



Rachel Notley's victory in the Alberta election in May unleashed powerful forces of change, though ultimately not the ones the NDP benefited from at the outset of the campaign. Flickr photo

## The Prairies: Notley Victory Unleashed Forces of Change

Dale Eisler

*The balance of partisan leadership among Canadian provinces and between their capitals and Ottawa has a cause-and-effect life of its own, like a political Calder mobile. That perpetual dance of probabilities was disrupted in May when Rachel Notley dispatched Alberta's hegemonic Conservative Party after more than 40 years of rule. It presaged the national mood for change that drove a campaign in which premiers were major players.*

It was the first clear signal that a powerful mood for change was stirring in Canada. On May 5, when the Alberta's NDP's Rachel Notley swept to power with a majority government, toppling more than four decades of rule by the Progressive Conservatives, Canadian politics seemed to have become unhinged.

With the countdown on to a federal election, it immediately breathed life into the hopes of Tom Mulcair and the

federal New Democrats. If the mighty PCs could be thrown from office in Alberta by the NDP in the very homeland of today's federal Conservative party, anything was possible. And, for a time, it seemed true. For much of the 11-week federal campaign, the NDP gathered strength and were leading many of the polls.

Ultimately though, it was Justin Trudeau and the Liberals who reaped the rewards of the shock waves out of Alberta. It was the Trudeau Liberals who positioned themselves as the agents of change in an election that was a referendum on the status quo. So rather than serve as a validation federally for the NDP, Alberta merely signalled to the rest of Canada that dramatic change was indeed possible. And we saw the results with the Trudeau Liberals' stunning majority victory on October 19, one that left the NDP crushed and the Conservatives facing years in opposition and the search for a new leader to replace Stephen Harper.

As people sift through the entrails of the campaign and its results, the impact of provincial politics on the outcome cannot be discounted. The clearest and most compelling evidence came from Ontario, where Premier Kathleen Wynne played a central role in the Liberal campaign and the party's stunning resurgence in that vote-rich province, which was key to a Liberal majority. An avowed and very public supporter of Trudeau, Premier Wynne made it perfectly clear whom she wanted as prime minister, campaigning with Trudeau and advocating for his policies. She was repaying the support she received from Trudeau during her own 2014 provincial election campaign.

**T**he flash point in Wynne's clash with Harper was his refusal to work with the Ontario government's plan for a provincial pension scheme. He called it just another tax on hard-working people. In response, Wynne said rather curtly: "Only the truly shortsighted could look at a pension con-

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tribution and describe it as a tax.”

But if the mood for change was given a shot of adrenalin by the Alberta election, in the final analysis the Prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba played a less pivotal role in the Liberal breakthrough nationally. In fact, the Liberal tide that was rolling west out of Ontario lost a great deal of momentum when it hit rural Manitoba, almost stalled completely in Saskatchewan and revived slightly in Alberta, a Liberal wasteland since the days of Pierre Trudeau's National Energy Program.

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wins, two by very narrow margins, the rest of the province's 10 ridings remained a Conservative fortress.

In Alberta, where change no longer seemed radical, the Liberals managed a breakthrough in Calgary, winning two seats, and two in Edmonton. The NDP managed only to retain its lone Edmonton riding. The rest of Alberta remained staunchly Conservative, oblivious to the national trend.

So what explains the unique results in the Prairies? Among the key factors was the impact of provincial and even municipal politics on the federal vote. Although none of the three premiers injected themselves into the partisan debate like Wynne, each were factors based on their unique circumstances.

It is no secret that Manitoba NDP Premier Greg Selinger is facing an uphill struggle as he heads to a provincial election next year. The NDP has been in power for 16 years in Manitoba and the mood for change seems evident. A year ago, Selinger faced a rebellion of five members of his own cabinet who believed he was past his best-before date, reflected in an approval rating earlier this year of 23 per cent, the lowest among all premiers.

Not surprisingly, Selinger kept a low profile in the federal NDP campaign. But ultimately, the Liberal momentum and the provincial hangover took its toll on the NDP. The agent of change in Manitoba, where the provincial NDP is viewed as a long-in-the-tooth political establishment, became the federal Liberals. The most telling evidence came in Winnipeg Centre, a traditional NDP stronghold, where NDP incumbent

Pat Martin was crushed by more than 9,000 votes by the Liberals Robert-Falcon Ouellette.

**T**he provincial dynamic in Saskatchewan differed dramatically. In a province where conservative-minded Premier Brad Wall has held the highest approval rating among premiers for several years, the westward Liberal momentum stalled. While the party was able to increase its popular vote to a respectable 24 per cent across the province, it was enough to produce only Goodale's re-election in Regina with more than 55 per cent of the vote.

For his part, Wall played a cautious, but not insignificant role in the federal campaign. He made three interventions, first to call for a change to the equalization formula. His argument is that provinces producing hydro power receive higher equalization payments because the national formula does not account for revenue from hydro-power generation, as it does from non-renewable resources such as oil and gas. Wall's effort got little traction in the federal campaign, but is a message that plays well to his provincial audience.

Premier Wall also sent letters asking the three federal leaders to state their positions on pipeline projects, genetically modified crops and equalization. Their responses were non-committal, which Wall called "disappointing."

"They all say the same thing, unfortunately, which is basically kind of a punt back to the provinces," Wall said. "I can kind of understand that, except the challenge there is that if we don't have federal leadership on equalization, we're never going to see reform. It won't come at the provincial level because the views are so disparate; the interests are so different at the provincial table."

Finally, Wall expressed his support for the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement signed in the midst of the campaign. He argued the TPP would bring significant benefits to a commodity-exporting province

like Saskatchewan, and ultimately led to him endorsing the federal Conservatives as the best economic choice for the province.

Some believe the nod to the Conservatives was a strategic move by Wall, who is being touted by many as a possible successor to Harper. It is an idea with roots stretching back almost two years when Wall, along with Jason Kenney and Jim Prentice—prior to his ill-fated venture into Alberta politics—was among the keynote speakers at the annual Manning Centre for Democracy Conference in Ottawa. The event, which brings together key Conservatives from across Canada, is considered a must-attend event for anyone with serious ambitions. Wall's appearance was seen as a first step in testing the federal Conservative leadership waters with other potential aspirants.

But Wall, who some suggest has been quietly studying French, denies any such interest. He faces a provincial election next April and when asked the day after the October 19 election if he "absolutely rules out the possibility" of seeking the Conservative leadership, he answered: "correct." Clearly, timing of the provincial election would make a move by Wall into federal politics extremely difficult.

In Alberta, the biggest influence on the modest but still significant Liberal breakthrough in Calgary and Edmonton rests not in provincial, but municipal politics. As Alberta's economy struggles through the wrenching effects of low oil prices, the Notley government can take little comfort in the federal results where the NDP popular vote came in at a miserable 11.6 per cent, far behind the Conservatives at almost 60 per cent, and significantly lagging the Liberals at 25 per cent. There is scant evidence the provincial NDP surge of last May created any positive effects federally for the party and, judging by the federal result, the Conservative vote has again solidified in large swaths of the province since the provincial results of last May.

A bigger factor in the Liberal urban

rebirth in Alberta was popular Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi, the son of immigrants, who thrust himself into the midst of both the refugee and niqab debates. Accusing the federal Conservatives of running a campaign of fear, Nenshi said he was not a fan of the niqab, but also believed the government of Canada should not be telling people what to wear. It was an intervention that led to a very public war of words with Jason Kenney. Moreover, Nenshi's withering criticism of Canada's response to the flood of Syrian refugees also clearly struck a chord with many Alberta voters. Not surprisingly, both Trudeau and Mulcair made sure during campaign visits to Calgary that they were seen with Nenshi.

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So, in the end, the lesson is a familiar one. There is no more powerful force in politics than the mood for a change in government. Once it takes root, it becomes self-fulfilling and finds energy in the idea itself. All that's left to decide is who can tap it electorally. We got that answer emphatically on October 19. **P**

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