

# THE DRAMATIC FALL OF JASON KENNEY

A failure  
to unite



By JARED WESLEY

**S**UBSEQUENT EVENTS HAVE CAST shadows over the jubilant atmosphere at the BMO Centre in Calgary on October 28, 2017. This was a banner night for conservatism in Alberta as former federal cabinet minister and movement leader Jason Kenney rode to the stage in a signature blue pickup truck to claim the new United Conservative Party's mantle.

The soon-to-be-premier's victory speech contained a lot of familiar rhetoric, but key elements of the speech caught some observers off guard. In a central theme of his remarks, Kenney contended that "we are one step closer to a government focused on prosperity so that we have the means to be a compassionate and generous society."

The comment marked one of the few times a major conservative leader in Canada has said the quiet part out loud: that in neoliberal ideology, prosperity must come before compassion. Kenney's tone was a noticeable departure from the tempered forms of "progressive" or "compassionate" conservatism that had defined the governments of Peter Lougheed and Alison Redford. It was also more doctrinaire than the pragmatic forms of conservatism under Ralph Klein, Ed Stelmach and Jim Prentice.

Later in his acceptance speech, Kenney elaborated on his view of what brought conservatives together to form the UCP. According to him, "This was never about uniting the right, because most people don't situate themselves along some theoretical political spectrum. It has always been about uniting Albertans who understand the traditional values that have animated this province since its beginning; those who understand that in order to be a compassionate and generous society, you must be a prosperous one first."

In keeping with that spirit, Kenney then declared an end to Alberta's days of "generously" contributing to the rest of Canada. The richest province in Confederation, he declared, would demand a fairer deal from Confederation.

Kenney's placing prosperity ahead of compassion would play very well in opposition. Indeed, the

notion helped pave the way to a majority UCP victory in the 2019 provincial election. But it also helps explain Kenney's dramatic fall from grace.

Within three years of becoming premier, Kenney only narrowly survived a leadership review. He subsequently announced his resignation. In explaining his political demise, his allies portray Kenney as a victim of circumstances beyond his control. But other conservative leaders in Canada faced down the pandemic without losing control of their parties or their grip on power. In this sense, Kenney's story is a cautionary one for conservatives and the broader electorate. Kenney's brand of "prosperity first" conservatism proved ill-suited to governing—to bringing society together to face existential threats such as pandemics, economic calamities and climate change. Not only did it fail under those circumstances, it actually made things worse.

KENNEY CONSCIOUSLY TIED HIS BRAND of Alberta conservatism to a version of the prosperity doctrine that has dominated thinking on the religious right for generations. The mantra links hard work and individual wealth to personal virtue and, in religious circles, the will of God. On the flip side, a lack of wealth is associated with lack of personal effort or worth.

In political terms, the conservative version of prosperity doctrine promotes faith in capitalism, the accumulation of wealth, individualism and the personal responsibility that appears to underpin it. In this sense, prosperity doctrine has an anti-collectivist bent, an insistence on freedom from government overreach and a reverence for local and family autonomy (or localism). Many but not all of these features figure prominently in neoliberalism.

Alongside "freedom" and "autonomy," "prosperity" remains one of the code words that animate Alberta conservative politics. From Social Credit's "prosperity certificates" in the 1930s to Ralph Klein's "prosperity bonuses" in 2005, the concept has permeated provincial politics throughout the past century. But not since the religious campaigns

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of Social Credit in the mid-twentieth century had we heard a leader articulate the doctrine so clearly, overtly and repeatedly as Jason Kenney.

Positioning prosperity ahead of compassion had the added benefit of matching Kenney's leadership style. A March 2021 Viewpoint Alberta survey asked respondents to identify one word that best describes Jason Kenney. The top responses—including "liar," "arrogant," "dishonest" and "asshole"—mirrored what the survey heard from dozens of focus groups across the province. In more than one session, participants reached consensus on labelling Kenney as "a dick" (their word). This reputation served him well, at least in the beginning.

**I**N 2019 ALBERTANS WERE CLEARLY in the mood for "a dick" like Kenney. Western alienation had reached a fevered pitch, with the Trudeau government in Ottawa embodying generations of Albertans' animosity toward a so-called "Laurentian elite." A second Trudeau victory in the fall of that year—despite the Conservatives receiving more votes than the Liberals—only inflamed tensions. Support for Alberta separatism reached 30 per cent in Viewpoint Alberta's November 2019 survey, on par with support for separatism felt in Quebec at the time. Many Albertans wanted someone new to protect their interests against a "marauding" federal government and disrespectful fellow provinces.

Provincially, Alberta had been governed by what Kenney labelled "an accidental NDP government." Months of UCP attacks on the NDP's supposed coziness with the Trudeau Liberals and its tax-and-spend approach had taken a toll on the Notley government's popularity. Add to this the alleged attacks on Alberta's oil and gas industry by environmentalists abroad, and the UCP had successfully primed the Alberta electorate to seek out a bully or guardian to "stand up" for Alberta in 2019. Whatever his other shortcomings, Kenney's "dickish" public persona fit that bill.

Kenney's UCP cruised to victory in the 2019 campaign. The term "prosperity" appeared five times in the UCP platform. It also formed the core of the UCP-friendly Alberta Chamber of Commerce's "Vote Prosperity" campaign in 2019 and was in the title of the Fraser Institute's 2019 election primer ("Alberta Prosperity: A Plan for Opportunity and Growth"). Kenney's half-hour election night acceptance speech was peppered with a dozen more references to "prosperity." The three keys to that prosperity—jobs, pipelines and the economy—were emblazoned on Kenney's lecterns throughout the campaign.

Moreover, the UCP's platform committed the party to "Standing Up For Alberta" against "the

Trudeau–Notley alliance" and "foreign-funded special interests." Pledges included taking the federal government to court; threatening to "turn off the taps" on any province that opposed pipelines through its jurisdiction; launching a referendum on removing the equalization principle from the Constitution as "leverage for federal action" on pipelines; setting up a "war room" to advocate for the oil and gas industry's interests; and establishing a formal inquiry into the funding of campaigns critical of Alberta's energy industry.

In short, by identifying "prosperity" as a defining value of Alberta society, Kenney was able to paint his political opponents—the Trudeau Liberals, the Notley New Democrats, leftists, environmentalists and more—as enemies of the province. And he was able to portray himself as the ideal leader to stand up to them. Kenney's brand and style of conservatism was a major reason the UCP gained control of government in 2019. Ironically, it would also be one of the reasons he lost control of his party and the premiership.

## "Prosperity first" conservatism proved ill-suited to bringing society together to face existential threats.

ONCE IN THE PREMIER'S SEAT, Kenney set about fulfilling his campaign promises. The "Summer of Repeal" lived up to its billing, as the UCP undid years' worth of NDP legislative achievements in a matter of weeks. In a bid to balance the budget and impose a neoliberal agenda on public institutions, Kenney and his ministers picked fights with teachers, doctors, nurses, healthcare aides, professors, environmentalists, Indigenous people, francophones and safe-drug-supply advocates, many of whom took the Kenney government to mediation, arbitration or court. Kenney lost most of those fights, but, true to his style, the outcomes seemed less important than the conflicts themselves. Victories by Alberta's "opponents" only further fuelled Kenney's need to keep fighting.

Even in the midst of the pandemic, Kenney lived up to his word in provoking other premiers and the prime minister. He went so far as to insult Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer as being "brain dead" for her concerns about the Line 5 pipeline in her state—which had recently seen a massive spill by the same Calgary-based company, Enbridge—and



CP (TOP); GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA (BOTTOM)

Top: Kenney's individualist ideology won him the UCP leadership but didn't work in the pandemic. Bottom: Chief Medical Officer of Health Deena Hinshaw announces public health measures, March 2020.

to pump well over a billion dollars into an ill-fated gamble to resurrect the Keystone XL pipeline. When these measures failed to produce results, Kenney blamed the Trudeau government for not doing enough to stand up for Alberta.

Albertans' mood shifted, however, as the COVID-19 pandemic deepened. Most citizens called for compassion over prosperity as infection rates, hospitalizations and deaths mounted. Healthcare and other social services steadily climbed the list of Albertans' priority issues; economic concerns waned. Prior to the pandemic, in November 2019, over a third (37 per cent) of Albertans named the economy the most important issue facing the province; this compared with just 17 per cent who cited healthcare. By August 2020, the gap had narrowed to just 5 percentage points (28 per cent economy; 23 per cent healthcare). This didn't bode well for an antagonistic premier intent on prioritizing prosperity. The situation was worsened for Kenney by the fact that only 11 per cent of Albertans viewed his UCP as the best party to handle healthcare.

While some Albertans grew wary of what they saw as draconian public health measures, a larger and steadily growing proportion of citizens saw the government's actions as too soft. In August 2020, over half of the province's population (55 per cent) felt that the level of pandemic restrictions in Alberta were "just about right," while another 35 per cent felt they were "too lenient." These numbers had flipped by October 2021, with 55 per cent feeling that the government's measures were too permissive and only 27 per cent saying they were balanced. This shone a harsh spotlight on the premier's insistence on preserving prosperity ("livelihoods") at the direct expense of public health ("lives").

Fewer still saw the virtue in Kenney's antagonistic leadership style when empathy and collaboration seemed to be in order. The UCP's equalization referendum in 2021 failed to generate much interest or support, for instance, with fewer than 1 in 4 voters bothering to show up and cast a yes vote. The inquiry into "anti-Alberta-energy" campaigns went over time and over budget and produced no damning findings. And the war room became a punchline after several public embarrassments, including its attack on a children's movie and its twice using plagiarized logos. This, combined with several high-profile scandals involving ministers flouting public health rules (Tracey Allard's "Alohagate"; Kenney's party on the Sky Palace patio) and an ongoing RCMP investigation into Kenney's 2017 leadership victory, further tarnished the premier's reputation as the kind of leader Albertans needed in the moment.



Top: The premier prematurely declaring victory over a global crisis. He proved ill-equipped to manage the public health emergency.  
Bottom: Kenney announces his resignation, May 17, 2022.

**J**ASON KENNEY'S REMAINING champions often attribute his political demise to a series of unfortunate events. To them, if the pandemic hadn't hit and the ensuing economic downturn hadn't happened, Kenney's prosperity-first approach and belligerent leadership style would have served him well. But those who frame Kenney as a victim of circumstance or a martyr for the times ignore two important lessons. Each is crucial to understanding the future of the conservative movement in Canada, particularly for those who would inherit leadership positions with federal or provincial parties.

First, Kenney is not alone among conservative leaders in terms of his inability to maintain public or caucus support. Leaving aside the revolving door on the federal Conservative Party leader's office, Kenney is not the first conservative leader to be ousted by his party after reaching the premiership. In fact, he's the third conservative Alberta premier to face that fate this century. Not since Ralph Klein two decades ago has a conservative premier in this province completed a full term in government. Compared to their counterparts in other parties and jurisdictions, it seems Alberta conservative leaders have had a harder time holding onto the premiership than gaining it in the first place. Why is this?

In part, Alberta conservatives suffer from an ailment that is the exact opposite of what political scientist George Perlin labelled "the Tory syndrome." Under his theory, Canadian conservative parties languish in opposition because they lack the discipline of power. Rather than building their bases of power while out of government, right-wing parties tend to succumb to infighting. This distracts them from the important task of preparing to win the next election.

By contrast, Alberta's conservatives have lately appeared more cohesive in opposition than in government. The need to mobilize against a common foe was incentive enough for PCs and Wildrosers to lay down their ideological and partisan differences following their defeat at the hands of the Notley NDP. Once in government, and once crisis hit, these old lines of division were laid bare. When Kenney's popularity began to slide, and polls and party fundraising totals showed the NDP were poised to return to government, the UCP turned on its leader. Without enough power to distribute to all factions, lacking a consistent set of experienced staff in the leader's office, and unable to rely on proven caucus management tools, Kenney's coalition began to unravel from both top and bottom.

Indeed, it is worth examining how Kenney's "dickish" brand of conservatism contributed to the

fracturing of the very UCP coalition he had built only a few years earlier.

Put simply, prosperity doctrine is appealing when a large portion of the electorate has the luxury of focusing on personal gain above all else. A belligerent form of leadership is most effective when one's primary opponents lie outside the party or the province, and when picking fights (as opposed to achieving policy goals) is the ultimate aim. And balancing between ideological factions is most feasible when you can allow individuals, families and local communities enough autonomy to make their own decisions. None of these circumstances were present in Alberta from 2021 to 2022. And they might not prevail here or in Canada more generally in the years ahead.

Beyond personal wealth or economic growth, the pandemic encouraged many Albertans to think beyond themselves to consider the common good (or at least a common threat). As political scientist Robert Putnam might put it, Alberta became more of a "we" society than an "I" society. During the second and third waves of the pandemic, as hospitalizations and deaths soared, Albertans became increasingly concerned about threats to the healthcare system and to their fellow citizens. Kenney's appeals to treat "livelihoods" with the same importance as "lives" was out of step with the public. His bull-headed persona and lack of empathy—not to mention similar qualities among his staff, who antagonized people daily on social media—only made things worse.

At the same time, many people within Kenney's own party turned on the premier for supposedly forsaking their personal freedoms. But a global crisis necessitated a strong, centralized state response. Ironically, Kenney's having cultivated anti-government sentiment, rugged individualism and local autonomy actually hindered him in maintaining party discipline and rallying broader public support for public health protections. In establishing unreasonable expectations among members of his party and caucus, who became similarly laser-focused on the virtue of personal responsibility, Kenney could not acknowledge, let alone address, real challenges that required mutual obligation and trust.

When rifts develop within conservative parties, their leaders like to lean on the notion that elected officials should represent the interests of their constituents, whether in the legislature through free votes or behind closed doors in caucus. In times of global crisis, however, the needs of the broader society take precedence over the desires of individuals and smaller communities. "Targeted" or "regional" measures such as calls for "personal responsibility" are politically enticing. But they make for ineffective public policy, as Kenney himself

## Few Albertans saw virtue in Kenney's antagonistic leadership style when collaboration was needed.

admitted when reluctantly instituting province-wide mask mandates, vaccine requirements and other public health measures. Viruses know no borders.

Such was Kenney's predicament, albeit of his own making. Unable to rely on libertarianism or localism, he was ill-equipped to manage either his caucus or the public health emergency. It is easy to dismiss him as a victim of circumstance, and to believe that Kenney's leadership style and brand of conservatism might have had success in other times and places.

But this ignores an important second lesson of Kenney's demise.

It would be folly to consider the COVID-19 pandemic the last major collective crisis to confront Canadians. Climate change demands sustained collective response and state action, both within Canada and internationally. Income inequality and inflation have reached their worst states in generations, necessitating new conversations about how best to boost wages and employment, redistribute wealth and manage the economy to make life affordable for more Canadians. An exclusive focus on prosperity—encapsulated by Kenney's appeals to personal responsibility (and by the Conservative Party of Canada's ill-fated 2019 slogan, "It's time for you to get ahead")—is unlikely to resonate with a large segment of the electorate, let alone help address the angst felt by many Canadians.

The failure of Jason Kenney's brand and style of conservatism to handle urgent, complex problems should be a warning sign to those who continue to laud his leadership of the conservative movement and dismiss his flame-out as the result of circumstances beyond his control. The "prosperity first" dogma and belligerent leadership that have come to define the modern conservative movement in Canada are great for riling up people who feel alienated from the political mainstream. If Kenney's tenure is any indication, however, these ideas are incapable of uniting communities behind a common cause and only end up further dividing a society in crisis. That is the legacy Kenney's champions must live with, and the challenge his successors inherit. ■

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**ARCHIVE:**  
"All The Rage,"  
by Tadzio Richards,  
September 2019  
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