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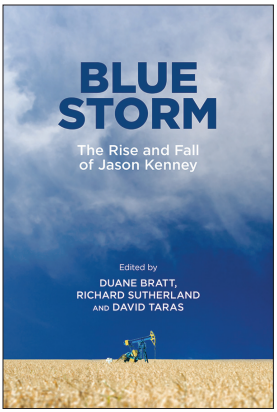

BLUE STORM: THE RISE AND FALL OF JASON KENNEY

Edited by Duane Bratt, Richard Sutherland and David Taras

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Introduction: Jason Kenney and the Perfect Storm

Duane Bratt, Richard Sutherland, and Lisa Young

When Jason Kenney drove his blue Dodge Ram pickup truck into the convention hall on election night in April 2019, he was celebrating a landslide victory that returned the province to "normal." After two years of campaigning to win the leadership of both the Progressive Conservative (PC) and Wildrose parties, merging them into a new United Conservative Party (UCP), and then soundly defeating Rachel Notley's New Democratic Party (NDP) government, Kenney seemed poised to join the likes of Manning, Lougheed, and Klein in the pantheon of long-serving Alberta conservative premiers. Instead, only three years later, Kenney stood in front of a much smaller crowd of supporters to announce that he would step down as party leader after receiving only 51.4 per cent yes votes in the 18 May 2022 UCP leadership review.

This book tells the rise and fall story of the Kenney government's ambitious plans to return to "true" conservatism reminiscent of the early Klein years, and how these plans were received. It examines the Kenney government's efforts to will the province out of its sense of decline by taking on national and international forces calling for a shift away from fossil fuels. It traces the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the internal tensions in the UCP, and enumerates the tragic consequences of the government's inability to manage the situation.

Just as Jason Kenney was the centre of attention on election night in 2019, he remained a central and increasingly controversial figure in the

government his party formed. Through many of the chapters, the book tells the story of hubris: excessive pride and self-confidence that left Jason Kenney resigning before finishing his first term.

From Orange Chinook to Blue Storm

In 2019 we, along with Keith Brownsey and David Taras, co-edited *Orange Chinook*.[1] We felt that the 2015 election of the NDP and Premier Rachel Notley was such a notable event that it needed to be documented in a major academic study. The NDP not only replaced the forty-four-year PC political dynasty, but also it represented a dramatic ideological turn for a historically dominant conservative province. *Orange Chinook* explained the breakthrough election victory and also examined the first three years of the Notley government. The Notley years saw the creation of the Climate Leadership Plan (CLP), fights over pipelines, changes to the tax structure, reforms to party financing, an ill-fated farm bill, and a host of other changes to Alberta's political and cultural system. The 2019 election, which saw the NDP lose to the new UCP, was initially seen as the second half of the same story.

If 2015–2019 was a dramatic shift away from conservatism, 2019 was the backlash and the restoration of conservative rule under the leadership of UCP Premier Jason Kenney. One of us was at the UCP election night victory party at Calgary's Big Four building. In speaking to UCP staffers at the end of the evening, they promised a return to Alberta conservatism. They did not just mean replacing the NDP, they were also referring to previous PC governments that they felt were insufficiently conservative (Stelmach, Redford, Prentice). In other words, they promised a return to the conservativism of Ralph Klein in the 1990s. The UCP would form government with a massive set of campaign promises that sought to reverse many of the NDP's policies, reclaim the glory days of oil and gas prosperity, cut back on the size of the public sector, confront the federal government, and institute more conservative social policies.

The first book had orange (NDP's colour) in its title, so we wanted blue (UCP's colour) in the title of this book. Within a year of the election, we realized that *Blue Storm* would be an appropriate title. This is because, by March 2020, the UCP's carefully crafted agenda was sideswiped by the arrival of the COVID-19 storm. This unprecedented health

pandemic also had far-reaching economic consequences and social dislocation. The Kenney government had to reorient its scheduled agenda to address COVID-19. However, in other respects, they decided to persevere with their agenda, sometimes to disastrous consequences, in the midst of COVID-19. This book analyzes the UCP agenda in the context of COVID-19.

However, COVID-19 was not the only storm facing Jason Kenney and his UCP government; they also confronted substantial political turmoil. Prominent Alberta pollster and political commentator Janet Brown regularly says that a premier has three main audiences: 1) the public, 2) the party caucus, and 3) the party donors. On all three indicators, there were storm clouds that swirled around Kenney leading to his resignation. As Brooks DeCillia shows in his chapter, the NDP passed the UCP in public opinion polls in June 2020, but because of the vagaries of seat distribution was not in a position to form a majority government until March 2021. If an election had been held in May 2022, the NDP would easily have formed a majority government. Kenney's approval rating was the lowest of any Canadian premier and was stuck in the high 20 per cent (the lowest of any Alberta premier since just before Alison Redford resigned). When it comes to caucus, as David Stewart and Anthony Sayers describe in their chapter, two former MLA critics of Kenney were expelled from caucus, two MLAs have been demoted, and other MLAs have been openly critical of Kenney's leadership. Adding to Kenney's woes was the re-emergence of Brian Jean, the former Wildrose leader and failed 2017 UCP leadership candidate. In March 2022, Jean was elected as a UCP MLA in a by-election in Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche (Jean's old riding) on an explicit platform of Kenney resigning as UCP leader.[2] Finally, UCP donors appear to be abandoning the party. Even in the era of stricter party financing rules, governing parties usually have a huge fundraising advantage, and conservative parties usually have a huge fundraising advantage over progressive parties. Therefore, it is shocking that over the last two years, the opposition NDP has raised several million dollars more than the UCP (see Table 0.1).

Table 0.1. Party Fundraising (2020–2022)

	2020	2021	JANUARY–JUNE 2022
NDP	$5,059,537.66	$6,152,003.93	$2,467,675.38
UCP	$3,747,753.11	$3,795,701.01	$1, 409, 149. 70

Note: The 2022 figures do not include donations to UCP constituencies, because recent reporting changes only require those numbers at the end of the year. The NDP does not have separate donations to its constituencies.

Sources: Elections Alberta, "Financial Disclosure—Parties," accessed on 3 August 2022 at https://efpublic.elections.ab.ca/efParties.cfm?MID=FP.

Revisiting the 2019 Election

The book begins with three chapters on the 2019 election. Graham Thomson summarizes the election campaign that saw the UCP form a majority government. The formal campaign was twenty-eight days, but in reality the 2019 campaign began when Jason Kenney won the UCP leadership on 28 October 2017 and continued to election day on 16 April 2019. It was a battle between two parties, two very different ideologies, and two powerful politicians. Rachel Notley was an incumbent premier challenged by Jason Kenney, a former senior federal cabinet minister. Kenney ran on a slogan of "jobs, economy, pipelines" and fixated on ending the economic recession that dogged Notley throughout her time as premier. Given the weakness of the Alberta economy, Notley decided not to run on her record. Instead, the NDP, through the surrogate of Health Minister Sarah Hoffman, responded by attacking Kenney's past record as a social conservative as well as other UCP candidates. Kenney won the election by largely sweeping Calgary and rural Alberta seats. Thomson concludes, in a foreshadowing of the rest of the book, "Kenney was about to discover that winning the election was the easy part. Governing would prove to be much more difficult."

Peter Malachy Ryan and Kate Toogood follow with a chapter that examines the parties' digital campaign: websites, apps, and social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). They make two key arguments. First, Alberta is turning from a historical one-party dominant system (the successive political dynasties of the Liberals, United Farmers of Alberta, Social Credit, and PCs) to a two-party system (UCP and NDP).

Second, there was a strategic communication framing with the NDP portrayed as a nurturing parent, while the UCP was seen as the strict parent.

Brooks DeCillia concludes the section on the 2019 election with a focus on public opinion polling. The election was not close (UCP won a majority government and had a 22-point lead in the popular vote), despite the media narrative in the last two weeks that the campaign was tightening. This is because the media was relying upon nine polls (half of the total that were publicly released) that showed the gap between the UCP and NDP was in single digits. DeCillia analyzes the accuracy of the public polls in the 2019 campaign to explain why they were so off the mark and critically analyzes the news media's reporting about the polls. He also goes beyond the 2019 campaign to demonstrate that the UCP government had a short honeymoon and by May 2022 were facing a massive loss in a 2023 election.

Inside the United Conservative Party

David K. Stewart and Anthony M. Sayers in their chapter detail some of the challenges that Jason Kenney faced within the UCP. Stewart and Sayers argue that COVID-19 did not create the divisions within the UCP; instead it amplified existing tensions of a party that is only a few years removed from its merger of the PC and Wildrose parties. Stewart and Sayers use surveys of party supporters in 2015 and 2019 and an analysis of party activists at the 2020 UCP policy convention to demonstrate that there are significant internal divisions within the UCP that go well beyond COVID-19 or the unpopularity of Premier Kenney's leadership. Changing unpopular leaders to present a new image with a new election on the horizon has been a frequent pattern of conservative parties in Alberta. All governing parties do this in Canada, but only in Alberta has it frequently led to electoral victory instead of an impending loss. During the last decades of the PC dynasty, the party replaced an unpopular Don Getty with Ralph Klein. When Klein started to become unpopular after over a dozen years in office, he was replaced by Ed Stelmach. When Ed Stelmach became unpopular, he was replaced with Alison Redford. And when Redford became unpopular, she was dumped in favour of Jim Prentice. Now the UCP is attempting the same trick by replacing Kenney.

In fall 2019, Justin Trudeau and the federal Liberals were re-elected, albeit with a minority government. However, the party was wiped out in Alberta, losing all four of the seats that it had won in 2015 with the lowest Liberal vote share in history (which is quite a feat, considering the party's unpopularity in the province). Trudeau's re-election sparked a noticeable rise in separatist sentiment in Alberta. In response, the Kenney government convened a Fair Deal Panel to hold town halls across the province and conduct research on a set of proposals to increase Alberta's autonomy within Canada. The most high-profile of these involved a referendum on the federal equalization program, creating an Alberta tax collection agency (replacing Revenue Canada), creating an Alberta provincial police force (replacing the Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP]), and creating an Alberta Pension Plan (withdrawing from the Canadian Pension Plan). Jared Wesley's chapter analyzes these efforts. He makes clear that these fair-deal proposals did not emerge from thin air but had been first promoted in the famous firewall letter of 2001 (written to then-Alberta Premier Ralph Klein by Stephen Harper and other prominent conservative thinkers) and had circulated among Alberta conservative intellectuals for two decades. Western alienation is as old as Alberta, but Wesley argues that these populist approaches have become more aggressive in recent years and are not only out of step with public opinion, but also have a potential to backfire.

Wesley discusses broadly the fair-deal proposals, while Doug King focuses narrowly on one of them: the proposal for an Alberta provincial police force. King links legitimate fears of rural crime with the proposal to replace the RCMP with an Alberta provincial policy force. The case of Eddie Maurice, who shot a trespasser on his ranch outside of Okotoks, is highlighted to show the unique challenges of policing in rural Alberta and the response of the UCP government. In this way, the desire for greater provincial autonomy meshed with the other UCP goal of combatting rural crime. As King notes, replacing the RCMP is not popular among the public (including in rural Alberta), it would also be substantially more expensive for the province and municipalities, but there are clear indications that the UCP government will still pursue it because those who do support it constitute the UCP base. King also examines the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions by the police, the defund-the-police movement,

and the removal of UCP Justice Minister Kaycee Madu for calling the Edmonton police chief over a personal traffic ticket.

Melanee Thomas contrasts the approach to gender and women between the UCP and its predecessor NDP government. While Rachel Notley had a gender-equal cabinet with women in many senior positions, women were under-represented in Kenney's cabinet and caucus. This did not mean that gender and masculinity were insignificant to the Kenney government; instead, Thomas argues that, "like many conservative and populist parties," gender and especially masculinity are central to the UCP and explain its representation and policy priorities. Thomas empirically assesses the UCP's performance in four areas of gender and women representation (descriptive, substantive, symbolic, and affective). She does this through candidate/MLA/cabinet counts and content analysis of Hansard.

The back cover of *Blue Storm* includes a photo of Jason Kenney arriving at his election-night victory party in his famous blue Dodge Ram truck. This was chosen because it captures the sense of optimism by UCP supporters that the election of the Kenney government would mean a return to economic prosperity, but also because it included the iconic blue truck. Chaseten Remillard and Tyler Nagel dedicate an entire chapter to assessing the symbolism of the blue Dodge Ram. Kenney conducted three major tours of Alberta: 1) in 2016 as part of the PC leadership race, 2) in 2019 during the provincial election, and 3) in 2021 as part of "Open for Summer." For each tour, Kenney used the same blue truck, and it was no accident. As Remillard and Nagel write, "[t]he image of Kenney and his truck aligned his own personal political brand with the well-trodden symbology of the pickup truck, and brought together powerful myths of Alberta exceptionalism, sovereignty, anti-elitism, and populist homogeneity." However, critics would not see the blue truck as a positive symbol. Instead, they would see the truck as "a symbol of an antiquated, troubled (and troubling) reliance on old thinking about resource management, exclusionary and pugilist politics, and conservative (non-liberal) populist values and politics."

Oil and Gas Policies

The next section of the book explores, in different ways, the importance of the oil and gas sector in Alberta. Duane Bratt examines the climate policy of the Kenney government. The signature policy of the Notley government was the CLP. From the moment that it was announced in November 2015, Alberta's conservative opposition (Wildrose, PCs, and then the merged UCP) railed against the consumer-based carbon tax and the rest of the CLP. However, on closer examination there is a lot more continuity between the Notley and Kenney governments on climate policy than appears. Despite quickly repealing the carbon tax, Albertans continue to pay a different version because the federal government carbon tax backstop kicked in soon after the removal of the provincial one. The Kenney government, along with other allies among conservative provincial government, sued the federal government over its carbon tax backstop, but the Supreme Court upheld the federal government's jurisdiction. As for the other components of the CLP—coal phaseout, an emissions cap on oil sands production, and methane reduction—they remain in place, and in some cases are even more stringent. This is a good news story, but something that the Kenney government does not want to publicly acknowledge. This contraction between rhetoric (defending the oil and gas sector) and reality (an improving climate record) is explained with a contrast between the Public Kenney and the Private Kenney. The Public Kenney is a fierce defender of Alberta's oil and gas sector and critic of the Trudeau government, but the Private Kenney is working behind the scenes to reduce Alberta's carbon footprint and is working with the Trudeau government to do so.

The difficulties of building pipelines to get Alberta's oil to market has plagued successive governments. In his chapter, Jean-Sébastien Rioux uses the concept of hubris to explain why there was such a wide gap between Kenney's rhetoric on pipelines (only he could get them built) versus the sustained lack of success he has had in getting pipelines built. Kenney promised he would get Trudeau to repeal Bills C-48 (tanker ban off the northwest coast of British Columbia) and C-69 (which Kenney always referred to as the "no more pipelines" bill), as well as fight other Canadian provinces and environmental non-government organizations (ENGOs). This would revive the old Northern Gateway and Energy East pipeline

projects. Unfortunately, despite Kenney's efforts, he was not able to repeal federal legislation nor restart old pipeline projects. Rioux also traces the ill-fated decision to invest in the Keystone XL pipeline. Keystone XL would take Alberta crude through the United States to refineries along the Gulf of Mexico. The Obama Administration had refused to sign a permit for Keystone XL, then the Trump administration approved it. But, on his first day in office, newly elected US President Joe Biden revoked federal approval. Over $1.5 billion of Alberta taxpayers' money went down the drain.

Rounding out the discussion of oil and gas, Brad Clark provides an analysis of the controversial war room. The war room (officially known as the Canadian Energy Centre) was created by the Kenney government to respond to the perceived misinformation being spread by ENGOs about Alberta's oil and gas sector. Modelled on political parties' war rooms during an election campaign, the war room was intended to respond quickly to ENGOs' claims and would defend and promote Alberta's oil and gas sector. However, Clark argues that the war room, since its launch in late 2019, "has become best known for its frequent missteps and belligerent tone, its credibility as the arbiter of lies and myths frequently shredded." Clark notes that the war room "has sought to take on the air of credibility associated with institutions associated with informational rigor, namely journalism and academic research." However, in practice the war room has been "highly selective in the voices and perspectives it incorporates, narrowly amplifying themes consistent with UCP rhetoric, attacking, discounting, or excluding legitimate points of view." For over two years, the war room has been such a constant source of ridicule that the Allan Inquiry into foreign funding of ENGOs was forced to acknowledge that it had "come under almost universal criticism."[3]

Alberta's Fiscal Situation

Is Alberta in decline? At one level that seems like a silly question. Despite a sustained economic downturn that started in late 2014, Albertans remain the richest people in Canada. But, by the time of the April 2019 provincial election, Alberta had had lingering high unemployment, increased personal and business bankruptcies, massive government budget deficits, large downtown vacancy rates in Calgary, and other negative economic statistics for over five years. Moreover, its primary industry (oil and gas)

seemed to be under sustained attack from ENGOs, other governments, large private investors, and insurance companies. Reversing this economic decline was the centrepiece of the UCP election campaign and in Kenney's victory speech on 16 April 2019, he pledged, "[h]elp is on the way, and hope is on the horizon!" It is in this context that Trevor Tombe examines the fiscal situation in Alberta. Tombe notes that, "Alberta has been managing a steady fiscal decline for over four decades," but despite the illusionary aspects of good times at various points over this time, the challenge has worsened. The essential problem is an overreliance by the government on resource revenue. This was a challenge that both the Notley and Kenney governments (like previous PC ones) have ignored, in the hopes that resource revenue would rebound (which it did in 2022). However, Tombe argues that the UCP government has made the situation worse due to implementing tax cuts, making it even more dependent on natural resource revenue. Then COVID-19 exacerbated the strain on Alberta's finances. Tombe argues that these fiscal hurdles are not insurmountable, but it will take a combination of spending cuts and tax increases to properly address them.

Roger Epp's chapter focuses on rural Alberta, a region that he says has been in decline for over a generation. One of Epp's challenges is defining rural Alberta, which he says is not just the parts of Alberta outside of Edmonton and Calgary, but also outside of smaller cities (e.g., Red Deer or Lethbridge) and satellite communities on the edges of the big cities (e.g., Sherwood Park or Airdrie). It is also not homogeneous, "rural is agrarian, northern-boreal, industrial, Indigenous, acreage-residential, and mountain playground." For Epp, the major challenge facing rural Alberta is not just economic or political, but demographic disappearance. As young people increasingly move to the cities, small towns and villages fear the loss of hospitals and schools, and in some cases, the disappearance of the municipality itself. This has led to resentment similar to what is seen in the rural parts of the United States, but Epp argues that this narrative is insufficient for two reasons. First, the Kenney government has "demonstrated that its strongest interest in rural Alberta lies in resource extraction, not communities." This was best illustrated by the rural backlash against the UCP plan to re-institute coal mining in the eastern slopes of the Rockies. Second, Epp argues that rural Alberta is not just a place of

decline; it is also a place that is adapting to reality, as evidenced by initiatives like renewable energy projects.

Alberta's economy is often described as a boom-bust cycle due to the volatility of the oil and gas sector. In periods of economic bust, there are loud calls for economic diversification to reduce the province's dependency on oil and gas. Richard Sutherland demonstrates that cultural industries have become one of the diversification targets by the UCP government. In particular, Sutherland examines film and television production and video game development. Soon after being elected in 2019, the UCP cut its financial assistance (grants and tax credits) to cultural industries. As Sutherland notes, this was part of a general repealing of the previous NDP government's policies. However, by early 2021, the UCP reversed course when Jobs and Economic Development Minister Doug Schweitzer announced new financial supports to film and television productions as part of its Economic Recovery Plan, which quickly succeeded. By November 2021, film and television production had become a rare bright light in Alberta's economy. The video games sector suffered the same initial drop in financial assistance when the UCP came to power, but unlike the case with film and television productions, there was no policy reversal. Explaining the differential treatment of these two main cultural industries is one of the themes of Sutherland's chapter.

Health Care, Education, and Public Sector Policies

Health care and education policy (K–12 and post-secondary) is in the jurisdiction of provincial governments. They represent, by far, the largest spending envelopes of any Alberta government. Surprisingly, when we published *Orange Chinook* we did not include any chapters on health care and education. This was because there was nothing really controversial or novel in the NDP's approach. That has not been the case with the UCP government, which set out to make fundamental structural changes to health care, K–12, and post-secondary education. One of the government's first acts was to appoint former Saskatchewan NDP Finance Minister Janice MacKinnon—who had instituted significant cuts to provincial spending in the 1990s—to lead a blue-ribbon commission to advise on the province's finances. The MacKinnon report laid out the blueprint for restructuring and reducing government spending, particularly in

health care, post-secondary education, and public-sector compensation and bargaining.

Spending on health care comprises 42 per cent of the provincial budget; it is the single-largest spending item,[4] so wrestling with rising health care costs is a challenge for any provincial government. The MacKinnon report emphasized that Alberta spent more per capita on health care than other big provinces (Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia) and recommended reducing the wages of doctors and nurses, and the contracting out of some hospital services. In her chapter, Gillian Steward notes that when then-Health Minister Tyler Shandro tried to implement these recommendations, it resulted in a fierce backlash with medical professionals responding by retiring, moving to different provinces, or withdrawing services. Rural clinics, in particular, were hard hit. Remarkably, the government did not abandon its efforts to reduce the compensation of medical professionals even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Turning to education, Charles Webber examines Alberta's kindergarten to grade 12 system with a focus on the adversarial relationship between the Alberta Teacher's Association (ATA) and the UCP government, controversial changes to the school curriculum, and the COVID-19 response. The ATA is publicly opposed to certain aspects of Alberta's educational system, in particular, school choice (private and public charter schools), standardized testing, and certain curriculum decisions. The UCP also has sought to reduce the power of the ATA by aiming to split its accreditation role from its collective bargaining role. The UCP promised to overhaul the school curriculum to promote greater literacy, numeracy, and citizenship, but its draft changes to the social study curriculum for K–6 students became another storm of controversy. Many teachers, and university education professors, described it as ideological social engineering that was filled with age-inappropriate and Eurocentric content, but lacking Indigenous content (especially around the history of residential schools). Due to these pedagogical concerns, most school boards have refused to pilot the draft curriculum. School boards, teachers, and parents have also complained that there were insufficient precautions to address the COVID-19 pandemic in schools. For almost two years, students have shifted between in-person to remote learning and back (often making the transition within hours). Mask use, vaccination requirements, and

extracurricular activities have been further COVID-19 issues. Webber discusses the long-term negative impact on learning, mental health, and socialization due to COVID-19.

In the case of post-secondary education, Lisa Young shows that, in successive budgets, the Kenney government has singled-out Alberta's universities and colleges for cuts to operating budgets. To compensate for this loss of revenue, Alberta's post-secondary institutions were encouraged to raise tuition (the NDP had frozen tuition for the four years it was in power but provided the institutions with a backfill grant), recruit international students (who pay higher tuition rates), and reduce employee wages. This approach is not unusual, as Young points out; for decades the funding of post-secondary education in Alberta has been on a fiscal roller coaster: "enjoying generous funding when times are good, and then hanging on while funding plunges in the harder times." But, this time is different because of the uncertainty that boom times will ever return combined with the expected rise in the number of Albertans in the prime age for post-secondary education.

Lori Williams turns to public-sector bargaining. She notes that for many decades Alberta governments (Notley's NDP notably the exception) have publicly dismissed and actively campaigned against socialism. When it comes to public-sector unions, Alberta's boom-bust economy is a critical variable. When times are good, Alberta has to pay public employees more than those in other provinces in order to retain them. However, when there is a downturn in the economy, one of the first targets of government restraint is public-sector wages. Given the long recession in Alberta, it was no surprise when Kenney formed government and declared war on labour. Williams carefully documents all of the anti-labour initiatives (legislation, contract negotiations, and control over pensions) pursued by the Kenney government. However, Williams also shows that the Kenney government has faced public pushback on these measures, due in no small measure, because his conception of Alberta's political history and culture is a caricature. In contrast, Williams argues that the reality of Alberta has presented "challenges for Kenney's vision that he did not anticipate, and has yet to effectively respond to."

COVID in Alberta and Ontario

Jonathan Malloy compares the Kenney government with the Ontario PC government led by Doug Ford. Ford and Kenney came to power within a year of each other, were both conservatives, campaigned as populists, replaced progressive governments, and aligned against the Trudeau government. The differences are just as striking. Kenney was a political lifer who had been a federal cabinet minister, while Ford had been a business owner before entering Toronto municipal politics. Kenney had merged two conservative parties, but Ford took over an existing PC party and moved it to the right. Malloy uses these similarities and differences to compare how Kenney and Ford handled COVID-19. He argues that there has been an ideological consistency to Kenney's approach, while Ford's reactions have been much more scattered. This helps to explain why Ford was easily re-elected with another majority government in Ontario, but Kenney was forced to resign before completing his first term.

The COVID-19 theme emerges in almost every chapter of this book, so it makes sense to conclude the book by pulling all of these threads together. Lisa Young's thesis is that COVID-19 "is a story of two mutually reinforcing failures." The health failure has resulted in over 4,300 dead Albertans, the postponement of tens of thousands of medical procedures, and the overwhelming of Alberta's health care system. In particular, the fourth wave (roughly August to November 2021) resulted in the highest COVID-19 case rates of any Canadian province. It emerged after Kenney prematurely announced that Alberta would be "Open for Summer," which led to the dropping of health restrictions and provided a disincentive for people to get vaccinated. The political failure was "a steady erosion in public support for the Kenney government, coupled with internal caucus strife that threatened the premier's hold on his office." The UCP caucus is split between those who opposed vaccine mandates and other health restrictions and those who believed that the Kenney government waited too long to respond and when it did its actions were confusing and incomplete.

Addressing COVID-19, largely unsuccessfully as Lisa Young writes, is *the* story of the Kenney government. The UCP's COVID-19 response was not the sole reason for Kenney announcing his resignation in May 2022,

but it was the most important reason. Young argues that these failures ended Kenney's political career.

Future of Alberta Politics

What about the future? At the time of writing, we do not know who will be on stage when the party leaders meet to debate during the 2023 provincial election. The NDP's Rachel Notley will certainly be there, seeking to demonstrate that her party's 2015 victory was no accident and to establish the NDP as an alternative governing party in a province prone to multi-decade dynasties. She will face the winner of the UCP's 2022 leadership contest. Notley will surely want to confront her opponent with the baggage of the very unpopular Kenney government, but the novelty of a change in leadership may make this difficult to accomplish. With Kenney staying on as premier until the fall of 2022, Danielle Smith will have a relatively short time to distance the party from the unpopular Kenney legacy.

It is within the realm of possible that Notley will face not one but two conservative party leaders in 2023. There are real risks of the UCP splintering. Kenney was the principal architect of the PC-Wildrose merger that resulted in the formation of the UCP. Therefore, it would be highly ironic if he was also in place if the UCP splintered. Duane Bratt and Bruce Foster have written that conservative parties, especially in Alberta, have had a habit of splintering and merging.[5] Conservatives are a tough group to lead, and COVID-19 simply exacerbated the internal tensions within the UCP.

For the past two decades, the politics of Alberta have been tumultuous. Ernest Manning served for twenty-five years as premier, and Peter Lougheed and Ralph Klein each served for fourteen. But since Klein left office in 2006, there have been seven premiers in seventeen years. It remains to be seen whether a new UCP leader can move beyond the Kenney government's troubles and establish another conservative political dynasty, or whether this period of tumult has been a transition to some kind of competitive two-party system.[6]

NOTES

1 Duane Bratt, Keith Brownsey, Richard Sutherland, and David Taras, eds., *Orange Chinook: Politics in the New Alberta* (University of Calgary Press: Calgary, 2019).

2 Mark Vallani, "Brian Jean targets Jason Kenney, rallying member votes for UCP leadership after byelection victory," *CTV Calgary News* (16 March 2022), https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/brian-jean-targets-jason-kenney-rallying-member-votes-for-ucp-leadership-after-byelection-victory-1.5822115

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