



BATTLEGROUND CALGARY

Hotly contested NDP nominations
in Alberta's must-win city

By TADZIO RICHARDS

“ABOUT 20 PEOPLE HAVE TAKEN campaign signs so far,” says Dany Allard. “Signs are one of those things where it often depends on the neighbours. Some people will say, ‘Well, my neighbour is conservative,’ and they don’t want to put up a sign. Then you knock on the neighbour’s house, and they say, ‘Well, my neighbour is conservative.’”

“One of you just has to do it first,” says Jennifer Burgess. “That’s right,” says Allard.

It’s May 5, 2022, five days out from the NDP nomination vote in Calgary-Glenmore. Burgess is a communications professional and a party activist—an NDP member for 14 years, press secretary for two ministries in the NDP government and president of the Calgary-Glenmore NDP constituency association before seeking the nomination. Allard is her campaign manager. They’re door knocking for the undecided vote in the community of Lakeview, an established neighbourhood near the Glenmore reservoir with older bungalows, townhome complexes and upscale

infill homes. The undecided—NDP members who previously told doorknockers that they don’t yet know if they’ll vote for Burgess or Nagwan Al-Guneid to be the party’s candidate in the riding—are sparse. Dark clouds threaten rain in the early evening sky, and they walk fast, both wearing comfortable urban hiking shoes—his grey, hers black.

“Unquestionably, the next election will be determined by who can win the most seats in Calgary,” wrote Leah Ward, the Alberta NDP’s former director of communications, in a CBC op-ed in 2022, “with Edmonton a lock for the NDP and the rest of Alberta tilted in the UCP’s favour.” Calgary-Glenmore—one of 26 provincial constituencies in the city—is a key riding to watch for many pundits, not least because it’s been a kind of litmus test for Alberta politics in recent elections. In 2009 the Wildrose Party won a by-election in Calgary-Glenmore, signalling the party’s rise. In 2015 the NDP won the riding by six votes, showcasing the party’s slim margin for error. In 2019 the UCP’s nomination race debate in the riding foreshadowed the party’s landslide win—the

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Top: Jennifer Burgess and Dany Allard door knocking in Lakeview. Bottom: Burgess and NDP staffer Garrett Spelliscy at the community association/daycare as Nagwan Al-Guneid wins the nomination for the NDP.

Finding one person to run for the NDP used to be an accomplishment. In 2022, with polls projecting an NDP majority win, the dynamic changed.



community hall so crowded that UCP members had to stand outside, listening through the open front door to five candidates rail against the carbon tax, “socialism,” Justin Trudeau and other popular enemies, while inside the hall it was shoulder-to-shoulder standing room only, the air so hot that sweat dripped in my eyes.

Recalling that nomination race in the Legislature in 2021, Calgary-Glenmore MLA Whitney Issik mocked the NDP, saying, “They don’t actually understand nominations very well because they don’t really have them themselves.” Contested nominations were unusual for the NDP—in 2019 they largely ran a slate of incumbent MLAs, and nomination races were rare before then. Often, just finding one person willing to run for the NDP in a constituency outside Edmonton was an accomplishment. In 2015 students, pizza waitresses and other political neophytes were acclaimed as NDP candidates. But in 2022, with polls at the start of the year projecting an NDP majority win over an unpopular Jason Kenney, the dynamic changed.

“I’ve been watching your videos,” says Joan, an older woman who opened her door when Burgess rang the bell at her home. “I’ve been watching both of you [Burgess and Al-Guneid].”

“I appreciate that,” says Burgess. “It’s exciting for Glenmore. As you probably saw, I’m the candidate that lives here [in the riding]. I’ve been doing the work here for a few years, with a team of amazing folks who are ready to go and beat Kenney. Any questions I can answer?”

“No, I don’t think so,” says Joan. “I’ve been following. I will vote.”

“Perfect. That’s the important part,” says Burgess. She says goodbye. The door closes. It’s after 7 p.m. and near puck drop on a Calgary Flames playoff game. “We do *not* want to be knocking on doors when the hockey game is on,” says Allard. “That’s a good way to lose a vote.” They pull out their phones and plan the next day of the campaign.

THE MATH IS THE EASY PART. ALBERTA HAS 87 constituencies. To form a majority government a party must win at least 44 of them. In 2019 the UCP won 63 seats and the NDP 24. “We need 20 more seats,” said Shannon Phillips, Lethbridge-West MLA (NDP), in conversation in 2020. “Where are they? Who are they?”

Hello, Calgary. In 2019 the NDP won three of the city’s 26 seats. That’s down from the 15 they won in 2015, when the PCs and the Wildrose split the right and the NDP squeaked out victories with vote totals as low as 29.9 per cent in some Calgary ridings.

The hard question for the NDP is how to again win at least

Top: Jason Luan (left), UCP candidate in Calgary-Foothills, with Travis Toews. Bottom: Toews launches his campaign to lead the UCP at the Calgary Stampede grounds Rotary House under a portrait of John Wayne.

15 and probably more seats in Calgary in a head-to-head battle with one conservative party instead of two.

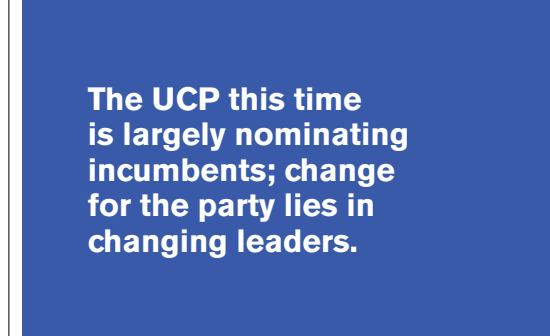
After the NDP’s defeat in 2019, the wag’s analysis held that the problem for the NDP in Alberta is not that the party’s power base is in Edmonton; the problem is that too many of the party’s Edmonton-based senior political staffers and operatives think that if you just dig down deep enough in Calgary, you’ll find Edmonton.

The two cities do have similarities—both are among the most sprawling cities in Canada, with a few high-density neighbourhoods near downtown but relatively low population density overall and a high reliance on cars. Edmonton, however, elected a progressive (Liberal or NDP) majority in the city in seven of the last 10 provincial elections. Calgary gave conservative parties a large majority in nine of those 10. The cities have distinct political cultures. So, implies the wag’s critique, what works in Edmonton is not the same as what will inspire voters in Calgary.

“I think we do have to be clear about what the jobs and economy vision looks like,” said party stalwart Phillips, back in 2020, musing about how the NDP could again form government. “I don’t believe the majority of people in Calgary aren’t open to a progressive approach. But I do believe the party cannot be doctrinaire about it.... We can’t, as a party, be afraid of any of those things that people in Calgary want to talk about or want to hear.”

ARGUABLY, IN 2021 ALMOST EVERYONE from across the political spectrum in Alberta wanted to talk about the same things: COVID-19 and Jason Kenney. The virus prowled Alberta, even as mandated protections against the pandemic met with stiff resistance in parts of the province. At the same time, the UCP slashed funding to public services, provoked disputes with doctors, nurses and municipalities and introduced a widely panned, learn-by-rote curriculum containing obvious absurdities (for kindergarten: find gravity on a globe). Kenney’s approval ratings sank as Rachel Notley’s party surged in the polls. The NDP raised five times more money than the UCP in 2021.

On October 24, 2021, poll aggregator 338 projected that the NDP would win 60 seats, including 23 in Calgary. The party began to attract nomination candidates in the city, as political blogger Dave Cournoyer framed it, “with impressive resumés who could presumably become cabinet ministers on Day 1 of a new Notley government.” Luanne Metz, the former head of neurology at the University of Calgary was acclaimed as the NDP candidate in Calgary-Varsity. Marilyn North Peigan, a Canadian Forces veteran, former VP of the



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Calgary Police Commission and a member of the Blackfoot Confederacy, won a contested nomination against two other candidates in Calgary-Klein. Rosman Valencia, a teacher and activist for the Filipino and LGBTQ communities, was acclaimed in Calgary-East. Energy analyst Samir Kayande was acclaimed in Calgary-Elbow (after Janet Eremenko, the constituency association president and 2019 candidate in the riding, jumped to and won a nomination race in Calgary-Currie).

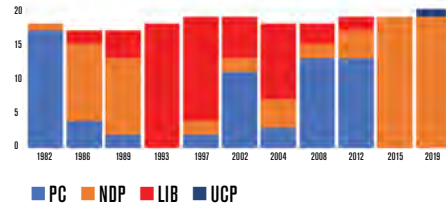
“We’re working on building a really strong team of candidates... and a campaign that’s very much focused on this city,” said party secretary Brandon Stevens, in an interview in Calgary. Attracting new candidates is “partially grassroots” work and also the work of political staff “reaching out to people that have credentials that resonate with Calgarians,” he said. “We have more staff than we’ve ever had in Calgary, and we [senior NDP political staff in Edmonton] are coming down all the time. Getting to know Highway 2 again.”

The party leader has final approval of candidates, traditionally the purview of the constituency association.

In February 2022 Druh Farrell, a Calgary city councillor for 20 years before retiring in 2021, announced she would seek the NDP nomination in Calgary-Bow. Farrell was a “star” candidate, the highest-profile recruit for the party, and she brought a wealth of experience in government. But not everyone was impressed by how she became a nominee. Calgary-Bow constituency association president Krista Li, a public education advocate with a Ph.D. in history, resigned. She detailed her concerns in a long letter, initially sent privately to Stevens and party president Peggy Wright. Months later Li released it publicly. Her concerns were many: The constituency association—a volunteer-run organization established by a political party to support its political activities in a riding—only learned Farrell was a nominee via Twitter. The party had held Li’s own nominee application for 11 months without giving her a yes or no answer. Constituency associations, “the backbone of this party... that fundraise, staff constituency offices, arrange volunteers and build the party infrastructure to keep MLAs elected,” were ignored and derided. Li’s call to Garrett Spelliscy, the party staffer overseeing nominations, was “the most incendiary and abusive phone call I have ever been a part of.”

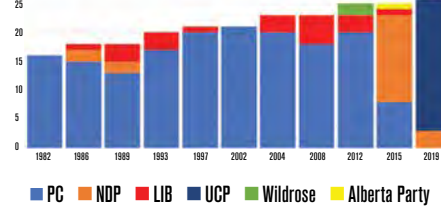
In closing, she wrote, “I’m not the first president in Calgary to express these concerns—only the latest. Treat volunteers with respect. Deal with applicants in a timely manner. And above all else refuse to employ abusive and misogynistic staffers.... The upcoming election is the NDP’s to lose. Continuing down this path without learning would be decidedly unwise.”

How Edmonton Votes



The proportion of Edmonton's provincial seats won by Alberta political parties, 1982–2019.

How Calgary Votes



The proportion of Calgary's provincial seats won by Alberta political parties, 1982–2019.

LEGALLY, POLITICAL PARTIES IN CANADA are private, not-for-profit organizations that “provide a public good” by offering policy platforms from which citizens can choose. Structurally, the federal and provincial parties operate on a “franchise model.” That’s the academic consensus reported by contributors to *Inside the Local Campaign*, a book on constituency elections. “Like a business franchise,” they write, “the party is largely responsible for determining policy positions, brand development, communications and campaign direction. The local level is primarily in charge of selecting candidates and providing logistical support in an election.” At the same time, the party leader has final approval of party candidates, and “there is clear interest and even a degree of control exerted [by the central party] in local nomination races, traditionally the purview of the constituency association”—a dynamic that can result in “tension between grassroots members and the central party.”

Both of Alberta’s main parties have felt that tension. In November 2021, 22 UCP constituency associations voted for an early leadership review of Premier Kenney—a vote that was eventually held, with the results of UCP member mail-in voting announced in May. Ahead of that vote, long-time Calgary conservative activist Al Browne told *Calgary Herald* columnist Don Braid that he talked “to many riding presidents from southern Alberta to northern Alberta” and they were all “supportive of the UCP. But are they dissatisfied with certain actions [of Kenney and his political staffers]? Yes, they are.” Similarly, in March 2022, 15 NDP riding executives sent a letter to the central NDP executive calling for an independent investigation into alleged mistreatment of volunteers and other issues—a demand that the party executive agreed to, with a commitment to “addressing the outstanding matters.”

These levels of tension are unusual. Along with providing local support for a party during and around an election,

constituency associations can be a primary way for a political party to connect with what voters in a riding want to talk about and hear. “If the constituency association is really good at what they do, they end up becoming part of the fabric of the community,” said Whitney Issik back in 2019, when the UCP’s Calgary-Glenmore constituency association was “at 2,500 members” (a number that was down to 814 in March 2022). “It really is that linkage between the membership and the party [executive], and a community to the party,” said Issik. Her riding, Calgary-Glenmore, she said, has “a lot of commonality—common histories [and] folks that have a can-do, get-it-done attitude.... For me it’s just true Calgary.”

IT’S MAY 10, 2022, THE DAY OF THE NDP nomination vote in Calgary-Glenmore. The president of the local NDP association, David Hyttenrauch, stands at the “Alberta’s NDP” podium in front of a portable backdrop showing a Rocky Mountain vista, in the Palliser-Bayview-Pumphill community association and daycare. Toys, bright learning materials and child-size chairs are stored along the white walls. NDP nomination candidates Jennifer Burgess and Nagwan Al-Guneid sit with their supporters—along with Edmonton-Whitemud MLA Rakhi Pancholi, Calgary-Edgemont nominee Julia Hayter and party staff Brandon Stevens and Garrett Spelliscy—in rows of stackable plastic chairs. Roughly 40 people are in the room. Almost all of them wear masks.

Al-Guneid entered the nomination race in early March. A sustainable-energy analyst who came to the University of Calgary from Yemen on a full scholarship at age 17, she is the director of Business Renewables Centre Canada—a non-profit supporting “large-scale” renewable energy development. Her campaign, which had a strong social media presence, including focused, on-message videos introducing herself as a candidate and endorsements from medical and finance professionals not obviously affiliated with the NDP, was helped by Esmahan Razavi, a principal at a public relations firm who wrote a notable CBC op-ed

in 2022. “Calgary is two different cities at the same time,” wrote Razavi. “One is a corporate city whose greatest success lies in a vision of the past,” where the brand is “corporate and cowboy.” The other city, “My Calgary,” she wrote, “just elected its first racialized woman mayor, after electing the first Muslim mayor of a large North American city. My Calgary is Canada’s third-most diverse city... where people move from across the world for everything from academics to tech to film to renewable energy.”

“Over the duration of this campaign the constituency association membership more than doubled, with 338 registered members,” says Hyttenrauch. “Out of those, 267, or 80 per cent, cast ballots, which is an amazing turnout.”

He then announced who’d won the right to represent the NDP in the riding: “I would like to welcome your nominee to the podium: Nagwan Al-Guneid.”

Al-Guneid comes to the podium, to loud applause, as Burgess visibly holds back tears. Burgess began campaigning in November 2021, because “we didn’t know the timeline” for when the party would vet another candidate and set a voting date. She ran “a strong campaign,” says Al-Guneid, thanking Burgess and then a long list of people, including “the party staff for always being there for us when we asked questions and who work long hours to support this party.”

“Right now, there are so many [Calgarians] who are politically homeless,” she says. “I want to help them find a voice. I want to help them to find a home with Alberta’s NDP.”

In an interview after the speeches—after Spelliscy made a call for donations: “We have a great candidate, we have great volunteers, and we have everything going for us, but we have to match the Conservatives dollar for dollar!”—Al-Guneid says that Calgary-Glenmore “is not an easy riding [to win]. We’ve been door knocking a lot, and every third door is either a geologist, a geophysicist or an oil and gas engineer,” she says. “People are looking for answers about the future of the oil and gas sector.... We need to share that the party has solutions and ideas for the future, because people want more hopeful messages.”

BY MAY 18, WHEN JASON KENNEY ANNOUNCED he would resign as premier, poll aggregator 338 projected a close provincial election, with the UCP getting 43 seats and the NDP 44, including 17 in Calgary. The odds of winning were put at 50/50.

On the day after Kenney announced his intention to resign, and with the city up for grabs, the NDP brought 21 MLAs and nominees to Calgary’s cSpace Studio Theatre to gather around Rachel Notley as she gave “remarks to all Albertans” and took questions from the media via Zoom. As they stand outside the doors of the theatre, waiting to be allowed in to join Notley, already inside, Edmonton-Mill Woods MLA Christina Gray gives the candidates a final instruction: “You need to look at the back of Rachel’s head like it’s the most interesting thing you’ve ever seen.”

The NDP candidates at cSpace include Calgary nominees such as Nagwan Al-Guneid, Druh Farrell and Diana Batten,

DAVE COURNOYER

a nurse and the party's candidate in Calgary-Acadia, the riding held by Tyler Shandro, Alberta's health minister during the worst of the pandemic.

For each successful NDP nomination candidate, the nomination gauntlet had culminated with a call for donations. At Farrell's nomination meeting at the Bowness Community Hall, MLA Joe Ceci put out the request. "I'm giving \$500. Who's going to match me?" he said, making the donation call auctioneer-style. "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, keep 'em up, 7 hands! OK! \$400? Four hands, thank you!"—raising \$20,000 from the crowd of some 150 NDP supporters.

Farrell's was by far the biggest of all the NDP's nomination events in Calgary. "I was born and raised in Alberta, I've lived here all my life," she told the crowd in the gym-sized hall with white cement walls. Under the UCP, said Farrell, "our healthcare, school curriculum, our universities, eldercare, our parks, affordable housing... have become almost unrecognizable in a few short years. I found I could not simply stand by and watch it happen."

"I've had my eye on trying to get Druh to step up and run for us as a candidate for some time," said Notley, following Farrell at the podium in Bowness. "We're building a team that is going to lead Alberta back to our best days." The supporters cheered.

Now, in the cSpace theatre in Calgary, Notley stands with Farrell and other nominees. They gaze at her. She looks into the camera. "I come with a message for all those Albertans who might have voted for the UCP and feel let down by their actions and behaviour over the last two years," she says. "You deserve better."

Danielle Smith declined to run in Calgary-Elbow, a seat that will be left vacant for nine months until the next provincial election.

UNLIKE IN 2019, THE UCP THIS TIME IS largely nominating incumbents; change for the party lies in changing leaders. In early June at the Calgary Stampede grounds, Travis Toews, the former finance minister and at the time the presumed front-runner in the leadership race, launched his campaign at the Rotary House, a log-cabin-style gathering hall. In front of some 150 UCP members, at a podium beneath a painting of John Wayne, Toews delivered a speech befitting his reputation as a family-oriented, manly accountant. "We must lead with strength and humility and return to the values that define us," he said. The crowd applauded. Country music swelled from the speakers. "Got my honey on my arm, Jesus in my heart," went the lyrics to "County Line," by High Valley, a band from La Crete in northern Alberta. Calgary cabinet

ministers such as Tyler Shandro, Sonya Savage and Jason Luan, all previously strong supporters of Kenney, gathered with Toews, Whitney Issik and other MLAs for a group photo. "We work hard, live right," went the song. "Tear it up on a Saturday night."

Nearly five months later, on October 6, when the UCP elected a new leader from seven candidates, poll aggregator 338 projected the UCP winning 51 seats, with the NDP getting 36, including only nine seats in Calgary. The leadership race gave the UCP a bump.

But just before the race results are announced, that polling trend isn't matched by widespread jubilation inside the BMO Centre on the Calgary Stampede grounds. Some 1,500 UCP members fill the convention hall. Balloons hang above the stage and podium in front of a giant Alberta flag. A bank of TV cameras faces the stage. The atmosphere is expectant, but it's more tense than celebratory, music barely discernible under the conversational murmur in the room.

Our darker political impulses can play out in the brightest light in Alberta, and October 6, 2022, was one of those times. Out of nearly 124,000 UCP members (59 per cent of whom are from outside Calgary and Edmonton), 84,593 ballots were cast. Danielle Smith eked out a narrow win over Toews on the sixth ballot. Deriving the bulk of her support from rural voters angry at Ottawa and COVID-19 restrictions, Smith made her signature campaign promise the Sovereignty Act, proposed legislation that would allow the provincial government to refuse to enforce federal laws.

"We will not have our voices silenced and censored," she said in her victory speech. "We will not be told what we must put in our bodies in order to work or to travel. We will not have our resources landlocked, or our energy phased out of existence by virtue-signalling prime ministers. Albertans, not Ottawa, will chart our own destiny on our own terms."

Balloons fell from the ceiling. Confetti burst in the air. Smith smiled, waved at the crowd, then stepped off the stage and exited the hall without posing for photos.

Smith wasn't an MLA and thus needed to run in a by-election to sit in the Legislature. She grew up in Calgary and went to the University of Calgary, but declined to run in Calgary-Elbow, a seat left vacant when MLA Doug Schweitzer (UCP) resigned at the end of August. Instead, Smith ran in Brooks-Medicine Hat, leaving Calgary-Elbow vacant for nearly nine months until the next election, scheduled for May 29, 2023. Smith's promised Sovereignty Act hadn't generated a warm response in Calgary—Deborah Yedlin, president and CEO of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, said it would "cause significant investment uncertainty"—and the empty seat spurred the impression that Smith felt Calgarians don't need full representation in the Legislature when the Sovereignty Act is introduced. Until the 2023 election, said Smith, her government would have "the adjacent MLA take care of issues in Calgary-Elbow." ■

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