



Premier Rachel Notley at the swearing-in of her cabinet on the steps of the Alberta Legislature on May 24. A new day for Alberta. Flickr photo, Connor Mah

Alberta After the Political Earthquake

Robin V. Sears

On May 5, Alberta voters decisively swung the province from the predictable outcomes of more than four decades of Conservative rule to a stunning New Democratic victory. Losing the election wasn't easy for Jim Prentice and governing won't be easy for Rachel Notley. But, as veteran NDP strategist and policy sage Robin Sears writes, the Notley premiership is poised to shake things up in Alberta and beyond.

In an era when polls as election predictors are less reliable than weather forecasts, Rachel Notley and her team were wise to resist even private predictions of election victory. After all, many public polls had the last two Alberta election results badly wrong. Her senior communications guru, Brian Topp, had watched in horror as British Columbia voters made fools of the pollsters in that province in 2014.

Still, they could be forgiven the small private smiles they permitted each other on the final weekend, as one poll after another made unanimous the consensus that devastation was ahead for the oldest one-party government in any developed democracy in the G7.

It is already hard to remember the sense of inevitability that surrounded the Prentice government's future success only months ago. The new premier had landed in the midst of the mess created by the implosion of the Alison Redford government. He came with apparent confidence, vision and a clear game plan. He imported seasoned players from Ottawa and elsewhere to help rebuild and renew the wheezing 44 year-old Alberta Conservative regime.

But he and his advisers forgot one essential truth: Canadian voters only return governments that old with some frustration, and only when two things are true—the alternatives are hopeless, and the old guys demonstrate that have the ability to deliver a new vision. Rachel Notley was immediately obvious as a very serious challenger and the Prentice vision got old quickly. The Alberta Tories saw a nasty fall and winter ahead as oil and commodity prices tanked and then decided prudence dictated they get a new mandate before the roof fell in on the economy. Seasoned pundits muttered approvingly of the strategic wisdom of a spring election.

There is another axiom political veterans are fond of: "When the wheels begin to fall off, they all fall off, one after another." The Prentice juggernaut's wheels began to get wobbly early on, but it was not obvious until much later. A new leader of an aging party in power always needs to perform a very delicate piece of political jujitsu—he must signal that they are new, and the past is past, without appearing to trash the *ancien regime*. However enthusiastic your core activists are about you and your promise of renewal, they resent suggestions that they were dummies to have been supporters of the previous gang.



Conservative Leader Jim Prentice and NDP Leader Rachel Notley at the leaders' debate which produced a defining sound bite when Prentice told her: "I know math is difficult." PC Alberta Facebook photo

Sadly, Prentice failed this test as well, saying that not only was he expert on the mistakes that had lead Alberta to its current sad state, but it was not *his* fault, it was...yours. His "look in the mirror" line in March was a stunning example of someone who had been away from the hard discipline of politics and campaigning for too long.

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Two strategic blunders of magnificent scale put paid to a smooth path to re-election. The first was the sleazy game of wholesale floor crossing he engineered with Wildrose Leader Danielle Smith last December and the second was a bizarrely tone-deaf budget in late March completely at variance with the pre-budget signals he had been carefully seeding weeks in advance.

When Smith and eight of her Wildrose colleagues “took the Queen’s shilling”—just weeks after they had been passionately excoriating the Alberta Conservatives in a series of by-elections—the province collectively gasped at the effrontery of both the turncoats and their new patron.

Then there was a budget that had been teased for weeks as being tough on spending and likely to require some hard choices. Instead, it offered \$7 billion in deficit spending despite new fees and taxes, and little coherent messaging about how the government would dig itself out of the deepening oil revenue hole. It was dead on arrival.

A friend and worried adviser of the premier’s, reflecting on these missteps on the eve of the election call, asked gently if Prentice felt that his “skates were sharp enough” for the tough game ahead. It was a prescient caution. It was seven years since Prentice had fought an election. He had rarely fought a competitive campaign in his life. His friend was of an age to recall John Turner’s shooting star return to politics and saw some of the same rusty performance risks.

The TV debate was proof of the adviser’s wisdom.

Harried and verbally outpointed by

Notley almost from the opening minute, in response to his opponent's attack on his tax revenue claims Prentice said with clear exasperation, "I know math is difficult...." It was a John Turner moment: patronizing, sexist and proof of serious political rust. To make matters worse, Prentice was factually—and mathematically—wrong.

The poll numbers began to swing heavily against the Conservatives and their response got increasingly erratic and vicious. A ham-fisted attempt to scare Alberta voters with horror stories from other Canadians' experience of NDP governments blew up in the Tories' faces when the Orange team's war room deluged social media with happy memories of New Democrat achievements from several provinces. Election night was one of those defeats that looked inevitable by the morning after, but was nonetheless stunning on the night.

Notley has inherited a somewhat poisoned political chalice. If oil prices were still happily at \$100 heights, she would have still have faced the legacy of decades of fudged and avoided problems. Alberta has Canada's most centralized, rigid and expensive health system. It has a school and university sector whose budgets have grown faster for longer than any in Canada. Despite efforts in the good years to diversify, its economy remains critically dependent on oil and gas revenues, which account for more than 22 per cent of provincial GDP.

The Notley government has, however, been granted responsibility for the public fisc at a time when oil and gas revenues will have fallen by nearly half in a matter of months. Notley came to power on a political tidal wave. Sadly for her young and green young cabinet colleagues, they arrived after an economic tidal wave had wrecked the provincial economy. As that economic tide continues to recede, it will reveal to just what degree infrastructure was poorly managed in the good years.

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Unless international oil markets rise dramatically, it will be a grim Year One ahead for Alberta and the new government. This is not a challenge that New Democrats have not faced before. With the exception of the Rae government in Ontario, their record of facing bad times coolly and with discipline is pretty good. Tommy Douglas turned Saskatchewan back from bankruptcy, Roy Romanow had almost as bad a deficit mess handed to him on election night and performed with similar discipline—with Brian Topp at his side, as he is at Notley's now as head of the premier's office—but not without serious political pain along the way.

The heart of the wickedly challenging balancing act a government must perform when its revenues are sliding and the weak economy is pushing up social costs at the same time is how much to cut without pushing the economy down even faster. Borrowing heavily and pushing stimulus spending to put a brake on the decline is a huge gamble. The Harper government was lucky in its stimulus spending gamble, as revenues climbed back quickly. The Rae government was clobbered when theirs didn't.

An additional challenge for the Notley team is that you would need to be nearing retirement age to remember the last time—more than 30 years ago—that the Alberta economy had to struggle with a similar sideswipe by global energy prices.

If your whole life experience is that this year will outperform the last one, the dramatic shift to managing decline can be paralyzing. It will take very adroit political management to help Alberta's hospital managers, school boards and municipal leaders

understand that they will need to do more with less.

However, the new government has several very powerful assets. First is the reservoir of good will, one of unusual depth, even for a massively elected new government. Alberta voters in every community, every social class and generation voted for Rachel Notley. They remain deeply angry at the Tory legacy and they want her to succeed. They are keenly aware of the economic challenges ahead and want confident, optimistic leadership to plot the path back to happier times. But as every politician discovers sooner than they can imagine, political honeymoons are always short and often end abruptly.

Notley has another asset that is almost unheard of in Canadian politics: She owes no one anything. This is her victory; not the party's, not the labour movement's, not local party organizers. Yes, courtesy and convention require that she never say that. Publicly the victory must be a collective achievement.

Her government's launch was flawless—a celebratory picnic introducing a small, 12-member cabinet. She is importing real talent from everywhere in the province and across Canada to beef up the ranks of the bureaucracy and ministers' offices. Her sunny style has wrong-footed the few provincial business and political leaders foolish enough to grumble publicly about the new government's plans.

Her role beyond Alberta will get very big very quickly, however, even as she struggles to get a grip on managing Canada's third largest provincial economy. In July, the premiers are committed to delivering on a prom-

ised national energy strategy. Alberta will be a crucial hinge vote in how far they collectively go on climate change, carbon pricing, and national co-operation. That decision, and the sales efforts the premiers will collectively make to defend it against Ottawa's very different vision will also feature the new Alberta premier.

Within weeks after that will come the federal election, during which New Democrats federally will look to their new star for support as they launch their first serious attempt at winning nationally.

And again, with a break of only weeks, Alberta will need to decide what role to play in the Paris meetings of world leaders seeking a consensus on climate change. She and her fellow premiers may be accompanying a new Canadian prime minister, himself with only weeks on the job. It is a mind boggling set of cross-pressures for any

government, let alone one on a steep learning curve about how to govern, struggling to shore up a flailing economy, and joining a set of discussions when their partners are already well on their way to decision.

But it would be unwise to bet against this improbable Alberta premier.

She has had an excellent formation for the role—the daughter of Alberta's pioneering NDP leader, Grant Notley, whom she watched battle the odds for years to establish his place in the province's history. The child of a strong, socially, politically and intellectually confident mom, Notley was immersed in the political debates and social currents swirling across Alberta as a young girl. A lawyer with a strong reputation as a negotiator and experience in government as a young official in B.C., her career has prepped her well for the challenges of political leadership.

Alberta voters saw and were clearly taken by the compelling smile and a sunny confidence Notley brings to every stage. It's an optimism grown out of beating adversity, not out of vanity; out of a lifetime of meeting and overcoming challenges, not innocence.

As leaders similarly endowed—Tommy Douglas, Ronald Reagan, Peter Lougheed—knew well, that kind of serenity grounded in the confidence of tough life experience will help get you through many a political storm, and can serve as the foundation of a long and successful career. **P**

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