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## Views

Today: Friday, October 26, 2007

# Ralph Klein's Real Legacy

Albertans can thank the 'King' for their one-party state.

By **Frank Dabbs**

Published: September 8, 2006



## TheTyee.ca

His critics may tell you that Ralph Klein, the 12th premier of Alberta, has done nothing much since winning his fourth general election. A little golf, a little fishing, receiving the Queen during the province's half-hearted centennial celebrations, deigning to attend vacuous sittings of the legislature. Slouching toward his place in some bucolic corner of history.

Not so.

His supporters may tell you that his legacy is a new fiscal order without government debts and deficits.

Not so.

It was, in fact, Klein's predecessor, Don Getty, who framed and



"Post-democratic" politician.

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launched Alberta's fiscal revolution. In the aftermath of the 1980s energy-price recession, Getty slashed public spending. In an April 2006 Edmonton Journal interview, Getty said, "(Klein) continued what we were doing. The debt and deficit was solved by God. Or Mother Nature, maybe. It was the price of oil, not any special creation."

So what is Ralph Klein's legacy? Nothing less than a total transformation of how Albertans are governed.

Since November 22, 2004, when his government was re-elected handily in spite of a desultory campaign, Klein has consolidated the unwritten constitutional framework for a workable one-party state, now so deeply entrenched in Alberta's economy and political culture that it may never be dislodged.

He has completed the creation of the first functional post-democratic government in North America, run by elites for elites -- with the citizenry left on political standby to profit from a predatory economy if it can, and otherwise to fend for itself.

What is more breathtaking is that this constitutional *coup d'état* has taken place within the framework of the law, without the need of a secret midnight cabal, and is accepted (or at least acquiesced to) as one more Alberta Advantage.

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## The 'only choice'

Historically, Alberta's democratic experience has been frail by comparison to the Canadian, British and American mainstream. During 200 years of the Hudson's Bay Company charter, it was part of a corner of the British imperium under the absolute sway of the governors of the company. Then, for four decades, it was a colonial territory of the new Dominion.

The 1905 provincial Autonomy Act that created Alberta withheld jurisdiction over resources and crown land. In the days before income tax, it could neither access its resource revenues nor freely manage its own economic development, leaving it dependent upon federal subsidies and federal decisions. Its first governing party -- the Liberals -- never challenged this status quo. So beginning in 1921 with the election of the United Farmers of Alberta, Alberta defaulted to political dynasties that steered Alberta further away from the traditions of parliamentary democracy and into one-party statehood.

After Klein was sworn in as premier on December 14, 1992, he persuaded Albertans, as political scientist Brooke Jeffrey says in her 1999 book *Hard Right Turn*, that he was their only political choice.

As his economic and social policies swerved sharply to the right compared to his Conservative predecessors, premiers Peter Lougheed and Don Getty, he set about persuading Albertans that they had no other political voice.

Having served his political apprenticeship in municipal politics, which has no parliamentary tradition and no party lines, Klein came to the provincial legislature with no respect for the Canadian tradition of representative, responsible government. He showed little civility toward opposition members of the legislature and scant respect for their constitutional office.

He began the path to post-democracy by severing the legislative assembly from the legislative process. Indicative of the sea change was his annual televised chat with Albertans, which immediately became a more important political event than the

speech from the throne. After the 2004 election, government MLAs were given heavy gold rings, graduation-style, denoting their elected office and paid for by the public. Opposition MLAs were given no rings, even though they are elected to the same office and sit in the same legislature. Those rings delineate a caste system that taunts centuries of hard-won parliamentary tradition.

During the centennial celebration in 2005, all MLAs were given medals to present to notable constituents. Conservative MLAs were granted the use of Government House -- a public facility -- as a venue to make the formal presentations. When Liberal MLAs applied to use it, they were denied permission. Such humiliation may seem petty, but it exemplifies a dangerous petulance toward the elected opposition, and a post-democratic frame of mind.

### **Starved opposition**

At the centre of the post-democratic order is the Conservative party, which celebrates its 35th anniversary as the governing party on September 10 this year. Nine days before Albertans went to the polls in 2004, Edmonton Journal columnist Graham Thompson wrote: "Forget the provincial election campaign. There's only one political race that counts in Alberta and it has little to do with the November 22 vote...The Tory leadership race is the one to watch, the one that will do more to determine the future of a post-debt Alberta than this all-over-but-the-counting election."

Membership in the Conservative party is a matter of self-interest for anyone seeking full opportunity and a full role in civic life in Alberta; the consequences of membership in an opposition party can be punitive, both socially and professionally.

In Alberta's post-democracy, general elections no longer express the will of the people in the Canadian tradition of responsible, representative government.

Opposition is excessively fragmented. In the general election of 2004, 10 opposition parties ran 367 candidates for 83 seats, a

pattern typical of the past 100 years. Government is routinely elected with a minority of the popular vote, yet gains an overwhelming majority of the seats. This has happened 12 times in 26 general elections. Voter participation has eroded steadily since 1935, when it peaked at an 82 per cent turnout; by 2004 it was down to 44.7 per cent. As the popular vote declines, elections become more ceremonial and less significant to the exercise of power.

Opposition parties are no longer able to develop the financial and organizational infrastructure to function effectively and mount serious electoral challenges. The Conservative party recruits the cream of professional political managers and electoral candidates. The opposition parties are starved for funds.

### **Post-democratic process**

In post-democratic Alberta, the opposition has no meaningful role in the legislative process because the legislature's committees function like committees of the Conservative caucus. Opposition members attend them only at the pleasure of the government and never participate in votes unless the Tories wish it. This means opposition MLAs are excluded from effective participation in debating and amending bills on second reading. They are denied the policy inquiry and review opportunities that legislative standing committees normally enjoy in the British parliamentary model.

In the absence of an effective, representative, responsible legislature, new mechanisms have evolved to carry out policy scrutiny, development and review.

When the advent of coalbed methane production created a firestorm of opposition from rural and environmental activists, the government established an elaborate public consultation process called the "multi-stakeholder advisory committee" (MAC). The government named representatives from its choice of "a broad range of stakeholder groups."

After conducting a review of government regulations and

policies, the MAC made recommendations for legislation, regulation and public administration to "balance resource development with environmental protection and minimize the impact on landowners of coalbed methane development." This is properly the work of elected and accountable politicians. It involves public policy and government performance that should be debated in the legislature. A similar process underway for oil sands will institutionalize this post-democratic process of policy review and change.

In a parallel trend that shields the government from controversy, public engagement on conflicts over energy production has been downloaded to the supposedly independent EUB -- the quasi-judicial agency that adjudicates, regulates and studies the province's fossil fuel and electricity operations to ensure the public interest is served. The board inaugurated the sour gas and public-safety working group to address changes to sour gas regulations and operations, and was called upon to make the choice between producing shallow natural gas or the underlying bitumen on overlapping oil sands and gas leases in northeastern Alberta. This was properly the work of the legislature, and doing it compromised the EUB's reputation for impartiality and service to the public interest.

Meanwhile, deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers are treated as butlers-on-call for the Conservative caucus. They are asked to spend hours helping government MLAs with pet projects and to act as public buffers for the political ministers, rather than as the advisors to and executors of ministerial decisions. A new layer of political professionals has displaced the advisory function. The controversial contracts associated with these consultants are designed to conceal their work from public scrutiny.

### **Centralized power**

Klein has also reined in the municipalities, school boards and regional health authorities, where opposition thrives and politicians learn their trade. The election of regional health authority board members was so repellent to his post-

democratic practices that the elections were rescinded and the boards replaced.

The machinery of one-party, post-democratic politics includes the influence of partisan political processes. While Klein was still mayor of Calgary, a close-knit circle was incorporated as the Friends of Ralph Klein (FORK). This informal caucus of trusted campaign volunteers and personal friends grew to include some of his cabinet and caucus, party financiers, donors and opinion leaders. It became the most exclusive political community in Alberta, and still plays a shadowy role in policy, patronage and political access.

Because post-democracy has emerged during one of the province's periodic oil and natural gas booms, it has been defined as "successful" in the narrow terms of economic growth and prosperity. Affluence has sugar-coated the pill for those who might otherwise challenge the new order but are prepared to mute their political sensibilities.

There are constraints and limits to Alberta's unwritten constitution. Public expectations are shaped by the 21st-century milieu of the Internet, global mobility, cultural interface with other Western democracies and the prosperity Alberta has gained from the global economy. Alberta also exists within a federal system in which constitutional power is divided, so that criminal law, important taxation powers, international trade, foreign affairs and the military are out of the province's reach.

### **Strange creature**

Klein's political creature is not quite a plutocracy, not quite an oligarchy, not quite an autocracy and not quite a Canadian Family Compact. Neither is it quite a democracy. Liberal Opposition Leader Kevin Taft argues that "Klein's idea of government isn't just process, it's a series of habits, a political culture and a set of entitlements that has become entrenched."

As political economist Gordon Laxer wrote last year in the *Parkland Post*, published by the Parkland Institute, "Real democracy requires the idea of the good of the community. Real

democracy challenges, indiscriminately and irreverently, all forms of privilege. In Alberta, people are no longer portrayed as citizens and wage earners in a democratic community. They are now consumers, investors and stakeholders, acting as individuals in the private marketplace. Everything public is discredited."

Alberta retains fundamental freedoms, such as property rights. It advocates personal opportunity, offers public education and an equitable tax system, and doesn't throw its opponents into jail. Yet those democratic forms are vulnerable, and prerogatives of citizenship such as economic opportunity and access to education and equitable health care have been repositioned as privileges for emerging elites.

Can the triumph of post-democratic government in Alberta be reversed? Opposition politicians think the ground is shifting.

Preston Manning thinks the Conservative party's stranglehold on Alberta is ending. He says the door is open in Alberta for a new party to ride a wave in public opinion -- such as environmentalism -- into power.

Leading journalists agree that change is in the wind. Calgary Herald political columnist Tom Olsen, who is sympathetic to the Conservative government, has said privately that the Liberals could displace it over the next two elections.

Even if the Conservatives survive their divisive leadership process, it's an open question whether they could survive a focused, competitive two- or three-party electoral process.

Which raises two questions: Is Alberta just one great opposition party away from the restoration of democracy?

And what will the Conservatives do to keep that from happening?

*A longer version of this essay runs in this month's issue of **Alberta Views magazine.***

*Alberta writer Frank Dabbs is the author of two unauthorized*

*political biographies*, Ralph Klein: *A Maverick Life and Preston Manning: The Roots of Reform*. *His Branded by the Wind*, the story of the Herron family who made the 1914 Turner Valley oil and gas discovery, won the Petroleum History Society 2001 book of the year award. Dobbs also holds the PHS lifetime achievement award for his journalism and authorship about Canadian petroleum history.

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