

Alberta: NDP election sweep ends 44 years of Tory rule

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7 May 2015

The trade union-backed, ostensibly left-wing New Democratic Party (NDP) was unexpectedly swept to power in Tuesday's Alberta election, bringing an abrupt end to 44 years of Progressive Conservative rule over Canada's main oil-producing province.

In the six preceding Alberta elections stretching back to 1993, the NDP had never won more than 4 seats. On Tuesday it won 53, as its share of the popular vote increased more than fourfold from the 2012 election to 40.5 percent.

The NDP swept urban Alberta, including the smaller cities of Red Deer, Lethbridge, and Medicine Hat. It won all 19 seats in the provincial capital, Edmonton, and 14 of Calgary's 25 seats.

Headquarters to Canada's major oil companies, Calgary has long been considered the political-ideological center of Canada's "new right," which first emerged as the Reform Party in the late 1980s and ultimately became the dominant force in Stephen Harper's "new" Conservative Party. Harper, who has headed Canada's national government since 2006, is himself a Calgary MP.

The Progressive Conservatives (PC), led by former Harper cabinet minister and Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce vice-chairman Jim Prentice, lost 60 seats and have been reduced to the third party in the 87-seat provincial legislature, behind the right-wing populist Wildrose Party—a party that only a few weeks ago appeared to be on its deathbed.

Prentice, in his election night concession speech, announced that he is not only resigning as PC leader. He is renouncing the Calgary seat to which he was just reelected and quitting politics.

Within weeks of Prentice becoming Conservative leader and Alberta Premier last September, the province's economy was roiled by the plunge in world oil prices.

The government's response was to introduce a raft of austerity measures aimed at placing the burden of the

economic slump on the working class in what is already far and away Canada's most socially unequal province.

The budget introduced by the government just prior to the election detailed plans to slash public spending by close to 10 percent in real terms over the next three years, eliminated the equivalent of 1,700 full-time health care jobs, introduced a new health care premium, and imposed numerous other hikes in taxes and government fees.

Speaking with the CBC while on the campaign trail last month, Prentice touted his imposition of unpopular policies designed for and by big business as proof of his capacity for leadership. "No one," said Prentice, "expected that we would lose close to 50,000 permanent jobs in this province in the last three months. Nobody expected we'd see a \$7 billion crater open up in our public finances because of the collapse in oil prices."

Although the New Democrats will on occasion employ vague anti-big business rhetoric, they are no less beholden to big business and staunch defenders of the capitalist profit system than their Tory rivals.

Within hours of the NDP sweeping the polls, Premier-elect Rachel Notley was pledging to work with Prime Minister Harper and offering obsequious reassurances to big business.

Any policy changes, Notley told a Wednesday morning press conference at the Alberta legislature, "will be done collaboratively and in partnership with our key job creators in this province." The premier-elect said she will be "reaching out" to industry in coming days. "I'm hopeful that over the course of the next two weeks they will come to realize that things are going to be just A-OK over here in Alberta."

The daughter of a former Alberta NDP leader, Notley has lifelong ties to Canada's social democrats and the trade union bureaucracy. As she insisted, and all but the most rabid right-wing sections of the corporate media conceded, the NDP is proposing modest changes—the

scrapping of the Conservative cuts to health care and education and the new health care premium; a staggered raising of the minimum wage to \$15 per hour over the next three years; a 2 percent increase in the provincial corporate tax rate; and higher tax rates for the upper middle class and rich (the top 10 percent).

If implemented, the corporate tax increase will roll the taxation rate back to what it was in 2004; the income tax increase would still leave high-income Albertans paying less than in any province but New Brunswick.

The NDP is committed to reviewing the royalties paid by the province's oil and natural gas producers. But Notley has pledged that there will be no increases during a period of depressed world energy prices, adding that the review could well leave the royalties unchanged. In a further measure of her readiness to work hand-in-glove with Big Oil, the premier-elect has repeatedly said that she is modeling her energy policy and relationships with the province's energy producers after that of longtime Progressive Conservative Premier Peter Lougheed.

Invariably the new government, as have previous NDP regimes in Ontario, BC, and wherever else Canada's social democrats have gained office, will come into headlong conflict with the working class.

That said, the Alberta elections point to growing political volatility and popular disaffection with the traditional political and economic establishment. This is the product of the recent economic tailspin, but also of years of government austerity, social reaction and ever-widening social inequality.

Buoyed by the development of the tar sands and high oil prices, Alberta's economy has grown far more rapidly than the rest of Canada's over the past two decades. The "boom years," however, were marked by intensifying hardship for wide swathes of the population due to housing shortages, inadequate public infrastructure, and the country's lowest minimum wage outside the impoverished Atlantic Provinces.

Prentice will now be forever identified with the collapse of the Tories' Alberta political dynasty. Yet only a few weeks ago he was being touted by the corporate media as a political titan who would in all likelihood lead Alberta's government for years to come.

Arguably the second or third most powerful minister in Harper's government till he choose in 2012 to cash in and make millions as a top bank executive, Prentice was coaxed back to Alberta by Calgary's oil barons last summer to take charge of a PC government that had been tarnished by scandal and to steer it further right.

Topping business's agenda for Prentice was a renewed push for health care privatization, slashing social spending, and overcoming the political logjam in the building of new pipelines for Alberta oil-sands bitumen.

Recognizing that the political ground was shifting under their feet, the majority of the Wildrose MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly), including the party's leader, Ayn Rand devotee Danielle Smith, crossed the floor in December to join the government and "reunite" the right.

The unions, for their part, were eager to work with Prentice. As the government was sent reeling by the drop in oil prices, the Alberta Federation of Labour and heads of the various public sector unions entered into talks with Prentice. In 2012 the unions had rallied round Prentice's predecessor, Alison Redford, claiming that she was a "progressive" Tory and that the reelection of her Conservative government was the only way to prevent the Wildrose from coming to office.

Three years on, the unions cited Prentice's promise to repeal a vicious anti-worker law that Redford had enacted in 2014 that threatens union officials and workers who even speak about the possibility of a walkout in defiance of the province's draconian antistrike laws with criminal prosecution, as evidence that they could work with the new premier to deal with the budget crisis caused by the oil price drop.

But in the aftermath of the Conservatives' March 26 budget, the corporate media-created bubble around Prentice and his government burst. Workers were outraged that Prentice, while slashing public services and hiking user fees and regressive taxes for Albertans across the board, insisted that corporate tax rates were untouchable. At the same time, the budget angered small business owners, professionals, and other petty-bourgeois layers by abandoning the 10 percent "flat" income tax that PCs had introduced in the later 1990s and otherwise relying on "revenue-raising" measures, not just social spending cuts, to balance the budget three years hence.



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