



BLUE STORM: THE RISE AND FALL OF JASON KENNEY

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Conclusion: States of Uncertainty

Duane Bratt and Richard Sutherland

When we were in the final stages of preparing *Orange Chinook* for publication in 2018 it was still a few months out from the election, but there were a few things that seemed clear. The contest would be between the incumbent New Democratic Party (NDP) under Rachel Notley and the newly formed United Conservative Party (UCP) led by Jason Kenney. Coming off a successful career in federal politics, as a leading minister in Stephen Harper's cabinet, Kenney was largely responsible for the creation of the UCP, formed with the express purpose of merging Alberta's two main right-of-centre parties, the Progressive Conservatives (PC) and the Wildrose. Polling had been relatively consistent, showing a strong lead for the UCP. Just as significantly, polling also showed that voting intentions had solidified around these two parties—there seemed no likelihood of splitting the vote on the left, as had happened so many times over the previous decades or on the right, as had been the case in 2015. In the event, as Brooks DeCillia's chapter shows, the UCP's margin of victory was even greater than the polls had suggested. The signals around the 2023 provincial election are far less clear—the UCP has been in turmoil for over a year, and polls have been much closer. However, we do know that Jason Kenney's time as leader of the UCP and premier of Alberta has reached its end. On October 6, 2022 Danielle Smith became the UCP leader and on October 11 she was sworn in as Alberta Premier.

On 18 May 2022, Kenney stood before a group of supporters at Spruce Meadows, just outside of Calgary, to announce his intention to step down as leader of the UCP. This, despite having just won his leadership review with 51.42 per cent of votes. As he explained, this tepid level of support was “clearly not adequate . . . to continue as leader.”¹ The road to Kenney’s resignation had been a long one, stretching back to at least late summer 2021. The NDP had been outpolling and outfundraising the UCP for some time even then. Kenney’s dismal polling results suggested that his days as leader were numbered. But because Kenney pushed back so hard against the efforts of some members of his party and caucus to hold a review, it was not a foregone conclusion that he would, in fact, depart. Over the fall and winter, he was able to delay calls for a leadership review to April 2022. The party’s controversial decision to hold a mail-in vote, pushed the announcement of the review’s results even further back to mid-May. Kenney had suggested throughout the review process that a bare majority (50 per cent + 1 votes) would be sufficient for him to continue, even though earlier leaders, such as Ralph Klein, had taken higher levels of support as insufficient to continue as leader. But when the results were finally announced, it was clear that a bare majority was not enough.

Kenney’s resignation is only one event in what has been a tumultuous decade for Alberta politics. The unexpected election in 2015 of the NDP government after forty-four consecutive years of PC governments was, perhaps, the most dramatic development (and the occasion for assembling *Orange Chinook*), but it was by no means the beginning. The fractures within the right wing of Alberta politics, and the efforts to overcome these divisions had already resulted in surprise wins for compromise candidates in leadership races in 2006 and 2011, as well as some extraordinary episodes, such as most members of the official opposition Wildrose Party, including then leader Danielle Smith, crossing the floor to join the PC government late in 2014. Such divisions were also at least partially responsible for the NDP’s election win months later, and they have continued to drive events in Alberta politics.

As Lisa Young’s chapter outlines, perhaps the greatest disruption of all has been the global COVID-19 pandemic. As of mid-2022 severe cases and hospitalizations are down. However, COVID is still circulating widely within many populations, and many members of the public remain

cautious about resuming their usual habits of socializing and circulating from before the pandemic. Many governments, including Alberta's, have dropped most, if not all, health restrictions and testing requirements, but politicians remain wary of declaring a definitive end to the pandemic. And for good reason—the Kenney government, especially, knows all too well the risks of such premature declarations. As a political issue, COVID and, even more so, the measures to combat it became a point of division within Alberta's public generally, with a significant portion of the population resistant to both vaccination and to other health measures. The division was felt especially within the UCP, a party that, as Stewart and Sayers show in their chapter, was already divided on many issues. The Kenney government's response to the pandemic poured gasoline on the smouldering disagreements within the party and the caucus. Several (mostly rural) MLAs declared their opposition to almost every restriction imposed by the government. Kenney, despite trying every approach from tolerance of dissent to expulsion from caucus, was unable to contain the dispute. As time went on, however, he himself became increasingly the focus of discontent within the party.

Kenney's announcement offers a turning point, a break in the narrative, even if the UCP remains in power until at least the next provincial election. But, as with the pandemic, the end of Kenney's premiership has proved to be an attenuated process. Within hours of his announcement, it became clear that Kenney was not leaving just yet. On 19 May, after a full day of deliberation, the UCP caucus issued an announcement that Kenney would be staying on as premier until after a leadership race had selected his successor. There was even some speculation in the first few days after the announcement that Kenney might enter the race himself, as there was nothing in the party's by-laws preventing it. Kenney eventually quelled these rumours, announcing the following Saturday on his call-in radio show that he would not be running. Regardless, Kenney would continue to govern, presumably with an eye to continuing to pursue his government's agenda. An immediate departure would have provided the party a much earlier opportunity to move on under a more neutral leader, likely in a caretaker role. Instead, Kenney continued to be associated with the party for some time yet. His continuing presence in the premier's office also clearly conditioned the terms on which the leadership race took place. His

lingering unpopularity was a challenge for any member of cabinet, such as finance minister Travis Toews, running for the leadership, requiring them to distance themselves from him, while still campaigning on their own records. On the other hand, Brian Jean and Danielle Smith, the last two leaders of the Wildrose Party and explicitly anti-Kenney candidates, had already declared themselves before the results of the leadership review had been decided.

Legacies

How will we look back on the events of the past four years? COVID-19's impacts on employment, inflation, and on political dynamics seem destined to outlast the actual pandemic. The consequences of shutting down the economy and then re-opening it has ignited discussions around long-term measures such as guaranteed basic income. Continued disruptions in the global supply chain have led to shortages of many consumer goods, possibly contributing to the highest inflation rates seen in decades. Employment in Alberta, particularly Calgary and Edmonton (already an issue prior to the pandemic) has been slow to recover, lagging most of Canada. Resistance to pandemic measures has offered a rallying point for the right, not only in Alberta, but across Canada and in other countries. COVID has changed the conversation about public health measures and individual rights.

However, although COVID has been by far the biggest issue confronting the Kenney government, there is more to the story. Regardless of whether the pandemic had happened, the UCP was already determined to be a disruptive force, taking on its perceived enemies forcefully and very publicly. The UCP came into government aiming at disruption, promising a very different approach, not only from the NDP, but also the most recent PC governments. The party aimed at challenging the status quo beyond Alberta's borders, promising to push back aggressively against the federal government under Trudeau's Liberals, and even further afield at environmental groups based outside of Canada. The "war room" (see Brad Clark's chapter) and the Fair Deal Panel (see Jared Wesley's chapter) were the two major elements of this more aggressive footing.

Much of this is reflected in Jason Kenney's confrontational political persona. When he entered Alberta politics, Jason Kenney was viewed as

the solution—the right man to bring together the two parties, as well as to forcefully defend the interests of Alberta and its oil and gas industry. The blue Dodge Ram he chose as his vehicle is, as Chaseten Remillard and Tyler Nagle suggest, a very deliberately chosen symbol for this attitude. Initially this seemed to work as the UCP handily won a large majority in the ensuing election. Kenney’s approval rate in the first months after the 2019 election was even higher than his party’s share of the vote at 61 per cent.² However, both ratings began a sharp decline in November, as his party unveiled its first budget. It seems that voters quickly grew tired of Jason Kenney’s style. As several authors in this volume point out, while every other political leader in Canada received at least some uptick in approval ratings as they dealt with the COVID-19 crisis, Kenney’s only dropped. He remained amongst the least popular premiers in the country. Many of the leading members of his cabinet have displayed a similar penchant for incendiary political behaviour, particularly in response to critics. The response of staffers (most notably Matt Wolf, former issues manager, and Brock Harrison, director of communications) and cabinet ministers such as Tyler Shandro, Jason Nixon, or Devin Dreeshen has been to hit back at opponents with maximum force, intensifying or even precipitating political scandals. This approach has left lasting wounds within the UCP, and has, arguably, contributed to an increasing polarization within Alberta politics more generally.

Although the Kenney government may be remembered by many for its confrontational style and the political battles that consumed it, there are other, policy-related legacies that may have lasting effects. Many of the steep cuts in government spending in education, post-secondary learning, and other sectors may have lasting consequences, such as the loss of jobs and closures of schools or programs. These effects will persist regardless of whether funding is restored in future. Of course, much also depends on how Smith chooses to govern over the coming months, as well, of course, on which party wins the next provincial election in May 2023. It seems likely that an NDP win would see very different approaches in many policy areas, but a UCP under new leadership might also have different priorities and positions in terms of policy. However, even if there is policy continuity, it is likely that the new leader will bring a different tone.

In his chapter on climate policy, Duane Bratt notes the NDP's Climate Leadership Plan has demonstrated surprising policy resiliency, with most of its elements surviving the change in government, despite the loudly announced plans of the Kenney government. There were some surprising continuities between the Notley and Kenney governments, regardless of what either one might say publicly. Just as for Notley's NDP, there are some areas where the resiliency of the Kenney government policies seems dubious and other areas where we could easily suppose they will continue. And, as Bratt's analysis might suggest, we might also be surprised at what stays the same. As always, we should look at the gap between political rhetoric and policy action.

Should the NDP reclaim government they have signalled their intention to eliminate the UCP's performance-based funding model for higher education.³ At the same time, it's worth remembering that the provincial mandates for post-secondary institutions that figured so largely in discussions of labour relations in the sector (see Lisa Young's chapter) were, in fact, introduced by the NDP, albeit with very different criteria. As for the cultural industries sector, while the NDP has promised to reinstate the Digital Interactive Media Tax Credit⁴ that was eliminated by the UCP in its first budget (see Richard Sutherland's chapter), there is no indication it would revert to grants from the tax credits the UCP introduced for film and television production. The NDP have also stated, as Charles Webber notes in his chapter on education, that it will drop the UCP's controversial revised curriculum for K–12 students, reverting, presumably, to the revised curriculum they had developed while in office. But it is less clear what line they would take on other matters, such as the removal of the Alberta Teachers Association's disciplinary role. It also seems likely that the NDP would take a different approach to health care, relations with the federal government, or fiscal policy, and it is almost unimaginable that the Canadian Energy Centre would continue to exist under an NDP government. However, there have been no specific commitments in these areas. Finally, in environmental policy, it is unclear whether the NDP would move to reinstate the provincial economy-wide carbon tax. On the other hand, a new UCP government with a fresh mandate might be inclined to follow a very different path on environment policy. For instance, even if Danielle Smith retains much of Jason Kenney's rhetoric on climate

change, she may choose very different policies from those his government has quietly pursued. Bratt's chapter should remind us that there is no guarantee that the UCP automatically offers more continuity in every respect with the Kenney's government than does the NDP.

Finally, one of the main legacies of Jason Kenney in Alberta's political career is, not only the creation of the UCP, but also the final destruction of the PC Party that had governed the province for forty-four years. Kenney, as the last leader of that party, explicitly campaigned for the leadership with the aim of merging it with the Wildrose Party. In doing so, he was attempting to replicate the merger of the right in federal politics that happened between the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives in 2003, which healed the split in the right-of-centre vote in the country and contributed to Stephen Harper's Conservative Party of Canada forming government in 2006 after thirteen years of Liberal rule. Initially Kenney's project followed the same script: the parties were successfully united with Kenney becoming the new party's leader and winning a general election not long after. However, maintaining Harper's success as a leader has proved more elusive. In the federal merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives there was a persistent sense that more moderate voices were sidelined, although it was also clear that more right-wing views were also held in check under Harper's leadership. Kenney faced a similar problem of keeping the centre and the right under the same tent, but he has not been able to manage this task.

As he leaves the leadership, it is unclear what lies ahead for the party he essentially founded. As discussed earlier, there are deep divisions within that have already claimed his leadership, and which threaten its stability in the longer term. The UCP do not seem to be especially united, based on the results of the leadership review's 50/50 split, as well as Smith winning the leadership with just 53.8 per cent after 6 ballots. This is more divided than the Progressive Conservatives were even under Stelmach or Redford, but perhaps less surprising if we remember that the UCP also includes the remnants of the Wildrose Party, the party Danielle Smith led between 2009 and 2014. It is debatable whether, under her leadership, the United Conservatives will be able to retain centrist, formerly Progressive Conservative voters, or essentially devolve into a revival of the Wildrose Party. It is also unclear whether a more moderate leader, particularly one

associated with Jason Kenney as a member of his cabinet, would have been acceptable to more right-wing voters. Either way, Jason Kenney's major legacy, the United Conservative Party itself, seems less than assured.

NOTES

- 1 Dean Bennett and Collette Derworiz, "Alberta Premier Jason Kenney intends to step down as UCP leader after narrow leadership win," *Global News*, 18 May 2022. Accessed at: <https://globalnews.ca/news/8846607/jason-kenney-ucp-leadership-vote-results-alberta/> on 27 May 2022.
- 2 Angus Reid Institute. "Premiers' Performance: Ford Continues to Fall in Approval, Houston Rides High on Strength of COVID 19 Handling," 17 January 2022. Accessed at: <https://angusreid.org/premiers-performance-january-2022/> on 31 May 2022.
- 3 Alberta NDP Caucus. "Strengthening Post-Secondary for a Resilient Future (2022)." Accessed at: <https://www.albertasfuture.ca/albertas-future/albertas-future-campaigns/post/strengthening-post-secondary-for-a-resilient-future> on 27 May 2022.
- 4 Alberta NDP Caucus. "Technology and AI Proposal (2021)." Accessed at: <https://www.albertasfuture.ca/albertas-future/albertas-future-campaigns/post/technology> on 27 May 2022.