himself as the one person who could effectively oppose Prime Minister Trudeau.

In the first week of the campaign, Kenney unveiled a nine-point plan that he said would strengthen Alberta’s position in Canada’s federation by, among other things, holding a referendum against the federal equalization program, demanding Ottawa increase payments under the Fiscal Stabilization program, and setting up an Alberta parole board.²⁰ In the second week, the UCP released an ambitious, decidedly anti-NDP, and unapologetically pro-business 114-page platform that included promises to scrap Alberta’s carbon tax, kill the NDP’s CLP, cut the corporate tax rate, lower the minimum wage, and set up a “war room” to defend Alberta’s energy industry.²¹

However, sensitive to complaints the UCP was a laggard on environmental issues—and no doubt realizing it could not ignore the dangers of human-made climate change—the party’s promises included a technology innovation and emissions reduction program where a carbon tax on large emitters would help fund new technologies to reduce emissions (see Duane Bratt’s chapter).

For its part, the NDP unveiled a platform that included promises to provide high-speed internet to all Albertans, help farmers buy energy-efficient equipment, lower the cost of prescription drugs for seniors, help families afford their first home, and expand the existing subsidized child-care system.²² Perhaps realizing Albertans were more interested in jobs than in cheap drugs for grandpa, Notley continued to focus her attention on Kenney, arguing his platform policies were a tired echo of the past that would hurt Alberta in the future. “His plan to remove the cap on emissions from the oilsands, his plan to move back to coal, this will actually

make our kids less healthy,” said Notley. “It’s a plan where the rich get richer. It’s a compilation of failed old ideas that got Alberta into a whole heap of trouble in the first place.”²³

At the midway point in the race came the one and only leaders’ debate that proved to be a microcosm of the whole campaign. Joining Kenney and Notley onstage for the televised event were Alberta Party leader Stephen Mandel and Alberta Liberal leader David Khan, whose parties each had one legislative seat when the election was called (neither of the seats were held by Mandel or Khan).

The debate was decidedly off kilter from the moment it started. Instead of Notley being the one under constant attack as the incumbent premier, the attention was focused on Kenney who was the campaign’s clear front-runner according to virtually every opinion poll. “Your record in Ottawa is a decade of failure,” said Notley of Kenney’s time as a federal MP. “It is becoming clearer and clearer that people on Mr. Kenney’s leadership team, at the very least, cheated for him to win the leadership,” she continued, once again trying to keep the spotlight on controversies surrounding the 2017 UCP leadership race.²⁴

But here Notley faced two problems. First, the leadership controversies had so far involved candidate Jeff Callaway and his campaign. Kenney was not directly implicated and as columnist Catherine Ford had pointed out at the beginning of the campaign, voters in Alberta were “yawning all over the province”²⁵ at leaked documents showing the Kenney and Callaway campaigns working together during the 2017 UCP leadership race. “I really don’t think that this is going to have any effect whatsoever on the Alberta election,” Ford told CBC Radio. “They won’t care. They think that this is how politics is played, that there is always some chicanery going around.”²⁶

And the second problem for Notley was that voters probably didn’t care about Kenney’s political past record as a cabinet minister in federal politics. This was a provincial election dealing with current issues. Much to Notley’s frustration, Kenney was a blank slate when it came to provincial politics. So, too, his UCP. Even though the UCP was formed from the ashes of the old PC Party that had governed Alberta for forty-four years, and from the right-wing Wildrose Party that had been viewed as too socially conservative by many Albertans in previous elections, the UCP was

a new political entity and thus relatively baggage free (see the chapter by David Stewart and Anthony Sayers).

Kenney complained during the debate that he was being unfairly attacked by the other leaders, that he was being “defamed.” But he, naturally, also launched his own attacks against Notley by lumping her in with the unpopular-in-Alberta Prime Minister Trudeau: “I respect your leadership, but you made a grave mistake with the alliance with Justin Trudeau. You sold Alberta down the river to your ally Justin Trudeau.”²⁷ Kenney was laser-focused on Notley and Notley only had eyes for Kenney.

For them, Mandel and Khan seemed to be merely pieces of furniture on set. Khan at one point tried to grab the spotlight by arguing in favour of a provincial sales tax. “We need a sales tax to stabilize our revenues,” said Khan, hoping to spark a debate. “I’m talking about replacing most provincial income tax with an HST (harmonized sales tax).”²⁸ But the other leaders ignored what is a non-starter in Alberta politics. Other planks in the Liberal platform included electoral reform, easier access to abortions in rural Alberta, and the elimination of personal income tax for most Albertans.²⁹ All of them were interesting ideas, but largely ignored because they were being offered by a party trailing in fourth place in opinion polls.

Mandel at times seemed to walk in lockstep with Kenney’s anti-Ottawa rhetoric. Indeed, the Alberta Party’s platform echoed some of the UCP’s policies including the need for Alberta to do a better job marketing its energy sector to highlight the industry’s environmental record. But Mandel had months before rejected Kenney’s war room idea as “juvenile.”³⁰ The Alberta Party platform also included lower corporate taxes, a \$1-billion voucher system for day care and dental care for children under twelve.³¹

As a seasoned debater, Notley performed as expected but at times the smile on her face didn’t match the venom in her anti-Kenney words. This was not a repeat of the 2015 leaders’ debate where Notley clearly emerged the winner and the incumbent, Jim Prentice, the loser.

Kenney, who had likely been preparing for this debate since he first stepped into provincial politics three years previously, emerged unscathed. As the front-runner that was all he needed to do. In the days after the debate, Notley continued to call into question Kenney’s character. But it didn’t seem to be resonating with voters.

This is not to say that issues of morality, character, compassion weren't important to Albertans. Even though more than a few Albertans were no doubt upset, even frightened, at the thought of a Kenney government—particularly when it appeared he was ready to “out” gay students to their parents³²—others were conversely fearful of the province's economic future, a dearth of new pipelines, ballooning government debt, and high unemployment. Kenney's simple mantra of “jobs, economy, pipelines” was more attuned to the concerns of voters than Notley's angry warnings over shenanigans in a conservative leadership race two years before.

Why didn't Notley focus more on her own record? That was one of the questions raised by a focus group in Edmonton on 8 April. Organized by the CBC in partnership with Janet Brown Research, ten voters representing a cross section of Albertans by party affiliation, age, and gender, discussed the campaign. Several expressed disappointment that the NDP didn't run a campaign extolling the virtues of its own record. And frustration that Notley hadn't defended her large deficits as a necessary tactic to protect government services, build infrastructure projects, and create jobs. “The NDP's going to lose the election because they really didn't defend why they're running a deficit,” said one of the participants. “I thought they would have made an effort to say, you know, ‘We're going to start trimming the deficit a little bit or show a path forward,’ and they really didn't. There was a path forward, eventually, and it was prudent and the money wasn't being wasted, it was going to be spent prudently.”³³

By focusing so much on Kenney, the NDP was trying to get Albertans to think twice about his ability to be premier. But consequently New Democrats seemed to be afraid to discuss their own record as government. On the surface that was understandable. The province's economic recovery had stalled, unemployment in Edmonton and Calgary was the highest of any major cities outside of Atlantic Canada, and the Trans Mountain pipeline was still not under construction. Kenney had also gained traction by attacking the NDP's CLP, particularly the province's carbon tax. And the provincial debt had hit a record \$60 billion under the NDP. It wasn't a record you'd want to shout from the rooftops or wrap around the side of a campaign bus. But perhaps that's exactly what Notley should have done.

In the final week of the campaign, the gap between the UCP and NDP did narrow but not enough to make it a horse race. According to an

opinion poll released by ThinkHQ on 9 April, the UCP held a six point lead over the NDP: 46 per cent vs. 40 per cent. The Alberta Party had eight per cent support while the Liberals had two, the Freedom Conservative Party one, and various other parties 3 per cent.

“The 2019 campaign is one of the nastiest ones I can recall, and as the advance polls open, barring a significant shift in campaign momentum in the final days, it looks like we’re getting a new government on April 16th,” said ThinkHQ president Marc Henry. “The province-wide vote share for the NDP, while closing on the UCP, is very inefficient. Notley’s problem is both geography and math; they are running up the score in Edmonton, but trail everywhere else. The (conservative) vote splits that led to 15 NDP seats in Calgary in 2015 just aren’t there today.”³⁴

For Notley, Calgary was the battleground. Thus on Monday 15 April, she donned a hard hat and work boots to tour a pipe fabrication plant in the city for a photo op to help push her own pro-pipeline message to counter Kenney’s relentless drumbeat that she was anti-energy and pro-Trudeau. “Through patient and determined action, we have built a durable national consensus on the need for pipelines,” said Notley. “A strong and growing majority of Canadians support Alberta pipelines, including in British Columbia. And I intend to keep it that way”³⁵ (see Jean-Sébastien Rioux’s chapter).

For Kenney, the Edmonton region was the battleground but not to win the election. He simply wanted to avoid being shut out of the capital city. Kenney thus spent his last day in Sherwood Park pointing out to a crowd of supporters that 700,000 people had voted in advance polls, three times the number that had voted early in 2015. For him, this was a sign that Albertans wanted a new government: “Just one more sleep, one more day before Albertans have an opportunity to vote for change that gets our province back to work and that gets Alberta back on track.”³⁶

The following day, election day, proved the opinion polls right. The final tally saw only the UCP and NDP win seats in the legislature. The UCP won sixty-three seats with almost 55 per cent support (a little more than one million votes) while the NDP won twenty-four seats with 33 per cent support (almost 620,000 votes). No other party came close.³⁷ The Alberta Party’s 172,000 votes represented less than 10 per cent of the provincial total and the Liberals, once a major player in Alberta politics, fared

even worse with 18,500 votes, or one per cent of the total. Both had been squeezed out of the middle of the political spectrum by the NDP.

The results indicated a lopsided win and geographical split in Alberta for the UCP that dominated Calgary and rural Alberta, but was virtually shut out of Edmonton where the NDP captured every seat but one. The Capital City was an island of NDP orange in an ocean of UCP blue.

Kenney's victory speech on election night glossed over the regional imbalance as he struck a defiant tone aimed at the federal Liberal government. "Today we begin to stand up for ourselves, our jobs and our future," declared Kenney. "Today we Albertans begin to fight back."³⁸ Kenney had wanted this to be a campaign about the economy, jobs, and pipelines. And he won. Fears over the economy drove the campaign and captured the attention of voters. Not fears over Kenney's socially conservative history, or the intolerant comments from some of his candidates, or an RCMP investigation into the 2017 UCP leadership race.

This was a campaign about who could best kick-start the economy, help create jobs, and get an energy pipeline to the all-important "tide-water." This was a campaign about the anger and frustration of many Albertans who felt the province, still suffering through a recession, had been forgotten or abandoned by the federal government and other parts of the country. Kenney had blamed the NDP's carbon tax for killing jobs, arguing that after four years of incompetence and scheming with her "good friend and ally" Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Notley had helped destroy Alberta's economy.

These were simplistic and unfair characterizations but, in the midst of an election campaign, politically effective. Kenney had accused the NDP of running an "anger-machine" but he himself was something of a one-man anger juggernaut. Among his promises: enact legislation to "turn off the [oil] taps" to British Columbia to force through a pipeline to the West Coast; hold a provincial referendum to force a change to the federal equalization program; fight the federal carbon tax in court; and begin a constitutional challenge against federal legislation deemed to interfere in Alberta's economic growth. Never mind that constitutional experts said Kenney had little to no hope of succeeding in any of these fights, Albertans just seemed glad he was willing to try. In that, Kenney was channeling the spirit of former-premier Ralph Klein who at one time or another promised

to fight the GST, stop same-sex marriage, and withdraw from the equalization program. He didn't do any of those things but conservatives were happy he gave voice to their anger.

Among Kenney's to-do list post-election was a "summer of repeal" where he would hold a legislative session specifically to tear, down, tear up and tear through Notley's legacy. Notley had spent four years planting trees of social justice legislation—and Alberta had just elected a lumberjack. Notley was again relegated to being leader of the official Opposition. However, for the first time in Alberta history the province had an Opposition that was once government, a leader who was once premier, and critics who were once cabinet ministers. "Yes, tonight's vote is not the result we had hoped or worked so hard for," said Notley. "But no matter what our role is in the legislature, we will not rest."³⁹

Kenney wasted no time trying to demonstrate how his leadership would bring results for Alberta. Speaking in French during his victory address, Kenney appealed to Quebecers to allow the energy industry to resurrect a proposal to build the Energy East pipeline from Alberta to New Brunswick. The following day, after thanking Kenney for his "elegant gesture" of speaking French, Quebec Premier Francois Legault said "non." "Regarding other oil pipelines, I want to remind him there is no social acceptability for it," said Legault.⁴⁰

Kenney was about to discover that winning the election was the easy part. Governing would prove to be much more difficult.

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