

A Canadian conservative split

A wild rose blooms

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A prairie echo of the tea party

WHEN the Progressive Conservatives won power in Alberta, Richard Nixon was still in the White House and Britain had only just abandoned shillings. Under various leaders, they have ruled continuously for almost four decades. Alberta, the home of oil, gas and cattle, has become the bedrock of Canadian conservatism. Yet now the Progressive Conservatives face a rebellion on the prairies—from the right, rather than the left.

Ed Stelmach, Alberta's premier since 2006, won 72 of the 83 seats in the legislature at an election just two years ago. Now he is Canada's least popular premier, with an approval rating in a recent poll of 14%. The recession has not helped. It has driven up unemployment in a province accustomed to the good life during a prolonged commodity boom, and caused Alberta's finances to fall into the red for the first time in 15 years. The premier has antagonised the oil and gas industry, first with a bungled attempt to raise royalties and then by his lacklustre defence of the province's tar sands from attacks on their carbon emissions by greens at home and abroad.

An election does not have to be called until 2012. But Mr Stelmach may be dumped by his own party before then. That is because it feels threatened by the Wildrose Alliance, a more conservative fringe party. This has only three seats in the legislature but leads the opinion polls. It is also setting the political agenda in Alberta.

Danielle Smith, the alliance's young leader, criticises Mr Stelmach's government for spending too freely and "blowing through" the province's savings. Her calls for smaller government are popular with Albertans, whose views often align more closely with American Republicans (of the tea-party persuasion) than with eastern Canadians. Many also like Ms Smith's unabashed defence of exploiting the tar sands (she argues that it is not clear that human activity causes climate change). Her suggestion that Alberta emulate Quebec and wrest control of a host of joint programmes, such as immigration, income-tax collection, the public pension plan and the police force, plays to a belief that Alberta is being short-changed in Ottawa.

Facing this conservative wind, the provincial government is tacking to the right. Mr Stelmach named Ted Morton, a fiscal and social conservative, as finance minister in a cabinet shuffle last month. The 2010 budget, unveiled on February 9th, involves a spending increase and a deficit, but it came wrapped up in promises of restraint and future balanced budgets.

Most of Ms Smith's positions hark back to an open letter in 2001 by a group of Calgary intellectuals whose number included Mr Morton. Known as the "firewall letter", it urged Ralph Klein, then the premier, to build barriers to keep the federal government from encroaching on provincial jurisdiction. As a leading contender for the Conservative leadership if Mr Stelmach jumps or is pushed, Mr Morton may get a chance to implement these ideas. One of the other signatories was Stephen Harper. Since he is now prime minister of Canada, he may be rather less keen to see firewalls going up.

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