



Premier Brad Wall won re-election in a walk with his Saskatchewan Party taking 51 out of 61 seats in the legislature and 62 per cent of the popular vote. Flickr photo

Saskatchewan's Seinfeldian Campaign

HOW BRAD WALL WON A CAMPAIGN ABOUT NOTHING

Dale Eisler

The Saskatchewan election campaign was a study in lack of contrast. Running for and winning his third majority, Premier Brad Wall pre-empted the change question and defused the devil-you-know cliché with the power of personality in a place that likes his type.

In the rich political history of Saskatchewan, the re-election of Brad Wall and his Saskatchewan Party to a third majority government on April 4 surely ranks as one of the most predictable and, in many ways, most impressive developments. Where it doesn't measure up as memorable is in terms of drama and the clash of big, visionary ideas.

Still, the fact that the result surprised no one, given polls that consistently showed a huge lead in for the Saskatchewan Party, doesn't diminish the significance or scale of Wall's overwhelming election to a third majority govern-

ment. Wall and the Saskatchewan Party steamrolled the Opposition New Democratic Party, winning 51 of 61 seats and more than 62 per cent of the vote. Among the NDP roadkill was party leader Cam Broten, which plunged the NDP into an immediate existential crisis. Often considered the province's natural governing party, the Saskatchewan NDP has never in its history found itself in such a precarious and vulnerable state.

But even acknowledging the scale of Wall's electoral achievement, the campaign still had the feel of an empty vessel. One couldn't help but get the sense that all concerned were going through the motions towards an inevitable outcome. It was an election without character, even purpose. One of those events when you're left asking: What was all that about? The short answer is apparently not much, other than voters were comfortable with Wall and his government, and in no mood for a change. For the Saskatchewan Party in search of its third majority, it doesn't get any better than an election without a defining issue to motivate the public. It hasn't often been this way.

Through the decades, Saskatchewan has carved out an identity as a province where elections are often fought over conflicting opinions about fundamental policy approaches. It began with the election of North America's first democratic socialist government in 1944. What followed were electoral waves defined by the yin and yang of left-right ideological clashes. There was the introduction of universal, publicly funded Medicare in 1962, followed by a dramatic swing to free enterprise and private investment; then a period of nationalization of natural resource development; then a pendulum swing to a wave of privatizations, followed by financial consolidation and health care reform.

Since being first elected in 2007, Wall has avoided the ideological traps that polarized the electoral choices of the past. His Saskatchewan Party government is a coalition of former provincial Progressive Con-

“ Even acknowledging the scale of Wall's electoral achievement, the campaign still had the feel of an empty vessel. One couldn't help but get the sense that all concerned were going through the motions towards an inevitable outcome. It was an election without character, even purpose. ”

servatives and Liberals. While clearly positioned as centre-right on the province's political spectrum, in government Wall has largely steered a pragmatic course. The result has been that no defining issues have emerged to either ignite the anxiety of voters or arm the NDP with serious weapons to attack Wall's government.

“ Wall has avoided the ideological traps that polarized the electoral choices of the past. His Saskatchewan Party government is a coalition of former provincial Progressive Conservatives and Liberals. ”

Coupled with that has been, for the most part, economic good fortune for Saskatchewan during the past decade. A diverse natural resource base and strong global demand for the province's commodities have amounted to a growing economy, low unemployment and a period of steady population growth. All of that has allowed Wall a narrative of growth and progress, which was the foundation for his re-election. The core theme of the Saskatchewan Party platform was “Keep Saskatchewan Strong.”

Wall is in many ways the quintessential prairie populist. He combines his pragmatic instincts with great strength as a communicator who speaks the language of average people. When you add the fact that he inherited from the previous NDP government an economy in the early stages of its boom, it has been a pow-

erful political combination. So potent that over the years Wall has consistently ranked as the most popular premier in Canada.

Not surprisingly then, for the Opposition New Democrats and Broten, the campaign was an uphill struggle. Only three years into his leadership, Broten more than matched Wall in terms of youth, and certainly represented a fresh face and generational change for the New Democrats. But his lower visibility and name recognition put him at a distinct disadvantage against a Premier with a national profile.

The NDP campaign focused largely on what it described as the distorted priorities and fiscal mismanagement of the Wall government. Broten argued the Wall government had squandered resource wealth during the good times, and now, in a period of low oil and commodity prices, was mired in an operating deficit projected to be more than \$500 million. But the precise state of the province's finances was unclear. The government refused to table a budget before the election even though the end of the province's fiscal year was March 31.

To buttress its argument, the NDP reeled off a litany of misdeeds and misspending. It argued the Wall government had burned through a \$1.5 billion rainy day fund it inherited from the NDP. It pointed to a controversy over a complex series of questionable land assembly transactions at the government-owned Global Transportation Hub (GTH) that erupted shortly before the campaign. According to CBC investigative reports, local land owners sold their land to a private investor from Alberta at below market prices, who quickly sold the property

for a multi-million dollar profit to local investor, who then sold it to the GTH at three times the value of the government's own estimates. The NDP also attacked the government for "wasting" taxpayers' dollars, from \$50 million on consultants for cost-cutting in healthcare that was of little value, to \$1.5 billion on a carbon capture initiative with uncertain results.

For the Saskatchewan Party, the counter-narrative was simple and effective, even if it was backward looking and lacked new horizons to conquer. The ballot question, Wall argued, was whether Saskatchewan should continue on its path of growth, or return to the bad old days of NDP government when the province was best known as an exporter of young people to neighbouring Alberta. Even with an economic slowdown driven largely by a collapse in oil prices, Saskatchewan was not facing the full impact of the consequences playing out in "NDP Alberta". A more

diverse resource base—oil, potash, uranium—and a solid agriculture sector had blunted some of the effects of the collapse in oil price on Saskatchewan. What voters sought in uncertain economic times was to take refuge with a tested political hand. Brad Wall fit the mood like a glove, asking voters rhetorically throughout the campaign who they trusted to manage the economy through turbulent times. On election night, the answer could not have been clearer.

What is less certain is the long-term future of the premier himself. There has been persistent speculation that in a year's time, Wall will let his name stand for the leadership of the federal Conservative Party and has been quietly taking French lessons. Wall dismisses the rumours, saying he already has the best job in Canada and has no interest in taking the plunge into federal politics. Perhaps, but people can't help but notice that in recent years, Wall has raised his

national profile, particularly on issues of energy and equalization. Given his most recent political conquest, the idea of Wall looking for a larger stage is not likely to fade away anytime soon.

But when the inevitable does come, and Wall decides it's time to leave, one thing is certain. In almost every respect, Brad Wall is the Saskatchewan Party brand. So much so, that for many of its supporters it's hard for them to imagine the party without him. Not surprisingly then, they prefer to believe him when he insists that he's not going anywhere soon. **P**

Dale Eisler, a senior Policy Fellow with the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Regina, is a former assistant deputy minister with the Government of Canada, the author of three books and a former journalist.

dale.eisler@uregina.ca

Propane

Low-Emission. Versatile. Canadian.

Propane is a vital energy source for Canada's industrial, transportation, agricultural and residential sectors.



It is an essential clean-burning alternative to oil and diesel for rural and remote communities.



It is a key part of Canada's energy future – not only because it is a 100% domestic natural resource. It supports tens of thousands of Canadian jobs and contributes billions of dollars to the Canadian economy every year.



It provides a low-emission ride for school buses & government fleets, and is the most popular alternative vehicle fuel worldwide.



Recognized for its low environmental impact by the Alternative Fuels Act, propane is one of the cleanest and most versatile fuels in existence.

Propane | Canada's Smart Energy Solution
www.propane.ca



Canadian
Propane
Association
 Association
canadienne
du propane