

THE GLOBE AND MAIL
TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 2006

Some familiar political theatre, Alberta-style

TOM FLANAGAN

Canadians have seen this play before, featuring a folksy political leader who didn't realize when his time on the stage was up, and a former finance minister who made his name by balancing the budget and now feels that it's his time to take charge.

But even if the script is the same, the stars are different. Now it's not Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin but Ralph Klein and Jim Dinning, and the theatre is the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta, not the Liberal Party of Canada.

Of course, the analogy can't be pushed too far. The Martinites spent years taking over the machinery of the Liberal Party, forcing Mr. Chrétien out and fixing the rules so that only their man could win the resulting leadership race. Mr. Dinning's crew has not been so heavy-handed. They've raised money and organized for the coming leadership race, but not worked directly to bring down Mr. Klein. He brought himself down by

throwing public money around, governing without a coherent agenda, and losing touch with the grassroots.

Mr. Klein's downfall was more a matter of happenstance and opportunism than calculation and plotting. Another leadership aspirant, Lyle Oberg, had stumbled in to a fight with the Premier that he did not really want, and the Premier's loyalists raised the stakes by suspending Mr. Oberg from caucus. With the conflict already escalated, Dinning supporters took advantage of last week's convention to deliver the *coup de grâce* to the self-wounded Premier.

Mr. Dinning now has the most to gain from a speedy leadership race. Being better known, funded, and organized than his five declared rivals, Mr. Dinning's ideal scenario would be a June leadership vote, leaving his opponents little time to catch up. The more time that elapses, the more chance the other candidates have to cement their "Anyone but Dinning" pact and sell new memberships to people who would have Mr. Dinning as their last choice.

The problem for Mr. Dinning, as for all early front-runners, is that

he must win, or at least show overwhelming strength on the first ballot. If he does not win early, he may be blocked forever.

Dinning supporters dominate the party's leadership election committee, and they must be sorely tempted to press for an early race with rules favouring their candidate. For example, strict fundraising conditions would hamper new candidates while not bothering Mr. Dinning, who has had plenty of time to raise money without any restrictions at all. But such a strike at the jugular could backfire. The mood of Alberta PC members is fragile; having seen what Martin-style hardball politics did to the unity of the Liberal Party, they might be spooked by a Dinning juggernaut.

Meanwhile, Preston Manning's shadow suddenly looms over what until recently was considered internal PC business. Mr. Manning startled everyone this weekend by

announcing that he would be amenable to a leadership draft. If there is one thing we know about Mr. Manning, it is that he never says anything without forethought. He must have a plan in mind.

Mr. Manning is widely esteemed in Alberta, and most voters would see him as a fine premier. But his chances might not be that good in a PC leadership race, particularly if it comes quickly. He could attract money and workers, but he has no organization in place, and he would face six other candidates who are already organized to varying degrees. Candidate Ted Morton has spent two years cultivating the sort of voters who would make up Mr. Manning's base, and he is unlikely to withdraw now in Mr. Manning's favour.

Yet Mr. Manning may have bigger plans in mind. He has said more than once that Alberta is ripe for a takeover by a newly founded or reconstituted party, as hap-

pened with the United Farmers of Alberta in 1920, Social Credit in 1935, and the Progressive Conservatives in 1971. He has even spelled out the ideological contours, combining fiscal conservatism and environmentalism. Call it conservative conservatism.

With a leadership race in 2006, time is probably too short for Mr. Manning to win control of the Alberta Progressive Conservatives. But there might be time to organize a credible new party to contest the next provincial election, which likely won't come until 2009. The timeline would be tight, but not impossible.

Memo to Alberta PCs: Rediscover the virtues of fiscal responsibility, savings, and tax cuts. Reconnect with the grassroots and build up the party's membership, which is shockingly low. Don't make the leadership race ugly and divisive. If you continue to turn voters off the PC brand, the dozen seats you lost in the 2005 election will prove to be the harbinger of much bigger losses.

Tom Flanagan is a political science professor at the University of Calgary.



More Comment

Preston Manning's original article, first published in 2004, on Alberta's need for a new, green political movement globeandmail.com