
The Rhetoric and Reality of Parliamentary Reform in Alberta

by Thomas M.J. Bateman and David M. Thomas

Parliamentary reform is never as simple as it seems. It is always tied to larger issues of political culture and to the uneasy mix of British and American influences that constitute Alberta's political system. Recently interest in parliamentary reform stems from traditional dissatisfaction with politicians and parties and is driven by the larger social, economic, and demographic changes that have taken place in the province. In recent years, opposition parties have demanded specific reforms. The Progressive Conservative government responded in part by creating the Select Special Committee on Parliamentary Reform in July 1992. This article takes a closer look at the forces that have driven the issue to the fore. It also examines the nature of the reforms sought and hazards a guess as to the prospects for serious, sustained, and systemic changes to the role of the Alberta Legislature.



Alberta's legislature has for most of its history quietly ratified the government's plans for the province. Reform has long been a matter of political debate, but many types of reform were designed as much to circumvent as augment the parliamentary system in the province. Political leaders at various times sought to end party government, institute the voter recall and hand over management of government operations to non-partisan boards of "experts" insulated from political criticism. In his classic study of Alberta politics, C.B. Macpherson argued that the United Farmers of Alberta advanced a critique of the party system "that carried with it the rejection of parliamentary government."¹ Alberta Progressives elected to federal office promoted their non-partisan ideas in Ottawa.

Several factors explain the recent rise of the parliamentary reform agenda in Alberta.²

Populism: Alberta's political culture contains a strong element of distrust of organized power, especially in its partisan, governmental form. Populists consider parties to be elitist clubs whose interests diverge from those of the people. This sentiment has overlapped with and inflamed western alienation – another potent political force in Alberta – because of the origins of the mainline parties in eastern Canada, their association with the entrenched central Canadian elites, and their domination of the federal political process. Populism thus is related to non-partisanship, which, historically, has implied an emphasis on leadership transcending class, regional, and political cleavages in society. This dimension of populism has proven remarkably well-suited to the role of Alberta Premiers as spokespersons for the province against federal incursions into provincial jurisdiction.

Populism has fuelled calls for direct democracy measures which would give decision making power to the people and accordingly keep politicians and parties under strict popular control. Underlying populism is the belief that the people are right, that issues are not as

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complex as they are made out to be, and that better political results are produced with more direct democratic political processes.

Recently, populism has fostered a "let's clean house" mentality among the electorate whereby politicians are thought to be riding too high in their saddles and must be stripped of their perquisites and privileges in order to sharpen their focus on the public interest. Thus we hear calls for reducing or eliminating MLA pensions, reducing expense allowances, and even tying MLA salaries to budget deficit reduction efforts.

The Alberta Political Economy: Alberta's resource based economy, though chronically unstable, has enjoyed enviable prosperity in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the halcyon days of the 1970s abundant provincial revenues were collected while personal income tax rates were the lowest in the country and a provincial sales tax was never levied. The main political preoccupation was with securing provincial jurisdiction over the regulation and taxation of energy. Albertans were content to support their Premier's battles with the federal government over these issues.

Several important consequences flowed from this state of affairs. First, the executive branch was in almost complete control. A weak legislative opposition was frequently belittled for daring to criticize the provincial government's efforts against the "central government". Managing the province was a technocratic matter of secret policy formulation and easy implementation through a burgeoning public service. Deference to the government meant an anaemic legislature. Second, unprecedented prosperity allowed the government to spend large sums of money without having to consider the central, difficult distributive questions of politics: who gets how much of what, and when? The government had the luxury of planning the budget in four year cycles.³ Third, Alberta politics were devoid of sustained demands for political accountability. As three scholars have suggested, "Alberta's tradition of one-party dominance, 'businesslike' government, and weak legislative opposition has won it the reputation as a province where political accountability is particularly weak."⁴ Commenting on Alberta's weak legislature, Frederick Engelmann writes: "No doubt the basic handicap for accountability in Alberta is that no one, including the people, seems to be used to it."⁵

Times changed rapidly and dramatically. The province has, since 1986, run annual deficits. In 1992 it became a net debtor province. This condition has been all the more embittering to Albertans because of a series of bad provincial loans, guarantees, and bailouts to Alberta companies. Energy revenues are no longer diverted into the Heritage Savings Trust Fund and the Fund's invest-

ment income is being funnelled into general revenues. Aside from some unique features in its tax regime, its continuing reliance upon energy revenues, and the need to maintain an extensive infrastructure built up during the boom years, Alberta's financial situation has in overall terms become like that of the other provinces. Its annual deficits are now in the \$2-3 billion range.

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The new Alberta economic condition has several consequences. First, "the politics of taxation will be a much more important part of Alberta's political future." And taxation is one of the toughest distributive issues facing the government. In Alberta the political challenge is to increase citizens' payments to the province without labelling these payments taxes. Second, the province's mounting public debt has been a humbling realization that Alberta is becoming a province more like the others in its political and economic problems. The government's main task now is to reduce public spending. Such a task compels it to make hard choices among programs, public services, public employees – in short, who will bear the brunt of the new austerity. The government's whole role in the economy is being scrutinized. Loans and grants to business and the status of quasi-public corporations are no longer the quiet affairs of the days of freely flowing revenues. The result is a call for greater accountability from the government and should lead to a more lively Legislature increasingly aware of its watchdog role.

The New Politics: Scholars have argued that post-industrial society is the setting for a new political culture of highly educated citizens possessing post-materialist values (emphasizing quality of life concerns rather than simple material gain) and imposing high expectations on the political system. The gap in political skills between the public and political elites is decreasing and post-materialists are not deferential to political elites and institutions but rather supportive of unconventional modes of political participation – direct action politics.⁶

The new politics have come to Alberta. The province has become highly urbanized, with over half the population living in Calgary and Edmonton and almost 80% of the province's residents living in urban centres overall. According to a recent study Alberta has "the most highly educated labour force in Canada."⁷

In the 1980s the province witnessed the birth of a broadly based, articulate environmental movement mo-

bilized by global concerns but also by the province's rush into forestry and the damming of rivers. Activists have demanded more open, participatory public policy processes including comprehensive environmental assessments on economic developments. Now the quality of democratic life in the province is being debated.

Environmentalists have not been alone. "Gender is now on the political agenda."⁸ And native issues, dovetailing with environmental activism and emergent ethno-cultural concerns, provide another force outside of the traditional Alberta political orbit. The new politics challenge the managerial, secretive, executive-dominated approach and places a host of new political issues on the agenda. In this sense the province's political environment in the 1990s has significantly "opened up".

Citizen Involvement: At the same time as Alberta's political economy and political culture were in flux, other specific events focused people's attention on the excesses of executive dominance and the need for popular political participation. The hallmark event was of course the Meech Lake Accord. Secretive deals concocted by First Ministers and presented to the public as 'done deals' were henceforth out of the question. For the purposes of this article the most notable aspect was that Alberta public anger was aimed as much at the Alberta government as it was against the other players and the process itself. Combined with the backlash against the GST, Meech told Albertans that the system needed change.

But Meech Lake was not all. After its demise, the Spicer Commission became a lightning rod for demands that citizens have more influence in the process. Governments responded with consultative committees and a plethora of provincial and non-governmental study groups on constitutional change. It would be death by consultation. The 1992 referendum which killed the Charlottetown Accord was indeed the quintessential demand for citizen involvement. Significantly, Alberta was one of the first provinces to pass legislation requiring the government to submit constitutional proposals to the electorate in a referendum that would be treated by the government as binding.

Alberta had begun to change its ways: it created a constitutional committee to solicit public opinions before the government's position was drafted. The Committee's report, *Alberta in a New Canada: Visions of Unity*, was released in March 1992. Witnesses before the Committee advanced myriad ideas for parliamentary reform, ranging from the relaxation of party discipline to fixed terms of government and more direct democracy measures. Many of these ideas were directed to the provincial government for implementation. The Committee made no formal recommendations regarding these measures but instead called for the creation of a committee of the

Legislative Assembly to study the implementation of these measures "within the context of our parliamentary system of government."

The Alberta Legislature's Select Special Committee on Parliamentary Reform was created to examine such issues as free votes in the Legislative Assembly, more opportunities for Albertans' direct involvement in the legislative process, election of the Speaker, "whistle-blowers'" protection, and access to information.

The Committee quickly ran into problems. First, it committed to spend money on advertising before the money was granted it by the Legislative Assembly – a rather ironic disregard for Parliament not lost on other MLAs.⁹ Second, after it had called for and received briefs it was dissolved with the Legislature this spring for the provincial election. The jury is out on whether anything will come of this Committee's work. Curiously, reforms have recently been implemented but these have little to do with the work of the Committee.

Types of Parliamentary Reform

Some demands for change are largely symbolic, although politically very powerful. Other types of reform have to do with how parties run their affairs and how they structure cabinet and caucus. A third category contains those reforms which would fundamentally alter the accountability links within, and the structure of, the Legislative Assembly itself.

Populist Reform: Here the emphasis is on popular control of politicians, direct democracy measures, and the stripping away of perquisites. High on the list of populist reforms is the voter recall, a means by which constituents can force the resignation of MLAs between elections. This was briefly tried in Alberta in the 1930s (and repealed by Premier Aberhart when recall procedures were initiated against him by his constituents) and is still popular in the West. Voters in neighbouring British Columbia overwhelmingly approved of it in a 1991 referendum coinciding with the provincial election. The Alberta-based Reform Party puts the recall in its blue book. The Alberta Liberals put the recall in their election platform this last spring. Reform demands also include the reduction of pensions, travel privileges, and hefty accommodation allowances for MLAs living outside of Edmonton. According to recently passed legislation, newly elected Alberta MLAs will have no pensions after retiring from elected office.

The primary virtue of populist reforms is that they are easy to grasp, visible, and symbolic; they have high public relations value. Callers to phone in programs routinely suggest slashing MLA salaries as a means of reducing the deficit, unaware that MLA salaries are a

minuscule fraction of government spending. Nonetheless the calls are made and politicians are forced to respond. Symbols are important in politics but the real consequences of symbolic change may either be marginal or contrary to intentions. For instance, tying salaries to deficit reductions may lead to thoughtless cost-cutting or more creative accounting, making public finance even more difficult to comprehend.

Partisan reform: Because political parties are so intimately tied to parliamentary government and are becoming quasi-public organizations as government regulation of their activities increases, reforms to party operations can be considered a species of parliamentary reform. Examples of partisan reform are party candidate and leadership selection procedures, cabinet structures and sizes, and caucus structures.

Alberta has been known for its very large cabinets (30+ in the Lougheed and Getty eras) and an elaborate caucus committee system designed to obviate the need for all-party standing policy committees of the Legislative Assembly.¹⁰ This scheme has meshed nicely with the executive domination of policy and legislative processes. Yet it is precisely this executive domination that has so inflamed citizens in the current climate.

In a bold move to revitalize the party and forge a new link between leader and people, the PCs resorted to an extra-parliamentary mechanism to democratize Conservative party politics. The key reform has been the new leadership selection process used in November 1992 to elect Ralph Klein to replace the retiring Don Getty. Faced with the need to do something drastic to revive membership rolls and public interest in the PCs, the party adopted a new process incorporating the runoff mechanism of normal leadership conventions and extending voting privileges to all party members throughout the province. The first ballot occurred on November 28, 1992. Party members chose from among seven candidates. After the first ballot the bottom four candidates were dropped and the third place candidate withdrew from the second ballot. One week later, party members again voted at polls in their constituencies to select the leader.

The process was opened up substantially. Candidates were allowed to buy thousands of memberships and give them away to supporters. Instant Tories could vote directly for the new Premier. The candidates' campaigns were province-wide; forums, speeches, and interviews took place in schools, community centres, TV studios, and universities. The whole campaign had the feel of a presidential primary except that this was a wholly PC event. Many people were confused by the innovation, wondering why it would cost \$5 to vote this time. Others were attracted to the thought of a 'direct election' of a new Premier.

After his leadership victory, Premier Klein announced a smaller cabinet – down to 17, from 32 in 1989 – and cut the number of cabinet and caucus committees from 26 to 6. To address criticisms of cabinet domination of the policy process, backbench MLAs were made chairmen of the four standing policy committees of the government.

Structural reform: Here is the classic type of parliamentary reform: changes to the way the Legislature operates to make government more Parliament-centred. The objective of structural reform is to make parliament a primary forum for public debate, policy making, and political accountability. The implication is that executive domination will be tempered, extra-parliamentary means of consultation and policy formation will have a parliamentary counterbalance, and public spending will be monitored more closely.

Examples of structural reform include all-party standing policy committees of the Legislative Assembly, common in most jurisdictions in Canada but absent in Alberta. Other examples are measures to improve the budgetary accountability of government: a more powerful public accounts committee, a more streamlined process for reviewing estimates, a heightened role for the Auditor General, and checks on the abuse of special warrants. Some sources of revenue like lottery ticket sales currently are not directed to general revenues. Proposals for reform seek to channel all government revenues through the normal budgetary process. But it should be noted that the Klein government created an extra-parliamentary body, the Alberta Financial Review Commission, comprised of prominent businesspersons, lawyers, and accountants, to report directly "to Albertans" on Alberta's financial condition. Some of the Commission's recommendations have been implemented in this year's budget process.

The government has initiated the election of the Speaker (a first for the province) and seems prepared to act on calls for effective access to information legislation. The last Speaker was criticized for bending the rules of the House in favour of cabinet ministers, for example by giving an expansive interpretation to the sub judice rule in Question Period. Opposition parties and the media have for years been frustrated by their virtual inability to get information out of the government.

A key reform is the relaxation of party discipline, an idea linked in Albertans' minds to the delegate model of representation whereby MLAs are thought to be accountable primarily to the constituents who elect them and only secondarily to their parties. Specific proposals include a tighter definition of what constitutes a confidence vote, calls for more free votes, adoption of the British 'three-line' voting system, and/or requiring a

confidence vote immediately after the government is defeated on a measure.

Relaxation of party discipline does not fit clearly within the structural reform category since it is so closely related to the operations and status of parties. The relaxation of party discipline carries a great deal of symbolic freight, likening it to populist reform. But the symbolism is not all favourable to the implementation of this reform. Some perceive it as empowering constituents. Others think the spectacle of MLAs voting against their parties creates the perception that parties are weak, without direction, and unable to marshal the support of their caucuses. Media quickly exploit this interpretation of free voting. Nonetheless, because the relaxation of party discipline has the potential of reining in executive domination and increasing importance of parliamentary debate, it can be considered a structural reform.

Immediately after the June 15 election, Premier Klein told reporters that caucus solidarity would be insisted upon in his government. The prospects for reform looked bleak until the Premier sought the Liberals' agreement to change the Standing Orders to reduce the number of sitting days each week from five to four (though increasing the number of hours of sitting time per week). One of the conditions set by the Liberals was a commitment to more free votes.

In August the parties agreed in writing that all private members' bills would be put to a vote instead of being 'talked out' as has been the practice; and on these votes MLAs would be free of the whips. To date there have been a few free votes on such bills and MLAs have voted across party lines. One Liberal bill to institute the voter recall failed but was supported by several Tory MLAs including a cabinet minister. Another Tory private member's bill has passed second reading debate and is expected to become law.

Parenthetically, an important structural reform just below the surface of political debate involves the electoral system. Provincial politics has for many decades been affected by the urban-rural split. The cities are the centres of economic and demographic strength, yet rural Alberta has been a key determinant of both electoral change and continuity, supporting the Social Credit government for decades and then realigning, if belatedly, behind the Conservatives in the 1970s. The government has attempted to exploit this by assigning the urban areas fewer seats than their populations warrant, arguing with some justification that rural MLAs have more constituency-based duties and time commitments than their urban counterparts.¹¹

Yet such tactics no longer escape notice. A non-partisan electoral boundaries commission refused to draw maps based on skewed seat distributions contained in the

government's legislation. When a committee of the legislature was created to draw the maps, opposition members boycotted, leaving the drawing of boundaries for the June 15, 1992 election to Tory MLAs. While it cannot be said that the boundaries produced the Tory victory in June, the issue is far from dead. The Alberta Court of Appeal is considering the province's boundaries in a reference case and could find them contrary to the guarantee of effective representation enunciated by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1991.

The three types of parliamentary reform have different political payoffs and different chances of implementation. Populist and some partisan reforms are attractive because they have high public relations benefits that can be realized quickly. Any reform which cuts into government power and control has been and will be resisted; thus structural changes, with the exception of more modest examples like election of the Speaker and access to information legislation, do not enjoy government party support. Structural reforms are also less visible and more complex matters whose benefits are noticeable only over the longer term — i.e. they have little public relations value. Yet in terms of political accountability and the vitality of parliamentary government, they are the most important. Herein lies a central paradox of parliamentary reform.

The Prospects for Parliamentary Reform in Alberta

Parliamentary reform ultimately hinges on how elected politicians react to the interplay of deeper forces and immediate pressures. Under Don Getty the ruling PCs faced political oblivion. The government in the late 1980s had become awkward and aloof, operating in a new socio-economic environment with assumptions from the booming 1970s.¹² With the New Democrats in disarray, the Liberals posed as heirs apparent. They attacked government largesse and presented proposals for attacking the deficit and cleaning up government. Going into the election campaign the Liberals released detailed proposals for parliamentary reform, signalling, they said, a "new approach" to government. "The very system of government in Alberta must be radically changed if the issues that confront us are ever to be resolved."¹³ According to the Liberals, Alberta's problems had much to do with excessive partisanship. Their proposals would "de-partisanize the political process." Under their stewardship, "the Legislature will be de-politicized". Their proposals borrowed from all three types of parliamentary reform discussed above: from voter recall and relaxation of party discipline to standing policy committees of the Legislative Assembly and heightened legislative control of the budget process.

While these proposals received some attention, they did not dominate the election campaign. The Liberals became the official opposition with 32 seats to the Tories' 51, forming the largest opposition in the province's history, but this was short of their goal of electoral victory. The New Democrats were completely shut out of the Legislature, despite their seemingly inexorable growth over the past decade. The "K-factor" – Mr. Klein's popularity – is widely acknowledged to have been the key to the PCs' success. Such is the power of personality in Alberta politics.

There are reasons for thinking parliamentary reform and an enlivened Legislature may come to Alberta. The Liberals were committed to significant reform during the election campaign and now form a strong opposition caucus. As an opposition party, the Liberals have every reason to propose structural reforms that would increase the accountability of the government. Having won an agreement on free votes for private members' bills, the Liberals can be expected to push for standing policy committees and a more open budgeting process. In this latter quest the Liberals are supported by years of Auditor General's reports and the recent report of the Alberta Financial Review Commission.

One of the tools of executive domination and party discipline is the control of patronage. The more patronage the government has at its disposal the more control it can wield over backbenchers. In this respect the downsizing of the cabinet is significant. Fewer cabinet positions will be available to award the loyalties of compliant backbench MLAs. If the rewards for compliance are reduced, then the likelihood of non-compliance are increased, by however small a degree. (While government/cabinet committees were reduced in number in January 1993 as part of Premier Klein's new approach to government, membership on each has increased, thereby preserving approximately the same number of positions available for MLAs as before.) Some backbench government MLAs have already acquired reputations for feistiness and independent thinking.

The recent decline in the salience of executive federalism will decrease the prominence of the Alberta executive. Constitutional politics are at least temporarily taboo and the Premier has been decidedly cool toward that perennial Alberta favourite – Senate reform. He spent only a couple of minutes, he said, raising the issue with the Prime Minister at the July 1993 First Ministers' Conference. And hardly a peep was heard when Alberta Tory Ron Ghitter was appointed (not 'elected', as was Stan Waters in 1989) to the Senate by Brian Mulroney.

The focus is clearly on problems for which the government cannot blame some external demon. These problems are redistributive in nature and overlap with the

issues of the "new politics" of environmentalism, aboriginal issues, women's rights, and homosexual rights. This new agenda signals a more participatory political culture, adds to the complexity of government, and makes a managerial approach to government more untenable. There already are pressures to 'open up' the political process, and one way this can happen is through parliamentary reform.

The government itself has started the parliamentary reform process by appointing the Select Special Committee on Parliamentary Reform. While the Committee was dissolved in the spring of 1993, its work was widely publicized and it had already received many briefs and letters from individual Albertans, groups, and institutions. The government has promised to revive the Committee.

Finally, the public temper has turned against politicians and the political process. This cranky mood is a product of both the prolonged recession and the high expectations associated with the new politics. People are concerned not simply with what politicians do but how they do it. They are interested in the shape and openness of institutions, the conditions under which politicians work – almost universally regarded as too lavish – and are frustrated with the games of partisanship, which they see as opposed to the tackling of real problems.

There are, however, many reasons why talk of structural parliamentary reform in Alberta may be so much bluster. While the public temper is in favour of change, it is unfocused and in many cases unsophisticated. Six months before the election pundits and academics alike were writing the political obituary of the Alberta Tories, proclaiming the "law of the threes" whereby each political party in Alberta is allowed only three leaders, the last one being a caretaker to guide the party into oblivion in the election after taking over the leadership. Voters can be very forgiving.

Knowledge of parliamentary government is often rudimentary and reform proposals are not well thought out. Voter recall is almost a mantra in Alberta yet no one discusses how it could be misused by interest groups and political opponents. Some favour direct election of the Premier, apparently unaware of how utterly inconsistent this is with the parliamentary form of government. Albertans, like Canadians generally, are prone to selecting aspects of the American Presidential model for incorporation into Canadian parliamentary government without appreciating the threats to institutional coherence such patch jobs may produce. Most people are in favour of scaling back the benefits of elected office but do not consider the consequences: public life would be unattractive to persons of high calibre, MLA turnover rates could

increase beyond what are already high levels, and consequently the chamber could become even more anaemic.

Now that Alberta has a two-party system, both parties will feel the pressure to present themselves as strong, determined, and united in the face of the other. MLA independence is appreciated in the abstract but derided as party weakness and lack of direction in reality. The media foster this impression. Reforms augmenting the independence of backbenchers are likely to be resisted. The collectivist element in Canadian political culture leads citizens to expect governments to act for the public good.

Canadians do not take lightly the intense logrolling characteristic of American pluralism. A collectivist, policy-oriented dimension of Canadian political culture also infuses the Albertan political psyche.

While a strong opposition is certain to elevate the status of the Assembly, it could equally increase the degree of partisanship in Alberta politics. In the area where legislative control is most needed – public spending and budget process – the opposition party will be tempted to exploit issues for purely partisan reasons. Thus a flexible, dynamic provincial parliament could harden into a rigid partisan arena, the opposite of Liberal promises in their parliamentary reform papers. This would perpetuate the history of both the Alberta Legislature and those of the other provinces.

The new political agenda of restraint and deficit-cutting will run headlong into Alberta's increasingly participatory political culture, producing conflict between the government and affected interest groups. Early in its term of office the government may benefit from "standing up" to the interest groups but will feel the pressure over time to keep difficult and conflict-ridden cost-cutting negotiations out of the public spotlight. This will lead the government to negotiate behind closed doors and present agreements to the legislature to ratify as faits accomplis. Hence the restraint agenda may produce executive domination and a quiescent legislative assembly as much as province-building did in the 1970s and 1980s.

The possibility of the government implementing the restraint agenda behind closed doors is made more likely when the parties' skewed representation is considered. The Tories were supported by most areas of the province but do not speak for many non-territorial interest groups normally aligned with the New Democrats. Nor do they have the support of Edmontonians, many of whom are

government employees. Organized labour and the non-territorial groups defined by gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation have no legislative voice. The government will therefore have to deal with these groups directly, outside the Legislature. Much depends on whether the Liberals will shift to the left and garner the support of these groups. The government has already convened education and health care roundtable consultations to discuss with stakeholders how to trim millions from the province's budget. Aside from concerns about the government's sincerity in seeking input from interest groups and the public, the effect of this is to diminish the visibility and importance of the Legislative Assembly as the arena for debating matters of the day.

Perhaps one should not be too quick to dismiss the federal-provincial dimension of Alberta politics. While Premier Klein appears uninterested in constitutional issues like Senate reform, some political hay can be made of federal-provincial fiscal issues like equalization which, though complicated and hard to package for public consumption, can become salient in the future as both levels of government struggle to control deficits. One school of thought depicts Alberta as the rich province subsidizing the rest of the country through equalization payments. Furthermore, Premier Klein has assumed the Cabinet portfolio of Federal and Intergovernmental Affairs, preparing himself perhaps for some future federal-provincial wrangling or a constitutional crisis.

The impetus for a stronger role for backbenchers must rest with backbenchers themselves; executive power will not easily be relinquished. Backbenchers must take power from the executive, and can do so when they are not dependent upon the executive for their political lives. If MLAs as representatives have the support of their constituents they know they will be re-elected regardless of their status with the political executive. This is not the case in Alberta. Almost half of the government MLAs are rookies who attribute much of their own electoral success to the popularity of Ralph Klein. This creates a relationship between backbencher and executive which is unlikely to foster MLA independence. Further, a smaller cabinet can simply give more power to senior public servants. One suspects the few feisty Tory MLAs will not be allowed to become too critical of their party.

Finally, the government does not seem particularly interested in parliamentary reform. The PCs have shown some interest in reforms like access to information legislation and election of the Speaker. They have agreed to more free votes and implemented changes in public accounting practices that give a more honest picture of the government's financial position. On the other hand, it could be argued that the appointment of the Select Special Committee on Parliamentary Reform was an obliga-

tion held over from the post-Meech constitutional debate. In addition, old political habits die hard. The latest budget was delivered five months after the beginning of the fiscal year, after hundreds of millions of dollars in special warrants were approved by cabinet. When the government caucus recently voted to cancel construction of a new \$10 million hospital in light of severe health care cutbacks, MLAs were quickly reconvened to reconsider their decision. They did. These 'business as usual' Alberta tactics have been a disappointment to those hoping for a change in the style of government.

Conclusion

New social, political, and economic forces are producing something of a malaise everywhere in Canada. Parliaments are increasingly unable to generate public policy and hold governments to account. Other governmental and non-governmental actors are supplanting Parliaments as agents of policy and accountability. Parliaments are also affected by the crisis in representation. What is an elected member of a legislature exactly to do? And who or what exactly does he or she represent?

Some jurisdictions are seeking to restore or recover a tradition of effective parliamentarism, to adapt it to new challenges. In this respect Alberta is different, for there is precious little parliamentarism to recover. Alberta's tradition at best can be described as an immature parliamentarism. Graham White offers a two-fold classification of legislatures: transformational assemblies which are law-making institutions and independent of the executive; and arena-like chambers which are forums for the clash of issues and the representation of interests but which have only a law-passing role under the influence of the executive.¹⁴ The Alberta chamber falls into neither category. So the current challenge is greater: Alberta has to create a parliamentary tradition and simultaneously adapt it to new forces. The depth of the challenge is indicated by the current confusion about the kinds of parliamentary reforms that should be pursued. The current debate lacks coherence and focus.

Alberta brings into sharp relief many of the maladies of parliamentary systems elsewhere. It reveals starkly the difficulties of serious, structural parliamentary reform. It illustrates in a complex way the uneasy marriage between old-extra-parliamentary reform pressures and the new, interest group led political forces. It shows how persistent historical themes, in Alberta's case the myth of the non-partisan leader, tangle with new issues and contexts to complicate debate and alter the course of the parliamentary reform agenda.

While some reforms will be implemented, many of these will simply bring Alberta into line with other provinces. The discussion of parliamentary reform comes at a time of fiscal uncertainty and will continue to be part of the partisan jockeying for power. As well, the shape of Canadian federalism is changing and representative institutions as such suffer from a decline in legitimacy. Attempts at parliamentary reform in Alberta are, like Alberta's politics in general, full of paradoxes: rhetoric and reality frequently travel down different roads. If they converge, Alberta's Legislature would be a new locus of political activity in the province.



Notes

1. C. B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962) p. 55.
2. See A. Tupper and R. Gibbins, eds., *Government and Politics in Alberta*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992).
3. Allan Tupper and G. Bruce Doern, "Alberta Budgeting in the Loughheed Era", in Allan M. Maslove, ed., *Budgeting in the Provinces: Leadership and the Provinces* (Toronto: Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 1989) pp. 121-141.
4. Tupper, Pratt, and Urquhart, in Tupper and Gibbins, *op. cit.* eds., p. 58.
5. Engelmann, in Tupper and Gibbins, *op. cit.* eds., p. 155.
6. For the Canadian application see Neil Nevitte, Herman Bakvis and Roger Gibbins, "The Ideological Contours of the 'New Politics' in Canada: Policy, Mobilization, and Partisan Support" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* XXII:3 (September 1989) pp. 475-504.
7. Robert Mansell and Michael Percy, *Strength in Adversity: A Study of Alberta's Economy*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1990) p. 57.
8. Linda Trimble, "The Politics of Gender" in Tupper and Gibbins, eds., p. 240.
9. See the proceedings of the Standing Committee on Members' Services, Alberta Legislative Assembly, April 7 and 8, 1993, pp. 111-116, 133-136, Transcript 22-4-9.
10. See Peter McCormick, "Politics After the Landslide: The Progressive Conservative Caucus in Alberta", *Parliamentary Government* IV:1 (1983) pp. 8-10.
11. But this argument cannot be taken too far. As the Alberta Court of Appeal suggested such a situation is an argument for increasing the size of the Legislative Assembly, not for privileging rural voters. See *Re Electoral Boundaries Commission Act (Alberta)* [1992] 1 W.W.R. 481 at 491 (A.C.A.).
12. Allan Tupper, "Alberta Politics: The Collapse of Consensus" in Hugh Thorburn, ed., *Party Politics in Canada* 6th edition (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1991) pp. 451-467.
13. Alberta Liberal Party, "Alberta's Biggest Problem: The System Itself" (April, 1993) p. 1.
14. G. White, *The Ontario Legislature: A Political Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989) p. 10.