

HILTON-O'BRIEN: happy “graduation,”

Rachel Notley

January 18, 2024

Former Premier Rachel Notley has stepped down as leader of the Alberta New Democratic Party (NDP) and I have mixed feelings.

That seems like an odd thing to say: I have been a strong opponent of her for a long time and I would be proud to think that I helped contribute to her long-term defeat.

But “opponent” in a democracy is not the same as “enemy.” I think Notley has performed far better at statecraft than expected — and that Alberta will be poorer for her moving on.

Both of these statements require some explanation. We'll begin with the comment about respect.

About twenty years ago, I was perplexed that Alberta was governed by a single party for more than 40 years. It was a distinction we shared with only two other democracies: India and Mexico. Eventually, I came upon a monograph that claimed the most important reason for this was not the corruption of Mexico's and India's dominant parties (even if there was some.)

Rather, the reason lay in the corruption of the *opposition* parties.

That corruption took a simple and unexpected form. People did not become directors or leaders of opposition parties because they wanted to govern: rather, they wanted to get ahead socially, or in their careers.

For instance, a lawyer was working for a law firm whose partners were prominent members of the Liberal Party. By running (ineffectually) for office under the party banner, the lawyer looked more virtuous to the partners and more eligible for promotion. The more strident he was, the more he appeared to be a “man of principle.”

At the same time, the extreme positions he endorsed made him less electable.

Extraordinary as it may seem, the story above was related to me by a young lawyer explaining his motives for running for the Liberal Party.

And, I have observed such motivations elsewhere: I once watched an NDP candidate in a rural race openly flatter the conservative candidate she expected would win, apparently hoping it would benefit the town where she happened to sit on the municipal council.

The political narcissism of candidates for both of our opposition parties were part of the reason that we had a 45-year dynasty in government. They had turned into tree-forts, more concerned with who they kept out than with statecraft.

This was corruption. The interests of the people involved is being served over and above the benefit that the party gives the commonwealth. It is poisonous for democracy.

It discourages accountability if the incumbent can't lose an election over bad policy. It's a big part of the reason I took part in the original Wildrose Party 16 years ago — to create at least one opposition party that was going for government.

However, when Notley took over the Alberta NDP, she decided to earnestly strive for government.

Thus, she moderated her party's statements and muzzled the most doctrinaire. She even sought fiscal restraint during her time in office, using her union connections to moderate their demands.

I might disagree with her policies — and in fact, I think

the party's positions on education ruined her career — but the fact is that she adopted policies she thought would win elections.

And compared to previous NDP policies, this was absolutely brilliant. Whatever her faults in personality or policy, Rachel Notley practiced genuine statecraft as an NDP leader and Premier and that deserves respect.

Of course, the NDP policies adopted left much to be desired.

While premier, Notley essentially allowed her minister of education to suppress the province's Christian and Muslim minorities.

She insisted that conservative premier Jim Prentice's Gay-Straight Alliances be mandatory in schools — even when in direct contradiction with the faith of the families they were forced upon. She even doubled down — forcing school boards to adopt policies to keep attendance at the clubs secret from the parents.

Ultimately, however, Notley's school policies crossed over into parody.

Her education minister sent “rainbow letters” to private Christian schools, colourfully highlighting their organizing documents and explaining

why almost every sentence was somehow anti-gay, transphobic or otherwise not allowed. hilariously, the word “truth” was singled out as being unacceptable for schools to use. Shades of Pontius Pilate!

The result was fairly intense. Parents for Choice in Education (PCE) sponsored simultaneous rallies in Edmonton and Calgary in 2016 — and more than 6,000 people showed up between the two locations. It was believed to be the biggest protest mounted at the Legislature to that date — an incredible display. There is no doubt that Notley's 2019 defeat was largely due to her antagonising parents.

In the 2023 election, Notley decided to antagonize them again. One of her candidates led a well-funded campaign to eliminate all forms of education aside from public schools. A press conference revealed an intent to eliminate charter and private schools — a promise that they “clarified” too late.

An op-ed published on the subject (in this publication) apparently drew more than 10,000 views on the *Western Standard* (WS) website alone.

In an election decided by a fraction of that number of votes, that's a big number. There is little doubt that

parents' reactions to the NDP education policy contributed to their election loss.

And that brings us to a third observation about Notley.

In the end, she was defeated not by matters of popularity, or bred-in-the-bone partisanship. Albertans rejected her on the basis of policy. Notley overcame the narcissism of the NDP to the point where they were able to actually define policy — even if those policies were pernicious (at least in the case of education).

Whatever else we may say about her legacy, the Notley years saw Alberta graduate to a new level of self-awareness. It was truly an achievement.

I am not sure that will be true going forward. Will Mr. Eggen — himself a former leadership candidate and author of the ridiculous “rainbow letters” — take over? Whoever does, it is likely Notley's successors will become ever more strident on education, and ever more unelectable.

I wish Notley well. She taught a lesson that would be well-learned by every opposition party (not only the NDP). We will miss her — if only because we suspect that the NDP will not remember the lessons learned.