Vivone's View

The closer Liberals are to Albertans, the more appealing they become

Few would dispute that Liberals are despised in Alberta. Our media is dominated by anti-liberal rhetoric. Radio talk programs are venomous. Provincial politicians regularly rant against the Liberal government in Ottawa. There is sporadic talk of separation for no reason other than displeasure with the federal Liberals.

Ironically, the fact is Liberals running for provincial office don't do badly at the polls—since 1989, they've drawn between 27 and 39 per cent of the popular vote (the numbers are somewhat misleading because most of the vote is in one city, Edmonton).

The provincial Liberals did their best—39 per cent—in 1993 under Decore, a fiscal conservative who copied whole swaths of the Reform Party platform. But even under the much more liberal Grant Mitchell in 1997, the Liberals still won 33 per cent of the popular vote.

When party politics are forgotten, Albertans drop even more of their anti-liberal bias. It seems that the closer liberals are to the voter and to the community, the more appealing they become.

Liberals running for municipal office, for instance, do quite well. Over the last 20 years, the mayors of Calgary, the bastion of anti-liberalism in the West, have all been Liberals. Yes, Ralph Klein was a Liberal when he was mayor in the 1980s. Al Duerr, a Liberal, was as popular as Klein. Current mayor David Bronconnier is a Liberal as well.

The mayor of Medicine Hat is a Liberal. The mayor of Claresholm is a Liberal and is also president of the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association. The mayor of Drayton Valley is a Liberal. Municipal councils and school boards are sprinkled with Liberals. The president of the Alberta Teachers' Association is a Liberal. The president of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees is closer to the Liberals than to the New Democrats.

Many of these people, some elected to local public office, ran federally or provincially, but couldn't win. It would appear their local popularity counted for little once their ambition grew larger. The farther Liberals get from Alberta—and the closer to Ottawa— the easier it is to despise them (except, it seems, Anne McLellan).

When did this selective hatred of federal Liberal politicians begin? The 1930s perhaps. Bible Bill Aberhart's incompetent Social Crediters won re-election partly by blaming the federal Liberals for striking down their screwy economic policies. Railing at interference from Ottawa to distract from his disastrous record, Aberhart won an election in 1940 that he didn't deserve.

In the early 1980s, Pierre Trudeau was reviled in Alberta for the National Energy Program. Albertans saw the NEP as a federal attack on a valuable resource owned exclusively by the province.

Anti-Trudeauism crossed all boundaries. Even respected Albertans paid for their association with Trudeau. Alberta MP Jack Horner was an extremely popular Conservative—until he crossed the floor to join Trudeau's Liberals in 1977. He was hammered in the 1979 election. Nothing personal; pure politics.

The anti-Liberal dogma still works today. Merely mention the National Energy Program and Albertans turn ugly.

Provincial politicians know this and take full advantage. When in trouble over his domestic policies, Premier Ralph Klein need only mention the federal government to distract Albertans—and it always works. In the 1993 provincial election, Klein tried to associate provincial Liberal leader Laurence Decore with the federal party that created the NEP. No one can say for certain how much this tactic had to do with Klein's surprising victory, but the fact is he won an election now remembered as "the miracle on the prairies."

The gun registry, gay marriage, the Kyoto Protocol, the Wheat Board, the perceived Liberal preoccupation with Quebec, equalization payments—there seems to be no end to reasons to despise Liberals.

Unless, of course, they stay close to home.

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