

Who Will Lead?

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BY FRANK DABBS

The bombastic premier William Aberhart tried to re-invent Canadian-style government between his rise to power with the Social Credit Party in 1935 and his premature death in 1943. The political establishment responded with a clamorous counterrevolution that undid his efforts and hastened his demise from stress-related liver failure. In an epitaph on Aberhart's term in office, newspaper editor Bruce Hutchison, a crony of cabinet ministers and confidante of prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, acidly dismissed Alberta politics as, "the volcano of extraordinary remedy."

In the summer of 1998 Alberta is, again, a simmering cauldron of political possibilities. The state of flux is a considerable turn of affairs. In the space of 16 weeks, from Feb. 11 to June 2, 1997, a 10-year insurrection against the entrenched liberalism of Canada's political establishment reached its zenith. Sometime between the



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Liberals are pinning their hopes on Nancy MacBeth.

day that Premier Ralph Klein called the spring election, which his Conservative government won commandingly, and the summer evening on which Reform Party of Canada founder Preston Manning became leader of the Official Opposition in the Parliament of Canada, a new political epoch seemed to entrench itself.

The numbers from the 1997 provincial and federal elections arguably demonstrated that Klein and Manning were unassailable. In spite of a first term of severe and arbitrary budget cutting and institutional restructuring in the core government functions of health care, education, social services and municipal finance, Klein garnered 51.1 per cent of the popular vote on March 11,

1997, compared to 44.5 per cent in 1993. His caucus captured 63 seats compared to 51 in the previous election. The Liberal opposition was reduced from 32 seats to 18, of which 16 were from Edmonton.

On June 2, the phoenix-like Manning recovered from two years of bad opinion polls and the treachery of people in his own party. In its third national election, the Reform Party gained eight seats from 52 in 1993 to 60, and formed the Official Opposition. Alberta was his bedrock; Manning collected more votes in the province

Frank Dabbs is an author and freelance writer living near Sundre. His latest book, Preston Manning: The Roots of Reform, is a Canadian best-seller. He is also the author of Ralph Klein: A Maverick Life.

ALEX RUTHERFORD (1905-1910) LIBERAL • A.L. SIFTON (1910-1917) LIBERAL • CHARLES STEWART (1917-1921) LIBERAL

than Klein, and reduced the Liberals from four to two Members of Parliament in the province.

On paper, the provincial Liberal Party and the western branch plant of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada were all but destroyed. Having drifted too far to the left for Alberta voters' tastes, they were replaced by new conservative leadership focused on economics and the restriction of government's social role. This is familiar ground for Albertans. Such is Alberta's singular civic nature that in nine decades it produced four transitions in the political status quo where reigning parties were virtually destroyed, the province was transformed and public life beyond its borders affected.

Alberta, however, has not necessarily settled down to a long ascendancy of right-wing conservatism. Within Klein's provincial Conservative movement the fiscal and social conservatives are warring one against the other, and the stability of his caucus is suspect. The Reform Party and the national Tories are deadlocked in a competition that splits the conservative constituency into two roughly equal blocs and prevents either one from defeating the Liberal national government. Alberta is a central venue in this fratricidal relationship. Rivals sullen and dangerous are manipulating events to undermine both Manning and Klein. Meanwhile, the province's dormant liberalism has experienced a spring thaw.

The Alberta Liberal Party's leadership campaign, although passed over by the mainstream news media, created a forum that addressed the disruptions, inequities and weaknesses of the new conservatism. In six round-table debates, the four leadership candidates defined a liberal alternative of moderate government that balances the needs of the economy with the needs of the community and the needs of the individual.

The party put its future into the hands of Nancy MacBeth, a product of Peter Lougheed's Red Tory politics: moderate, mildly interventionist, ideologically muted, using power to foster a better life for citizens. MacBeth is a competent political executive with a clear opportunity to catch the pendulum of public opinion as it swings away from Klein's single-minded fiscal policies and back to the middle ground on which Canadian politics has been played in the 20th-Century. Politics, however, is unpredictable; the Liberals and their new leader have embarked on a voyage with no reliable map, and no sure estimate of the distance they must travel or the time the journey will take.

In Alberta, power changes hands in epochal steps. A charismatic leader emerges in times of social upheaval and transition with a fresh and compelling vision that, widely communicated and accepted, becomes a movement. The visionary becomes the premier and the movement becomes the governing party.

The United Farmers of Alberta dreamed of changing the world from their rural holdings and rode a tide of social change triggered by the First World War and the agrarian wealth it created on the Prairies. Although its ideological leader, the unworldly Henry Wise Wood, never sat in the legislature, the movement presided over the province's transition from a pioneer society to a

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modern agricultural community. It united with a parallel movement in Ontario and for a time challenged for national power. The influence of the farmer's movement survived with the Progressives of the Progressive Conservative Party.

Social Credit offered to deliver Alberta from the economic and social collapse of the Great Depression. School principal and lay preacher Aberhart wrecked the old political institutions and parties. His protégé and successor, Ernest Manning, moulded Aberhart's dream — economic justice and a classless community. In the process, Alberta gained a strong, resource-based, post-war industrial economy. Another Aberhart Depression-era disciple, Edmonton hardware trainee W.A.C. Bennett, applied the lessons he learned in Alberta to British Columbia. Social Credit also played a small, eccentric part in the raucous federal minority parliaments of the 1960s.

Peter Lougheed's 1971 political revolution was the gentlest of all, more a graceful summer transition than a jarring break in the course of history. The young lawyer

and business executive seized on the discontent in Alberta's close-knit towns and small cities, and transformed it into ambition and energy. In the process the province changed into a sophisticated, affluent urban society whose cities seemed larger than they really were. Lougheed used government to manage the economy with mild interventions and to expand the role of servant government by strengthening the education, health care and social service institutions.

His successor, Don Getty, had no capacity to sustain the style of government that worked for Lougheed. A decade of poor oil and gas prices eroded the government's fiscal base, and Getty developed no coherent response. In the election of 1989, Getty survived with a reduced majority of 59 seats, although he lost his personal constituency in Edmonton and was forced to contest a by-election in the safe rural riding of Stettler. The New Democrats formed the official Opposition with 16 seats and the Liberals, led by former Edmonton mayor Lawrence Decore, held eight seats.

The ND leader, schoolteacher Ray Martin, was ill equipped for his office, and tied to an unpopular social democratic ideology. Decore had pinpointed the next theme in Alberta politics when, in a campaign speech decrying the financial mess of failed business investments, he pulled his wallet from his pocket and waved it as a symbol of the personal threat debt and deficit posed to taxpayers.

During the next four years, Decore built an inclusive, moderate Liberal coalition embracing federal Reform Party members on its right and former New Democrats disillusioned by socialism on the left. His core message was fiscal responsibility, and in the autumn of 1992, he was ready to blow away the 22-year Conservative regime.

After Getty resigned, the Conservatives split into two camps to select a new leader. A group of younger, urban Tories wanted to build on the Lougheed legacy, repairing and restoring it where necessary and advancing it to include new realities such as technological advance. Their candidate was a young, bilingual political prodigy, Nancy Betkowski, who had two decades of experience working for senior Lougheed ministers such as treasurers Dick Johnston and Lou Hyndman. She held the riding of

Edmonton Glenora and sat in Getty cabinets first as the minister of education, then health. She articulated moderate, pragmatic ideas that respected the role of government as the servant of shared community interests and individual opportunity.

A group of older, mostly-male MLAs from small town and rural ridings wanted to take the party hard to the right, in the direction that was proving successful for American Republicans, British Thatcherites and Preston Manning's blossoming Reform Party of Canada. Their candidate was former Calgary mayor and environ-

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ment minister Ralph Klein. His traction came from the tandem messages of fiscal responsibility — deficit and debt elimination — and a reduced social role for government, which was never competent and could never be trusted. Klein won and moved government right, preempting Decore's campaign theme of fiscal responsibility. In June 1993, in what was instantly named the miracle on the Prairies, Klein won the election that Getty would have lost had he stayed on as leader.

The New Democrats were wiped out. However, the province stopped short of endorsing the new Conservative Party as unanimously as it had the United Farmers, Social Credit and Lougheed Conservatives. Decore had an official Opposition caucus of 32 members, the strongest in the province's history.

The Klein revolution thus became the fourth defining political landmark in the province's short history. It

paralleled the rise of the Reform Party. Alberta had produced — partly as the product of eight decades of conflict with Liberals and liberalism over every important aspect of economic, social and constitutional policy — a new ideology. It was based on interwoven threads of fiscal conservatism, democratic populism, constitutional equality of the provinces, anti-federalism and minimalist treatment of social issues.

Western Canadian conservatism gained popularity from the economic boom that accompanied it, by coincidence or not, in Alberta. Bay Street and the mainstream media endorsed it. It developed academic credentials, a broadly based literature and a substantial branch industry of think tanks, lobbyists and political action groups. It had the advantage of standing alone on the political stage: no alternative vision opposed it.

Arrogant in victory, the Klein cabinet and caucus treated the Liberals in the legislature with a taunting contempt that was often childish. They missed the point that the province's endorsement of fiscal conservatism was equivocal. Dispirited and battling cancer, Decore stepped down in 1995 and was replaced by Edmonton business executive Grant Mitchell.

In the face of the new conservative monolith, Mitchell made no bones about his liberalism. His opposition caucus developed clearly expressed policies on universal public health care, well-funded public education and strong environmental protection. Seeking a balance between the fiscal responsibilities and social obligations of government, the Liberals supported balanced budgets and debt repayment, but argued that good government, as well, could spend wisely and aggressively on the social agenda.

But Mitchell had inadequate financing and an ineffective organization. He had no call on an intelligentsia to refresh Liberal philosophy. He lacked strong strategic advice. A young, urban futurist politician, he was not understood by most Albertans, even though they respected his honesty, commitment and the value he placed on democratic processes.

His amiable and generous disposition was subsumed by the harsh role he chose to play as critic of the small detail. He became the ombudsman of the dislocations and mistakes created by Klein's overhaul of government. His advocacy for the victims of change had a certain grave nobility, but his voice seldom sounded beyond the confines of the legislature. He never discovered or articulated an alternative vision to counter the fears created by Klein's decisions.

Mitchell presided over the death of a great idea — modern liberalism. In earlier forms it had succeeded widely around the world, through more than 100 years,

as the politics of social conscience. Applied liberalism improved people's lives and limited the natural disparity and injustice to which human nature is prone. It knitted together the social fabric, enabling capitalism to create pools of great personal wealth without social upheaval, because it nurtured individual opportunity.

However, after the 1960s it created excessive public debt. It attracted mortal enemies who believed the debts of profligate liberalism would bankrupt the state and choke the life out of capitalist affluence. Mitchell was cast in the role of a good man watching the end of a good idea. The fatal flaw of his party, under his leadership, was its nostalgia.

Mitchell's contribution to the next generation of Alberta Liberals is to have preserved the party from the temptation to pose as conservatives-at-heart. This took courage. On his watch, the Liberals preserved a base of Edmonton seats, nurtured new blood in the caucus and kept the Grit brand differentiated from the Tory's against the day that Klein's mistakes catch up with him.

Had Mitchell acted differently, he would have ceded many more Edmonton seats to the New Democrats in the election of 1997. After the ND's disastrous showing in 1993, Martin left politics and was succeeded by Edmonton MLA Pamela Barrett, an articulate, focused and competitive leader. Like Mitchell, however, she has suffered from her party's organizational and financial weakness.

In 1997, Ms. Barrett campaigned against Mitchell, not Klein, and re-instated her party in the legislature by taking two Edmonton seats, including her own, from the Liberals. In the end, what gave the Liberals the edge in Edmonton was a message more attuned to the thinking and mood of the city. New Democrats are now quietly considering their alternatives, including the return to public life of former Edmonton mayor Jan Reimer.

Meanwhile, Mitchell saw the limit of his political future and decided to leave public life. His final contribution to the Alberta Liberal Party was a measured leadership process that drew the strongest field of candidates in the party's memory: MLAs Ken Nicol, Karen Leibovici and Linda Sloan — and from outside its establishment, the Lougheed-era moderate Nancy MacBeth (formerly Betkowski). MacBeth's controversial return from the Diaspora of temperate Conservatives spoke to the growing taste for a countervailing force in Alberta to the ideas and impact of Klein's government and the Reform Party.

The old liberalism may be dead, but instead of mourning the past, the party used the leadership process to look into the future, in a process that invigorated its thinking and renewed its optimism. The candidates are

young; Nicol is 54, MacBeth 50, Leibovici, 46 and Sloan 38. They are well educated: MacBeth is a linguist, Sloan a nurse, Leibovici in social work and human resources and Nicol in agriculture and economics. They have solid professional backgrounds, are accomplished in their fields and have earned peer recognition and gained leadership experience outside politics.

Perhaps most important, they are tough. “A Liberal in Alberta is a person of iron-clad resolve, combined with a strong belief that Alberta deserves better government and better politics, and that the values of Liberalism — balanced, and people-rooted, are the best alternative to achieve it,” Sloan reflected following the

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“We are the mainstream,” says Leibovici. “We are the moderates, the pragmatists and our fundamental principles are those of most Albertans. Our view of society is based on values of fairness and compassion. Government can play a role in working out the balance between the needs of the group and the needs of the individual.”

“I am a Liberal because I make my political decisions based on what is the impact of a government action on people, not on asking is this better for the operation of the economic system,” Nicol says. “A Liberal is someone who believes government is of, by and for the people — not of, by and for special interests. Klein’s politics are the politics of self-interest for a political elite. A lot of what his government does is decided on the basis of its impact on business — and not business in general but specific large business interests.”

When MacBeth accepted an armful of victor’s roses in Edmonton’s Shaw Conference Centre on Saturday

April 18, she had the unequivocal support of her rivals, who were focused on the common ground they found during the campaign.

Buoyed up by a convincing win — she recruited 60 per cent of the 11,000 new members drawn to her party and garnered 4,271 of the 7,636 ballots cast — MacBeth was delighted by the unanimity of the party. She won on superior organization and heavier financing, but the campaign, especially the six regional debates, was remarkable for its civility and unanimity. As MacBeth says, “Now I can lead by walking around and talking to people, getting a sense of what is important to them.”

The common phrase the candidates used to describe liberal leadership for the future is balance. This is a party not afraid of government. “It may not be perfect, it can always be improved and reformed,” says MacBeth, “but government can do many things better than they can be done privately.”

She believes the Conservatives under Klein made improvement impossible through cuts so devastating that professionals delivering services do not have the time or energy to go beyond coping to start reconstruction. She also believes the clarity of the Liberal’s commitment to public education, universal healthcare and an open democracy that operates from the legislature is what Albertans want for their society in the long term.

MacBeth faces a daunting task. The Liberal Party has a \$280,000 debt and a badly atrophied organization. In paid-up membership, they command only one-tenth Klein’s following. The Conservatives are going to make her life as unpleasant as possible — she faces a rough ride from a government that fears her enough to marshal all its resources against her in the by-election for the Edmonton McClung seat vacated by Mitchell.

MacBeth begins her leadership in a time of upheaval, on the threshold of an unwritten century. At such a moment in his career, William Lyon Mackenzie King looked for a “proper chart and compass to guide public affairs rightly.”

“A proper social order depends on a fine discernment between economic and human values; between the ends which Wealth and the ends which Life are meant to serve,” he wrote. The clash of values that defines politics, he concluded, is the decision between the use of power to serve people or the use of people to serve the ends of the powerful. In many important ways, his values define the future of liberalism as well as its past and could change the present course of Alberta politics. 