THE Contender

Liberal leader Nancy MacBeth, former candidate for the leadership of the provincial Conservatives—and Ralph Klein's archrival—prepares for the campaign of her life

by Curtis Gillespie

Outside the town of Jasper sits Lake Edith, a stunning natural jewel. Tasteful cabins ring the lake; the owners tend to be families who have held the lease rights for generations. They also tend to be well off, but clearly respect and love the land, an acknowledgement that they have somehow been blessed. There is very little development here, and much ecological sensitivity. It is, in short, a place of both privilege and integrity. Lake Edith is also not well known, somewhat distant. Only those with direct and regular access can claim to really know it.

Nancy MacBeth, the leader of the Alberta Liberal Party, has been going to Lake Edith for most of her 51 years. MacBeth wants to unseat Ralph Klein as Premier of Alberta, and the next year (or less) leading up to the provincial election will be the most important phase of her political career. What unfolds over this period will determine precisely how much time she'll be spending at Lake Edith over the next eight to ten years. If things go as she hopes, visits will be few and far between for the new premier. But if the forces that have tripped up MacBeth in the past do so again, the other residents of Lake Edith will be regularly enjoying the company of a woman whose ultimate political aspiration was not realized.

Nancy Elliott was born December 29, 1948, in Edmonton. One of five children, she grew up in the affluent Glenora district of central Edmonton, where her father worked as a physician. From the age of four and well into her teen years she studied piano. "I remember when I left politics in 1993, I went back to piano, and to singing. I love music, and wanted to return to it, because I'd lost so much of what I had." MacBeth is very musical, and has continued to sing in her church choir for much of her adult life.

Her parents were originally from Prescott, Ontario, but her father loved Alberta so much they considered settling here. The matter was finally decided when Dr. Elliott had the opportunity to lease the site at Lake Edith. "And the story of how it happened is also something that I think really indicates his character," says MacBeth. "And maybe a little bit of mine, too."

She's referring to the manner in which her father went about building a cabin on the site. He was a young doctor with three small children (they would have two more). The year was 1948, the year of MacBeth's birth. Dr. Elliott asked his family back in Ontario for a little financial help to get him started with building the cabin. Certainly, there was every indication he was going to have a successful career, but his family said no, perhaps upset he'd decided to stay in the hinterlands. "What he did was, he just said, 'Fine, I'll do it myself.' He built it a bit at a time, doing a lot of the work himself. He had this 'Just watch me' attitude." MacBeth pauses. "I know that's where I got it from. He was a star and a saint to me."

Photograph by ROTH AND RAMBERG INC.

MacBeth's childhood and early teen years were marked by a kind of post-World War II innocence. She swam competitively, learned her music, spent summers at the cottage. But in 1963, when MacBeth was a Grade 10 student at Ross Shepherd High School in Edmonton, her father died of a massive heart attack. The family was devastated. "He meant so much to me, but after he died he actually became more of a real person to me because I stopped idealizing him. I think I even feel closer to him now. But back then, it was just about loss, that's all."

Around the time MacBeth completed high school, where she'd been involved in student government, the arc and content of her political life began to take shape. She had also studied French throughout high school, and decided to take languages at university. She majored in French and minored in Russian, and in 1969 graduated with an Arts degree. Following her graduation, she went to Laval, Quebec, to increase her facility with French. "After that year, I can say that I felt genuinely comfortable with French," MacBeth recalls. This ease and sympathy for the French language would surface later, and not always to her benefit, in her career as an Alberta politician.

Her education, however, was not the primary influence that would steer her toward politics. In the summers between university terms, MacBeth worked at the pharmacy in Jasper. She came to like and respect its owner, a man named Bob Dowling. In the late 1960s, Dowling was involved with the surging Progressive Conservative Party, and he often remarked to MacBeth that she ought to consider getting involved. MacBeth demurred. After finishing her year at Laval, she and a friend travelled throughout Europe and North Africa. She returned in 1971, the same year that Dowling successfully ran as an MLA under Peter Lougheed's leadership. In 1972, MacBeth heeded Dowling's advice and entered the government work force.

She was hired, at the age of 23, to establish the translation service for Alberta Culture. After two years, MacBeth moved on to Premier Peter Lougheed's correspondence office. There, she met Dick Johnston, who hired her in 1976 to work as his executive assistant in his portfolio of Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs (a portfolio that would later play an ironic role in MacBeth's political life). She worked with Johnston until 1982, after which she accepted a similar position working for Lou Hyndman, then MLA for the Edmonton riding of Glenora. The March 7, 1993, edition of the *Edmonton Journal* reported that Hyndman had been so impressed by MacBeth (then Nancy Betkowski) that, when he announced his retirement, he encouraged her to succeed him in the Glenora riding. MacBeth did so, won, and represented Glenora until 1993. During her stint as MLA, MacBeth acted as Minister of Education from 1986 to 1988 and Minister of Health from 1988 to 1992.

In 1992, Don Getty resigned as Premier (a resignation that brought Stockwell Day to one knee in front of Getty, uttering the words, "No, don't!"). The race to replace Getty came down, in December 1992, to MacBeth against Ralph Klein.

"I'd seen the more extreme element of the party start to gain influence," she said in a recent interview. "And I thought I could make a difference, be a moderating voice, work toward strengthening [the ministries of] Health and Education." After the first count, she and Ralph Klein were the two highest vote getters. MacBeth had tallied one vote more than Klein. The other candidates dropped out and put their endorsement behind MacBeth. The run-off was to be one week later, and every pundit picked MacBeth to walk away with the leadership. But what transpired in that week is an object lesson in win-at-all-costs politics. Klein played it. MacBeth did not. The second vote swept Klein to victory by more than 14,000 votes. MacBeth was stunned. Klein was jubilant.

"I did believe I was the best person for the job," she says now. "When I look back at that leadership race, as well as the Liberal leadership race, I certainly believe I had solid reasons for running in both. But in 1992 I just wasn't chosen. That's all. It was certainly one of the worst nights of my life, but now I can say it was the best thing that ever happened to me. It made me realize I couldn't control my world just by the force of my will. It sounds strange, but it really brought me humility, and that's been important to me."

What Klein had that MacBeth didn't was the master of amoral strategy, Rod Love, who orchestrated Klein's coarse, brutally efficient attack in the week between votes. MacBeth, then Minister of Health, had been involved in a two-year consultative process to address the needs of the health care community. In a variety of talks, addresses and reports, MacBeth had (ironically, in light of the present day agenda) become strongly linked to the need to control costs and redistribute resources throughout the health care system. Love saw MacBeth's stance as an opportunity, and he dispatched a team of Klein supporters to convince rural Alberta that if MacBeth were elected they could kiss that new local hospital good-bye. This strategy, along with highlighting MacBeth's lack of "real world" private sector experience, worked. The rural vote, delivered by such loyalists as Ken Kowalski, Ron Moore and Ernie Isley, assured Klein the leadership of the PC party. Interestingly, MacBeth had never before, and has never since, felt that her gender was an issue in her political career; only in that leadership race did she feel it played a part. "But I didn't think it was that Albertans weren't ready for a woman Premier. I think it was that the PC Party wasn't ready for a woman leader."

"I was definitely hurt and angry," says MacBeth now. "No question about it. That's ultimately why I decided

not to run for the leadership of the Liberal party in 1994. Because, in my heart of hearts, I knew it would have been only about getting even. And to operate that way would have made me sick. I can't be motivated by anger and stay healthy, and my sense was that I was up against a group of people who would do anything they needed to do to win. So I bowed out."

Of course, it wasn't quite as simple as just bowing out. After the race, Klein failed to contact MacBeth for several days. Former Premier Don Getty spoke with MacBeth, and expressed his shock that Klein had not yet been in touch. A few hours later, Klein called to talk about what role MacBeth might play. They agreed to meet on the Thursday, at which Klein opened with an offer. "I was thinking of Provincial Treasurer."

MacBeth suggested that she thought it was important to heal the wounds in the party caused by the leadership race, and offered to work with Klein as a one-two tandem, while stressing she'd need authority in government to make it work. Klein was non-committal. After a further wait of three days, he called MacBeth back to offer her the minor post of Federal and Intergovernmental Affairs. She asked about the other leadership candidates (all of whom had backed her). They were to be shut out. She asked about the position of Deputy Premier. Klein said Ken Kowalski and Peter Elzinga, strong Klein allies in the campaign, had been handed those posts.

"What would my rank in cabinet be?" asked MacBeth.

Klein paused. "Your rank will be what it was before. Six, maybe seventh."

"I remember," MacBeth says today, "how shocked I was. What it meant, really, was that I would have no real clout in government, no opportunity to make a difference. I told him I would have to call him back."

Klein gave her a time to call back. "I'd decided I pretty much had to accept his offer," says MacBeth, "bad as it was." But Klein was unable to keep the phone appointment he'd set. This gave MacBeth time to reflect. "I thought of all those people who'd helped me so much, all the volunteers and supporters, and I wondered what message I'd be sending them if I took the job. I thought I'd be condoning all the stuff that went on. I also thought that with Kowalski and Elzinga in the top positions I would be fighting all the time to change the direction government took."

After a restless night, and another conversation with her husband, Hilliard, MacBeth realized that there was no way she'd be able to accept Klein's terms. She phoned him, and informed him she would not be accepting his offer. She recalls his first reaction was, "This is no good. What's it going to take to get you in the cabinet?"

She told him he'd made his decision, and she'd made hers. She wished him well. It was the last time Nancy MacBeth and Ralph Klein spoke alone one-on-one. The only favour MacBeth did ask of Klein (in their Thursday meeting) was to clear up some of the personal debris left behind from the hard-fought leadership campaign. "Let's get it on, Nancy!" Klein had brayed during the run-off. MacBeth worried that Klein's sexual innuendo would make it difficult for her husband and son to feel comfortable about her working for Klein. MacBeth said that Klein's remarks didn't bother her that much personally, but that it would be helpful if he were to clear them up. Klein immediately apologized. "As soon as the words were out of my mouth I knew it was a mistake," he told MacBeth. "What can I do, a press release or something?"

MacBeth said no, it was more a personal thing and a note of apology to her son and husband would be fine.

"Consider it done," said Klein.

The note never arrived. "I don't think it's that big a deal in the greater context of things," says MacBeth today. "But I've never forgotten it. I've never forgotten that those were his last words to me. Consider it done."

"It was certainly one of the worst nights of my life, but now I can say it was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Photo courtesy of the *Edmonton Journal*

MacBeth the night she lost the Conservative leadership campaign to Ralph Klein, December 6, 1992.

Nancy MacBeth stayed on as the Glenora MLA, resigning prior to the election of 1993. She tore up the PC Party card she'd held for over 20 years. And so for almost the first time in her adult life, she was outside the political arena.

MacBeth took time to change her life, to reassess priorities. She made a commitment to her personal health, to being at home, to setting an example as a community and family figure, rather than as a public figure. "I just had to get to the point where I could live my life one day at a time, in a way where I could accept the world the way it is rather than always trying to craft it and change it to my liking." She smiles at the recollection. "That took some work, I can tell you. I would also say that I had a certain amount of self-doubt 10 years ago, but I hope that's been replaced by a kind of humility. I see myself as part of a whole, not as the centre. I guess I have less fear than I used to. Losing to Ralph in 1992 erased—not at first, but eventually—my worry, my fear."

Doug Pratt was the minister at Robertson United Church in the 1960s, and he remembers MacBeth's unique combination of vulnerability and confidence. "She was, and is, memorable," says Pratt. He recalls a bright young member of the parish who sang in the choir and participated in the various activities of the church. "What I like about Nancy," says Pratt, "is that she's a believer without being a person who swallows everything whole. And she's always reminded me of that old joke, about the scientist who once successfully crossed a canary with a tiger. 'What did you get?' they asked him. 'Well, I don't know what you call it, but when it sings we listen!'"

Senator Nick Taylor, long-time Alberta Liberal and former leader of the provincial Liberal Party, also thinks we ought to listen. "Whether she's mixing with university professors or a Métis trapper or Calgary Eighth Avenue millionaires, she has that touch of being able to communicate at the level of the person she's talking with. She's not a slap-you-in-back kind of person, but that's because she's genuine and not fake about who she is."

Of course, there are numerous critics, such as Neil Waugh of the Edmonton Sun, who has said that the Liberal leader's policy manual has up to now contained two brief items: "Ralph Klein is a bad man" and "Why can't Nancy be premier?" Waugh has opined that MacBeth's attacks on Klein in the legislature will be fruitless. Alberta has it too good right now, he says, for the population to want change. "Happy times are here again," enthuses Waugh. "Let's see what the Liberals have to match it."

Bill 11. Just the words have become a lightning rod for demarcating the political boundaries of the province. "You know, even just a year ago," says MacBeth, "I was wondering about the nature of our being in opposition. It was hard in some ways. The economy was good. People had jobs. There wasn't any genuine mass discontent over anything. And then Ralph came along with Bill 11. Now people are going to have a real issue to choose on. But that's the funny thing. I don't know why the Klein government chose now. They didn't have to do it now. Not with an election nearing. But they did. And I can't think of a better issue for us to be involved in."

It's a good question. Why is Klein and team choosing now, of all times, to introduce Bill 11? He could have easily coasted through the next year, crowing about debt reduction, getting credit for the recent cash infusions into the system. A spring 2001 election would have seen the Tories still in a position of more or less unassailable power. As Taylor has said, "Oppositions rarely bring governments down; it's usually governments that bring themselves down."

"Right now," says MacBeth, "we have 17 Regional Health Authorities. Some are huge, some are small, but they are all functionally stand-alone, private little fiefdoms. It's gotten to the point now where the Tories are going to allow, through Bill 11, each RHA to set up its own conflict of interest standards. This kind of regionalism is not conducive to consistent health delivery throughout the province. Essentially, the government is trying to have it both ways. They are downloading the responsibility to the RHA boards, so that they have to take the heat, and yet the government still retains the power to appoint the boards. It's sleight of hand and it's dishonest. They have it both ways, by having the power but not the responsibility."

Rich Vivone, a former executive assistant to Education Minister David King, and now the publisher of the respected and non-partisan newsletter Insight Into Government, believes it's possible that Klein, who has always been suggestible to the private-care sympathies of Calgary Regional Health Authority Chair Jim Dinning and CEO Jack Davis, has simply had his legendary political instincts abandon him in the case of Bill 11, much as they did in the Leilani Muir sterilization fiasco (in which his government made an unpopular attempt to limit the amount of damages paid to those wrongfully sterilized by the province before 1972).

If the Liberals are elected, the first thing MacBeth will do is rescind Bill 11, and place a moratorium on further clinics. "Absolutely," she says, nodding her head. "It would be gone, instantly. We'd also need to address post-secondary education right away. Overall, though, we'd try to establish a different tone in the relationship with the people of Alberta. I really believe in the consultative process, and you can say that it's slower, and maybe it is, but it's more inclusive, and we wouldn't be turning a deaf ear."

Of MacBeth and the Liberal opposition, Senator Taylor, in a recent interview from Ottawa, says, "They're not playing dirty. They are preparing themselves to govern, and I think that's the best way for an opposition party to

operate. They're showing Albertans that they're ready to move in and operate efficiently."

"We're getting close," says MacBeth. "Obviously health and education will be things we'll focus on immediately. We need to do some updating and modernizing in this province. Tax reform needs to get going in business and property taxes, not just personal income tax. Municipalities have a lot of issues. There's a lot of stuff out there that we think needs doing, and we're just getting ready to do it right if we're given the chance. Overall, I would say that we wouldn't be able to do what people want all the time, but I can assure you that if we don't, we'll be there and responsible to tell people why."

Rich Vivone has said that "the political story of the coming year (2000) will be Liberal leader Nancy MacBeth." The story will be whether or not she can convince voters to follow her. Vivone believes it's crucial to the state of democracy in the province that MacBeth seriously challenge, and perhaps defeat, the Klein government in the next election. "If she fails," Vivone wrote in December of 1999, "it will be a long time before any political party develops the skills, the credibility, and the profile to challenge the Tories."

Vivone is speaking of the traditional political illness of the democratic process in Alberta: one-party "stampede" voting by successive generations. Many Albertans have expressed dissatisfaction with health and education under the Klein government, says Vivone, but when asked why they continue to support the Tories the answer is always "What's the alternative?"

This is MacBeth's challenge. For all his bluster—"I whupped her once and I'll whup her again!"—Klein is clearly worried about the threat posed by MacBeth. The huge infusions of cash into the system, from a supposedly cost-conscious government, signify the Tories' desire to placate the population in the run-up to an election, not the tactic of a government with no opposition. Even Rod Love, Klein's irascible former tactician, admits to MacBeth's potential. "She's a formidable person," Love said in a recent interview. "We'd be stupid to take her lightly."

MacBeth firmly believes her party has a solid chance in the next election. They have a lead issue on which they believe they are in the right. The lessons of Alberta history show that Albertans vote in generational cycles, indicating the Tories will likely lose sooner than later. The Liberals believe they are carrying the standard of discourse to a higher level than the Tories, and they trust Albertans to recognize that. But questions remain: Will the lightning rod of Bill 11 draw enough spark to carry an election platform along with it? Will the Tories find a way to deflect attention? And, of course, the question remains about MacBeth's leadership. Nick Taylor has said his only doubt about MacBeth's leadership is whether she's "mean" enough to fight a trench war against an opponent willing to do anything to win. MacBeth is firm on that point. "I won't fight an election that way. I truly believe the people of Alberta don't respect that."

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MacBeth wins the Liberal leadership, April 18, 1998.

Considering the Machiavellian, and ruthlessly effective, manner in which she was routed in the 1992 leadership campaign, the question arises: In a booming economy, will MacBeth's considered approach to policy development and her focus on consultative procedural integrity be enough to defeat an opponent proven to use any and all tactics to win?

"Yes, I think so," she says. "But I don't focus on it. If I spent all my time thinking about the eventual outcome, I wouldn't be doing a good job day to day. I think that's how you prepare, by doing a good job day to day. Of course, I may be wrong," she smiles. "But maybe I'm right."

Curtis Gillespie is a regular contributor to *Saturday Night* magazine. His first book, *The Progress of an Object in Motion*, won the Henry Kreisel Award from the Writer's Guild of Alberta and the Danuta Gleed Prize from the Writer's Union of Canada. His second book, *Someone Like That*, has just been released.

A Beginner's Guide to RUNNING

Ever dream of getting elected to provincial office? If so, here's a primer for whipping yourself into fighting form.

BY CLEM MARTINI

The Dream

Everyone has on occasion dreamed of getting elected to provincial office. Like one's visions of running in a marathon, it is a birthright of those living in democratic societies. No matter how dark the night or desperate the times, one can always find some small comfort in the secret notion that one could take up running, either for exercise or for office. The question is, how does one go about exercising this particular right? How does one rid one's self of the paunch of inactivity and indolence, and get into politically fit fighting form?

Could You be a Contender?

So. You've a yearning. You want to make a difference. You've seen the golden dome in Edmonton. It appears to beckon. You believe you can go the distance. The question is . . . do you have what it takes?

First, be comforted by the fact that for a job so weighty in nature, the requirements are not rigorous. To qualify as a candidate one need only have achieved the requisite age—18 years or older—be a Canadian citizen, and have resided in Alberta for the previous six months. All are welcome to run. Previous membership in secret societies, triads or bike gangs will not exclude you—with the exception of membership in those two most dangerous organizations, the House of Commons and the Senate.

There is a preliminary qualifying race for those who are members of a political party. If, however, you intend to run as an independent candidate, you move directly to the main event.

Signing Up

If you phone, fax or send a letter to the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer you will be sent free of charge—one of the few provincial services which have escaped the Fee For Service Plague—a nifty little package containing several pieces of densely constructed literature with titles like "Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act" and "Instructions on the Preparation of Official Receipts," the most critical of which is titled rather unimaginatively "A Guide for Candidates on the Election Act." Simply reading and distilling the truths of these tracts may represent something of a test in itself, but if you manage to navigate your way through the literature, you will have begun. As they say, the first step is the hardest.

Should you then, after perusing the literature, truly decide to throw your hat into the ring, steel yourself. In preparation for the job of MLA, the paperwork begins immediately. One must file the Candidate Nomination Paper with the Receiving Officer before 2 p.m. of the day fixed for the closing of nominations. A candidate must attach a Candidate's Nomination Endorsement Certificate signed by a designated representative of the registered party—unless the candidate is running as an independent. The names and signatures of a minimum of 25 qualified electors from the electoral division are required on the Candidate Nomination Paper. The nominators' signatures must be witnessed by a qualified elector, the witness must complete an affidavit, and—could it be any other way?—a separate form is required for each witness.

"I thought I had a pretty good idea of what it would be like running for election, but I had no idea. It is the most intense 28 days you could imagine."

Training

Certain skills are essential to any competition. If you haven't the lungs or legs to run to the corner store, it is pointless to sign up for the Boston Marathon. What skills, then, are necessary to make a go of it politically? Veterans have their own opinions.

Stamina, suggests Liberal MLA Gary Dickson, is essential. "It's a physical challenge just getting around to all the doors, never mind talking to the media and reading all the literature and staying current with all the issues and debating the other candidates."

Mental toughness, claims former MLA Bob Hawkesworth, is a requirement. "Eventually, you're going to run into the odd person who is cranky at life in general, or you, or your party, and they are going to make this very clear to you when you knock at their door. It takes a real reservoir of psychic energy to dip into so you can continue on your way and get right on to the next door."

Cross Training, suggests Conservative MLA Greg Melchin, adds depth: "Having some experiences in other walks of life adds breadth to your work, and becomes a key ingredient later on."

Strength of lungs, or at least oratorical skills, are necessary, maintains Provincial Liberal Leader Nancy MacBeth: "The first time out, I was terrified of public speaking. Here I was, for the first time, not speaking for someone else. I was the one taking a position. It was an important hurdle for me to get over. Still, it's part of an MLA's job, and luckily it's one of the things you can learn how to do."

Good coaching, MacBeth adds, may be critical: "Find a group of people—three or four, it doesn't have to be large—who will tell you what they actually think, not what you want to hear. They don't even have to be from the same party necessarily. What you want is someone who will be honest with you no matter what."

And finally . . .

Depth of pocket, points out Mr. Dickson, is an oft overlooked component—you need money. It's hard to run a campaign in the city for less than $15,000. Very difficult. And many candidates have spent over four times that amount by the time the race is run.

The Race

Melchin sums up the essential elements of an election rather nicely when he says the job of a political candidate boils down to "three simple tasks: One, identify yourself to the voters; two, identify your bases of support; and three, get your voters out on election day." Sound easy?

Be warned, the actual campaign is only one month long, but it is a long one month. As Dickson notes "I was involved in the Liberal party for some time. I had worked a lot with MLAs. I thought I had a pretty good idea of what it would be like running for election—but I had no idea. It is the most intense 28 days you could imagine."

In a similar vein, MacBeth recalls: "It's too nerve wracking to stay around the campaign office talking. I would just get up and go door knocking each day. It's good exercise, it settles the butterflies in your stomach, and it keeps you in touch with what's going on in your constituency."

Dickson offers this encouragement: "Recognize that you're never working on your own. It requires a lot of people. In my by-election campaign, I had more than 500 volunteers involved. And you have to have some very skilled people to organize those volunteers. I was lucky to have a very organized sister-in-law. And my wife is extremely organized as well."

Approaching the Finish

If you are one of the lucky few to win, prepare yourself. The first months are, by all accounts, something of an adjustment. Dickson, the sole Liberal representative in Calgary, reflects: "You have a whole city to represent. The volume of calls, the number of issues—there is an inexhaustible list of things to do. It's a challenge finding a way to keep your feet on the ground and find balance in your life."

Hawkesworth, remembering his transition, says, "I actually liked the people I was running against in my riding. To me, it always felt like a friendly competition. But once you get to Edmonton you really feel the lines are drawn. The partisanship is imbedded into virtually every meeting."

All the former candidates concur on one point, however. To those agonizing about whether to run or not, they have one message. "Do it," urges MacBeth. "If people are actually interested in public office, they generally know it and I would encourage those people to get active." Adds Hawkesworth, "If in doubt, do it. The more people who offer themselves up to the process—even if they don't win—the better the government is that we all eventually get."

If you lose, try to be gracious, not bitter. Prepare. Eat well. Train. There's always another new day dawning. By law another election must be called within five years, which gives you, potentially, 1,825 days to prepare for the next race. Who knows? Next time, you might just go the distance.

Clem Martini is an award-winning playwright (most recently the WGA Best Play award for *Illegal Entry*) whose mother was a long-time Calgary school board trustee.