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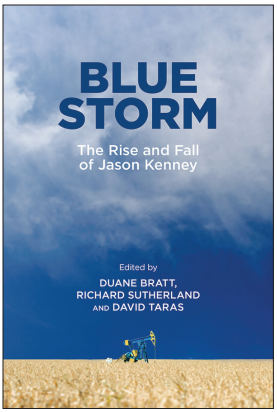

BLUE STORM: THE RISE AND FALL OF JASON KENNEY

Edited by Duane Bratt, Richard Sutherland and David Taras

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Always More Than It Seems: Rural Alberta and the Politics of Decline

Roger Epp

Arrivals and Departures

The Road Home might have been the last of the glossy, coffee-table-size books, supported with public money, to emphasize the point that Alberta was no cultural backwater. Published in 1992, with copies distributed to every high school and municipal library, it featured evocative new writing and striking photographic portraits. It reads now like an artefact from a more optimistic time. Despite its title and, for that matter, its cover photograph of a rancher and a dog in silhouette, the book celebrated the new Alberta: sophisticated, multicultural, Indigenous—"the world in a nutshell," as the introduction put it, and nothing like the stereotypes that presumably still lingered in other parts of the country and some corners of this province.[1] The new Alberta was a place of arrival, a place with prospects. It told stories of people arrived from around the world. They had come, almost all of them, to Calgary and Edmonton. Give or take a funny-dark rumination on hunters and hunting season in Peace River country and Sid Marty's poem about the gamble of buying a little house for a lifetime, tucked into a hillside at the foot of the Livingstone Range, *The Road Home* was a very urban register of Alberta as a place of arrival. Rural, when it appeared, was a place of return: a drive out to the fall turkey

supper in Tofield. Or else lament: the sale of a family farm, the kind of place where a farmer, when they were still called that, "walked between buildings with a meadowlark on his lips."[2]

The question of whether Alberta is on the brink of decline is, in an important sense, about arrivals and departures. By that measure, there is no single trajectory. The reality is that much of what we call rural Alberta has been in decline for a generation, maybe two, living in the second-hand lustre of a prosperous, young, resource-based province, one of the most urban in Canada; its statistical markers have been increasingly out of step but mostly hidden in aggregate figures. In rural places, people have lived on the defensive for a long time. They have worried about community futures, jobs, and Main Streets. They have worried about whether their own young people, enough of them, will stay home or return home with education enough to be a nurse in the local hospital or a teacher in the school, and about keeping that hospital or school open at all. This might not be every rural place—not the ones near the mountains or a major city, or the ones that get the Wal-Mart as economies concentrate into regional centres. But it is many of them. The 2021 national census registered another round of population loss in some communities, even as Alberta grew by another 200,000 people. In recent years, century-old villages like Granum and New Norway have voted themselves out of existence. Battle River School Division framed its 2020–21 strategic plan around a 30 per cent drop in student numbers over the past quarter-century (more than 40 per cent in Flagstaff County), an average bus ride of ninety-seven minutes per day, and most of its eleven high schools across east-central Alberta having fewer than seventy-five students.[3]

This chapter considers the decline question through a rural lens. It comes with an important caveat: a skepticism that there is a coherent, single place called rural Alberta, much less the one so often invoked to describe the cultural heartland of the province or one side of a simple, polarized politics or vaccination compliance ledger.[4] The word rural can serve both as a synonym for backward and as an oppositional identity marker. There are no clear lines marking where it begins or ends. Sometimes in policy and in public discourse rural is a residual category that contains everything outside of the metropolitan regions of Calgary and Edmonton. But Red Deer, with more than 100,000 people, is not rural, not even close

by any of Statistics Canada's measures. Grande Prairie, Airdrie, and Camrose are not rural—not "really rural," as people say—though you might be able to see it from there.

In Alberta, rural is agrarian, northern-boreal, industrial, Indigenous, acreage-residential, and mountain playground. It is never hermetically sealed. Rural people know their way around cities. They regularly move back and forth, to shop, visit family, work, see a doctor, or watch a hockey game, though the same is far less likely to be true of those who live in cities. In the end, what defines rural Alberta in 2023 might be some combination of the everyday experience of distance, the likelihood of a gravel road, and a poor internet connection. In that case, rural is not so much a solid-line demarcation as a shading out from the centre towards the perimeter of the province. Typically, that shading also reflects older populations—First Nations communities are a marked exception—as well as significantly lower per-capita incomes, poorer health outcomes, and higher levels of dependency on government transfers, including pensions. The provincial government has tracked those disparities at least twice: once, in a "resource package" compiled for internal purposes in 2002; then, a decade later, in a commissioned study, which concluded that economic growth in rural Alberta had "decelerated noticeably," despite years of post-Klein reinvestment, and that income levels remained "well below" those in cities.[5]

The words rural and decline share a material, measurable quality, but they are each more than that: they sometimes show themselves as anxiety, fatalism, anger. They suggest the temptation of a politics of nostalgia—of better times remembered, lost, or taken. There is, as colleagues have suggested, reason to think about rural Alberta through narratives imported from the United States: a "politics of resentment" for places that are "left behind."[6] Those themes certainly resonate in rural speech; they have been mobilized politically to effect. In this chapter, however, I want to challenge the sufficiency of that reading in light of two considerations. One is that the Kenney government has demonstrated that its strongest interest in rural Alberta lies in resource extraction, not communities. The other is that rural places, at least some of them, drained of any sense of their exceptional place in the provincial mythos, are where we might look for signs of adaptation, not just decline.

Where to Start

The story of decline—a rapid descent into unfamiliar hardship—depends on where and when you start. The settler-colonial countryside is layered with the story-arcs of decline. The first is an Indigenous one. From the early 1870s, when smallpox had already ravaged populations, it took less than a generation. Indigenous leaders—offended by the sale of Rupert's Land, as if it belonged to anyone, and anxious for the future—petitioned for treaty, a way to share the land, and for the tools of an agrarian transition that mostly never arrived. The Dominion of Canada used the hardship of disease and famine to force First Nations to take up reserves and submit to its authority, including an Indian Act.[7] Waves of homestead settlers followed the surveyors. The first church-run residential schools opened in the 1880s. Eventually, there would be more of them in Alberta than anywhere else in Canada. The story still haunts the province. In summer 2021, the prospect that ground-penetrating radar would confirm unmarked graves of children at residential school sites prompted the United Conservative Party (UCP) government to announce an $8-million grant program to support documentation, site-work, and commemoration—this while its controversial curriculum review equivocated about whether and how to teach that history in Alberta schools.

At the same time, decline was not disappearance. Populations began to rebound in the 1920s. Indigenous peoples reasserted themselves politically, in the League of Indians of Canada, which drew 1,500 people to its national meeting at Samson reserve,[8] and the Indian Association of Alberta, which met for the first time at Wabamun in 1939, when it was essentially illegal to do so.[9] In 1969, a decade of parent agitation at Blue Quills residential school near St. Paul became a three-week sit-in, resulting in the first Indigenous-administered school in Canada.[10] That same year, when Pierre Trudeau's federal government proposed in a White Paper to eliminate the Indian Act, Indian status, and historic treaties on principle—Canadians should be treated equally and individually under the law—it was the Indian Association of Alberta and its young president, Harold Cardinal, from Sucker Creek, that led the national response. The Red Paper articulated a fundamentally different set of principles based on

treaties and inherent rights; it forced Trudeau to acknowledge the prejudices of his liberalism.[11]

Against that first story-arc, the perverse paradox of the homestead era was a relatively egalitarian distribution of land that gave rise to one of the most creative political-economic movements in Canadian history.[12] A century ago, the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) swept into office as part of a broader agrarian political sweep across North America. Theirs was a reluctant government, divided over whether it could achieve its purposes through the ballot box and parliamentary institutions; it was elected without a leader—a strange, telling populism. But it had strength in numbers. UFA locals drew on the same organizational energy that built cooperatives of all kinds, notably the Wheat Pool in 1923; cooperation was liberty, the higher law. Actual farming, though, was as hard as governing a cash-strapped province. If there was a golden age of rural Alberta, it was over soon enough. Its decline was captured visually in Henry Glyde's 1941 painting, "The Exodus," in which a ragged procession of men and women climbs to an indistinct city under an orange-brown sky.[13] Within a generation, the agrarian countryside had become a place of departure more than arrival, beginning with climate refugees from the dustbowl of the Palliser Triangle. It was more mechanized and dependent on bank credit. The 1951 census showed, for the first time, that most Albertans lived in cities and towns. Farming was no longer their primary occupation. Edmonton and Calgary were booming, helped by oil discoveries at Leduc and Redwater. The urban-rural gap was as basic as paved roads, indoor plumbing, and electrical appliances,[14] but it was also psychological: prosperity and power—the future—had been relocated. For the provincial government, the most important economic relationships now lay with industry and American capital. Oil leases were its primary source of revenue. Oil had first call on the land.

The political management of this shift has had an enduring impact on Alberta politics. First, it meant a rhetorical veneration of the pioneer, removed from a history of smallholder radicalism or an imposed settler-colonialism—but re-enacted in the 1955 Diamond Jubilee[15] and annually in the Calgary Stampede. This veneration fed a powerful sense of heartland exceptionalism increasingly at odds with actual rural life or the choices people made to leave. Second, from the 1950s until the early 1990s,

governments used the resources that rolled into the provincial treasury to secure rural political support.[16] They built roads, consolidated schools, and hospitals. Sometimes the explicit purpose was to shrink the gap between rural and urban standards of living: electrification in one generation, natural gas in the next. Other times it was to sustain profitability and generational succession in agriculture: a fleet of grain cars, a West Coast port, an irrigation dam, a farm lender. This patron-client relationship ensured that some of the benefits of oil-and-gas prosperity were redistributed to those who often lived closest to the extraction and shipping of those resources. It came with the disciplining fear of electing an opposition member; it co-opted municipalities; and then it stopped. As one researcher concludes, the failure of "rural development" has been its success: to ensure acceptance—no other choice—for an economy that extracts resources and wealth from the countryside.[17]

Rural Consciousness and Its Limits

DON'T PULL THE
PLUG ON PUBLIC
HEALTH CARE

United Nurses sign, posted on a farmyard,
outside of St. Paul

WILL TRADE
RACISTS
FOR
REFUGEES

T-shirt, draped over a chair, in Daysland

"Alberta's best country music"

Windspeaker radio, CJWE-FM, broadcasting
on ten frequencies in English, Cree,
Nakoda, Dene, and Blackfoot

Rural Alberta, according to an important ethnographic study published in 2020, ought to be regarded as a social identity, a kind of "consciousness"—"a sense that rural citizens understand themselves to be both fundamentally different from urbanites and often ignored by urban-focussed decision makers."[18] The study, an attempt to understand how people think, not just what they think, or how they vote, involved coffee-shop political conversations in sixteen communities. It concluded that its subjects considered themselves as rural, as "ordinary people," and as Albertans, perhaps the real Albertans. As such, they were alienated and angry. While they represented a "moral code" of "hard work, self-reliance and equal treatment," their experience was that governments neglected people like them and routinely violated the code in favour of "cultural minorities, newcomers, and Indigenous peoples."[19]

The conversations were conducted in the months before and after the election that brought the UCP to office. They record no mention of Jason Kenney, only an admiration for US President Donald Trump. For that matter, they record only a passing mention of Rachel Notley, whose New Democratic Party (NDP) government had generated a firestorm of protest in the countryside early in its term by introducing a bill to bring farm workers under the jurisdiction of provincial labour law. In the overheated rhetoric of the time, the bill was taken up as an attack on the family farm, even an entire way of life, and proof that the NDP did not understand rural Alberta. What the NDP did represent was a post-rural politics. It did not give the homestead pioneer pride of place. It broke with the politics of rural exceptionalism. It had limited rural instincts. Though it spoke in terms of families, communities, and workers, it did not foreground rural in the way it presented Alberta or in the kind of economy it proposed to build.[20]

From inside the consciousness attributed to rural coffee-shop patrons, this would have been tantamount to hostile indifference. Like all identity politics, this one seems focussed on respect and recognition—it wants to be heard—rather than on the details of policy. It echoes the localism of the old agrarian populism as well as its insistence on the dignity of the "plain common people." But it asks far less in return. It does not build things. Its politics require a champion or patron: someone who speaks the same "common-sense" language, accords rural people an important rhetorical place, and shields them from one-size-fits-all bureaucratic impositions

from Edmonton. Its populism is highly individuated around work and personal responsibility. It borrows from elsewhere, as populism increasingly does, drawing symbols, language, and clothing (MAGA hats, yellow vests, and Confederate flags) from a worldwide web. Indeed, it might sound something like the "lost cause" discourse that has resurfaced so powerfully out of the American South.[21] That discourse, too, is about loss, respect, and heritage. It is a matter of co-creation, involving its subjects and powerful political interests over time. It is both malleable and portable. As one historian writes, it became a national bulwark against "racial, political, and industrial disorder" and "a model of masculine devotion and courage." The coffee-shop participants, as the study acknowledges, were disproportionately male and older. Judging from the talk about minorities, newcomers, and Indigenous peoples, they were also white and straight; they were insiders, those who know who belongs in the rural and who does not.

Two observations are in order here. First, the study's construction of social identity refers to rural Alberta as if it were both uniform, since themes recur across locations, and timeless, that is, without a history. The voices in those conversations and their sensitivity to any hint of urban condescension are familiar enough. But the rural consciousness characterized in the study is far from static and uncontested. It is not the discourse, not exactly, of nurses and other health care workers whose rural hospitals, emergency wards, and jobs have been under threat since 2019—shielded only partly and temporarily by the realities of a pandemic. It is not the discourse of rural school boards, almost all of them, that declined to pilot the provincial government's controversial draft K–6 social studies curriculum.[22] It is not the discourse of those who have worked to make their communities places of welcome rather than departure for 2SLGBTQA+ residents: students and teachers who have built gay-straight alliances into the fabric of rural high schools, and activists who have raised pride flags in unlikely places. Rural consciousness is not the discourse of those who intend that their communities serve as places of arrival for refugees and immigrants, like the increasing numbers of Filipinos settled in places like Lac La Biche. Rural Alberta is always more than it seems.

Second, the UCP's pitch to rural voters in the 2019 election campaign mapped closely onto the study's construction of identity and grievance.

The campaign was light on policy: commitments to funding equity for rural schools, action on rural crime, and incentives to attract entrepreneurial immigrants (the right kind) to smaller communities—not even the perennial all-party pledge to improve broadband service.[23] But the party got identity politics. It understood, it said, how keeping "farms and ranches sustainable is vital to the fabric of Alberta's history and culture." The most prominent photograph inside its lengthy platform document, subtitled "Getting Alberta back to work," besides the one with the ubiquitous blue campaign truck parked alongside grain bins, featured a young rancher, sitting on a round bale with a child, staring into wide-open space. Freedom. Family. Hard work. That photograph appeared beside the priority commitment to repeal the NDP's Bill 6 and replace it with the Farm Freedom and Safety Act, once it had "listen[ed] to farmers, ranchers, and agriculture workers that the NDP ignored."[24] When the promised legislation appeared in the UCP's first six months, it did not gut the principle of workplace insurance in agriculture, which farm organizations actually supported, so much as exempt small operations and introduce an element of public-or-private choice for larger ones.

The UCP government, however, soon encountered the limits of the grievance language of rural consciousness. The issue was Grassy Mountain, the open-pit metallurgical coal project proposed for a legacy mining area north of Crowsnest Pass. In May 2020, without public consultation, the government rescinded a four-decade policy that, in varying degrees, protected the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies from coal development. The change authorized the Alberta Energy Regulator to issue approvals on a case-by-case basis. It delighted major Australian mining companies; six proposed mines were already in the queue. Months later, the government invited and granted more than 150 exploration leases covering almost half a million acres, including land around the headwaters of the Oldman River. The policy shift prompted immediate alarm in the area, where groups like the Livingstone Range Landowners, comprised primarily of ranch families, have been active for years on conservation issues. But the opposition only gained a wider public traction in early 2021, as prominent Albertans like singer Corb Lund—"a great musician who hates politics but loves the mountains"[25]—went public with concerns, and as regional municipalities, environmental organizations, landowners, and several

First Nations began to coalesce against the project. Legal fights loomed. While his energy minister cancelled some of the new coal leases, Premier Kenney went on the offensive. On talk-radio, he defended the decision to rescind a "dead letter" policy; he gave assurances about the "exhaustive environmental review" that awaited any mine project; and, not least, he played the urban-rural card: "There's thousands of Alberta families who put food on the table because of the mining industry. *I don't think those of us who live in the city should look down on those folks*."[26] The premier's intervention did not divide the opposition or bring ranchers and councillors into line. The government, in retreat, appointed a five-person committee—including a representative from the Livingstone Range group but not from any environmental organization—to hold public consultations and make recommendations on coal policy. When the joint federal-provincial review panel concluded in June 2021 that the Grassy Mountain project was not in the public interest, the Kenney government simply said that the review process had worked. One journalist added: "But it was Albertans who rallied and did that alone, without their government."[27]

The story of Grassy Mountain is far from over. The policy review committee's report was released in 2022. Using the language of "halt," but also "pause," for "advanced projects," it recommended that regional and sub-regional land use plans, involving Indigenous communities, be completed first in order to rebuild public trust and provide "investment certainty"; it did not rule out future mining.[28] The mayor of High River reported after a meeting with the premier that Kenney remained an "unapologetic supporter of coal."[29] Nonetheless, the story suggests a very different rural consciousness, one that is more about land and water than identity and recognition. Likewise, it suggests that the UCP government's rural policy interests under Kenney were focussed on resource extraction: mining in the mountains; logging in old-growth, caribou-habitat forest near Willmore Wilderness Park; new oil and gas leases on native grasslands in the south. Given its primary focus on the oil and gas industry, including pipelines, in the face of a prolonged downturn, it introduced measures to reduce or suspend tax assessments for energy producers, over the strong objections of the provincial organization, Rural Municipalities of Alberta. Counties and municipal districts—who were owed an estimated $250 million in unpaid industry taxes at the end of 2021—were

left to absorb a significant loss in revenue, in effect, a transfer of wealth from the countryside.[30] At the same time, they were dealing at close range with the massive environmental liability of 73,500 abandoned and 97,000 inactive well-sites in places from which the industry had already exited—a liability long in the making, but intensified as prices dropped.[31] That was the downward legacy of oil and gas in the countryside. If the government's direct investment in the Keystone XL pipeline gave a temporary benefit to towns like Oyen, at least until construction was halted by decisions made by a new US administration, it had already chosen not to intervene when Battle River School Division closed the school in Hardisty, the originating terminal, due to low enrollment. Even if resources flowed south, that would not translate into more of the kinds of steady local jobs that supported families.

If the UCP government viewed rural Alberta through a resource extraction lens, the same could be said for how it viewed Indigenous peoples. Notably, it created the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation with an initial billion-dollar allocation to provide access to credit and "support Indigenous-led investment in energy, mining, and forestry projects."[32] It also created a legal defence fund to "help groups with Indigenous membership defend their right to economic prosperity."[33] In early 2020, the premier gave a major speech to the Indian Resource Council's national conference in Calgary in which he accused "urban green left militants" of "misappropriating the voice and the cause of Indigenous people" and the federal government of suffocating new energy projects that promised economic development for communities.[34] Alberta oil, in effect, was not only ethical oil in a world where dictators and human rights abusers were going to keep producing it; it had also become reconciliation oil. The message was amplified by the government's energy "war-room" and the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers.[35] A government that had been deeply suspicious of the idea of social licence as an argument for a carbon tax embraced it vis-à-vis Indigenous peoples. Better shield than barricade.

In pre-pandemic times, getting resources out of the ground and shipped to market was the biggest file on the premier's desk. Teck Resources had withdrawn the Frontier oilsands project just south of Wood Buffalo National Park from review, having signed benefit agreements with Indigenous governments in the region. The Trans Mountain pipeline

expansion had run aground on the federal government's failure to meet the test of consultation with affected Indigenous communities along the route. The Coastal GasLink pipeline in British Columbia faced blockades in traditional Wet'suwet'en territory and solidarity blockades in Alberta, including the CN line through Enoch First Nation. The government's first response had been the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act, Bill 1, which limited protest around pipelines, oil and gas production sites, refineries, mines, utilities, highways, and railways. The premier said at the time the bill was about "lawlessness" and Albertans "getting to work and putting food on the table."[36] The Opportunities Corporation was the positive invitation to Indigenous peoples to be industry partners. The logic was no secret: "The more deeply vested First Nations are in the resource industry, the more overall aboriginal support there will be for projects like pipelines."[37]

The message evidently had some appeal. Already in 2016, the Mikisew Cree and Fort McKay First Nations had bought an equity stake in Suncor's new tank farm, payable on opening. The Athabasca Tribal Council announced its ownership interest in the Trans Mountain Pipeline. Leaders like Alan Adam, Chief of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and a prominent critic of the industry's impact, had come around. Better to sign a deal and get some of the benefits.[38] That still left Indigenous communities deeply divided about resource development, as they were about coal, in the case of the Piikani, the Stoney Nakoda, and the Grassy Mountain mine; or the case of Ermineskin and Whitefish Lake First Nations, which have benefit agreements riding on Coalspur Mines' proposed expansion near Hinton and sided with the company against federal review.[39] In this sense, their division and ambivalence over large-scale resource extraction mirrored that of other rural communities with what seem limited options for economic development and jobs. If anything, they had more public leverage and access to capital. But the economic and environmental stakes of investing in oil sands and pipelines were higher too: was this good money after bad? As it was, some of the province's abandoned and inactive conventional wells could be found on reserves further south.

In the case of rural municipalities, there were fewer carrots in the UCP government's approach. On the issues of taxation and unpaid taxes, it sided with oil and gas producers. At the fall 2020 conference of Rural

Municipalities of Alberta (RMA), the premier told delegates that they needed to do more to reduce red tape in order to attract economic investment.[40] It was their problem. Soon after, his government introduced an online tool so that Albertans could compare tax rates and expenditures across communities. If rural municipalities had once been the linchpin in the patron-client relationship, they now felt, as one county councillor put it, "under attack."[41] Or, as a reeve said, after the province changed the municipal funding formula for policing: "How come we don't have that strong rural voice that we thought we were going to have?"[42] About the same time, the government announced major cuts to Alberta Agriculture and Forestry positions and facilities around the province.[43]

The political emergence of rural municipal leaders from a culture of deference did not begin with the UCP government. To some extent, it has tracked the province's declining fiscal ability to reward and punish. It was visible in 2016 when the NDP deputy premier was booed at the RMA fall convention during her remarks on climate policy. That political emergence might sometimes sound like straight-up rural resentment. But it has also taken the form of polished media campaigns and policy briefs on issues like taxation through the RMA; legal action on Grassy Mountain; practical regional collaborations with First Nations governments; a public defence of hospitals, obstetrics, and emergency wards as doctors began to leave rural communities after the provincial government tore up the existing fee schedule. Historically, that kind of oppositional advocacy has been rare enough. Add to it the considerable efforts from rural municipalities to shift towards alternative energy sources in their own operations—that is, to treat oil and gas as tools, and not the only ones, rather than as identity. From Raymond and Carmangay in the south, to Smoky Lake and Big Lakes County, municipalities have installed large photovoltaic systems towards net-zero emissions. In that sense, the transitional energy economy might be a local one. (In Fort Chipewyan, too, Mikisew Cree First Nation, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, and the Fort Chipewyan Métis Association have worked with ATCO Utilities on a solar project that will displace an estimated 800,000 litres of diesel each year.) The mayor of Oyen, meanwhile, sounded more stoic than outraged at the impact of the Keystone XL cancellation. Construction was mostly complete, he said,

COVID has had more impact on the local economy, and wind and solar might have better long-run potential.[44]

Indeed, large-scale private solar developments—attracted by plenty of sun, a deregulated energy market, and advance contracts with companies as big as Amazon—had begun to pop up on tracts throughout southern Alberta, leaving municipalities scrambling to put policy tools like reclamation bonds in place and balance the concerns of neighbours. The new energy economy needed land and capital perhaps more than it did people. So did schemes for bitcoin mining, powered by abandoned gas wells, and a racetrack resort for middle-aged men. And so did a global market for land itself that, according to a 2021 report,[45] had pushed prices in Alberta increasingly out of reach of local people and livelihoods—a reality that might work for those ready to sell, but that will certainly result in the transfer of more wealth out of rural places to lenders, investors, and heirs. Unregulated land prices make a community-supporting food-and-fibre economy elusive, especially at greater distances from urban markets. What the countryside is for, for whom, and who decides, is still the issue.

Conclusion

In October 2021, past the midway mark in the UCP government's term, one of two MLAs elected under that banner but expelled after calling publicly for Kenney's resignation, circulated a five-page discussion paper, asking whether there was "a better way to protect rural voters from opportunistic politicians who abandon rural policies in pursuit of urban voters."[46] The paper defined rural in the most expansive terms: everything outside of Calgary and Edmonton. That was precisely the political divide—strong echoes of the language of rural consciousness. The paper accused the UCP of a "sharp left turn" away from the "rural values" that got it elected. The solution, it suggested, was a new Rural Voice party that would "embrace the idea of Alberta exceptionalism," grassroots democracy, and "economic and social freedom." Heavily sprinkled with the word rural, it said strikingly little about actual rural communities, including Indigenous ones, only that they all wanted limited government and a "resource-driven economy." It might still strike a chord, especially in the post-Kenney period, though the electoral map is no longer in its favour. At about the same time, however, Corb Lund re-recorded his conservation anthem, "This is

My Prairie," with help from a number of well-known country singers, plus the Cree-Dene musician Sherryl Sewepagaham, who contributed a verse in Cree. The last message on the video is this: "We stand in solidarity with urban and rural Albertans, ranchers and First Nations communities, in strongly opposing coal mining in the heart of our Rocky Mountains."[47] Sid Marty, the poet, had already made his own prosaic statement in a much-circulated article in *Canadian Cowboy Country* magazine.[48] Rural Alberta is always more than it seems.

Decline is not disappearance. It is not fate. It is not acquiescence. It is not a future without choices to make, and, if the experience of rural Alberta has anything to teach, those choices, while not open-ended, become more meaningful when the easy money and the mythology of the exception are gone, and when the authority to make them has to be reclaimed. This future is certainly not as simple as resource development or not. But adaptation in the face of decline does mean letting go of a deep investment in a particular story, one that positions rural as the real Alberta and thinks only in terms of restoration to a rightful place. Instead, it calls for a clear-eyed realism and a wariness of would-be patrons. The departure of people, especially young people, remains the reality of rural places. The UCP government has not reversed that experience. Apart from an implied visual campaign commitment to bring back outdoor jobs for men dressed in denim, it made no such promise. Moreover, at the end of its term in office, rural places in Alberta—north, south, and central, inside and outside the corridor, Indigenous and not—continue to face significant challenges. Climate change impacts, direct and observable, will intensify.[49] COVID will continue to mean the digitization and ownership concentration of economies away from small-town main streets. In health terms, recovery, when it comes, will require an unlikely investment in rural rehabilitation professionals, doctors, and nurses to deal with the virus' long-term effects as well as the backlog of elective surgeries. Distance and connectivity will matter even more. If the policy response to a post-oil reckoning in public finances is simply to shrink, the provincial state will recede further from a meaningful service, infrastructure, and regulatory presence in the countryside. The temptation to double down on resource extraction—as plunder, not transition—will invite hard choices and, in places, oppositional vigilance. In all of these ways, the potential story-arc of a province

in decline will matter to rural people. One more thing: they will surely be caught in its politics of blame and resentment, for which people might already be primed, if the coffee-shop conversations are any indication; but they will also have reason to resist the idea that Ottawa is the sole author of their misfortune—or that a different UCP premier-champion, steeped in "rural values," will turn back the clock in their favour.

Acknowledgement

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NOTES

1 Fred Stenson, ed., *The Road Home: New Stories from Alberta Writers* (Edmonton: Reidmore Books, 1992), p. xi.

2 Gordon Pengilly, *They Don't Call Them Farmers Anymore*, quoted in Stenson, *The Road Home*, p. 105.

3 Battle River School Division, Board of Trustees, *Strategic Plan 2020–2021*. Copy in possession of the author.

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