

Klein wins big: But Liberals, NDP double seats at Tories' expense
Liberals make breakthrough in Calgary

Tony Seskus, with files from Jason Fekete, Calgary Herald
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Albertans gave Ralph Klein a place in history on Monday, handing the populist politician his fourth straight term as premier -- and another Conservative majority government -- in his swan-song election.

But the Liberals, led by rookie leader Kevin Taft, also established major beachheads in the province's major urban centres -- and cracked the Tory's Calgary fortress -- after a rocky campaign that saw Klein's popularity beginning to fade.

At press time, the Conservatives were projected to capture 64 seats of 83 seats in the Alberta legislature. However, the Liberals were heading towards victory in 15 ridings, including three in the heart of Calgary, and one seat too close to call.

NDP Leader Brian Mason, also running his first campaign in charge, raised his party's number of seats from two to four, all in Edmonton.

"Tonight, our party has been given a solid, and I say solid, mandate from Albertans to serve as their government for another term," Klein told supporters at his headquarters in southwest Calgary.

"Tonight, yes, we lost some seats . . . but this is the nature of the democracy," he added. "We'll have to hear what Albertans have told us."

Taft, who received a resounding ovation in Edmonton, said Albertans had a new voice at its centre.

"Look how far we've come in just six months," said Taft, who took over from former leader Ken Nicol last spring and fought a tight battle in Edmonton with the NDP. "A Tory government will fall and when it falls, it will fall to us."

Mason, cheered by supporters at his campaign headquarters in Edmonton, pledged the party would continue to fight against private health care.

"My friends, it looks like we're going to need a bigger phone booth," said Mason, joking about the past size of their caucus.

"Tonight, there are more NDP MLAs in the Alberta legislature, more strong voices for Alberta families."



CREDIT: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald
Premier Ralph Klein thanks the campaign team at his Calgary headquarters for helping deliver a new majority.

Though the margin of victory was not as great as many Tory supporters would have hoped, Klein joins Peter Lougheed, who won also four elections, as the second-most successful premier in Alberta history at the ballot box.

Only Social Credit icon Ernest Manning, who celebrated seven straight victories, has led his party to more election wins.

But while the Tories will be savouring -- with some relief -- Monday's victory, the election saw the party lose seats and run a lacklustre campaign that offered no new promises or platform announcements.

"It was the most bizarre campaign I've ever seen," said David Taras, a political analyst at the University of Calgary.

"The entire purpose of elections is to get a mandate to do specific things so he has an election victory, but he doesn't have a mandate because he didn't tell voters what his intentions were."

The Conservatives had held 73 of 83 seats, while the Liberals controlled seven ridings. The NDP held two seats, and one was held by the Alberta Alliance.

Monday's victory marks the 10th in a row for the Conservatives, who swept to power in 1971 amid a political sea change that saw Lougheed end the Social Credit dynasty.

During the campaign, the Tories promised more "good" government, but seemed to side-step much of the debate on issues, such as health-care reform.

Klein also felt the heat from the public at the start of the race when he took aim at "abusers" of welfare programs for the disabled.

Political observers say the victory is a demonstration of Klein's lingering popularity -- despite a slide in the approval ratings -- in the absence of any policy.

"This, I think, reflects more Ralph Klein's personal popularity than it does the party," said Keith Brownsey, a political scientist at Mount Royal College, who now expects few shocks under Klein.

"The only big surprise will be how much money we spend on the centennial celebrations," he added.

The next big question is who will succeed the premier from within the Tory ranks.

Klein has pledged to stay until 2008, but if his slumping approval ratings continue to slide, it may prompt him to go sooner.

"The clear successor is Jim Dinning, but the longer that Ralph Klein stays around, the harder Dinning will have to work to get the leadership and to keep the party together," Brownsey said.

Other key questions for the re-elected Tories is how the government plans to spend future surpluses, deal with health-care reforms and address growing concerns over the rising cost of post-secondary education.

"We don't know what the future holds because they've kept it under wraps. All of the issues in regards to the surplus and health care were not election issues for the Tories," Taras said.

While there are many questions about what the next term will bring, there is little doubt now that Klein will be remembered.

He came to power in 1993 when the Tories were struggling and he led them to a majority.

Last week, Klein said he hoped his legacy would be the elimination of the province's \$23-billion debt.

But some observers said the debt was amassed by previous Conservative governments and that Klein's efforts were helped by a booming economy and huge oil and gas royalty payments.

"Ralph Klein has had a populist appeal . . . but more to the point, he's been very lucky in terms of having been in power during a very prosperous period," said Tamara Seiler, a Canadian studies professor at the University of Calgary.

But Taras said Klein should also be remembered for reversing the Tories' political fortunes.

"He gets a lot of credit, especially in the early years," he said.

"The question now is whether or not he has any vision to take us beyond that point."

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Results Online

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Conservatives

64 seats

47% popular vote

Liberals

15 seats

29% popular vote

Alliance

0 seats

9% popular vote

New Democrats

4 seats

10% popular vote

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