

# Moral Compass or Political Antennae

## How our three party leaders find their bearings in an increasingly diverse and secular Alberta

by Larry Johnsrude

If you have ever wondered why Albertans have such a God-fearing tradition, all you have to do is take a drive in the country on a summer day. From your car window, as far as the eye can see, you will witness the rich bounty of fertile fields, sparkling streams and shimmering lakes beneath an afternoon buildup of menacing thunderheads rolling over the plains like huge granite boulders. In a scene that could be plucked from the Old Testament, the prairie skies are poised to rain down Jehovah's vengeance in a fury of hail, lightning and tornado-force winds, as we cowering mortals commit ourselves to lives of righteousness and virtue if only to be spared the Lord's wrath.

There is, of course, more to understanding our province's tradition of piety than sky watching on a summer afternoon. Early immigration patterns set a spiritual tone for a new land that offered freedom from religious persecution for Christian and non-Christian alike. History dictated a religion-based value system, which has had a lot of influence on the way our province is governed and who we choose to govern it.

Like anywhere else, however, ours is a society on the move. As our province becomes more pluralistic, more multicultural and more secular, it shifts from a one-size-fits-all, religion-based moral code to a range of competing and clashing values. Today's Alberta is more complex than when it was governed by the Social Credit party of radio preacher William (Bible Bill) Aberhart and his disciple Ernest Manning, whose quirky blends of evangelical Christianity and unconventional monetary policy defined the values of a generation. The task of divining the values of the Alberta voter has fallen to a new crop of

political leaders whose core values are not tied to their religious beliefs. Instead, the values on which they base their decisions come from a variety of life experiences. Neither do they adhere to any strict political ideology; they are more prone to pick and choose from a buffet of political thought.

But that suits the times. Albertans are not particularly ideological or religious, either. Despite the province's Bible-belt reputation, polls show that we go to church less regularly than most other Canadians. Our prevailing laissez-faire attitude toward abortion, gay rights, video lottery terminals and liberalized liquor laws indicates that we by and large reject the notion of imposing our own morals on our neighbours.

Still, we expect our political leaders to show strong moral direction. We may have drifted away from religion-based values, but we retain a knowledge of right and wrong and a sense of moral fair play, and we expect the same from those who govern us. This moral leadership is becoming more critical as undefined phrases such as "Alberta values" and "family values" are thrown about in debates over gay marriage and the future of the social safety net.

How are our values reflected in Premier Ralph Klein's moral makeup, his values, instincts and motivations? Will we have to pay higher medicare premiums and visit private hospitals in the future? Are programs for senior citizens threatened by his penchant for reducing the size of government?

We can ask the same of Liberal Leader Ken Nicol and New Democrat Leader Raj Pannu. Do the opposition leaders subscribe to values more attuned to our own?



What does Klein mean when he says something is “the right thing to do”? Is it something he believes, or just something he knows the public will buy?

THE THREE LEADERS come from very different backgrounds, which nurtured beliefs that help define their moral character and political values. Klein grew up on the wrong side of the tracks in working class Calgary, Nicol on a farm in southern Alberta, and Pannu in the midst of social upheaval in India. While the leaders’ values are not necessarily opposed, they are different.

Nicol is forthcoming about the core beliefs that underlie his political thinking. The Liberal leader traces his values to the self-reliance and neighbourly spirit that came from growing up on a dairy farm in southern Alberta. Although he was raised in the United Church, religion was secondary to the importance of community and the rewards of hard work. “When I think of Alberta values, I think of a sense of community, a sense of us all being in this together,” he says. “Some people’s values will be different than others. But what is consistent among Albertans is they want good education and a good health care system because it makes us all better.”

New Democrat Leader Pannu, who was raised a Sikh moderate (he doesn’t wear a turban or carry a ceremonial dagger), feels that his values were influenced by witnessing the marginalized, outcast and disenfranchised in his native India being brought into the mainstream. He sees a need for the continuation of this type of social change in his adopted country. “I have a vision for a society where democratic rights are entrenched,” he says. “It’s not enough just to have public education and health care. It has to be responsive to the individual and society as a whole.”

Klein, the only professional politician of the three, is more guarded. He rarely gives interviews, and when he does, he’s not likely to share his inner thoughts. “How do I define ethics personally?” he said recently, during a typically evasive exchange. “That’s between me, myself and God.”

That isn’t to say, however, that Klein doesn’t make value judgments all the time. When his eyes lock onto yours and he says, “It’s the right thing to do,” you cannot doubt his sincerity. He seems to have a picture in his mind of what is fair, reasonable and just, measured against what he often refers to as his “moral compass.”

But it is never clear whether Klein is plumbing his own moral depth or just discerning, with uncanny accuracy, what is morally acceptable to Alberta voters. What does he mean when he says something is “the right thing to do”? Where does this judgment come from? Is it something he believes or just something he knows the public will buy? Is he allowing public opinion to replace his own moral compass? He never says. As a master of public relations, he doesn’t have to. Perception is reality.

For such a public person about whom so much has been written, remarkably little is known about the real Ralph Klein. But a look at his past helps provide some clues. A product of a broken home, Klein grew up in the 1950s, an era when there was still a social stigma attached to divorce. This may explain the derisive remarks he has often repeated about the former Social Credit government and its Christian fundamentalist brand of social conservatism. Despite pressure from the social conservatives in his Tory caucus, he tries to steer government policy away from divisive moral issues such as gay rights and abortion.

No doubt he recognizes that such social issues are a political minefield. But Klein’s own experiences growing up in a socially repressive political culture likely created a genuine divergence in his values from those of social conservatives. A latchkey kid shunted between his mother, father and maternal grandparents, he knows better than most that the family unit is continually evolving. Klein is more tolerant of untraditional lifestyles than many in his Conservative party, and, as a

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result, more sympathetic to gay rights. He stared down the social conservatives in his Tory caucus and carried the day when his government decided against challenging the Supreme Court's *Vriend* decision that extended human rights protections to cover sexual orientation. On the eve of the legislature's Easter break in 1998, he appealed to the Christians in his caucus to "use this holiest time of the year to reflect on what it means to be tolerant." He added, simply, that it was "the right thing to do." Why he draws the line at gay marriage may have more to do with what he believes most Albertans and his Tory colleagues will accept than with his own morals.

Klein's childhood in Calgary's gritty Tuxedo Park neighbourhood gave him a common touch with the poor and the working class. But while his humble beginnings may have made him sympathetic to the plight of the poor, he values individual initiative over collectivism, expounding the virtues of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. He pulled himself out of want and poverty, he reasons, so others should be able to do the same, an attitude that's reflected in his government's tight-fisted welfare reforms and work-for-welfare schemes.

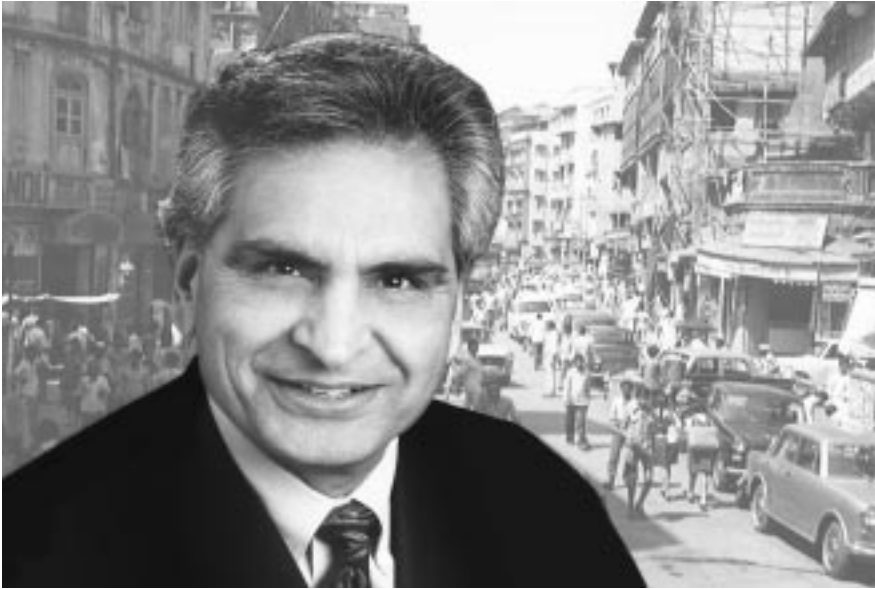
After dropping out of high school for a brief stint in the air force, Klein finished his schooling at a privately run business college. He remains suspicious of universities, viewing them as ivory towers of academia without much everyday use. His government cut funding for universities more severely than for post-secondary technical schools and has been channeling most of its reinvestment in education into engineering and high-tech fields while neglecting the liberal arts. He values institutions of higher learning more for their role in preparing future generations for the workforce than for their pursuit of knowledge. This bias, along with his faith in the free market economy, explains the proliferation of learning

partnerships between the private sector and post-secondary education in Alberta. His government's attitude, which seems to reflect his own, is that the state has minimal responsibility for a student's post-secondary education. It's up to the individual to make it through by hard work and bank debt.

Klein wasn't raised in a particularly religious atmosphere, but he underwent a personal epiphany when, as a CFCN TV reporter covering the Siksika Nation east of Calgary, he adopted Blackfoot religious traditions. He continues to seek comfort and inspiration in a spiritual world that emphasizes harmony with nature, although he won't say to what extent those spiritual beliefs affect his daily decisions.

As a popular television reporter covering Calgary's city hall, Klein became frustrated with downtown development plans in the boom-time 1970s that further marginalized the working poor and disenfranchised. With what he called a "burning in the belly" to challenge the status quo, he pulled off a stunning victory in 1980 to become mayor of Calgary. The classic political outsider, he appealed to Alberta's maverick spirit when he overcame a slate of establishment Conservative candidates in 1992 to win the party leadership and the premier's office.

Because of his humble origins, Klein fits our own image of the self-made Albertan. In short, he's one of us, faults and all. But this is where his portrait as the self-assured man of the people gets a little murky. Despite his much-vaunted ability to read the mood of the average voter, he has come a long way from being one of the common people. While he once said a politician should feel just as comfortable in Calgary's exclusive Ranchmen's Club as in the down-market St. Louis Hotel, he hasn't been spending much time in the St. Louis lately. He has surrounded himself with the wealthiest and most powerful Albertans, and often appears more interested in



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doing their bidding than in acting in the interests of the average citizen. Klein seems to have adopted the mindset that whatever is good for corporate Alberta is good for all Albertans.

More pragmatist than ideologue, Klein pays close attention to popular opinion but has never claimed to be a populist. When public opinion conflicts with his own political will, he's inclined to try to change the public mood through any means available. In 2000, when Albertans were practically rioting on the steps of the legislature over Bill 11, his contentious private health care legislation, his response was to counter the public anger with a taxpayer-funded public relations drive. Although it is debatable whether it really changed the public's mind about private health care, his Conservatives increased their majority in the 2001 general election and picked up seats in Edmonton, the Bill 11 battleground.

Beneath the slick advertising and his televised addresses, it is still unclear what values are driving Klein's health care agenda. While it may have been a matter of economics during the debt crisis and federal funding cuts of the 1990s, the current return to Lougheed-era surpluses has eased fiscal pressures. Klein insists he's not blaming the sick, but he has often said he believes Albertans should share in the financial cost of medicare, which is why he has rebuffed moves—even from within his own caucus—to eliminate medicare premiums.

Klein's belief in a mixed economy likely gives him comfort that there is enough room for private and public health under the same roof, just as he thinks parents should have the right to choose between public and private education for their children. When confronted with the argument that private clinics will erode public medicare, his response seems naive in its simplicity: "Why would we want to destroy the health care system?"

We need it, as do our friends and family."

Perhaps that is Klein's essence. Rather than debate an issue on its merits, he sells the Alberta public on himself and his ability to deal with whatever problem comes along. He shuns opposing viewpoints because that could generate debate, which he would rather avoid. Instead, he prefers to approach public discourse from a position of power, where he holds all the cards, has the biggest advertising budget and can manipulate the media. The ultimate promoter, he sells the sizzle, not the steak.

This doesn't apply only to health care. When polls suggested that seven in 10 Albertans favoured ratifying the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, he launched a costly campaign to swing public opinion against it. Within months, the results reversed: 72 per cent of Albertans opposed the accord. Again, the issue isn't the merits of the initiative itself. The issue is whether Albertans trust their premier to do what is right for them.

Some have characterized Klein as a right wing ideological warrior. But his record shows he is malleable to the prevailing political mood. His first brush with party politics was as a Trudeau Liberal, likely because he felt it suited the mood of the times. He toyed with the idea of running for the Liberals provincially, until he recognized that his best chances for political power lay with the Conservatives. Reading the topsy-turvy political climate of the day, he stole the cost-cutting platform from the Liberals in 1993 and saved the Conservatives from almost certain defeat.

Since then, he has cut spending, reduced the size of government, privatized liquor retailing and registries, deregulated electricity marketing, and cut taxes while hiking health care premiums and other user fees. All of this is consistent with his conservative conversion.

Along the way, Klein's belief in public utility has been lost. As mayor of Calgary, he pushed the city hundreds of

millions of dollars into the red to finance light-rail transit in time for the 1988 Winter Olympics. As premier of Alberta, however, he's reluctant to put money into streets and roads, leaving municipalities to consider toll roads and privately funded bridges.

In the post-deficit era, he has reinvented himself once again, throwing money at his problems, and thereby committing the same sins he has accused others of committing. Although he trumpets open government, he treats Albertans as taxpayers rather than citizens, affording only a fortunate few the opportunity to influence his government's policies. His round tables, summits and standing policy committees tend to be little more than sounding boards for his own ideas and those of his colleagues.

Klein's Conservative government's latest incarnation can best be described as one of drift. Neither right wing nor centrist, and certainly not left wing, its philosophical epicentre seems to shift depending on whatever crisis presents itself. Little thought is given to long-term direction or purpose.

Klein's political opponents seize on this inconsistency as evidence of a lack of political values. "The first two terms were very much small-c conservative, very focused on the business agenda, very focused on the individual and individualism," says Liberal Leader Nicol. "Now, it's hard to see where they are."

NICOL, WHO ENTERED POLITICS OUT OF FRUSTRATION with the construction of the Oldman River dam in southern Alberta, subscribes to a small-l liberal philosophy where the state encourages private initiative but also has a responsibility to provide for the weakest of its citizens. He says this philosophy validates his support of a social safety net that includes public education and health care, and solidifies his belief that the state shouldn't interfere with personal liberties by defining marriage or outlawing abortion.

An economics professor on leave from the University of Lethbridge, Nicol uses an economic model to differentiate himself from the Conservatives. Under his view of economics, intervention is justified if it forces the private market to work for the betterment of society rather than just the wealthy. He argues that the Conservatives' hands-off approach to the free market fails those it is supposed to serve. "This government has time and again told Albertans they are committed to the value of the output of the province, not necessarily the people of this province," he says. "In other words, the growth in our output isn't being distributed to the income-earners, whose income is falling behind; it is going to the wealth-owners."

New Democrat Leader Pannu, a retired professor of sociology from the University of Alberta, is suspicious of both the Liberal and the Conservative models. He believes that the free market is at odds with the people it is meant to serve unless it is reined in by strict democratic controls. "As a sociologist, I see democracy and mar-

kets as competing forces," he says. "Markets are about competition, becoming bigger and stronger. They represent a lot of power. At many times, market forces treat democratic rights in an antagonistic manner."

As a social democrat, Pannu believes individuals should have democratic control over the functioning of their economic and social institutions. While a socialist would argue that all businesses should be state-owned, Pannu accepts private ownership but thinks institutions should be controlled by the people they serve. His belief in individual empowerment of the average citizen underlies his support for abortion rights, gay marriage and the right to public health care and education. He says he entered politics because he saw the Conservatives acting in the interests of business to the detriment of citizens.

Being in relatively small opposition parties affords both Nicol and Pannu the luxury of consistent and firm political values. In government, the game is different. Compromise is the order of the day. Reconciling seemingly incompatible interests is more difficult because there are more interests to be served. To his credit, Ralph

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Klein has been extremely good at this. He has been able to control a Conservative party that includes people with a range of values, including social conservatives and social liberals, pro-lifers and pro-choicers, supporters of public education and advocates for private schools. By nature, a big-tent governing party is more reflective of the diverse opinions and values of the population than small opposition parties are. Public opinion polls suggest that a majority of Albertans approve of what Klein is doing. While that may not prove that Albertans share his values, it is an indication that he is still good at gauging the values of Albertans.

But Klein's talent for reading and responding to public opinion raises questions about the moral direction of his government. Nicol characterizes it as a rudderless administration lacking in vision. "He is able to respond very quickly to a change in public opinion," he says. "But when the premier says 'it's the right thing to do,' is it the right thing for today or for the future? There is a real discrepancy."

Pannu fears he is trading his sense of values for short-term popularity. "I have great respect for his political antennae," he says. "He is extremely able to read the public mood. But when one does that too much, you tend to lose the benefit of the moral compass inside you. You lose judgment. You make decisions that reflect a slippage into amorality."

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