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Notley was no saint

Canadian University Press

EDMONTON — When Grant Notley decided to run for leader of the Alberta New Democrats in 1968, two of his supporters forced the corduroy-clad 29-year-old to go to the tailor.

"If it means that much money, I don't know if I want to be leader," Notley moaned. As he was being fitted for two suits, he looked at the bill and huge tears rolled down his cheeks.

Later, an NDP colleague would take him aside and say, "Grant, you're too damn poor to be a socialist!"

Notley eventually won the leadership race he was being outfitted for, but he did not finish his long campaign to bring a significant social democrat presence to the Alberta legislature.

He died in a plane crash just 19 months before his party would win its highest number of seats in the Alberta legislature: 16, on May 8, 1986.

"I was a little worried that anything written about him would turn him into a saint," says Larry Pratt, a University of Alberta political science professor and a friend of the late Notley.

"He would not have wanted that kind of book written about him."

Instead, Pratt decided to publish a collection of essays on what Notley loved best: politics.

For *Socialism and Democracy In Alberta*, subtitled "Essays in Honour of Grant Notley", Pratt's faculty and NDP colleagues contributed chapters on everything from "Intraparty Democracy" to "Oil, Class and Development in Alberta." The analysis is hard-hitting, the view is unromantic.

In researching his chapter, a short biography of Notley, Pratt discovered almost forgotten aspects of the party's history.

After the Diefenbaker Conservative sweep of 1958, the CCF — Cooperative Commonwealth Federation — was left with eight federal seats and an endorsement from the Canadian Labour Congress.

Disenfranchised and disenchanting, the CCF and the CLC joined forces to create the National Committee for the New Party. Soon,

New Party clubs popped up on campuses across the country to the chagrin of hardline CCFers.

"To people forming the New Party, politics was more important than issues and ideas," says Pratt.

But one CCF loyalist objected to having "middle class people smothering his socialist ideas."

The New Party initiative was eventually successful, but divisive. A CCF think-tank in Edmonton refused for years to associate with the NDP after the party's founding convention in 1962.

Notley's organizational aggression in the New Party campaign only previewed his tactical skill.

"Notley was a good politician. Even when the NDP was not popular, Grant could reach out to individuals and groups and get them to feel they were important to him," Pratt says.

Despite Notley's personal popularity, the NDP was chronically unsuccessful at the polls. Notley was the lone NDP MLA from 1971 to 1979, when Ray Martin, the current provincial NDP leader, was elected in Edmonton Norwood.

Every election was anticipated as "the breakthrough", but for Notley it never came.

"There are two main reasons why they were not successful," says Pratt. "The first was Peter Lougheed and his Conservatives."

The Tories represented corporate success, says Pratt — old family tradition (Lougheed's grandfather was an Alberta lieutenant-governor), good organization, and the rising urban middle class in Edmonton and Calgary.

But the Tories came — and continue — to symbolize the second reason for the NDP failing in the seventies: the economic boom in Alberta.

Nothing succeeds like success — or the appearance thereof. That was one of Notley's mottoes. The trouble was the NDP did not look successful.

"Notley believed if you can demonstrate you're successful, that you're on the rise and that you were going to be the next government, people would join just because of that," says Pratt.

In 1984, the future for the NDP

was looking up. Albertans were outraged the economy was crashing, while the premier was retiring. The NDP was starting to look like a viable alternative, and the political climate was perfect for a breakthrough.

Notley's death was considered an irrecoverable setback, both by political experts and the party faithful. But the tragedy just made the committed more determined.

A year and a half later, the breakthrough came.

"Grant always expected there would be a breakthrough," says Pratt. "But he would have never predicted this."

The NDP increased its popular vote from 19 to 29 per cent. It now dominates the city of Edmonton and even elected a member in historically more conservative Calgary.

But because lower voter turnout indicated people were actively not voting for the Tories rather than voting for the NDP, Pratt warns all 16 seats are up for grabs in the next election.

"The danger is the closer the NDP gets to power, the more it will start acting like other parties."

Pratt called Premier Don Getty's Tories "centre-right interventionalist" while voters see the NDP as being "centre-left interventionalist."

What's the difference? In his essay, U of A political science chair Allan Tupper writes the party must emphasize its socialist roots. Pratt disagrees.

"Before the NDP can emphasize socialism, it has to become another party."

The hierarchy of the NDP is pyramidal, says Pratt, with the smallest number of people at the top of the power structure and the grass-roots at the bottom.

"Social democratic parties tend to be undemocratic. The NDP could become more socialist if it became more popular."

Albertans, Edmontonians especially, are getting used to the new MLAs. None of the NDP MLAs are as yet as popular as their late leader.

But the delegates at the November provincial NDP convention in Edmonton, the first since 'the breakthrough', were still punch-drunk, elated, and unused to having so much to cheer about.

Pratt's book was released in time to become a hit at the conference, to no one's surprise.

"It's really important that people who live and work in a place know something about their history," he says.

"And it's the winners who write the history."

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Even though there may be problems in the present educational system, such as using the average student as a basis for the curriculum, I don't think that Peter Pocklington's ideas for education would work effectively. Mr. Pocklington should recognize how important social involvement is in the classroom, and make himself more familiar with the present educational system before he condemns it as being too socialistic.

Mark Belanger

STAFF MEETING

Thurs. Dec. 4th

Agenda: CUP Conference, etc.