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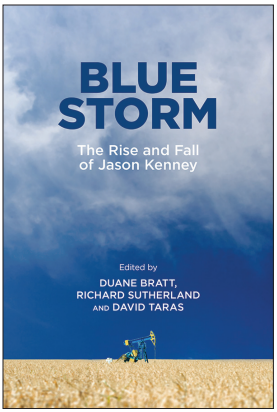

BLUE STORM: THE RISE AND FALL OF JASON KENNEY

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Comparing the Kenney and Ford Governments

Jonathan Malloy

Two provincial conservative political regimes were elected to power within a year of each other in 2018–2019: Jason Kenney's United Conservative Party (UCP) government in Alberta, and Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative (PC) government in Ontario. Both elections represented a clear swing away from more interventionist governments of the left, and the new premiers were clearly bent on a course correction for their province. Both premiers were also relative newcomers to the provincial political scene, as Kenney had built his reputation in federal politics and Ford at the municipal level. They also oversaw parties in evolution. Kenney led a party that had recently united from two separate parties. Ford had very recently taken over his party and swung it in significantly different directions than his predecessor.

But much is also different. This chapter draws out similarities and differences between the Ford and Kenney governments to better understand the distinctive characteristics of the latter. We see very different leadership styles and governing philosophies, which were particularly evident in the reactions to COVID-19 (see Lisa Young's chapter), as well as increasingly divergent paths of successful re-election for Ford and political demise for Kenney. Yet there are also similarities in general policy directions and visions for the provincial state. Examining the two regimes, we see how each reflects the distinctive political culture and environment of their respective provinces.

The chapter begins with the political contexts of each province and their contrasting political cultures and histories. It then gives a high-level overview of the two governments prior to the onset of the COVID pandemic. We then focus specifically on each premier and government's response to the pandemic. The chapter concludes with an overall analysis of the two governments and leaders, and their increasingly divergent political paths.

Ontario and Alberta Compared

While "political culture" can be an imprecise concept, there is little doubt that Alberta and Ontario have contrasting political systems, histories, and recurring values. Albertan politics have long had a populist streak, with recurring periods of confrontation with federal authorities and a sense of alienation from the political, economic, and social structures of central or "Eastern" Canada. In contrast, Ontario politics have been identified as managerialist and fundamentally moderate by nature.[1] While not without its own confrontation with federal authorities historically, including recent disputes over fiscal arrangements and transfers, disputes are more technical and intergovernmental. There is no broader sense of alienation among the general Ontario population comparable to Alberta.

The provincial party systems are also different. While the two provinces happen to hold records for the longest unbroken party regimes in Canadian politics (forty-four years for the Alberta PCs and forty-two years for the Ontario PCs), the similarities stop there. The Ontario party system is remarkably durable. Until the election of a Green MPP in 2018, the Ontario Legislative Assembly had had the same three parties since 1955.[2] The Alberta system is more fluid, with Social Credit dominating the province from 1935–1971 but then disappearing, and the rise of the Wildrose Party in the 2000s leading to a newly constituted UCP.

Alberta governments are also more dominant. The province has never had a minority government (Ontario has had four since 1975) and opposition parties at times have been reduced to a bare presence. In contrast, Ontario opposition parties have always remained robust, and all three parties held power in a remarkable rotation between 1985 and 1995. Since 1995 the Liberals and PCs have alternated in power while the New Democratic Party (NDP) remains a robust force, vaulting to second place

in the legislature in 2018 and retaining that status in 2022. The current Alberta dynamic with two well-matched and experienced government and opposition parties facing each other is new to the province, while Ontario is accustomed to a strong three-way dynamic.

The two conservative parties are also different. The Alberta UCP are a recent construction from the longstanding PCs and the Wildrose Party, which arose largely as a right-wing reaction to what was seen as excessive centrism in the PCs. Jason Kenney's entry into Alberta politics was predicated on bringing the warring parties back together, which he did. But fault lines remained between ideologues and moderates, and became increasingly evident during the COVID pandemic and challenges to Kenney's leadership.

In contrast, the Ontario PCs are an ideologically lurching yet perennially unified group. The party has cycled through the "bland" Bill Davis, the "Common Sense Revolution" of Mike Harris, the distinctive moderation of John Tory (leader from 2004 to 2009), and the more hard-edged Tim Hudak (2009–2014). The party's most recent leader before Ford was Patrick Brown. Brown strongly identified himself with Bill Davis and his moderate legacy, and built a centrist platform in the runup to the 2018 election, embracing climate taxation for example. But Brown's removal in early 2018 due to sexual harassment allegations triggered a leadership race won by Ford, over two more moderate candidates, Christine Elliott and Caroline Mulroney, and a social conservative, Tanya Granic Allen. Ford discarded much of Brown's platform and yet oversaw a unified party to victory. And as we will see, while there has been dissent in the PC caucus, it is not indicative of broader fault lines. In short, despite leading "conservative" parties, Kenney and Ford oversaw very different parties amid historically different party systems and political cultures.

Ford and Kenney—Origins and Political Philosophies

While all provincial premiers tend to dominate their cabinets and governments, Kenney and Ford are particularly outsized personalities that monopolized attention and overshadowed the rest of their teams. It is important to examine each leader at a personal level to gain clues to their styles

and philosophies of governing, which we can then link to their policies and especially their response to COVID-19.

Jason Kenney has spent his entire adult life in politics and political advocacy, briefly as a political staffer, later in the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, and then nineteen years as an MP and eventual cabinet minister, before switching to Alberta politics. Kenney has arguably never really laid out his political philosophy in any extended fashion, though others, especially his opponents, have conjectured at length. But Kenney is widely associated with having acute political and ideological antennae and a strategic mindset that bridges ideology and pragmatism. His reputation for outreach as a federal minister to ethnic and racial communities has become almost apocryphal, and for a long time was key to the Kenney image as a strategic politician. His move to provincial politics with the express goal of reunifying the two warring parties can also be seen as evidence of a careful and strategic approach to politics.

Doug Ford has a more complicated background. His chief job before politics was working in the family business, Deco Labels, a small Toronto manufacturer. His father and the founder of the business, Doug Ford Sr., served briefly as a backbench MP in the Harris conservatives in the 1990s. Most importantly, his brother Rob Ford was a Toronto municipal councillor first elected in 2000, becoming mayor in 2010 for a single stormy term. Doug Ford Jr. did not run for office until 2010, when he took over his brother's municipal seat. He served a single term and then unsuccessfully ran for mayor himself in 2014, in place of his terminally ill brother. (The seat was then held by a nephew, Michael Ford, who was himself elected to the legislature in 2022 as a member of his uncle's caucus, perpetuating the image of a family political machine.)

Surprisingly, Doug Ford has laid out his political philosophy, at least in a rudimentary way, in the book *Ford Nation*, written in his voice but presenting a single Ford family approach to politics.[3] A key recurring concept in *Ford Nation* is "customer service." Ford repeatedly refers to this as the core of the Ford family approach to politics. While starting with the general delivery of public services, Ford frames this as a larger approach anchored on personal contact: "Return every single phone call or, better yet, show up at the caller's door."[4] The tendency of both Rob and Doug Ford to give out their personal phone numbers and to take and return

individual citizen calls is well documented, along with indeed showing up unexpectedly at their homes. More than just a personal quirk, this fundamentally reflects the Ford view of politics as retail and individual, and a possible inability to think in broader systemic terms. This is quite different from the strategic mindset attributed to Jason Kenney. And while Ford repeatedly expresses support for "business," this is based more on his own self-identified background and retail approach to politics, rather than an ideological commitment to market forces or small government and libertarian values. This is key to understanding his response to COVID-19 and how it differed from Kenney.

On the other hand, one commonality with Ford and Kenney is their chronic positioning against an external enemy. Another recurring phrase in *Ford Nation* is disdain for "downtown [Toronto] elites," and establishment "lefties" that the Fords positioned themselves against. This is not unlike Kenney's positioning against central Canada and Ottawa.

Ford has been compared to Donald Trump and other disruptive politicians because of his amateurism and impulsiveness. But he does not display the same level of disdain and contempt for government and experts, at least not publicly. Nor is Ford narcissistic by the standards of modern politicians, though he attracted ridicule for pursuing a customized van at government expense.[5] Rather, Ford projects a sense of paternalism—an image of an authentic, well-meaning, even humble, leader who wants to do his best for the province. This taps into a longstanding tradition of paternalistic leadership in Ontario politics, reminiscent of not only Bill Davis but also Dalton McGuinty, known for his "Premier Dad" image and phrase "it may not be popular, but it's the right thing to do."[6] Ford occasionally brings his family into the public spotlight, and of course acts as the patriarch of the "Ford family" political force.[7]

In contrast, Jason Kenney struggles to project personal authenticity. A life narrative shaped entirely by politics has left him with a combative and single-minded image. His adoption of the "blue truck" to campaign through the province was seen as contrived (see Chase Remillard and Tyler Nagel's chapter) and not a natural fit with his personality and character. Kenney does fit with an Alberta history of strong, distinctive premiers. But Kenney lacks the paternalism of Ernest Manning and Peter Lougheed, nor the man-of-the-people style of Ralph Klein (who shares

many characteristics with Doug Ford). Rather, Kenney appears solely as a political animal, driven by ideology and strategy.

Overall then, while Kenney has a long political record associated with a strategic mindset that balances ideology and pragmatism, Ford has a more eclectic record, anchored in his family narrative and more impulsive than consistently ideological in a conventional sense. This is important for analyzing their governments and especially their responses to COVID-19.

Governments before March 2020

The Kenney government came to power with a clear agenda. While explored more fully elsewhere throughout this book, we can identify two overarching strategies. The first was a rollback of many of the initiatives of the Notley NDP government, which the UCP saw as unnecessarily costly and/or interventionist, in favour of more small-government and market-based policies. The second was a determined assault to advance Alberta's interests externally, including a more confrontational approach to Ottawa and the targeting of pipeline opponents. These priorities were both consistent with the long-time views of Kenney and his party. They also clearly tapped into longstanding patterns in Alberta politics, particularly confrontation with the federal government.

The Ford government was more erratic. One of Ford's first moves was to downsize Toronto city council, an unexpected and seemingly revengeful action; he also instituted an immediate freeze on government hiring and restrictions on small expenditures.[8] Yet these were more impulsive than indicative of a clear governing strategy. On a larger scale, Ford cancelled the Wynne government's cap-and-trade program and other green energy programs, along with a basic income pilot project and planned minimum-wage increases, and instituted "free speech" policy requirements for universities. He also capped public sector wage increases at 1 per cent.[9] But the government showed a wavering commitment to confrontation. After announcing in-year cuts to municipalities, these were reversed,[10] as was a controversial change to autism programming. While the government certainly made significant cuts, they were not always as consistent or as deep as some anticipated.[11] In education, a slow-burning series of rotating teacher strikes dragged out, suggesting the government was determined to meet its objectives yet not prepared to provoke a full-scale

walkout. The government also brought in performance-based funding for the university sector but showed a tepid commitment to serious change in post-secondary education, quite different from the major cuts and interventions in Alberta.

The competence of the Ford government was also unclear. The Harris government of the 1990s was noted for its exceptionally strong understanding of government and its successful harnessing of the bureaucracy to pursue its strategic goals.[12] In contrast, the Ford government regularly went off-message on strange tangents, such as the customized van. Much of the initial chaos was attributed to the premier's first principal secretary Dean French, who was widely accused of personalized and erratic decisions.[13] However, responsibility ultimately lies with Doug Ford and his idiosyncratic ways of operating.

One of the most high-profile examples of this erraticism was Ford's nomination of Ron Taverner to serve as the new commissioner of the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP).[14] While there were good arguments for bringing in outside leadership to the OPP, Taverner was a seventy-two-year-old district superintendent within the Toronto police force, showing no obvious distinction to head the provincial police force. He was, however, a long-time acquaintance of Ford, overseeing the district of Etobicoke where the Ford family is based. The Taverner nomination was eventually withdrawn but not before the government spent considerable political capital on it.

Overall then the Ford government was ideological but inconsistent. There was limited sense of an overall cohesive strategy, or a disciplined commitment to follow through on major items regardless of political opposition and difficulties. When the government did dig in its heels, it was on erratic and sometimes minor items. While the Kenney government also has its share of policy retreats and dubious appointments and initiatives, it stands, for better or worse, as a much more disciplined and consistent operation compared to Ford in Ontario.

Jason Kenney also faced a clearer legislative opposition in the Alberta NDP, led by former premier Rachel Notley. The straightforward polarization, and Notley's experience and enduring popularity, gave clarity to Alberta's legislative and partisan struggles. In contrast, the multipolar Ontario party system became even more complicated when Doug Ford

came to power, nearly obliterating the Liberals to 7 seats in the 124 seat legislative assembly and driving their leader Kathleen Wynne to political retirement, while the NDP under Andrea Horvath unusually formed the Official Opposition with forty seats. Ford thus faced a divided opposition—one party profoundly weakened, and the other relatively inexperienced—and it was in the PC's long-term strategic interest to keep it fractured.

The two leaders and governments also had very different relationships with the federal government, each consistent with historic provincial patterns. Jason Kenney came to power explicitly promoting an aggressive stance against the federal Liberal government and central Canada in general. Kenney's Alberta-first stance promoted pipelines and targeted equalization programs. This is of course consistent with Alberta's longstanding combative relationship with Ottawa. In contrast, while Ontario has been more assertive in the twenty-first century on issues of fiscal federalism, its overall relationship with the federal government has long been pragmatic, with issues being more technical than combatively political.

Doug Ford in fact had a curious relationship with the federal Liberal government. In the fall 2019 federal election Prime Minister Justin Trudeau regularly attacked Ford and his cuts as an example of what a federal Conservative government would do. Yet Ford did not directly respond and remained on the sidelines of the election. Following the Liberal minority win, Ford issued a conciliatory statement congratulating Trudeau and pledging to work with the renewed government.[15] Later Ford did get into political combat with the federal Liberals at the height of issues around procuring sufficient COVID vaccines[16] but even this dissipated by the 2021 federal election in which Ford reportedly instructed his party to not get involved[17] and in turn Trudeau did not attack Ford. Overall, the patterns in each province are not surprising—combative in Alberta, pragmatic in Ontario—and both are highly consistent with the longstanding relationships each province has with the federal government.

A final pre-COVID comparative aspect is the direct relationship between the two premiers. Initially, Ford and Kenney appeared close both ideologically and personally, as part of a larger group of conservative men premiers coming to power, including Manitoba's Brian Pallister and Saskatchewan's Scott Moe. While their personalities and backgrounds had little in common, both Kenney and Ford embodied traditional masculine

values of aggressiveness and confrontation. Kenney reportedly referred early on to a "bromance" between the two and hailed Ford's early cancellation of the Wynne government's cap-and-trade approach to carbon taxation.[18] However, over time the relationship grew more pragmatic. It probably did not serve either politician to be too closely associated with the other, given the conflicting national priorities of their provinces. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic then forced both to concentrate on local priorities. And despite similar pandemic responses at times, they did not seek a common front.

To conclude this section, the pre-COVID Ford and Kenney governments were ideologically on the same track, but operated differently. Some of these differences are attributable to each leader's distinct philosophy of governing. Others followed logically from the different historic patterns and specific political and economic contexts of the two provinces.

COVID Responses

This background is essential for examining each premier and government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic—by far the dominant issue for both governments. At the height of the pandemic in late 2020 and early 2021, both were seen as among the weakest responses to the pandemic in Canada. But in Alberta, there was a significant polarization of public opinion on COVID-related measures, and a major rebellion within the UCP and Kenney's political base. In Ontario, opinion was less polarized and political rebellion more marginal. And in both cases, the premier's personal style of governing was key to the pandemic response.

Given its complexity and ongoing nature at the time of writing, I will not get into a detailed examination of either province's COVID responses, and in any event the Alberta response is covered more fully elsewhere in this book. But we can take a high-level view and identify the different motivations and dynamics behind each province's, and each premier's, response.

In Ontario, Doug Ford's initial reactions swung widely. As late as 12 March 2020, two days after the global pandemic had been declared, Ford urged families to relax and "go on vacation."[19] Yet later that day the province suspended schools until April. In the next weeks, Ford was a model of patrician leadership in the style of Bill Davis, largely supporting and deferring to expert authorities on public health measures. When a small

group of protestors appeared on the Ontario Legislature lawn, Ford memorably dismissed them as a "bunch of yahoos"—a significant phrasing for someone occasionally accused of yahoo status himself.[20] On the other hand, the more substantive provincial response was weak. Most importantly, retroactive studies have found significant and deadly failings in the provincial long-term care system.[21] The government was better at overall communication of health restrictions, led by Ford in daily press conferences, than the tougher work of systemic responses to major underlying vulnerabilities.

As the second wave built in the fall of 2020, contrasts were made between the Kenney and Ford responses; the former as ideological and the latter as pragmatic. The *Globe and Mail* remarked: "The country's two leading provincial conservative figures have taken drastically different approaches to COVID-19."[22] The difference was most noticeable in style. Both spoke about making difficult decisions, but Kenney framed the difficulties as ideological, while Ford's concerns were more pragmatic, especially about the disruption to businesses.

In line with his background, Doug Ford was clearly uncomfortable restricting commercial activity and forcing businesses to close, and he expressed this often. In October 2020 he said, announcing new and continuing restrictions:

> I can't stress enough . . . how difficult, how painful it was to make this decision. . . . [If] I put my business hat on I'd switch those things open in a heartbeat but I can't. I have to listen to the health experts. It's proven, it works, and that's how we've been able to move forward this whole time. I'm a business person. I don't want to close these down but health trumps my personal belief of doing something.[23]

Digging deeper, the reality is more complicated, though again consistent with Ford's philosophy of governing. Indeed, evidence suggests that "business" rather than either ideology or public health science determined the increasingly complex restrictions and exemptions in the province. Examining the provincial lobbyist registry, the *Toronto Star* found clear links between business lobbying and exemptions in the provincial restrictions.[24]

But absent from Ford's rhetoric were references to larger abstract ideas of personal freedom or individual choice. Ford did not express the same sort of discomfort about mask mandates, social distancing, or other general public health measures. He did not pour his heart out in the same way about school closings as he did with businesses. He was in fact more likely to take a patrician attitude, as he did in the early days of the pandemic, telling "folks" (a common Ford phrase) that necessary measures had to be taken for the public good and urging their compliance.

In contrast, Jason Kenney tweeted on 13 October 2020: "We're not going to enforce our way out of COVID. Alberta's approach is to focus on the broader health of society—physical, mental, social, and economic—by encouraging personal responsibility, rather than micro-managing people's lives."[25] There was a clear and unmistakable difference between the two leaders, corresponding broadly to both their own political philosophies and the political contexts of their provinces. Ford was reactive and paternalistic, while Kenney expressed more overall reluctance and only grudging assent to restrictions.

Contrast is found even in how both leaders violated their own COVID restrictions. In May 2020, Ford admitted his own family had broken social distancing rules by gathering together for Mother's Day.[26] In contrast, Kenney apologized in June 2021 for the infamous "Sky Palace" dinner in which he and several ministers and staff were photographed eating together in violation of restrictions, all in professional dress. The Sky Palace dinner did further damage to Kenney's image, while Ford's Mother's Day actions probably reinforced his own family paternalistic brand and Ford's projection of flawed but well-meaning authenticity. There is also a contrast in how the leaders dealt with ministers who travelled internationally over the 2020 winter holidays despite strong advice to avoid foreign travel. Ontario Finance Minister Rod Phillips resigned after a holiday trip, with Ford calling the trip "unacceptable" (though Ford had learned about the trip while it was in progress, and Phillips was later reinstated to cabinet in June).[27] In contrast, a much larger contingent of UCP cabinet ministers and MLAs were found to have travelled over the holidays, and Kenney was slow to take responsibility and impose disciplinary measures in what became known as the "Alohagate" affair.[28]

Partisan and Political Environments

The two leaders also faced different partisan environments. In Alberta, Kenney faced strong opposition to the pandemic response within his own caucus and the UCP grassroots. This led to an April 2021 public letter signed by seventeen UCP MLAs condemning pandemic restrictions. Even while being criticized by much of the province for not sufficiently responding to the pandemic, Kenney faced very clear challenges from the right to the restrictions he did introduce. The insurrection continued to grow, especially with the return of former rival Brian Jean to the legislature in March 2022 expressly as a challenger to Kenney's leadership.

Doug Ford did not face the same scale of challenges. Two backbench MPPs, Belinda Karahalios and Roman Baber, were expelled from caucus in July 2020 and January 2021 for opposing pandemic restrictions. A third, Rick Nicholls, was expelled in August 2021 for refusing to be vaccinated, and a fourth, Lindsey Park, resigned from the PC caucus in October 2021 also over her vaccination status. A fifth outspoken anti-restrictions MPP, Randy Hillier, had already been expelled from the Tory caucus before the pandemic. While Karahalios co-founded a new party, the New Blue Party, and Nicholls affiliated himself with the minor Ontario Party, this opposition was far more individualistic and eclectic than the organized dissent found in the UCP. It did not constitute a serious threat to Ford's grip on the durable Ontario PC party. More generally, while there were many reports of serious and prolonged discussions in the Ford cabinet over COVID responses, leaks and public dissent were limited and there was no strong sense of an ideological fault line within the cabinet nor the larger caucus.

This reflected larger public opinion in the province. While comparable data at the provincial level is somewhat limited, Ontarians clearly were more generally supportive of pandemic measures than Albertans. For example, a January 2021 poll[29] found that 75 per cent of Ontarians supported the closing of most retail stores and restriction to pick up only, compared to 47 per cent of Albertans (though British Columbia was even lower at 46 per cent). Religious institutions were a special flashpoint for Albertans, given the historically close intertwining of religion and Alberta politics; 83 per cent of Ontarians supported the closing of places of worship

compared to 62 per cent of Albertans. An Edmonton church, GraceLife Church, refused to comply with restrictions and became a rallying point garnering national attention. While some Ontario churches also refused to comply, their impact was more isolated. A May 2021 poll[30] comparing vaccine acceptance found that 73 per cent of Ontarians had taken the vaccine or would as soon as they could—above the national average of 71 per cent—while only 61 per cent of Albertans said the same. Interestingly, outright opposition was not as different—9 per cent of Albertans said they would never get the shot compared to 6 per cent of Ontarians (and 10 per cent of residents in Saskatchewan and Manitoba)—but hesitancy was much higher in Alberta. (See below for actual rates of vaccination in each province.)

Jason Kenney thus led both a divided party and a province where a significant portion of the population was skeptical of COVID-19 measures. Regardless of his own views—which may themselves have contributed to and reinforced some of the skepticism—Kenney did face a volatile situation, most importantly within his own party. In contrast, Doug Ford had a much more free hand politically. While there was likely more skepticism expressed privately within PC circles, his party remained fundamentally united publicly, with malcontents quickly marginalized. And Ontario public opinion was more solidly in favour of restrictions. We must also take into account the differing economic and fiscal climates of the two provinces. The Albertan economy and deficit were already weak and concerning even before the pandemic struck, fuelling further worries about the impact of business restrictions and closures. In contrast, while the Ontario economy was also at risk, it lacked the same worry of being pushed over the brink by pandemic restrictions.

The greater political freedom allowed Ford's idiosyncratic approach to flourish in the pandemic. At times, the Ford government *exceeded* recommended measures. This was particularly evident in April 2021, when new province-wide measures were introduced to combat the third wave. Among the many measures, the government announced that police would have the power to randomly stop pedestrians and drivers to ask why they were out of their homes. This alarmed many, and at least twenty-three police services, including Toronto, Ottawa, and Hamilton, announced they would not conduct random stops. The measures were quickly withdrawn and Ford said "we got it wrong. We made a mistake."[31] Yet it is hard to

imagine Jason Kenney ever pursuing such a strong infringement of civil liberties. A smaller but high-profile reversal at the same time was on playgrounds. The new measures shut down playgrounds, despite expert consensus that they were low risk; after an outcry from parents, playgrounds were reopened. According to one analysis, the overreach was motivated by a desire for Ford to look sufficiently proactive after a tepid response earlier in February[32]—thus motivated by image rather than ideological reasons.

Perhaps the all-time illustration of Doug Ford's unique style of policy-making occurred in May 2021. The Ontario government announced that schools would stay closed for the remainder of the school year—but outdoor graduation ceremonies would still be held. School boards and principals questioned the practicality of the latter. Upon closer inquiry, Ford revealed that the outdoor graduation idea had come through a letter from a young boy named Arthur. In true Ford style, he had then visited Arthur's house, unannounced, to discuss the idea further.[33]

Ford also showed emotion and apologized for errors, sometimes tearing up, in a way quite different from the stoic and combative Kenney. After withdrawing the police powers above, Ford said: ". . . as premier, as I said right from the beginning, the buck stops with me. Again, I'm sorry and I apologize to each and every one of you."[34] Such contriteness is typical for Ford, who at least *appears* to wear his heart on his sleeve, as did his brother Rob. Ford also appears impulsive and overly eager in his actions, such as early in the pandemic when he personally drove his own truck to pick up a donation of masks.[35] As in all things Ford, personal engagement and "customer service" are at the heart of his philosophy of governance, different from the more ideological and supposedly strategic Kenney.

Still, the two leaders shared one thing in common in mid-2021: low popularity. Ford's popularity initially soared at the start of the pandemic, jumping from 31 per cent in March 2020 to 69 per cent in April.[36] It slowly declined but was still at 50 per cent in March 2021. In contrast, Kenney had no initial peak at the beginning of COVID, and went from 47 per cent in March 2020 to 39 per cent in March 2021. Both then dropped dramatically, so that by June they were two of the lowest ranking premiers in popularity in Canada (along with Manitoba's Brian Pallister). Ford's June approval rating was 35 per cent and Kenney's 31 per cent; in comparison,

other conservative premiers were much higher, such as Quebec's Francois Legault at 66 per cent and Saskatchewan's Scott Moe at 61 per cent.

But as the pandemic continued, the two provinces, and their leaders' political fortunes, began to diverge further. While Alberta dropped most restrictions in early July and Kenney proclaimed "the best summer ever," Ontario retained key restrictions, especially mask requirements. Most Ontario businesses, especially retail stores, were reopened and were able to operate with some normalcy. This likely relieved Ford of his chief concern, as unlike Kenney, he never expressed much discomfort with restrictions on principle, but only their direct economic effects. On the other hand, both premiers resisted vaccine passports despite their adoption in other provinces, though Ford reversed his position in late August.

By fall 2021, the public health situation was vastly different in the two provinces. On 24 September 2021, Ontario's COVID rates were half that of Alberta's, with 6,500 cases per 100,000 in Alberta compared to 3,949 in Ontario.[37] Even more, hospitalizations were drastically different, with 1,061 in Alberta, far higher than any other province, compared to only 308 in much more populous Ontario. Vaccination rates also differed at 72 per cent for eligible Albertans compared to 79 per cent for Ontario, though most other provinces had crested 80 per cent.[38] The disastrous situation in Alberta led to Kenney's dramatic 15 September announcement reimposing heavy restrictions and adopting vaccine passports, along with an admission that the "best summer ever" had been a disaster. In contrast, Doug Ford's Ontario retained a relatively steady course.

By early 2022, the two leaders and governments were on vastly different political paths. Ford and the Ontario PCs grew steadily in the polls while the opposition parties struggled for traction, leading to a smashing PC re-election victory in June 2022 with an increased seat count. In contrast, the UCP were anything but united, with the disastrous spiral of challenges to Kenney's leadership leading to his May 2022 decision to step down as leader in favour of a replacement.

Conclusion

There is much more that can be said about both the Kenney and Ford governments. However, in this final section, we will consider how they ultimately compare. The beginning of this chapter noted the similarities

in how Doug Ford and Jason Kenney came to power, within a year of each other. They also both oversaw conservative governments generally pursuing reductions in the scope and size of the public sector. Yet they led two quite different provinces, and this chapter has outlined their very different personalities, governing styles, and approaches to COVID-19. They also experienced very different political fates. Ultimately, which prevails—the similarities or the differences? And what does this comparison ultimately tell us about Jason Kenney and his government, the focus of this book?

Jason Kenney and Doug Ford are very different personalities. But they ultimately share common views, especially a skepticism of traditional government and intellectual elites. They both favour, at least in principle, a broad rollback of the public sector and scope of government. For Kenney this is based on libertarian individualism and a belief in market forces. For Ford it is a more instinctive sense of "business" unencumbered by government regulation. They also rely on constructing and emphasizing external threats. As premier, Kenney emphasized external enemies of Alberta, especially in central Canada. While Toronto resident Doug Ford himself nominally fits in that category, Ford has long positioned himself against his own political enemies of Toronto's "downtown elites."

The two leaders operate in different contexts. Kenney fit with Alberta's historic political traditions of strong leaders and populist politics, at least until his stunning demise. Despite his sometimes amateurish and impulsive style, Ford ultimately fits with Ontario's tradition of pragmatism and "managing government." Kenney operated in a volatile environment with both a polarized legislature and significant internal dissent within his own ranks. Ford enjoyed a more multipolar environment without sustained opposition, and led a party that has always been highly adaptable and continued to follow him throughout the pandemic with little (public) dissent.

But while their styles and political context differ considerably, the substantive outputs of the Ford and Kenney governments are not as dissimilar. Both cut back the public sector, in a clear commitment to restraint and smaller government. They valorize the private sector, and show little interest in cultivating other types of elite opinion or support. Kenney's government made more drastic cuts, but also dealt with a more difficult fiscal and economic environment for much of its term. Both governments followed erratic approaches to managing the pandemic, failing to act

particularly on systemic problems and issues, though as time went on, the provinces had increasingly different strategies.

What we ultimately see in any comparison is that both Jason Kenney and his government are fundamentally an Alberta phenomenon, in the same way that Doug Ford and his government are of Ontario. Each led parties rooted in their provincial political traditions, and governed distinct and contrasting populations. Jason Kenney is a more disciplined political thinker than Doug Ford, who is an unusual figure in Canadian politics by any standard. But both are fundamentally leaders of the political right, and each pursued their policy and ideological agendas in ways that suited their province.

NOTES

1 Sid Noel, "The Ontario Political Culture: An Interpretation," in *The Government and Politics of Ontario*, ed. Graham White, 5th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

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