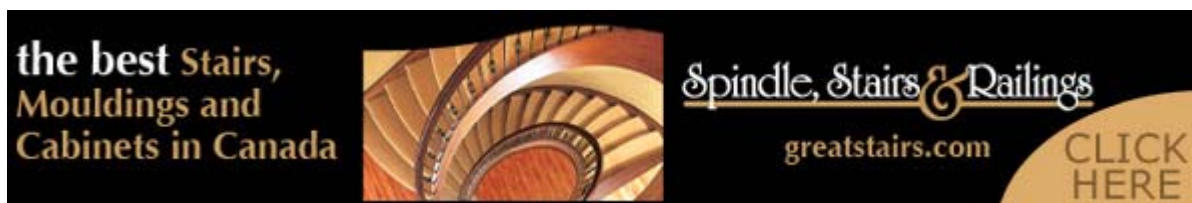




*Troy Media – by Doug Firby*

The people of Alberta appear eager for a political shift on a massive scale. All they need now is the right party and a modern vision to rally around. They're not looking for either a party of the traditional left or right, but a new paradigm in which ideology gets parked in the back lot in favour of plain good governance. It's reflected in polling and in recent voting.



Alberta is the seat of modern Canadian conservatism. Its “Calgary school” of academics leads the nation in conservative political thought and it is home to political icons like Ralph Klein, whose 1990s-era new conservatism inspired those of like mind on the right across the country.

And yet the mood of the province is changing. This weekend, the Alberta Conservatives – the very party that once made deficit fighting its number 1 goal – released the results of a poll that suggests the population is most concerned about the “pressing social deficit,” and that the province should base spending decisions on the public’s need for services, not on its ability to pay.

This, in the birthplace of debt-free governments.

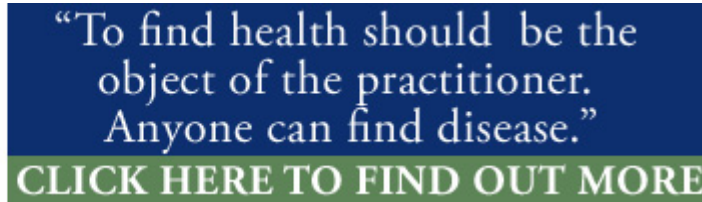
But the seeming new-found willingness to spend does not necessarily suggest a shift to the left on the political spectrum. Instead, it suggests a craving for more enlightened political leadership that makes decisions free of ideology. It was this same craving that drove the come-from-nowhere win of Naheed Nenshi as mayor of Calgary – Alberta’s biggest, richest and most influential city.

### **Political operatives undressed**

In doing so, Nenshi’s band of volunteers demolished both fiscal conservative Ric McIver (whose campaign was organized by the the well-polished election machine of Stephen Harper) and TV

personality Barb Higgins (who had Ralph Klein’s old masterminds behind her effort).

What is interesting is that Nenshi bristled andishes at being labelled either liberal or conservative. Perhaps to underscore the point, he was recently quoted as saying he shares much in common with Toronto’s fiscal hawk and new mayor, Rob Ford, a claim that surely befuddled many of Nenshi’s supporters who view him as “progressive.”



Most telling, though, is that the same poll the Tories released on the weekend reveals a stalemate among the existing parties. Voters, it seems, aren’t satisfied with any of the current options, a dangerous position for the established parties if a viable alternative emerges.

### **Wildrose surge stalls**

The survey of 601 Albertans conducted in June and October this year by the Toronto-based Innovative Research Group found that if an election were held today, 29 per cent would vote Conservative, 20 per cent would vote Wildrose, and 14 per cent would vote Liberal, with 15 per cent undecided. Faith in leaders broke down like this: 31 per cent say the Tories’ Ed Stelmach is the best choice for premier, 23 per cent favoured Wildrose Alliance leader Danielle Smith, the Liberals’ long-suffering David Swann received 10 per cent backing, and the NDP’s Leader Brian Mason got seven per cent support.

What’s significant, though, is the leadership undecideds. Fully 28 per cent of those polled picked none of the four leaders as a favourite. With a margin of error of plus or minus four per cent, that means that it’s possible more people preferred “none of the above” than any of the current leaders.

Tories seem to be best connected to the people: 27 per cent of Albertans believe the Conservative “stands for the values I believe in,” compared to 21 per cent for the Wildrose Alliance and 14 per cent for the Liberals.

The poll suggests Conservative and Wildrose voter are “really not all that different,” echoing a cynicism with politics captured by The Who when they sang, “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.”

Albertans aren’t apathetic and they’re not fickle, either. They have gotten more sophisticated, however, and are demanding more from the politicians than recycled rhetoric and old ideas. If a new coalition could capture this new brand of politics – one that puts ideas ahead of buzzwords, and intelligence ahead of formulaic answers – it has the potential to displace every political force – left and right – currently in the game.

It’s what the Reform Party promised to do in the early going before losing itself in the political vortex of Ottawa.

Such a phenomenon may seem like a long shot, but Nenshi’s group in Calgary proves that political surprises are not an endangered species. Rather, it’s the old guard that should be feeling its neck right now. If the stars align, Alberta might once again redefine the way politics are done in this country.