

Cracks in Tory win: Victory marred by drop in support, Klein vulnerable to leadership challenges

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EDMONTON - Ralph Klein won a fourth consecutive majority Monday night, but saw his support at the polls slip for the first time in his 24-year political career.

Losing legislature seats and points in the popular vote, the 62-year-old premier will now likely be vulnerable to leadership challenges within his own party, which may hasten his departure from politics.

Just days ago, Canada's longest-serving premier signed a pledge to stay on in his final mandate until at least 2008, but may now rethink his plans after seeing his party suffer reverses across the province.

"The jockeying to replace Klein will begin right away and it will be out in the open," said Linda Trimble, a political science professor at the University of Alberta. "It could be very disruptive and make it difficult to govern."

Though the Conservatives maintained their 33-year hold on power, the party saw its majority shrink by 12, to 61 seats. The Tories lost three seats in Calgary, the first wins for the Liberals in Klein's hometown since 1997.

Conservative support across the province slipped to 47 per cent, down from 62 per cent in 2001.

DEFEAT FOR NORRIS

In the key battleground of Edmonton, the Tories dropped from 10 seats to two and also lost a seat in St. Albert. The Liberals under new leader Kevin Taft won 17 seats across the province and defeated several Tory incumbents in the capital city, including Economic Development Minister Mark Norris in Edmonton-McClung, who three years ago defeated former Liberal leader Nancy MacBeth and had recently been cited as a potential Tory leadership challenger.

"We can't be perceived to be arrogant and we've got to deliver what the bosses want," Klein said in a televised victory address.

"Albertans ... have given us our marching orders for the next four years. Tonight, yes, we lost some seats, we saw some very good candidates for our party defeated, but this is the nature of democracy. And while we have earned a very solid majority government, we will have to hear what Albertans have told us tonight."



CREDIT: Bruce Edwards, The Journal
Liberal Leader Kevin Taft and his wife Jeanette gathered with hundreds of boisterous supporters in the ballroom of the Mayfield Inn on Monday night.

Taft said his party will use Monday's results as a foundation to build for the future.

"Alberta has a new voice at its centre," he told jubilant supporters.

"The Tories have the money but we have the people, we have the ideas, we have the future. Look how far we've come in just six months. Imagine what we could do in four years.

"Tonight I promise you this. The Tory government will fall, and when it falls it will fall to us."

The New Democrats, under new leader Brian Mason, doubled their seat count to four -- all in Edmonton -- and won official party status in the legislature. The party's winners included former leader Ray Martin, who led the party to 16 seats and official opposition status in 1986.

The gains mean the NDP is ready to hold the Tory government's feet to the fire, Mason said.

"My friends," Mason told a boisterous crowd of at least 350 supporters, "it looks like we're going to need a bigger phone booth. Our increased vote total and increased seat total suggest Albertans are also looking for someone to keep a closer eye on the Conservatives. I promise you tonight, we will."

The victory gave the Tories their 10th consecutive majority. The party first came to power under Peter Lougheed in 1971.

Single seat for Alliance

When the election was called last month, the Tories held 73 of the 83 seats, the Liberals held five, the NDP two, and two were vacant. The new Alberta Alliance party held one seat after former Edmonton Tory MLA Gary Masyk crossed the floor this summer. He was defeated Monday, but his party won the seat in Cardston-Taber-Warner in southwest Alberta.

For the party that has ruled Alberta for more than three decades, the four-week campaign was about the past and the present, rather than the future.

The Tories refused repeatedly to offer voters clear policies on issues such as health care, education and infrastructure, and instead spent 28 days talking mostly about their success in eliminating the province's debt.

"There's a message going out," Trimble said about the results. "The message is, 'you should really tell us what your election platform is. You should show some enthusiasm. Don't run a rudderless campaign.' "

Klein admitted Monday night that some losses were expected.

"I certainly felt that we were going to give back some ground in this election, especially in Edmonton," he said. "I'm a little surprised by some of the Calgary constituencies."

Asked to define his new mandate, the premier said he plans "to do what the bosses want you to do -- quality health care, good education, good infrastructure, sustained economic prosperity ... that's what they want."

Klein said he expects a new cabinet to be appointed by the end of the week.

In a province awash in oil and gas royalties, where the year's budget surplus could top \$10 billion, Klein's government was willing to run on its record and an all-but-plankless platform.

But the vacuum of a commitment-free campaign soon became, in part, a referendum on the premier himself, after Klein tainted his own man-of-the-people image.

Just three days into the campaign, during a speech in Calgary, the premier told supporters about meeting two women who were "yipping" at him to raise benefits in the Assured Income

for the Severely Handicapped program, under which the maximum payment of \$850 a month hasn't changed since 1999.

"They didn't look severely handicapped to me," said Klein, whose comments touched off a firestorm.

The remarks gave opposition politicians a focal point for renewed attacks on a premier they claim is increasingly out of touch with the grassroots people who have made him a winner since he was first elected mayor of Calgary in 1980.

The heated atmosphere of the election campaign turned sombre early on with the death of the premier's 80-year-old mother, Florence Gray. Klein left the campaign trail for five days.

IDEAS FROM OPPOSITION

Though the AISH controversy had largely passed by then, Klein found himself facing two opposition parties armed with ideas. Both promised to eliminate health-care premiums; the Liberals pledged billions for an endowment fund for post-secondary education; while the NDP floated a plan to roll back college and university tuition fees by 10 per cent.

Repeatedly asked to make public his health-care plans, Klein refused, at one point saying election campaigns are not the time to discuss complicated issues -- sounding vaguely like former prime minister Kim Campbell during the federal Conservatives' disastrous 1993 election campaign.

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