



A piper at the beginning of the state memorial for Jim Prentice in Calgary on October 28. Three former prime ministers attended, as did five sitting provincial premiers. Photo courtesy Government of Alberta Protocol Office

# Jim Prentice: A Deputy Minister's Appreciation

Richard Dicerni

On September 15, 2014 Jim Prentice was sworn in as Alberta's 16th premier. The previous year, in a convocation address to the graduating class at the Alberta School of Business, he had urged the students to be bold. "Serve your community and your country," he had said. "Make your family and your nation proud." He had taken his own advice and returned to public service.

In the weeks preceding his swearing in, he had reached out to me asking if I would consider the post of deputy minister of the Executive Council of Alberta. After a few discussions, I accepted.

Thus began the renewal of a politician-bureaucrat relationship that had been established when I was his deputy minister at Industry Canada in 2007.

In one of our early meetings in the fall of 2014, he set out his major objectives for the province: the need to ensure meaningful sustainable development; the priority of getting product to tidewater; the importance of forging on a number of fronts a new relationship with the First Nations and the goal of economic diversification. We discussed in particular his objective of rebuilding a public service that had become demoralized and less effective than it could be. He referenced

the Lougheed years, during which the senior echelons of the Alberta government were meaningful partners with the body politic and were thought leaders in public policy across the country. He emphasized that he wanted a professional public service where truth could be spoken to power without fear of retribution or permanent career damage. One of his first actions as premier was to communicate this vision directly to the top 250 officials of the government.

Looking back, I always thought Jim Prentice would have been a superb deputy minister and, on some days, he may have preferred it to the job of minister or premier.

But he had chosen a different path—a more difficult and more demanding one. He wanted to contribute to the public good of his province and his country; he wanted to make a difference in the lives and hopes of people; he wanted to leave a legacy of which people would say, “He has improved on what he inherited”. He had chosen to be a politician.

Few Canadians appreciate how demanding and taxing the life of a political leader is. Few Canadians are aware of the number of birthday parties or special anniversaries that get missed, the number of family vacations that get messed up because “duty calls”. Few Canadians have a sense of the toll that political life takes on spouses and children of political leaders. Few Canadians understand the physical hardships involved in flying and or driving the five, six or more hours it takes to get to the riding from Ottawa. Political life has many rewards but it also has significant demands and travails.

Fortunately, Jim Prentice was always supported—personally and professionally—by Karen, without whom he could not have pursued his goals and his dreams. She was his best friend, his wife, his partner and the love of his life. Senior leadership positions in public service often extract more in the short term than they give back. In order to be successful and to survive in public life, one needs to be in love and loved. Jim and Karen Prentice were.

Jim Prentice, between January 2006 and November 2010, held three senior ministerial portfolios: he was minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, minister of Industry and minister of the Environment. Michael Wernick, who was Jim’s deputy minister at INAC and who is now clerk of the Privy Council, summed it up best in a note he sent to all federal public servants upon learning of the tragic death of his former boss:

“He was the kind of Minister public servants love to work for—smart, tough-minded, decisive and unfailingly respectful and warm in his interactions with us.”

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His first cabinet assignment was Indian and Northern Affairs. The early days were turbulent, dominated by the crisis at Caledonia, Ontario, and the repercussions of the government’s decision not to implement the Kelowna Accord. Michael Wernick, his former deputy minister, recalls that Prentice was determined to tackle the legacy of history that was impeding a new relationship and brighter future with First Nations. He persuaded his cabinet colleagues to implement the tentative agreement to end the class actions by former students of residential schools. He secured cabinet approval for what became the Specific Claims Tribunal to bring resolution to hundreds of historic grievances around moneys and lands. He intro-

duced legislation to give First Nations individuals, particularly those living on reserve, access to the full protections of the Canadian Human Rights Act and launched consultations that ultimately led to legislation that gave First Nations women, for the first time, strong legal protection of their matrimonial property rights. Starting with a very early appearance at the 2006 Assembly of First Nations convention, he quickly earned respect as a candid and respectful interlocutor, who was determined to find common ground and put the country on a path to healing and progress.

In August 2007, he was appointed minister of Industry, where he worked with the captains of industry, especially in the aerospace and automobile sectors, to enhance Canada’s industrial footprint. He launched the first-ever auction for cell phone spectrum with a view to enhancing choice for consumers. He was the first minister to use section 20 of the Investment Canada Act to reject a proposed foreign acquisition of a major Canadian company because he did not believe it met the net benefit test. He was a champion of industry but also a defender of consumers.

In the fall of 2008, he was moved to the Environment portfolio. Even though he was disappointed at leaving Industry, given the key linkages he had established and the challenges facing Canada in the midst of the Great Recession, he took on his new portfolio with focus and determination. He challenged his deputy, Paul Boothe, to do what was necessary “to make Environment Canada a world class regulator”. During his time at Environment Canada, he initiated a national policy to phase out coal-fired electricity plants, led a federal-provincial approach to improve the treatment of waste water, and significantly expanded the national



Jim and Karen Prentice with their three daughters, two sons-in-law and grandchild. As Richard Dicerni writes, Karen was the great love of Jim's life and his family was the centre of it. Photo courtesy of the Prentice family

parks system. Despite the reluctance in some quarters, he reached out to David Suzuki. They visited the legendary archipelago, the Haida Gwaii, off the coast of B.C. and then toured together for a couple of days the newly designated Gwaii Haanas National Marine Conservation Area.

**J**im Prentice will be remembered not only for what he did but also for how he sought to do it and for why he did it.

He was a political leader who always sought to grow the center, to broaden the coalition both in the formulation and the implementation of policies.

He was as comfortable in the boardrooms of corporate Canada as he was in the meeting rooms of Treaty 6 Nations. He could engage the CEO of Boeing as well as the minister of the environment from Italy. His extraordinary intellectual bandwidth, coupled with his easygoing interpersonal style, permitted him to listen to a cross-section of points of view, to broaden the circle, to enhance the coalition in support of the best path forward. Jim Prentice knew how to listen to and talk with university presidents, local and national indigenous leaders, CEOs, union leaders,

fellow premiers and ministers.

Public policy generally, and politics specifically, are much more complex in 2016 than when Jim Prentice started his political career. Social media and the excessive focus on short-term issues have made governing more challenging and subject to multiple contrarian winds simultaneously. Against this challenging media landscape and throughout his political career, Jim Prentice was primarily guided by his own GPS: the public interest, doing the right thing, making things better. This principle was, time and again, evident when he had to make difficult decisions. One such moment was in October 2005, when he was one of three Conservative MPs who voted for same sex marriage. He felt strongly that it was the right thing to do.

Eric Prentice, Jim Prentice's father, was not keen on his only son becoming a politician. Partially to address his dad's concern and partially because it reflected his own values, Jim Prentice vowed that when he left political life, he would leave a name that was untarnished and respected.

The testimonials that poured in after his death underline the fact that Jim Prentice honoured the vow he

had made to his father. He proved that public service—politics—can be an honourable profession in which policies and ideas can be debated without compromising one's integrity and identity.

Jim was looking forward to reentering policy debates in Canada with the publication of his book *Triple Crown: Winning Canada's Energy Future*. He wanted to make another contribution to Canada. He was going to argue that the current energy policy is not working; that a new vision is needed for converting our nation's vast resources into a secure, prosperous and environmentally responsible future that will benefit all Canadians. He was also going to make the point that Canada had failed to craft fair and enduring partnerships with its indigenous people. In the weeks before he died, he was in the best shape of his life, having just delivered his suits to his tailor for them to be taken in.

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Over our last dinner, we reminisced about our time in public service, talked about how proud we were of our children and about the hierarchy of important things in life. We settled on: health, love, friends and making a difference. Power did not made the cut. We ended the evening over one last glass of Italian red wine and concluded: *Carpe Diem*. **P**

*Richard Dicerni retired as Deputy Minister of the Executive Council of Alberta in April 2015, having served both Premier Prentice and Premier Rachel Notley.*