

With Alberta election, Canada's political elite lurches still further right

Keith Jones
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Pollsters are predicting a close result in Monday's Alberta provincial election, which pits Premier Danielle Smith, a far-right ideologue, and her United Conservative Party (UCP) against the nominally "left," trade union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP). That the race is even close is an indictment of both the right-wing record and campaign of the NDP.

Smith became premier of Canada's wealthiest and fourth most populous province last October, after capturing the UCP leadership based on far-right anti-vaxx, pro-"Freedom" Convoy and Alberta First appeals.

She has spent much of the provincial election campaign trying to walk back some of her most notorious claims and policy prescriptions, including support for health care privatization. At the campaign's outset, she demonstratively declared that the Alberta Sovereignty Act, which she pushed through the legislature within weeks of becoming premier, would not figure in her campaign. In patent contradiction with Canada's constitution, the Sovereignty Act asserts that the Alberta government can ignore and disobey any federal law it deems harmful to the province's economic "interests."

Smith's attempt to reposition herself as a moderate who will govern on behalf of "all Albertans" is a cynical fraud—an attempt to bamboozle the electorate, so as to win re-election and pursue a savage anti-working class agenda. Under Jason Kenney, who Smith energetically denounced from the right, the UCP government implemented brutal austerity, passed draconian legislation illegalizing protests that interfere with "critical infrastructure" (including railways, oil sands sites and mines), and pursued a profits-before-lives pandemic policy that repeatedly made the province Canada's epicentre of mass infection and death.

Last week, 190 Calgary Emergency Room doctors, three-quarters of all those employed at the four adult hospitals in Alberta's largest city, issued an open letter to

warn of a growing "capacity crisis" due to cuts to primary care, staff shortages and a dearth of hospital beds. "The wait time in Calgary's Emergency Departments" the letter declared, "has skyrocketed, with patients sometimes waiting up to 15 hours to be seen by a doctor. These patients often become sicker while waiting." Having documented some of the causes of this crisis, the physicians' letter continued, "While all of this is occurring ..., we are regularly asked to consider covering rural sites who are equally suffering with staffing shortages and intermittent closures of their urgent care and emergency departments."

Smith casts herself as a political outsider. Yet she has a decades-long career advocating libertarian and other far-right views as a school board trustee, Alberta legislator, leader of the now defunct right-wing populist Wildrose Party, journalist, shock-jock radio announcer and television host. If anything, she has become even more extreme in recent years.

In the midst of the election campaign, Alberta Ethics Commissioner Marguerite Trussler issued a report that confirmed Smith had sought to pressure her justice minister, Tyler Shandro, to drop criminal charges against far-right pastor Artur Pawlowski arising from his role in the "Freedom" Convoy's illegal blockade of the Coutts, Alberta, Canada-US border crossing. Pawlowski, already well-known for organizing defiance of anti-COVID public health measures and anti-LGBTQ protests, was recently convicted of mischief for urging participants in the Coutts' blockade to stand their ground and ignore police orders they disperse.

Some sections of the capitalist establishment's avowed right-wing faction are wary of Smith. They fear a Smith-led government, with its close ties to the religious right, Alberta separatists and outright fascist forces, will become a lightning rod for working class opposition. They are also concerned that her aggressive pursuit of an

Alberta First agenda will exacerbate deep-rooted ruling-class cleavages over energy policy and financial transfers from Alberta and other wealthier parts of the country to the “have-not” provinces, thereby destabilizing the Canadian federal state.

However, the national Conservative Party leadership, the *National Post*, and Postmedia chain, among others, are enthusiastically promoting a Smith victory. In the campaign’s final days, federal Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre—like, Smith a strident supporter of the far-right Convoy that menacingly occupied downtown Ottawa in early 2022—and former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued videos reiterating their support for Smith and the UCP’s re-election.

Poilievre said a UCP government would “Stand up for Alberta and its energy sector.” Notley and her NDP would, on the other hand, Poilievre claimed, “work for” Prime Minister Trudeau and “the NDP-Liberal coalition bosses in Ottawa,” “support higher carbon tax(es) on your gasoline (and) groceries,” and help “Trudeau attack the energy sector, putting you out of a job.”

Notley and the NDP have run a thoroughly right-wing campaign, aimed at convincing the ruling class that they are a “safer pair” of hands than Smith and her UCP.

In recent days, the NDP has been touting endorsements from ex-ministers in Alberta’s long line of Progressive Conservative (PC) governments, including former Deputy Premier Thomas Lukaszuk, Attorney-General Jim Foster, and Municipal Affairs Minister Doug Griffiths. In 2017, the PC’s and the right-wing populist Wildrose Party merged to form the UCP. In the same right-wing tenor, the NDP is urging traditional Conservatives to “lend” it their “votes” to defeat Smith.

Under conditions where the health care system is buckling from want of funds and personnel and Alberta’s ability to contend with ever-more-frequent wildfires has been crippled by budget cuts, Notley is promising balanced budgets and no tax increases for the rich and super-rich. In other words, more austerity.

Alberta governments have long boasted of a so-called “Alberta advantage” of ultra-low personal income and corporate taxes. This continued during the four years, May 2015-May 2019, that Notley led the province’s first-ever NDP government. So too did austerity for public services and wage “restraint”—i.e., after inflation real-wage cuts—for the workers that administer them.

Notley is vowing that if the NDP returns to government, Big Oil, the banks and other large businesses will continue to enjoy the country’s lowest tax rate. She is a

proposing a tiny, three percentage point tax increase for medium and large business to 11 percent, which is less than what it was when the UCP came to power in 2019. Small businesses will not have to pay any income tax on their earnings whatsoever.

Notley and her Alberta NDP are strong supporters of the union-backed and to a large degree instigated NDP-Liberal governmental alliance. Like federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, she stands four-square behind the Trudeau government in waging war against Russia, funneling tens of billions of dollars into preparing for war with China and imposing “post-pandemic” austerity and inflation-driven real-wage cuts on working people. However, as Notley told CTV, “I disagree with (Singh) completely” when it comes to providing tax subsidies to Canada’s oil and gas sector, which made record profits of \$34 billion last year. While the federal NDP postures as an opponent of such subsidies, Notley, who loudly shilled for Big Oil during her 2015-2019 stint as premier, argues the subsidies must be sustained, even expanded. She claims this is necessary if Canada is to compete with the US oil and gas sector for investment, and to “green” oil and natural gas production.

The trade unions are fully onboard with the right-wing NDP campaign. The attacks of the UCP government and its ruinous pandemic policy have repeatedly provoked angry protests. But at every point the unions have worked to confine them within the pro-big business, state-regulated collective bargaining system and to corral workers behind the NDP. Thus, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union ordered workers to return to COVID-stricken meatpacking plants and denounced potential worker job action to protect their and their families’ health as “illegal.” When protests broke out in August 2021 over Kenney’s attempt to dismantle all anti-COVID protections, they were led by doctors, other health workers and anti-COVID activists, not the unions.



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