During its first 105 years as a province, Alberta has had only three changes of government. Its last two regimes, Social Credit from 1935 to 1971 and Progressive Conservative from 1971 to the present, have been extraordinarily long-lived for elected governments. The province’s oil wealth aided both dynasties, allowing them to spread money around and buy voters’ support, but in each case, communication of a particular image has also been crucial. In this chapter, I examine the means that the two dynasties used to project a certain image, and then I explore the extent to which these images accurately portrayed the performance of the government. I suggest that the images were largely spin and that both regimes proved able to use communications strategy to project false images of their performance. The spin worked best when a dynasty’s leader appeared to embody the image that the regime sought to put forward, and the dynasties only faced collapse when the party proved unable to find a leader whom the image-makers could use.

Political dynasties in Alberta have also benefited from the limited presence of an opposition, unlike other provinces, where two or three parties have vied for office, with an established opposition party with ample legislative representation over many years replacing a governing party when it could persuade voters that it was time for a change. In Alberta, the first two changes
of government in 1921 and 1935 brought to office parties that had not even existed at the time of the election that preceded their victory. The Progressive Conservatives of Peter Lougheed had formed the Official Opposition in the 1967 election that preceded their victory, but it was the Liberals that occupied most of the small number of opposition seats during most of the Social Credit period, with the Tories failing to win any seats in 1963. Effectively, voters began turning to a “Lougheed party” in 1967 and put that party over the top when a change in leadership in the Social Credit Party weakened what had become the “Manning party.” Without strong opposition parties, Albertans have tended to view the governing party and its leader as the embodiment of the province. Image-makers had to take heed of popular desires as they spun their narrative of a government’s works, but they had the advantage over their counterparts in other provinces of dealing with significant numbers of voters who did not view the opposition as a way of dealing with their dissatisfaction with a given government.¹

**SOCIAL CREDIT**

Social Credit’s image throughout its period in office was infused with the religious affiliations of its first two premiers, “Bible Bill” Aberhart and Ernest Manning, who, between them, governed for all but the last three years of the Social Credit era. The religious mantle of the government was important because the government’s elected officials, including the Social Credit premiers, at their outset had only modest claims to expertise relevant to government. Aberhart was a school principal and mathematics teacher, but he was also the founder of the fundamentalist Calgary Prophetic Bible School Institute. He had never served in any elected or appointed position in government before becoming premier. Manning was a farm boy and the first graduate from Aberhart’s institute. He also had no experience outside of that restricted religious world before being elected at age twenty-seven as an MLA in the Social Credit sweep in 1935 and immediately being appointed to cabinet.²

In many respects, the key, if unofficial, communication between the Social Credit premiers and the people of Alberta was the “Back to the Bible Hour” broadcast on radio that Aberhart began before becoming premier and that continued throughout his premiership. The immense popularity of Aberhart’s
radio ministry had been the fuel that ignited the Social Credit movement of the 1930s, and it reflected the importance of religion in the self-identification of Albertans in the early years of the province. With 300,000 listeners, two-thirds of them in Alberta, Aberhart reached a large audience both before and after becoming premier.³ When he died in 1943, Manning took over as both premier and host of the Bible Hour, continuing the broadcasts even after he retired as premier in 1968. The fire-and-brimstone quality of those broadcasts cast an aura of righteousness over the government, and the portrayal of the government as religious and honest through these non-formal means replaced a formal communications policy.⁴ As Simon Kiss argues, the Social Credit government lacked an overarching communications policy. No government agency linked messages from the various departments of government to put a brand on government messaging. Communications staff in most departments were political appointees, but they relied mainly on the government’s Publicity Bureau for advertising. The Publicity Bureau, initially established in 1906 to promote the province to potential settlers, did little more than contract out these requests for promotional materials to two advertising firms of questionable competence but with ties to the government.⁵

The informal policy worked well enough during the Aberhart and Manning periods. The party leaders personified the party while their cabinet ministers and backbenchers seemed little more than cheerleaders for the leader. It is clear from his papers during his time as premier that Aberhart was a rambunctious, authoritarian individual who devised policy on the fly and who quickly lost his grip on efforts to implement the largely fanciful Social Credit policies that had won him election in 1935.⁶ But the combination of his religious views, fanaticism, and anti-establishment rhetoric allowed him to survive a concerted challenge by the establishment parties to push him out of office in the 1940 provincial election.⁷ Manning, when he became premier in 1943, significantly toned down the anti-bank, anti-business rhetoric of his predecessor. He followed conservative economic and social policies while retaining enough of the early Social Credit message to appear as something more than a shill for big oil companies, which he increasingly became. His “Back to the Bible” persona gave the government the aura of honesty and prudence in its management of public monies.⁸ As Manning biographer Brian Brennan writes: “Before 1955, the Social Credit government had a reputation for honesty and integrity that went virtually unchallenged. Its public persona
as a party of devoted Christians kept it free from allegations of dishonesty and corruption. The personality and image of its leader defined the persona of the party, and most Albertans viewed Ernest Manning as a man of sincerity, rectitude and moral correctness. But the glow seemed to fade in the months preceding the election of 1955, an election called only three years after the previous election so that Premier Manning could gain a public vote of confidence before allegations of government incompetence and dishonesty became too overwhelming to refute.

Opposition MLAs and the media made a variety of allegations of Social Credit improprieties in tendering government contracts, in government procurement policies, and in MLAs transacting business with the government, including receiving loans from the Alberta Treasury Branch. The ATB was a quasi-bank with branches throughout the province established by the Aberhart government when the courts and the federal government rebuffed his efforts to control the lending policies of the chartered banks in the province. The Alberta Assembly Act forbade MLAs from transacting business with the government, and Manning introduced legislation to exempt dealings with the ATB from that provision after revelations that Social Credit MLAs routinely received loans from the Treasury Branch. When the Liberals challenged the retroactive character of this exemption and, along with it, the legality of laws passed in Alberta since MLAs began receiving Treasury Branch loans, Manning argued that the voters would have to make the ruling as to whether the laws passed by the Social Credit administrations since 1940 were valid. Though Manning won the election by focusing on his own integrity and downplaying the accusations against his underlings, Social Credit dropped from fifty-two of the legislature's sixty-one seats in 1952 to only thirty-seven seats in 1955.

After the election, Manning set up a Royal Commission with a restricted mandate to report on some of the specific opposition allegations made before and during the election. This would spare the government a more general inquiry about how contracts were awarded and how the government interacted with the Treasury Branch. Manning's reputation for rectitude was such that the commission trusted him to provide it with the requisite government documents necessary for its work. But even with the limited information provided to them, the commissioners expressed concern about the casual character of the government's procurement and contracting policies. Possibilities for
ministers to benefit personally or politically from the awarding of contracts were endless. The commission saw no evidence, however, that the government had behaved corruptly or irresponsibly. Premier Manning, agreeing to implement the commission’s recommendations to establish arm’s-length agencies for contracting and procuring, claimed that the government had been vindicated.

But Premier Manning had a secret. He had withheld documents that would have led the commissioners to different conclusions. What the commissioners would have learned, as Bob Hesketh demonstrates in an impressive and largely unknown master’s thesis for the University of Alberta, was that the Manning government was urging the managers of the Treasury Branch to make loans to certain business people with little collateral. Other government departments—such as Public Works, which handled all the highway contracts—were then urged to award contracts to Treasury Branch business clients. When the commission examined highway contracts, they were given only partial information about fifteen contracts for which Public Works had negotiated with companies rather than seeking competitive bids and no information at all about fourteen other contracts, nine of which involved O’Sullivan Construction or Mannix-O’Sullivan, two large recipients of underperforming loans from the Treasury Branches. Social Credit’s veneer of prudent management of government funds was fraudulent. Religious spin spared the government from being forced to make revelations that might have removed Social Credit from power a decade or more before they were finally defeated. Hesketh concludes: “Yet, under Manning’s leadership, the Alberta Social Credit government created a fiction of the Treasury Branch operating as an orthodox banking institution; the Main Highways Branch rigged contracts to benefit the Treasury Branch and its customers; and the government lied to the public and to a Royal Commission to cover up its guilt.”

In the late 1960s, just after Manning had retired as premier, another commission report suggested questionable behaviour, though no clearly illegal actions, by two government ministers. Premier Harry Strom, Manning’s colourless successor, could not weather the storm in the manner that the long-time Social Credit premier had done. Strom, an old farmer, typified a Social Credit membership that had become unrepresentative of the province as a whole: old, rural, and religious in an Alberta that was increasingly young, urban, and secular. The
Strom government had only weak strategies, both substantive and communicative, to harness changing demographics in its own favour.15

THE CONSERVATIVES: LOUGHEED AND GETTY

The Progressive Conservative (PC) Party of Alberta, led by Peter Lougheed, worked to take advantage of urban, educated, secular Albertans’ alienation from Social Credit. Winning a beachhead of seven seats in the 1967 provincial election, the PCs followed the earlier Social Credit tradition of making their leader the party message. As the 1971 election approached, the PC communication directors worked to shape a John Kennedyesque version of their leader. Party candidates, especially in urban areas, were mainly university-educated professionals and business people, and the Conservatives projected an image of expertise and hipness that contrasted with the tarnished Social Credit brand of rural religiosity.16 Telegenic and comfortable before microphones, Lougheed had his party spend more than 85 percent of its advertising budget in 1971 on television spots. Social Credit, by contrast, used that medium for only 25 percent of their ads.17

Once in office, Lougheed worked to create a communications policy that matched his party’s urbane image. He gutted the Publicity Bureau and created the Public Affairs Bureau (PAB) in its stead. This centralized agency with about two hundred positions would hire trained communications professionals and lend expertise to all departments. According to Simon Kiss, it was run along civil service lines and was not politicized in the Lougheed period.18 It was always in the hands of a junior minister and the cabinet made no direct effort to control its work. Roger Epp has argued, however, that it was a centralized operation under the control of the politicians and modelled on public relations departments in the corporate world. It was meant to provide a particular spin about the government to the media. Rich Vivone has also claimed more recently that the PAB was set up by Lougheed “to centralize and control communications and to put a protective barrier between politicians and the media.”19

Lougheed’s fixation with secrecy, with not letting the media define the issues, and his swift retaliation against Tory MLA Tom Sindlinger for expressing views contrary to the Conservative position on several issues, sent a clear message to PAB employees that their employer would brook no conflict with
the premier’s perspectives. Perhaps, though, as Kiss suggests, the overall favourable environment within which Lougheed worked—no serious opposition party, a soaring economy, a largely supportive media—meant that he did not see the need to take the drastic, formal steps to bend the PAB to his absolute direction that Ralph Klein would take in the 1990s.

Nonetheless, Lougheed took care to cultivate a particular media image, making himself available to the media only at tightly controlled news conferences. Essential to that image was the notion that Lougheed was not simply the leader of a political party but the leader of all Albertans as the province fought alleged federal government efforts to prevent Albertans from controlling their provincial resources. This “Captain Alberta” approach was invoked during both the 1975 and 1979 provincial elections, to good partisan effect. In 1980 and 1981, the premier was unchallenged when he used government rather than party funds to pay for special addresses on television regarding the province’s position in its dealings with the federal government regarding the proposed National Energy Policy.

The premier was prickly and sued CBC in 1976 over a dramatization of the provincial and federal government’s dealings with energy companies in negotiating the Syncrude tar sands project. The network agreed to pay a $250,000 out-of-court settlement and make a public apology. Mostly, however, the media aided the government in projecting an image of being at once fiscally conservative and innovative regarding economic policy. While Social Credit presented itself as unwilling to risk public expenditures on efforts to lure private investors, the Lougheed PCs were bolder on the economic front. Lougheed argued that the province’s dependency on oil revenues was not sustainable over the long run because Alberta’s supplies of conventional oil were dwindling. Immediate economic diversification was necessary, and his government would attempt to promote the development of new economic sectors and the expansion of existing ones. In addition, the government would save petroleum royalty revenues for future generations in the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund (AHSTF), which was promised in the 1975 provincial election and established the following year. Thirty percent of resource revenues were henceforth to be placed in the fund annually and to be invested prudently. There was an urgency in the government’s message that convinced even its left-wing critics that it intended to diversify the provincial economy and that it had the support of a burgeoning urban middle class in

Myths Communicated by Two Alberta Dynasties
Calgary and Edmonton to use government policies to promote an industrial policy for the province. The major enemy of such a province-building exercise, in Lougheed's view, was the federal government, which allegedly wanted to make use of Alberta's oil and gas to provide cheap feedstocks for central Canadian industries and to maximize federal government revenues from Alberta's resources.

While energy prices continued to climb throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the Lougheed government had little to fear from either forces to its right or its left. The former complained about the rapid growth in the province's expenditures while the latter complained that the distribution of wealth in the province was more skewed than ever and that government policies did little to counterbalance market-created inequities. Only the recession that began with the collapse in the international price of oil in early 1982 raised questions about whether the Tories were good economic managers. Though Premier Lougheed had left office before such questioning began in earnest and his successor, Don Getty, would bear the brunt of criticisms, some of the questionable decisions for which Getty would have to take the blame had been made during the Lougheed period.

Getty became premier in 1985 and had a public image of someone who was more interested in playing golf than in governing. His loss of a significant chunk of the Tory vote in 1986 and his failure to regain it in 1989, which can be partly attributed to dissatisfaction with the province's sluggish economic performance, are also sometimes attributed to Getty's inability to maintain the Tory brand of expertise, innovation, and at least moderate fiscal conservatism.

Lougheed had initially responded to the recession in 1982 with spending programs, particularly mortgage subsidies, which were meant to ensure his re-election. Afterwards, however, he focused on spending cuts, which included a get-tough policy on single unemployed people. After three weeks in an urban homeless shelter, individuals were expected to look after themselves. The policy—according to Tamara Kozlowska, associate director of the Unemployed Action Centres set up by the Alberta Federation of Labour—was to persuade the single unemployed to leave the province. By contrast, both the Lougheed and Getty governments treated families in poverty with relative compassion.

The governments of these two premiers also made marginal cuts in programs that affected the middle class, such as health and education. They
attempted to maintain their image of good fiscal managers by reducing the revenue flow into the AHSTF by half as a means of increasing current revenues. This proved enough to maintain surpluses until 1985, when the government’s net assets were reported to be $12.6 billion. But in 1986, the bottom fell out of oil prices and the government began a series of budgets with annual deficits. While the first Getty budget in 1985–86 recorded a $761 million deficit, that figure increased to $3.1 billion by 1992–93. It was only after the fact that it became clear that the Lougheed government had successfully communicated a comfortable mistruth to Albertans: that it had collected enough revenues through taxation and set aside sufficient funds to deal with rainy days and a post-energy future. In fact, the cupboard was almost bare and the province’s low-tax strategy, in which low corporate and personal income taxes and no sales tax figured prominently, left few alternatives other than debt or substandard social programs.

By 1992, the failure of a variety of private companies to which the government had committed significant public revenues or on which it had failed to impose sufficient regulation had wrecked the image of the Getty Conservative government as a good manager of public finances. The first domino to fall was the Principal Group, a large investment fund in which thousands of Alberta investors had placed their trust. After Principal’s collapse in 1987, a judicial inquiry concluded that weak laws and weak enforcement had contributed to the investors’ predicament. The cost to the government of the inquiry and compensation to investors was about $100 million. The problems had begun under Lougheed’s watch, but the Getty government suffered the political consequences. Another Lougheed-era financial decision, the financing of a canola-processing company, cost taxpayers about $68 million before it was sold in 1994. But, according to Mark Lisac, “the biggest of the Conservatives’ business failures was probably the pouring of billions of dollars into land and housing development during the boom years,” which boosted the overheated land market of the Lougheed years, a pro-cyclical set of investments that contradicted Keynesian theory and belied the government’s image of fiscal prudence.

Getty continued Tory financial recklessness with a combination of privatizations of government firms (particularly Alberta Government Telephones) and socialization of risk for private ventures. Loan guarantees under Lougheed had amounted to $9.7 billion, and Getty added another $2.5 billion to the pot.
This money was risked on firms that were supposed to either diversify the Alberta economy or preserve existing jobs. The biggest loss was $566 million, which the government had to write off for its investment in Nova Tel, a wireless manufacturer, but it was only the tip of the iceberg, with losses recorded for investments in a smelter, a meatpacking plant, pulp mills, a steel plant, a computer design firm, a laser-cutting machine manufacturer, and a port operation in British Columbia. The smelter alone cost taxpayers over $100 million. Losses in Nova Tel, though, were a particularly bitter pill for Alberta taxpayers to swallow because Nova Tel had been hived off from AGT when the government privatized its telephone company in 1990 and 1991 to help balance its recession-battered books; during 1990 and 1991, the province earned about $1.7 billion (minus costs of sale) for AGT shares. The announcement in 1992 of the Nova Tel writeoff meant that at least one-third of that profit would be spent on the government’s earlier mismanagement of AGT.

With so much of the government’s program going wrong, Don Getty was badly in need of a communications policy that would help him get across a positive message to the media. Several of his ministers urged a reorganization of the Public Affairs Bureau to make it more of a political propaganda agency, but Getty opposed such a change. Instead, he set up a cabinet committee chaired by Peter Elzinga, minister of Economic Development, to coordinate communications campaigns and work on a long-term strategy for government messages. But it was composed mainly of low-ranking ministers and developed little clout with the cabinet.

The government’s amateurish communications were evident in 1991 when it began a campaign, produced by the Department of Economic Development and Trade, to advertise that the administration had finally balanced the budget after six years of deficits. The budget was not balanced, though, and the opposition had a field day attacking the government both for lying and for using public funds for a clearly partisan campaign. By the time Getty announced his resignation as premier in 1992, the mighty Conservatives of Alberta had fallen well behind the provincial Liberals in public opinion polls.

COMMUNICATIONS IN THE KLEIN ERA

Ralph Klein, who succeeded Getty as Progressive Conservative leader and premier, faced a difficult task. He had been part of the Getty cabinet since
1989 and had therefore been part of the decision-making group that the public believed had inflicted severe damage to the public finances of the province. He faced a strong opponent in Liberal leader Laurence Decore, a former mayor of Edmonton, who was calling for “brutal cuts” in government spending to balance the budget, while attracting enough small-l liberal candidates to alleviate fears about how unfair the cuts would actually be. Klein fought fire with fire, dissociating himself from the previous government, of which he had been a key minister, to call for “massive cuts.” Trading on his popularity as the former mayor of Calgary and several years of attending every rural Conservative constituency meeting that he could, Klein successfully convinced 44 percent of Albertans, enough to give him a majority of seats, to keep the Alberta Tories in power, but with Decore’s Liberals having received 40 percent of the vote, Klein could not take power for granted.

Klein therefore developed a communications strategy that he hoped would ensure that the cabinet and caucus spoke with only one voice and with a united message. Along with his chief of staff, Rod Love, he further tightened control over the Public Affairs Bureau, eventually having it report directly to the premier, a centralization of communication that matched an overall centralization of government authority under Klein.37 The bureau was to provide strategic advice to the premier and cabinet and to ensure that the government had a consistent, positive image within the media and with the public. All government public relations messages were scrutinized to make certain that they followed the party line.

But Klein wanted more than consistent messages from communications staff. It was also important that his ministers say only things that were pre-approved and in line with the government’s overall message of frugality. Through the PAB and Love, ministers received “talking points” on most issues and were told never to diverge from these points when they spoke to the media. “Talking Points devalued political discourse,” notes Rich Vivone, a one-time executive assistant to a Conservative minister and later the publisher of Insight into Government, a perceptive journal regarding the government’s manipulative media strategy throughout the Klein years.38

Klein, a long-time TV anchor before he entered politics, manipulated the media by allowing only reporters who provided favourable reports on government activities to receive leaks—thus allowing their coverage to be disguised as investigative journalism—or indeed, to be given any interviews at all.
Pliant reporters received complete “stories” assembled by the PAB and needed to do little digging, the price for the story often being an agreement not to include opposition reaction to the government’s perspective. Annual television addresses in which the premier summed up the government’s strategies and successes, without any reporters or members of the public present to ask any questions, served as an emblem of the overall approach to communication. Simon Kiss, who has provided the most extensive examination to date of the government communications strategy, sums it up as “manipulative and aggressive news management tactics, politicizing and centralizing the public relations staff and integrating the entire range of public relations techniques into regular politically contentious advertising campaigns.”

One word summarized the government’s agenda: cutbacks. Within a few years of coming to office, the government had reduced government spending by 28 percent in real per capita terms. The message that it communicated was that it had no choice: spending was wildly out of control, and deficits and debt would strangle the provincial economy unless the government took tough action. Through more controls over its own spending and more contracting out to the private sector, the government could still assure basic social protections to citizens, but at reduced cost. While cuts in health and education spending spread grief throughout the population, social services and housing cuts were far deeper and targeted mainly the poor. The government received national attention when it gave about four thousand social service recipients one-way tickets to British Columbia. The PC’s communications strategy stressed the need to minimize the information given to the public about the impacts of the cuts and to maximize the alleged ultimate benefits to all Albertans, and especially the poor, of reducing the “nanny state” and giving individuals and families more responsibility for their own well-being.

Obviously, such a message was hampered when public employees revealed hardships that cutbacks were creating for their clientele and/or for the workers. So the government informed its employees that they would be disciplined if they made public comments about impacts of government cutbacks. Minister of Family and Social Services Mike Cardinal was quoted in the media with explicit warnings to social workers to stay silent. When Guy Smith, a provincial social worker and well-known activist in the Alberta Union of Public Employees, defied this ban, he was suspended from his position for three weeks in 1996 and was warned that a repeat could cost him his employment.
Klein even attempted to interfere when he was criticized by university professors. He asked the president of the University of Alberta to eliminate the Parkland Institute, a left-leaning research body that scrutinized Klein’s ideology and policies. He tried to stop the University of Alberta Press from publishing *Shredding the Public Interest*, a book by Kevin Taft that demolished the government’s fiscal arguments. For good measure, he publicly labelled Taft, whom he had not met, as a “communist.” Taft was, in fact, a non-partisan business consultant with a PhD in business. He later became leader of the provincial Liberal party.

The universities did continue to defend academic freedom but, like most public bodies, they were paranoid of the government’s willingness to punish its critics. This caused all four public universities to obfuscate and almost perversely defend Klein when, through strange circumstances, he posted an essay that he had written for Athabasca University on his website, only to have critics note that 27 percent of the essay was taken word for word from Internet sites that he had failed to credit. Athabasca University, rather than follow normal academic channels to deal with a situation that could have resulted in a normal student receiving a grade of zero and a plagiarism note on his or her student file, gave the issue over to a media relations company. An academic issue became instead a communications/damage-control issue. The presidents of the other three universities succumbed to a request from Learning Minister Lyle Oberg and “wrote public letters defending the Premier’s ‘commitment to learning.’” Only Athabasca president Dominique Abrioux declined to send such a letter. These letters were sent even before Athabasca had contentiously cleared the premier of the plagiarism charge, making dubious use of the word “willful” as if the premier of a province and a long-time journalist could be seen as too ingenuous to know that failing to cite Internet sources was plagiarism.

Of course, policies of manipulating the media and intimidating government employees, while reprehensible, do not, in and of themselves, demonstrate that a government is communicating false information. So how accurately did the Klein government convey the state of the province’s finances? Much of the literature to date suggests that the Klein cuts—with their promise of creating a leaner, meaner government—were based on faulty economics and false promises. Kevin Taft demonstrated in *Shredding the Public Interest*, published in 1997 after the cutbacks had largely ended, that
Premier Klein had exaggerated increases in Alberta’s expenditures in the years preceding the government’s cuts. Expenditures had actually been tightly controlled during the Getty years, and deficits and debts were mainly the result of revenues having temporarily declined during the period of low prices for oil; they would be quickly restored when oil prices rose again. Klein had also ignored the province’s considerable tax room, the envy of every other province, in favour of a business narrative that suggested that an “Alberta advantage” of low across-the-board taxes was necessary for attracting investment. With regard to medical care spending, for example, Alberta spent 7.9 percent of its GDP on health care before the cuts began, while the country as a whole spent 9.7 percent. Per capita spending on health care had peaked in 1987; Taft writes, “I have never seen reliable data to support Ralph Klein’s claims that in the years before he became premier, health care spending in Alberta had ‘tripled,’ or that costs were ‘soaring,’ ‘skyrocketing,’ or ‘out of control.’”48

Taft’s conclusions are echoed by economist Greg Flanagan, who suggests that program spending during the Getty period was relatively stable. The main reason for provincial deficits and debt was the money risked and then lost on new industries. Since oil and gas revenues were temporarily low when Klein assumed office but it was inevitable that they would pick up again, “the deficit would soon have disappeared regardless of what the government did on the expenditure side of the ledger.”49 As for tax room, in 1993, before the Klein cuts started, Alberta spent the lowest proportion of provincial GDP on government expenditure: 22 percent, compared to a mean for all the provinces of 27 percent. By 2003, the Alberta figure had dropped to 13 percent against a provincial mean of 22 percent. Flanagan notes that “the role of government as stabilizer was abandoned, as regulator was considerably reduced, and as provider of public goods was diminished.”50 The poor, he suggests, were hit hardest by the government’s cutbacks, a claim that various articles in two books by the Parkland Institute documented closely.51 The wealthy were favoured by the Klein tax policies. Flat taxes alone cost the provincial treasury $5.5 billion in potential income from higher-income Albertans in 2006.52

The government’s message that spending was out of control in 1993 and that therefore weapons of mass destruction were the antidote for the provincial budget was, on the whole, false, or at least an artifact of ideology rather than an accurate portrayal of either the state of provincial finances or the capacity of the Alberta government to spend. But it might nonetheless be
argued that the government was reflecting the views of Albertans generally that reining in spending rather than maintaining social programs should be the government’s first priority. Klein’s re-election with large majorities in 1997, 2001, and 2004 does demonstrate that his party remained the most popular party in the province. Klein could also argue that he had consulted widely in the period after provincial deficits gave way to surpluses on how the province should spend. Certainly, his government carried out a series of consultations and polls leading to the Alberta Growth Summit in September 1997. The consultations and polls indicated that what people wanted most was to rebuild the programs that had been slimmed down during the first Klein mandate. The Alberta Growth Summit was more conservative, but that was because the government chose the participants, provided all the background documents, and steered the overall summit in the conservative direction that it felt most appropriate. In any case, the government did not bind itself to following the advice that came from its various consultations, treating them all as part of an exercise in communicating the openness of what was, in fact, a very closed government.53

Indeed, the jury is out as to how conservative Albertans truly are. On the one hand, as sociologist Harry Hiller has argued, the province’s conservative reputation has attracted migrants from other provinces who see it as a low-tax province without the heavy hand of the state on citizens’ behaviour or their pocketbooks.54 Yet, as political scientist Doreen Barrie maintains, there is a large liberal element in the province as evidenced in surveys on a variety of social and economic issues. She believes that conservatives in the province succeed both provincially and federally because they have proven able to create and maintain a mythology of an evil federal government determined to rob them of their birthright.55 While that may explain why the Progressive Conservative Party has done so well in Alberta, it does not help to explain why the Klein Conservatives, whose battles with Ottawa were tame compared to those of the Lougheed Conservatives, managed to sell a far more conservative agenda than their Conservative predecessors. Klein’s consistent message provides much of the explanation: he did not usually sell cuts as an absolute good to create more freedom for individuals because that would not have gone over well with Albertans, who wanted to have their cake and eat it too: they wanted both low taxes and exceptional public services. Instead, he sold cuts as necessary because the province was going broke, and his ability to
control communications within the province meant that only a minority of Albertans got a glimpse of the arguments of those who claimed that Klein was exaggerating the province’s financial problems, if not fabricating the evidence for impending financial disaster out of whole cloth.

Klein and his advisors also had their ears to the ground as to how far they could go before the public turned against them. After a November 1995 strike by unionized Calgary hospital laundry workers, who faced job losses, almost triggered a province-wide strike of all health care workers, the government, aware that the laundry workers were being embraced as heroes by much of the population, not only made concessions to the laundry workers but significantly scaled back further health care cuts it was planning. Klein was quite public about his turnaround, noting in good populist fashion: “I’ve said before if we reach a roadblock and we have to make a detour, we will do that…. We’re getting the feeling people are impacted by the overall health care restructuring.”^56 From the 1997 election onwards, as the government began to spend money on health care and other services again, it always insisted that funds were available for such spending because the earlier cuts had allowed the government to gradually get the province out of debt.

Klein’s ability to use his communications strategy to convey the government’s priorities went beyond the success of the campaign to make cutbacks look necessary. In the early 2000s, the Alberta government, which was vigorously opposing the Kyoto agreement on behalf of the energy companies that were the Conservatives’ chief financial backers, was dismayed to find that national polls suggested that two-thirds of Albertans, along with a similar majority of Canadians as a whole, wanted Canada to ratify this agreement that required Canada to make substantial cuts in its greenhouse gas emissions. Much as it did with the National Energy Program, the governing party, assuming that its position allowed it to use government revenues to promote the views of the governing party, filled every home with slick pamphlets and television, radio, and newspaper advertisements that used scare tactics to condemn Kyoto. The campaign suggested that the Alberta government had a plan to preserve the integrity of Alberta’s environment at the same time that it allowed unrestricted growth in the energy industry, including the Alberta tar sands. This campaign succeeded since polls demonstrated a substantial decline in Kyoto support in Alberta over a short time.^57
But how honest was the message that this communications campaign conveyed? As with the financial message, it would seem that the government was disguising the potential harmful impacts of its plans. It appears to have had no plan other than to let the tar sands companies carry on as they saw fit. While $200 billion had been invested in the tar sands by 2008, including pipelines and upgraders, making it the world's largest energy project and largest construction site, journalist Andrew Nikiforuk wrote in 2009, “No comprehensive assessment of the megaproject's environmental, economic, or social impact has been done.” He added, “Easy wealth has turned Alberta into a petrotyranny, while Canada has adopted all the trappings of an imperious oil kingdom, with a profound bitumen bias.” Though he would never use such tough language to describe the policies followed by Ralph Klein, Peter Lougheed became one of the province's toughest critics of the government's unwillingness to regulate the pace of tar sands development and its failure to require that the companies involved be required to build upgraders in Alberta rather than simply export raw bitumen.

**Ed Stelmach’s Conservatives**

When Ralph Klein resigned as premier in late 2006, his replacement, Ed Stelmach, was virtually unknown to most Albertans. But he was able to win another mandate for the Tories easily in 2008, despite some grumbling from energy companies about his plans to modestly increase royalties on resources. At the time, Big Oil saw the alternative to the Tories, the provincial Liberals, as less friendly to their interests than the Conservatives. In the period following the election, they would hedge their bets on the Tories by generously funding the Wild Rose Alliance, previously viewed as a fringe right-wing party mainly interested in defending rural interests and social conservatism. The goal of the energy industry seemed to be both to have an alternative government friendly to their industry ready to govern should the Tories falter and to use support for that alternative governing party as a lever to pressure the Tories to renege on their royalty increases.

Ed Stelmach, though his own impulses seemed initially less authoritarian than Ralph Klein's, seemed gradually to follow almost instinctively both substantive and communication policies that had worked in the Klein era. Communications remained centralized, and critics of the government were
Members of the legislature who said anything critical in public were removed from caucus. Stelmach, however, lacked the charisma to get away with such bullying. Perhaps Albertans were finally simply getting sick of the Tories. Perhaps the nasty recession that struck in late 2008 and ended what had seemed an unending energy boom made people anxious to look for new leaders. Stelmach’s key problem, though, was that he was not a showman like Ralph Klein. Like Harry Strom and Don Getty, he did not project much of anything to Albertans. He lacked Klein’s populist impulse that could make a premier who was arguably in the pockets of oil companies seem to be an everyman, whose concern at all times was, as he said endlessly, to think about the views and needs of “Henry and Martha.” Stelmach resigned in 2011, and the party chose Alison Redford, formerly the provincial minister of justice, as the new party leader and premier in September of that year.

Conclusions

Parties that present themselves as the personification of all Albertans rather than mere policy-driven political organizations have struck a chord with voters throughout most of the province’s history. They have been able to create long-lasting political dynasties when they have found charismatic leaders who embodied aspirations of significant sections of the population at a given time. Communication strategies reflected efforts to create a unity of purpose between the governing party and the people. Christian beliefs in the period before significant urbanization united most Albertans. Social Credit relied on an image of righteousness and tight controls of the public purse that appeared to hide the fact that for much of its period in power, the party was venal and secretive about at least some of its economic policies. The imposing personalities of Aberhart and Manning caused their Christian-minded supporters to have few doubts about the integrity of the regime. It was only when the rather boring Harry Strom took power at a point when younger Albertans and newcomers to the province failed to identify with a religious-based Social Credit regime that the dynasty, unable to create a more modern image, began to crumble rapidly.

Peter Lougheed, who kept whatever religious beliefs he had to himself, developed a more sophisticated communications strategy that gave him the aura of JFK and “the man from Prudential” of advertising fame rolled
into one. He and his cabinets presented themselves as prudent but visionary economic managers, taking advantage of the very real concerns that Albertans had developed about whether the province could survive over the long haul as a one-trick pony. While his government did indeed have ambitious plans to diversify the Alberta economy, it largely failed in this objective. The spectacular failure of the Principal Group in the early Getty years raised questions about just how deserved the Lougheed government’s “prudent economic manager” image really was. His successor, Don Getty, proved unable to develop a communications strategy that would give his government the same image of competence that the Lougheed government exuded. If the Lougheed and Getty governments could nevertheless at least be given credit for having some vision of the public good, however flawed, the Klein government seemed obsessed with cutbacks and reducing the overall role of government in Alberta. It developed a centralized, intelligent policy for conveying its neo-liberal policies as in the interests of balanced economic development for Alberta. But all that materialized was uncontrolled tar sands development, which will likely define the province’s economic and political directions for the foreseeable future. Klein’s populist anti-government spin proved almost as effective as Lougheed’s patrician approach in limiting the advance of a partisan opposition in Alberta. While Lougheed caught the wave of concern about apparently depleting energy resources in the 1970s to create a somewhat state-centred version of Conservatism for the province, Klein took advantage of the disillusionment with the failure of the Lougheed-Getty vision to refashion the provincial Progressive Conservative Party as the party of minimal government and minimal taxation. Each man had both the personality and a supportive communications strategy to use the same party as the tribune for their rather different approaches to the role of government.

NOTES

1 C. B. Macpherson, in Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), was the first to accuse Albertans of subscribing to plebiscitarian ideas rather than accepting the party system. While the first-past-the-post system wildly exaggerates the extent to which Albertans as a whole fail to consider opposition parties as the answer to governments that seem to be failing their citizens, it also creates legislatures in which such parties have little representation. That leads to demoralization. So, for example, when the CCF won one of every four votes in 1944
but only two seats in the legislature, it began to fall apart; by the time the 1948 election occurred, it had a membership only one-third as large as its 1944 membership. Alvin Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 125–26.


On religion in Alberta more generally, see W. E. Mann, *Sect, Cult and Church in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955).


Simon Kiss, “Selling Government: The Evolution of Government Public Relations in Alberta” (PhD diss., Queen’s University, 2008), 68.


Brennan, *The Good Steward*, 120.


Ibid.


Ibid., 371–72.


23 John Richards and Larry Pratt, Prairie Capitalism: Power and Influence in the New West (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), chap. 7.
25 Tamara Kozlowska, interview with Alvin Finkel, Edmonton, December 1, 2009.
29 Lisac, The Klein Revolution, 30, 32.
32 Leyton-Brown, Canadian Annual Review, 247.
35 Ibid., 113.
38 Vivone, Ralph Could Have Been a Superstar, 6.
This calculation was made by my colleague Jeff Taylor after he read Klein’s essay. Taylor noted that Klein, despite his conservatism, was lifting materials at random from the web, including materials that were clearly Marxist in their orientation that he quoted uncritically along with more conservative materials, all mishmashed together without any indication that the student saw the differences among these various materials.

As a professor at the university, I joined a conspiracy of silence in which we refused media requests for comment. No one in management directed us to remain silent. There was a general understanding that any comments to the media or any effort to punish this student for failing to cite his sources could result in arbitrary reductions to the Athabasca University government grant.

Vivone, Ralph Could Have Been a Superstar, 112.

Athabasca University’s plagiarism policy at the time defined plagiarism as follows: “The willful act of presenting another person’s work as one’s own without the proper academic acknowledgment and recognition.” Athabasca University Calendar 2007–08, 258.

Kevin Taft, Shredding the Public Interest: Ralph Klein and Twenty-five Years of One-Party Government (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1999), 95.


Ibid., 122.


Doreen Barrie, The Other Alberta: Decoding a Political Enigma (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2006).


Andrew Nikiforuk, Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2008), 2. As Nikiforuk notes, before the 1980s, bitumen sands were
commonly referred to by all as tar sands. The term conveys the extent to which bitumen is a viscous entity, which requires that large amounts of fresh water be mixed with it before it becomes a usable petroleum product. Critics of tar sands development emphasized the large-scale use of fresh water and the huge carbon dioxide emissions that characterized the extraction of bitumen. In an effort to minimize the differences in environmental degradation associated with the tar sands in comparison to conventional oil, during the 1980s the energy industry rebranded the tar sands as “oil sands.” By 2000, most of the conventional media forbade the use of the term “tar sands.” Nikiforuk’s views are echoed in a number of works on the tar sands, including Marsden, Stupid to the Last Drop, and Don Woynillowicz, Chris Severson-Baker, and Marlo Reynolds, Oil Sands Fever: The Environmental Implications of Canada’s Oil Sands Rush (Drayton Valley: Pembina Institute, 2005). The government’s own take on the oil sands is found at Alberta Energy, “Oil Sands Frequently Asked Questions,” http://www.energy.gov.ab.ca/OilSands/792.asp.

59 Nikiforuk, Tar Sands, 166.

60 “Peter Lougheed Speaks Out: An Interview with Alberta’s Iconic Ex-Premier,” Oil Week, January 30, 2008.

61 Insight into Government reported on the large donations that oil companies were making to the Wild Rose Alliance in 2009.

62 For example, when four top public health officials quit in June 2008, the government did not allow them to speak publicly about their reasons for resigning and claimed that they left for other jobs because they wanted more money than the government was willing to pay. But infectious disease expert Dr. Stan Houston of the University of Alberta revealed publicly that one of the health officials who was leaving claimed that she was getting little government support for combating a syphilis epidemic in the province. The acting chief medical officer of the Department of Health, Dr. Gerry Predy, responded by filing a complaint against Houston with the College of Physicians and Surgeons for his public comments. The College, according to Houston, simply asked him to elaborate on his comments, and no discipline was applied. But the lengthy process, during which Houston was unsurprisingly advised by his lawyer not to comment on the matter to the media, allowed the original issue to slip by before Houston was in the clear. Brian Mason, M.L.A., Highlands-Norwood, Alberta Hansard, November 5, 2008, 1778–79.

63 Guy Boutilier, a cabinet minister under Klein, criticized the government for doing an about-face on its promise to build a long-term care facility in his constituency of Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. Premier Stelmach ousted him from the P.C. caucus for this action, claiming that MLAs who had criticisms of the government should make those criticisms behind closed doors in caucus meetings, not in public.