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Stelmach a nice guy, but with a lot of gall and no mandate

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The first time I met Ed Stelmach, he was running for leader of the Alberta Progressive Conservative party.

I had heard from colleagues prior to that meeting -- even hypercritical, grumpy ones -- that Steady Eddy was a really "nice guy."

During our hour-long meeting, after he told us about his quaint farm upbringing in Andrew, Alta., and after we pushed him to articulate a clear plan for the province, we all concluded that, yes, he is a very nice man, but we also left the meeting scratching our heads.

Other than a rather lame promise to match all charitable donations made by Albertans with tax dollars, he really didn't have any concrete ideas. He was big on platitudes, small on policy. As for the charitable donation promise, he has since, thankfully, amended that by offering Albertans an enhanced charitable tax credit, rather than matching charitable donations, which is not a bad idea at all, particularly for us charitable types.

Anyway, as we all know, on Dec. 2, 2006, Honest Ed -- everybody's second choice -- won the leadership of the PC party and became Alberta's new premier, replacing Ralph Klein.

For some reason, it took the Tories more than six hours to count up a measly 144,289 votes. As a result, like many Albertans, I went to bed before learning the results, and recall my husband waking me up early Sunday morning to tell me the shocking news that Stelmach had won. Was it a dream or a nightmare?

Well, a year has passed and several things have become clear. Stelmach is no dream. He is spectacularly inarticulate -- though he has improved -- he has shown flashes of horrendous judgment, like allowing early handlers to offer private meetings with him for the princely sum of \$5,000, and he has signed deals allowing Tory cronies, like Murray Smith, to get a huge severance for leaving his cushy government job in Washington for a better-paying gig with the private sector. How many of us regular folk get severance when we quit our jobs? None. And how many people a little more than a year ago would have pegged the wannabe preem as having an abundance of gall? Again, the answer is none. But that's exactly what Stelmach has proven to have. After all, this is a premier without a mandate from the electorate who has literally messed with this province's holy of holies -- the oil and gas industry.

While Stelmach won a leadership race for Alberta's natural governing party, he is not the elected premier and he really had no right to alter the royalty structure on non-renewable resources that has served this province so well for so long.

On the first ballot for the leadership, Stelmach came a distant third with just 15 per cent of the vote to leader Jim Dinning's 30 per cent and Ted Morton's 26 per cent.

As a result, all other candidates were dropped off the ballot and only the top three remained for the Dec. 2 vote, where Dinning supporters strategically placed all their second-choice votes on the preferential ballot for Stelmach, believing he couldn't win, and Morton's followers did the same, and presto! -- the third-place guy wins the province.

Stelmach eventually won 51,764 first-choice votes to Dinning's 51,282 votes -- a difference of 482 votes. Because neither of the two front-runners won more than 50 per cent of the vote, the preferential ballot system looked at voters' second choice. It was here that Stelmach won over Dinning.

Besides learning that preferential ballot voting has serious flaws, the next big lesson these numbers teach us is that out of a population of about 3.48 million Albertans, Stelmach had a mandate from just 51,764 of them -- or about 1.5 per cent.

Coincidentally, the federal Liberals had chosen their own third-place candidate to run their party just hours before the Alberta Tories did the same.

So, naturally at his first news conference after his surprising win, reporters asked Stelmach how he planned to deal with new Liberal Leader Stephane Dion, who had declared that if he ever becomes prime minister, he intends to go after Alberta's oilsands development by hiking taxes at the wellhead in an effort to meet Canada's Kyoto targets.

Stelmach's answer was limp.

"I'm going to tell them right off the bat that they have to be careful as to the kind of policies they start articulating," he said.

"Any damage to Alberta's economy is going to severely hurt Ottawa and their treasury as well.

"The steelworker in Hamilton, the valve manufacturer in Quebec, those jobs are dependent on Alberta, and we're going to make sure that Alberta's economy remains vibrant."

Too bad Stelmach didn't listen to his own words. When he announced his government would alter existing contracts with big energy players and raise the province's royalty take by

\$1.4 billion a year, he said he was "confident" he had found the "right balance" between giving Albertans a "fair share" of their resources and maintaining the kind of business climate that attracts investment.

Now, however, Saskatchewan has a more attractive business climate than Alberta, and many experts agree that by scaring off investment, this cash grab

will wind up being revenue-neutral at best for Albertans.

In the last fiscal year, Albertans gave Ottawa \$15 billion net in taxes. Over that same 2006-07 time period, the feds recorded a \$13.8-billion surplus. Those are numbers a steelworker in Hamilton can understand. Without Alberta, Ottawa would not have a surplus at all.

How Albertans allowed a nice guy without a mandate to head down a road he had no right to travel is a wonder. It still remains to be seen whether that unmandated gall turns out to be dream or nightmare.

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