

**Manitoba's Progressive Conservative Party:
A "Great Renewal" or Continued Disarray?**

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I. Introduction

At the annual general meeting of the Manitoba Progressive Conservative Party held last spring, leader Hugh McFadyen acknowledged that while it had had some disappointing setbacks, the Party was nonetheless on the verge of a “great renewal”. In light of the Party’s diminishing fortunes over the past decade, and most recently in the May 2007 election when it suffered its worst electoral showing since 1953, McFadyen’s attempts to instill hope in his Party’s faithful is understandable. Whether the Party is simply experiencing the ebb and flow natural to all political organizations, or is suffering from a deeper, more serious malaise, however, remains disputable. What is clear is that the Conservatives, as they enter the 21st century, are at a turning point in their history. The extent to which it is able to overcome its current woes, and be viewed as a credible and realistic alternative to the governing New Democrats by a wider proportion of Manitobans, is the fundamental question before the Party today. It is also the focus of this paper.

In addressing the varied challenges confronting the P.C. Party as it enters the new millennium, the paper will draw on interviews with party insiders as well as a variety of primary and secondary documents¹. The paper will be divided into three parts. The first section will begin with an overview of the Party under the leadership of Gary Filmon, who led his Conservatives to three successive electoral victories. In contrast to these past successes stands the Progressive Conservative Party of today. Once lauded by some as the natural governing party of Manitoba, the Tories have suffered a steady erosion in their electoral support over the past three general elections, and in particular in the crucial battleground of Winnipeg. The second section of the paper will examine some of the defining, macro-level variables that led to the downward spiral of the Party since the late 1990s. Some of these factors include the negative fallout from the 1995 vote-rigging scandal; the successful re-branding of the NDP and its movement to the ideological centre; the financial and structural woes faced by the Party; and its struggles with leadership in the wake of Filmon’s departure from the helm in 2000.

The third section of the paper will consider both the opportunities and the challenges before the PC Party as it attempts to rebuild under the leadership of Hugh McFadyen. While much of the Party’s fortunes will depend on the future of the NDP (in particular, the continued presence of Gary Doer as the leader of the NDP Party), its biggest challenge will be clarifying what it stands for in the 21st Century. In doing so it will need to reconcile its progressive and conservative wings that have tended to reflect the urban/rural divide within its membership base, and reclaim the ideological centre that has been the source of much of the NDP’s electoral success.

As the paper will conclude, it is difficult to predict the degree to which the P.C. Party will be able to overcome these challenges and achieve its ultimate goal of forming office in the next election. However, one thing appears certain. Unless it is able to appeal to a broader cross-section of the electorate, notably in the Winnipeg ridings, it will continue to languish in opposition.

I. The Progressive Conservative Party in the 1990s

When we think of the PC Party of Manitoba in recent times, the figure of Gary Filmon looms large. So central was Filmon to the fortunes of the Party through the 1990s that his legacy continues to reverberate, some ten years after his retirement from public office. Indeed, it would not be far off the mark to suggest that much of the Party's misfortunes over the intervening decade can be attributed precisely to the strong leadership of Filmon, his masterful political skill, and his accomplishments in office. As leader of the Party from 1983 until his announced departure on the eve of the Tories' 1999 defeat, the Party came to be singularly personalized in his image.

Building the Filmon Machine

Filmon's tenure as one of the strongest and most effective leaders of a Manitoba political party was not necessarily guaranteed at the outset. Indeed, until his majority win in 1990, Filmon was perceived by many outside and even within his own Party as "weak and a five-star nerd" (A4, 2008). And indeed, much of his early years of leadership were spent trying to ward off challengers from within the Party (Cohen, 1990). A professional engineer, business owner and former city counsellor, Filmon was first elected to the Manitoba Legislature in 1979, later joining the cabinet of Sterling Lyon as Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs and Environment. In the 1981 provincial election Lyon's Tories were defeated by the NDP under Howard Pawley; Filmon, however managed to get re-elected in the new riding of Tuxedo. In what was to prove to be a difficult and tumultuous leadership campaign, in 1983 Filmon replaced Lyon as leader of the PC Party, defeating fellow caucus members Brian Ransom and Clayton Manness who represented the rural/conservative wing of the Party.

During his bid for the leadership Filmon already displayed many of the characteristics that would later propel him to his later successes both within the Party and in Manitoba politics generally. A delegate to the 1983 leadership convention ascribed much of Filmon's early success to his ability to inspire personal loyalty and to reach out to individuals who had not been members or even supporters of the Conservatives in the past. He built his leadership base by visiting every constituency association personally; meeting one on one with delegates and selling them on his personal, folksy style. Believers in the cause became 'Filmon Tories' rather than 'Progressive Conservatives', and were encouraged to place their faith in Filmon even if they remained unsure about the Conservative Party. "We were part of the 'Filmon Team' and we took great pride in that. We felt that we were all in this together" (A3, 2008). The loyalty that Filmon's supporters developed towards him rather than the Party per se did not occur by happenstance. Rather, it was a calculated maneuver designed to neutralize opposition within the Party – notably emanating from the rural, more conservative wing which was mistrustful of Filmon's urban, more progressive approach to issues.

Much of Filmon's appeal also rested with his clear and singleminded message – that in order to move Manitoba forward, the economy needed to be brought in order. "Filmon said 'I have a plan, a vision for Manitoba and I want you to help me achieve it'" (A3, 2008). And given the troubled state of the Manitoba economy at the time, this wasn't too

difficult of a sell. With provincial debt levels more than doubling over a six year period and a series of fee increases implemented in major Crown corporations, confidence in the Pawley government's ability to manage the province had gone into freefall (Government of Manitoba, 1993:24). Under Filmon's tenure, this central and unwavering economic vision would become the central paradigm under which all aspects of public policy would be subsumed (Saunders, 2007).

While the Conservatives narrowly lost the 1986 election, securing 26 seats compared to the NDP's 30, it was given another opportunity two years later when it managed to bring the NDP government down in a non-confidence motion (with the assistance of disgruntled NDP backbencher Jim Walding). In an election that marked what Alex Netherton (2001:225) has described as "the shift to the contemporary globalization-neoliberal policy paradigm marked by fiscal orthodoxy, attention to market competitiveness, deregulation and privatization", the Filmon Tories managed to win enough seats to form a minority government on April 26th, 1988. Despite Netherton's assessment, however, the Conservatives moved slowly at first, continuing with the expenditure control program developed in the latter years of the former NDP government but extending it to such policy areas as health and education. While the governing Conservatives knew where they wanted to go in terms of establishing its neo-conservative policy paradigm, they also recognized the limitations of minority government and the need to prepare the public for the kinds of structural changes that were to come. In describing how this thinking shaped his particular area of responsibility, a former Minister of Education in the Filmon administration commented that "we had to be so careful in how we addressed issues because the opposition parties, especially the NDP, did not want to see changes made in the structures that they had established in the education field" (A2, 2006). Hence, while the Conservatives knew that "we somehow had to start down that road", they recognized that they could not rush too quickly into reforms that Manitobans were not ready for, and that could potentially cost them electoral support.

While embarking on expenditure control plans much of Filmon's first two years as Premier were caught up in the debates surrounding the Meech Lake Accord. While a tumultuous time for the province, it proved to be extremely fortuitous for Filmon and his Party. Inheriting the issue from the previous Pawley government, Filmon used the mounting opposition in the province against the Accord, and its ultimate defeat at the hands of NDP MLA Elijah Harper, to his political advantage. With Harper's move, Filmon had avoided being held responsible for the death of the Accord, while at the same time dodging criticism from Manitobans for allowing it to pass despite many of their objections. And, in spite of his flip-flops on the issue, the "image of Filmon which resonated with public opinion was not his compliance or surrender, but his long-standing opposition to Ottawa and Quebec" (Wiseman, 1994, 103). As a former senior advisor to Filmon commented, "it was after Meech that we knew Filmon was a leader. I said, call the election now" (A1, 2005).

The gamble paid off. Filmon called a snap election for September 11, 1990, and campaigned on the need for a majority government. Taking advantage of his newfound role as a strong defender of the province, and to offset the growing unpopularity of the

Progressive Conservative brand at the federal level under Brian Mulroney, the provincial Tories became revamped as the “Filmon Team”. Campaign signs and brochures had Filmon’s name prominently displayed, with “Manitoba Progressive Conservatives” barely legible underneath. Winning over many voters who had supported the Liberals in 1988, the Conservatives were returned to power with a majority government of 30 seats.

During its next term in office, the Progressive Conservative government built on its reputation as strong fiscal managers. As campaign material from the 1995 election screamed, “our top priority is economic security and more jobs!” (PC Party of Manitoba, 1995). Despite going through the second worst recession of the century, under the Tories’ watch Manitoba was able to avoid the more extreme economic fallout experienced by other provinces; and in March 1995 managed to introduce the first balanced budget in Manitoba in over 20 years (the Filmon Government Record, 1995, 4). It also brought forward a mandatory balanced budget law; at the time, the toughest legislation of its kind in Canada. Not surprisingly then, the Progressive Conservatives headed into the 1995 provincial election with the central campaign theme of making “Manitoba Strong” - and secured its largest majority in over 15 years.

While the Filmon Tories had banked much of their success on their ability to convince Manitobans of the need for their brand of strong fiscal medicine, as they proceeded through their third mandate their fortunes began to shift. A number of controversial bills led some to perceive the Conservative government as arrogant and power hungry. Filmon also appeared to have dispensed with the pragmatic incrementalism which had marked his early years in government, and had ideologically shifted further to the right in the fashion of the Harris and Klein governments in Ontario and Alberta². Proposed legislative changes included the privatization of MTS (which 75 percent of Manitobans had opposed); new governance structures for health care and post-secondary education (with the introduction of Regional Health Authorities and the creation of the Council on Post-Secondary Education); as well as various amendments to the province’s labour laws that would make it harder for unions to organize, spend members’ dues, and hold votes on contract offers.

An assessment of the Filmon administration’s last years in office reveals that, in many ways, the Conservatives became victims of their own success. Certainly, their record on fiscal management had earned it high marks. In the face of recessionary pressures and cuts in federal transfer payments implemented by the Chretien government, the Tories could boast of numerous successes on the economic front. The province continued to enjoy levels of economic growth that outpaced the national economy and a low unemployment rate (at that point, the best in the country). The Conservatives had also balanced the books for five years in a row and through eleven consecutive budgets had managed a freeze on major taxes; a claim that no other government in Canada or North America could make at the time (PC Party, Our History). The Tories were also already ahead of their ambitious 30 year debt repayment plan. These conditions – a strong economy, low unemployment and moderate taxes – reflected the typical kinds of factors that would lead to re-election for an incumbent government.

However, it soon became increasingly clear that a decade of protracted restraint under the Tories' watch had led to nothing less than a social deficit in the province, and which in many ways would prove to be the Party's downfall. In the public's mind the years of cuts had eroded the quality of care in many of the province's social services, most notably in the area of health care; a perception the NDP were capitalizing on with their repeated references to "hallway medicine". A 1998 poll conducted by Angus Reid showed that on the health care issue, the Manitoba Conservatives had an almost 70 percent disapproval rating – the highest disapproval rate across the western provinces (Winnipeg Free Press, 1998, A10). The government's stated plans to privatize home care services and contract out hospital food services, and the union strikes and public outcry with which these measures were met, did little to ameliorate the Conservatives' credibility gap on the health care issue.

In the lead-up to the 1999 election, the polls had also begun to show that the Progressive Conservatives were in trouble, particularly in the city of Winnipeg. While the Tories entered the election in a virtual dead heat with the NDP, the gap appeared to be widening in the city of Winnipeg. In March 1999, a Probe Research poll conducted for the Winnipeg Free Press found that while 38 percent of Winnipeg residents favoured the NDP, support for the governing Conservatives was virtually tied with the Liberals at 30 percent and 29 percent respectively (Winnipeg Free Press, March 20, 1999, A14). Despite these signs of troubled waters, Filmon called a fall election, and the Tories entered the campaign on a positive note. The centerpiece of the Conservative's election platform was the 50/50 plan. Billed as a "solid and balanced approach" designed to "keep Manitoba strong", the heart of the plan involved \$500 million in tax cuts on the one hand a \$500 million infusion in social programs on the other (PC Manitoba, 1999, the 50/50 Plan). For a regime that had long sold the merits of fiscal restraint and cautious government, this apparent spending spree to the tune of a billion dollars was perceived as totally out of character. It was also more than the voters could credibly swallow. When the dust settled on September 21, 1999, the NDP had won 32 seats to the PCs' 24. After 11 years in power, the Filmon machine had come to a grinding halt. As Harry Enns, longtime Tory MLA and cabinet minister was to later comment, "we lost an election we ought to have won" (Winnipeg Free Press, May 15, 2000, A8).

II. The Party in Disarray

In assessing the PC Party's decline from the heights of majority government to opposition status in 1999, several factors can be highlighted. Certainly the Tories' 50/50 plan was itself problematic. An overly ambitious plan that seemed an ill fit for a government that had built its reputation on financial caution, it proved to be a tough sell even to Progressive Conservative members. Indeed, even the Party's own internal assessment of the 1999 campaign highlighted the poor job it did in communicating and presenting the idea to voters (PC Party of Manitoba, 2000). But the issues that led to the Tories' defeat went much deeper than simply poor electoral strategizing – and in many ways represent some of the ongoing challenges that the Party is still struggling to overcome almost a decade later.

The Vote Rigging Scandal

Without question one of the most significant issues that damaged the PC Party in recent memory is the vote-rigging scandal that broke following the 1995 provincial election. Devised by key strategists within the Party, the plan involved the fronting of “independent” Aboriginal candidates in the constituencies of Dauphin-Roblin, Interlake and Swan River, in an attempt to siphon votes away from the NDP (Smith, 2003). Implicated in the scandal and the subsequent cover-up were three very high ranking Conservatives, including Taras Sokolyk, the Premier’s Chief of Staff and campaign manager of the 1995 campaign; Julian Benson, Secretary of the Treasury Board and former Party treasurer; and Gordon McFarlane, comptroller of the PC Party for the 1995 campaign.

When the scandal broke in 1998, Benson and Sokolyk resigned from their positions and the Premier, denying that he had any knowledge of the scheme, appointed Justice Alfred Monnin to investigate the matter and determine whether any election laws had been violated. Calling Sokolyk and Benson’s actions “unethical” and “morally reprehensible”, in his final report Monnin famously declared that “in all my years on the Bench I never encountered as many liars in one proceeding as I did during this inquiry” (Monnin, 1999, 16). After the release of the report Filmon took the additional step of commissioning Leonard Doust, an independent prosecutor, to review Justice Monnin’s findings and consider whether charges might successfully be brought against Sokolyk and Benson. Doust’s report, released in August 1999, concluded that prosecutions would likely be successful. However, he recommended against charges on the grounds that the two men had suffered enough both personally and professionally (CBC News, 1999).

While Justice Monnin had accepted Filmon’s claims that the architects of the vote-rigging scheme had operated independently of his knowledge or consent, the damage caused to him and his Party was unequivocal. Polls taken only months before the 1999 provincial election revealed that a majority of undecided voters (57%) and a third of Progressive Conservative supporters believed that Filmon was not telling the truth about what he knew regarding the scheme. A third of those polled, in addition to 10 percent of those who identified themselves as Progressive Conservatives, also indicated that the vote rigging scandal would likely influence their vote (Winnipeg Free Press, March 19, 1999, A11).

Despite these troubling signs it appeared that some within the Party failed to fully absorb the damage that had been caused to the Conservatives by the scandal, and the degree to which the public’s trust in Filmon had been violated. At the Party’s 1999 Annual General Meeting, held just a month before Monnin released his report, a senior aide to the Premier was quoted as saying that “there’s no question the scandal hurt, but not so much that it will mean losing the election”. Another Party delegate maintained that the whole thing was being “overblown” (Winnipeg Free Press, February 28, 1999, A3).

Yet the issue of broken faith proved to be too insurmountable for the Conservatives. While Gary Filmon remained more personally popular than NDP leader Gary Doer, the 1999 election turned out to be precisely about faith and trust. Despite the Tories’ solid

economic record, it was the credibility question that sunk them in the end. As one former MLA noted, “I think we could have won in 1999 if not for the vote rigging scandal. Sure health care was an issue, but not enough to lose over. But when the trust is broken, you need time to recover from that” (A4, 2008).

The Re-Branding of the NDP

Much of the success of the NDP, and by default the struggles of the Progressive Conservatives, can be attributed to Gary Doer’s masterful re-branding of the NDP. Doer’s keen assessment that the best way to beat the Tories was to imitate them was born out necessity. As Nelson Wiseman (2002: 227) cogently argues, “neo-conservatism has, with some success, identified itself with fiscal prudence and tarred social democracy with the brush of fiscal profligacy” – an image and fact that does not correspond insofar as the Prairies are concerned”. As Wiseman reminds us, despite the fact that it was the Lyon Conservatives that were responsible for running up what was until then the largest public debt in the province’s history, the NDP’s defeat in 1988 imprinted an image in the public’s mind of the social democratic NDP as the party of high taxes and incompetent financial administration.

This was an image that Doer, upon becoming leader of the NDP in March 1988, knew he had to overcome if his party were to win office again in the near future. And overcome it he did. In February 1999, at the Party’s last Annual General Meeting before the fall 1999 election, Doer unveiled “Today’s NDP”; a party that under his tenure would be committed to fiscal responsibility, balanced budgets, debt repayment and tax freezes. In addition to a commitment to balanced budgets, the NDP’s election platform in 1999 was tailored down to four straightforward pledges: an end to hallway medicine; a post-secondary education tuition freeze; the maintenance of Manitoba Hydro as a crown corporation; and crime prevention. Doer essentially argued that his government would be committed in many ways to following the same fiscally prudent path as the Conservatives (and which had resonated so well amongst Manitobans) -- but at a slower, more compassionate pace.

To a large degree Doer’s successful reinvention of the NDP rests with his pragmatic, as opposed to ideological, approach to politics. As Gary Filmon commented upon Doer’s succession to the leadership of the NDP, “I think it’s fairly well known that Gary Doer hasn’t always been a committed New Democrat”³ (Maclean’s, May 24, 2007, online edition). Doer also recognized early on the importance of what he referred to as “personality politics” and the importance of character in leadership – a wise move given the fact that it was the trust factor which had done so much damage to Gary Filmon. As Doer noted in a speech early in his premiership, “I am finding that substantive policy is very important. But while we debate policy — in our party, in caucus, and in Cabinet — the public wants to get a sense of the character of the people they may vote for or against. Personality politics, as I refer to it, is more important with the public than when I first entered public office over ten years ago” (Doer, 2000, 7).

Already halfway through their first term, the NDP had successfully fashioned themselves as a centrist, incrementalist party that appealed to people from all walks of

life, including those who normally didn't vote on the left. As Paul Thomas (undated: 10) notes, the ability of the Doer administration to combine some of the right-of-centre policies of the former government (such as the balanced budget law) with new funding in such social policy areas as health and childcare struck the right balance with Manitobans. "The overall policy stance of the NDP government, which combines fiscal conservatism with spending to create social opportunities, seems to fit with the provincial culture." Since 1999, their grasp on the huge centre has remained as tight as ever. Doer's steady approach to governance has not only allowed the NDP to divert from the typical two term pattern in Manitoba, but has allowed the NDP to consistently build upon their electoral strength in the past three successive elections. The "Doer Phenomenon" has remained a challenge for the Progressive Conservatives ever since.

The NDP have also benefited from what Chris Adams (2008:9) has described as the "long-term realignment within the provincial electorate, especially in Winnipeg" that occurred in the 1999 election. Traditionally, support for the province's two dominant parties, the NDP and the PCs, has tended to break down along urban/rural lines. While NDP support has historically been strong in the core areas of Winnipeg and the Northern regions of the province, the Progressive Conservatives have long dominated the rural areas, particularly in Southwestern Manitoba, and the growing suburban ridings of Winnipeg (Dyck, 1996; Serfaty, 1996). However, in the 1999 election the New Democrats were not only able to more efficiently translate their votes into seats than the Conservatives, but they were also able to increase their support throughout all of Winnipeg, including ridings that had been formerly held by the Tories. This realignment, Adams adds, appears to have held through the 2003 and 2007 elections.

The Challenge of Leadership

In hindsight, it is questionable whether Gary Filmon did the PC Party a disservice by announcing -- even before the Monnin inquiry into the vote-rigging scandal began its public hearings -- that he would lead the Conservatives into the 1999 provincial election. With this announcement Party members were denied the opportunity to decide whether they wanted Filmon to remain at the helm, or whether they preferred to take their chances on a new leader and possibly salvage a minority government. By 1999, as William Neville stated at the time, Gary Filmon had gone from being a leader that had been his Party's greatest strength just a few years previously to becoming its biggest albatross (Winnipeg Free Press, March 19, 1999). And indeed, the fact that so few contenders would step up to replace him upon his subsequent departure is indicative of just how far the Party had fallen into disarray. As one longtime Conservative stated, "maybe if Filmon had stepped down a year or so earlier, perhaps the Party would have had time to recoup" (A4, 2008). As it was, it would take another seven years before the leadership issue would be brought to any kind of resolution within the Party.

While still reeling from its defeat after 11 years in power, the Party had to further contend with Filmon's announcement, the very night of the 1999 election, of his intention to step down as leader of the Progressive Conservatives. While the sudden departure of any leader would be problematic for a political organization, in the Conservatives' case it proved to be nothing less than devastating. There is a rich literature pointing to the

leader-centric nature of political parties in Canada and in this way the PC party of Manitoba had certainly been no exception. A constant theme amongst many of those interviewed for this project was how the Party had been re-fashioned in the image of Gary Filmon, and the impact this had on the Party's organization and grassroots. "Once we won a majority government in 1990, Gary Filmon became seen as the winning formula. And after that, the thinking of his staffers was that we didn't need the Party or the membership anymore as long as we had Filmon at the top" (A10, 2008). As the "Filmon machine" became increasingly professionalized and controlled by his political advisors, the balance of power shifted not only from the Party to Filmon and his inner circle, but caucus was left increasingly powerless as well (A3, 2008).

Public criticisms from those who had sat in Filmon's cabinet lend credence to the degree to which the Party organization had withered during his tenure. High profile cabinet minister and subsequent leadership contender Darren Praznik admitted that in its final years, the Filmon administration had turned its back on party rank and file, while Harry Enns, considered by many at that time to be the "Dean" of the PC Party, stated that "we were arrogant and we paid for it. We have to get out of that inner-circle crowd that has been running the Conservative Party of Manitoba" (Winnipeg Free Press, May 15, 2000, A8).

While Filmon's announcement of his imminent departure was a blow, the Conservatives were thrown into further turmoil when shortly after Eric Stefanson, the former Finance Minister and natural replacement to Filmon, declared that he would not be contesting the leadership of the Party. The events that followed were to shape the PC Party's fortunes for the next several years, and from which scars the Party still bears. Rather than appointing an interim leader and delaying a leadership convention a year or two, the decision was made to forge ahead immediately with Filmon's replacement. The quick turnaround would mean that the Conservatives would have insufficient time to recover from their 1999 defeat, to rebuild their organizational base and to consider life post-Filmon. At the very least, the Conservatives would have benefited from a well-fought leadership campaign; one which would officially mark the break from the old regime to the new, and which would re-energize the grassroots of the Party as only leadership campaigns typically can. Certainly, if ever a leadership convention was needed in the PC Party, it was at that point in 2000. It had been a full 17 years since the last such convention, when Filmon took helm of the Party. Yet this was not to be the case.

In the spring of 2000, Darren Praznik was the first candidate to officially throw his hat into the leadership race. Soon after Stuart Murray, longtime party strategist at both the federal and provincial levels, also announced his intention to run. As described by ex-Filmon cabinet minister Linda McIntosh, the race between Murray and Praznik would shape up to be "a contest between the establishment and the grassroots" (Winnipeg Sun, May 4, 2000, 5). Despite Praznik's tenure as a cabinet minister within the Filmon administration, Murray was clearly the preferred choice of the Conservative elite. While he had long served in a number of advisory roles, most recently as Filmon's Director of Communications in the 1999 election campaign, the fact that Murray had never actually run for office himself was considered an asset. Untainted by this kind of direct political

baggage, he was seen by his supporters as the kind of fresh, new face needed to renew the Party rank and file, and to convince voters that the Tories were again worthy of their trust.

Given the Party heavyweights that threw their support behind Murray, the race was over as soon as it began. With Praznik's subsequent withdrawal from the race in May 2000 (citing as mitigating factors a lack of funds and the exceedingly long length of the campaign – almost twice that of the 1983 leadership campaign), Murray remained uncontested in his bid for the Party's top job. Praznik's withdrawal was to turn the leadership race into nothing less than a public relations disaster for the Party. In announcing that he was stepping down, Praznik suggested that the contest has been set up so as to favor Murray. Members of the Party executive needed to think long and hard about the campaign rules they set, he added, and needed to ask themselves why only one person in the province would seek to lead a political organization that had ruled for all of the 1990s. As he stated, "I think (my withdrawal) is an indication that the people putting this together haven't thought things through" (Winnipeg Free Press, May 20, 2000, A6). Indeed, the fact that no other members of the PC caucus were interested in leading their own party was telling.

With Praznik's withdrawal from the race, Murray was acclaimed as leader at the Party's Annual General Meeting in November 2000. As Gary Doer was to quip, the fact that Murray assumed the top job without a single vote cast confirming his leadership is "unusual in this province. Even Boris Yeltsin had a leadership vote" (Winnipeg Free Press, November 5, 2000, A3). The manner in which Murray assumed the leadership of the PC Party, by acclamation rather than through a truly contested contest, continued to plague him throughout his tenure; a situation from which he never fully recovered. Not only did the absence of a leadership campaign fail to give the Conservatives the shot of adrenaline that the Party so badly needed after its demoralizing loss the previous year, but Murray was never able to fully solidify his authority over his own caucus.

The Party under Stuart Murray

Murray's leadership was beleaguered from the start with a number of fresh scandals and challenges. In the spring of 2001 Elections Manitoba launched investigations against several high profile Progressive Conservatives for engaging in smear tactics against an NDP candidate during the 1999 election campaign, as well as spending irregularities in the 1995 and 1999 campaigns. Particularly damaging for Murray, however, were two events that led many within his caucus and Party to question his judgment. The first was his decision in October 2002 to hire Taras Sokolyk on a three-month, \$25,000 consulting contract to help strategize for the next provincial election. What was particularly troublesome was the fact that Murray had failed to inform the Party's executive, which was constitutionally mandated to approve all expenditures (PC Party of Manitoba, Constitution, 6).

Murray had also neglected to inform the majority of his elected caucus until a month after Sokolyk had been hired; indeed, the issue was only brought to light when an invoice was submitted to Party headquarters. The issue subsequently sparked a firestorm and led

to the resignation of the Party's treasurer. Dubbed "Taras-gate" by the media, the scandal created further rifts within the Tory caucus, and shook the Party faithful across the province. While Murray managed to escape calls for a leadership review at the Party's last AGM before the 2003 election⁴, the damage was done. As one Conservative commented, "Murray had tried to sell the fact that the Party was under new management; that it had learned its lessons and could be trusted again. While there was no question that Taras is a smart strategist, to go ahead and hire the one person many Tories still blamed for costing us government was pretty poor judgment" (A9, 2008).

In hindsight, Taras-gate marked the beginning of the end for Murray; galvanizing as it did opposition forces with the Party and caucus who still bore resentment over the process that led to his coronation as leader in the first place. Despite attempts to address criticisms and put his own stamp on the Party (including the unveiling of a new party name and logo and the adoption of a one member, one vote leadership selection process), grumblings within the caucus began to publicly surface over Murray's seeming inability to lift the Party out of its doldrums (Winnipeg Free Press, March 14, 2002, A12). Much of the blame was attributed to Murray's lack of experience as a politician, which wasn't helped by the fact that many of his closest staff was also new and unseasoned. After the Party's loss in the 1999 provincial election there had been an exodus of not only Filmon's most skilled political staff, but also former cabinet ministers and MLAs who had built up a wealth of experience and institutional knowledge over the years. PC Party headquarters had also similarly experienced a similar turnover in staff, going through three executive directors over a two-year period.

The second event that was to cause Murray much personal damage and cause some to question his leadership skills was his mishandling of the Crocus Investment Fund issue. While rumors had begun to surface of financial mismanagement within the labour-directed fund in late 2001, Murray made the decision to not only back away from the issue, and possibly score some much needed political points against the NDP, but he also stopped his finance critic from looking any further into the matter. In June 2005, the day after the Auditor General of Manitoba released a report affirming that the Fund was in trouble, Murray admitted in a live radio broadcast that he had been "shaken down" by high-ranking members of the Party who were themselves involved in the investment fund. As someone who was close to Murray at the time commented, "Stu never seemed to recover after that" (A8, 2008).

The Progressive Conservative Party was also substantially wounded during this period by changes brought in by the NDP to the Manitoba Elections Finances Act. These amendments, which took effect in January 2001, introduced stricter accounting rules, banned corporate and union donations to political parties in Manitoba, and set ceilings on individual donations of \$3,000 per person (Elections Manitoba, "Summary of the EFA Changes in 2000-01"). The Conservatives cried foul over these changes, arguing that it was an attempt by the government to financially cripple its opponents. And while all parties saw their donations drop as a result of these changes, the PC Party was by far the hardest hit. The Tories, who were more dependent on corporate donations for the bulk of their financial resources than the NDP received support from unions, was plunged into

nothing short of a financial crisis. Prior to the new restrictions, the Conservatives routinely collected more than \$1 million annually in donations. By January 2002, a year after the law had come into effect, donations to the PC Party had dropped by almost a half to under \$400,000; the largest drop of all the political parties (Elections Manitoba, “Election Financial Returns 1995-2003”).

The 2003 Election

Heading into the June 2003 election, the prospects for the Manitoba Tories were anything but promising. Murray remained a relatively unknown commodity to most Manitobans, with polls indicating that only 16 percent of voters could actually identify him as the leader of the PC Party (Winnipeg Free Press, May 7, 2002). Ongoing discontent within his own caucus, coupled with generally weak showings in the Manitoba Legislature, also made it unclear as to what the Party stood for in the post-Filmon era. The Conservatives were also struggling on the financial front. Carrying a debt of over \$350,000 with virtually no cash reserves, and having had already exhausted two lines of credit, the Party was forced to borrow money from one of its supporters in order to fund its election campaign (A5, 2008). Forced to lay off staff at its headquarters, including the Party’s CEO, concerns began to surface over the extent to which the Party would even be able to effectively compete in an election.

The result was an austere election campaign, with a budget of only a quarter of what the Party had spent in the 1999 campaign (Elections Manitoba, Party Financial Returns, 1999 and 2003). The lack of resources meant that the Conservatives were unable to launch a significant advertising campaign or even have Murray travel extensively throughout province – and given the lack of name recognition and visibility that already existed where the leader was concerned, this didn’t help matters. The minimalist campaign that the Tories were forced to mount also undermined their ability to effectively sell their ideas (not helped by the fact that the campaign website was not active for almost two weeks into the campaign), and made voters skeptical over whether they would actually be able to deliver on their key promises.

The Party focused their campaign on a promise to cut education property taxes to the tune of \$200 million, while at the same time delivering balanced budgets. Hailed by the Tories as a panacea for the Manitoba economy, it proved to be a hard sell during the campaign in the face of NDP attacks that dismissed it as reckless. And, as the results would later validate, voters remained skeptical about the PC Party’ ability to cut taxes that significantly without triggering deficit spending. Whatever credibility the Party had been able to build up after the vote-rigging scandal, it appeared, had dissipated as a result of Taras-gate. Murray’s growing unpopularity as a leader and perceived liability to the Party was also reflected in the fact that some candidates didn’t even want him electioneering in their ridings. His picture was not portrayed in election brochures; nor was his name featured on signs. Some incumbents even abandoned party-approved signs and brochures in favor of materials that were absent of all references to the PC Manitoba team and Murray (A10, 2008).

Yet despite these factors, the 2003 election was not the complete disaster for the Conservatives that many had predicted. While it certainly was the Party's worst electoral showing since 1953, the Party still managed to hang on to 20 seats (down four from 1999), and garner a respectable 36 percent in popular support (a drop from 41 percent in 1999). Murray publicly noted that while the election result was a step backwards for the Party, there was still reason for optimism. "The fact that we came back with 20 seats when everyone had written us off, I'm very, very pleased with that" he stated (Winnipeg Free Press, June 5, 2003, A4). And indeed, given the challenges that the Party had faced, a drop of only five percent in the popular vote affirmed that the Conservatives still enjoyed a powerful base of support.

The Progressive Conservative Party's own post-mortem on the 2003 election, co-authored by Murray's Campaign Manager and Director of Communications, attributed the poor showing to a number of factors. The report absolved the leader and the central campaign team; instead the fault was pushed onto the elected caucus and the grassroots of the Party. In addition to the lack of resources, the report pointed to a lack of volunteers to explain its poor showing, noting that many Tories were "frustrated with the state of the Party" and hence "were turned off" (A8, 2008).

The Revolt Against Murray

As the Party prepared for its first Annual General Meeting following the 2003 election, rumors abounded over whether Murray's leadership would be challenged. While a last minute motion that could have resulted in a leadership vote was almost unanimously defeated, it was clear to many in attendance that day that the issue was not going to go away. And indeed, it didn't. By the following October, despite the fact that the Tories had managed to not only retire \$500,000 in debt but had begun to rebound in the polls, high ranking members of the Party were already openly discussing the need to remove Murray as leader (A10, 2008).

These plans became public when, in the weeks leading up to the November AGM, a motion calling for a leadership convention was seconded by the MLA from Morris. The timing of the motion, coming as it did on the eve of the opening of the fall session of the Manitoba Legislature, only led to the further division of an already fractious Party. With no real contenders to replace him on horizon, and with the next election looming closer, many within the Party felt that it was foolish to dump Murray and spend the next several months engaged in internecine battles while the NDP continued to govern unchecked. At the same time, many felt uncomfortable with the manner in which events were progressing. As one party member commented, "it was all done in such poor taste. Despite whatever supposed faults he may have had, Stu was our leader, and we needed to respect that. Instead of fighting the NDP, we declared open war on our own leader" (A9, 2008). On the other hand was the view, expressed by some, that "Tories like to win, we haven't been winning, and somebody needs to account for that" (Brandon Sun, October 30, 2005: A7).

The day before the PC convention was set to open, Murray held a press conference. Releasing a letter of support signed by the majority of his caucus, Murray announced the removal to the backbench of two caucus members alleged to have been involved in the plot to overthrow him. This proved to be a risky move for Murray. Not only did it bring the internal strife within the Party out into the public, but some felt that he had gone too far in his decision to publicly punish and embarrass members of his own caucus. The stakes were clearly raised. Either the show of strength would finally cement his control over his caucus and Party, or it would be the death knell of his leadership.

In the end, it would be the latter. While the resolution calling for a leadership convention was defeated 55 percent to 45 percent, Murray decided to call for a leadership convention. Two weeks later, Murray brought his own political career to an end with the announcement that he would not be running as a candidate. As Ron Schuler, Progressive Conservative MLA and Murray supporter commented, “we’ve realized my greatest fear. We’ve overthrown the leader, we don’t have a lot of time, there is no heir apparent and there’s a government that needs our full attention” (Brandon Sun, November 7, 2005, A4).

While Murray was genuinely well liked by those within his own Party, in many ways his leadership was doomed from the start. Murray was never able to quite step out of the shadow of Gary Filmon; a leader who had brought the Progressive Conservative Party a level of success not seen since the days of Duff Roblin more than 30 years ago. He also inherited a caucus that never fully accepted him as their leader. And while Filmon had had to face internal criticisms and challenges from within his own organization as well, he chose to meet them head on⁵. Perhaps if Murray had chosen to do the same thing, the outcome would have been different. As one Party insider noted, “I think Stu made the mistake of not calling for his own leadership review. He could have gotten his people in place and won, and that would have brought an end to all of the sniping” (A8, 2008).

III. The Party Rebuilds

Once again, the Party found itself in search of a leader. But now it had to contend with not only lingering resentment over the events which had resulted in the removal of Stuart Murray, but the realization that this time around there could be no quick fixes. It was clear to all that there needed to be a well-contested leadership race. The Party executive also banked on the hope that the new one member, one vote leadership selection process that had been brought in under Murray would not only boost memberships but bring some much needed new energy into the Party. With a vote set for April 2006, three candidates stepped forward to replace Murray: Ron Schuler, MLA for Springfield; Ken Waddell, a longtime member of the Party and the former mayor of Neepawa, and Hugh McFadyen, who had joined the PC caucus in 2005 as the MLA for Fort Whyte.

While the Party executive took pains to stress that it would be a truly open race, McFadyen quickly became the top contender. A rookie MLA, McFadyen had a long

history with the PC Party. He had worked for a number of years behind the scenes in the Filmon administration, eventually replacing Taras Sokolyk as Filmon's principal secretary in 1998. A young, personable and articulate lawyer, McFadyen had gone on to serve as the Deputy Campaign Chair of the Party's 1999 election campaign; and following the Tories' defeat had also served as an advisor to Winnipeg mayor Sam Katz. Like Murray before him, McFadyen was clearly the preferred choice of the Party establishment. Seen as a bit of a "golden boy", in the leadership campaign, he quickly amassed the support of an impressive array of former heavyweights from the Filmon era as well as the majority of caucus members.

With the theme of renewal front and centre throughout the leadership campaign (not surprising given the dismal state of the Party at that point), McFadyen capitalized on his youth and energy and launched a polished campaign to win over the Conservative faithful. In his speech at the Party's leadership convention on April 29, 2006 McFadyen highlighted his plans to unit both the Party and the PC caucus, recruit strong candidates, win back seats in Winnipeg, and keep young Manitobans at home. His slogan of "New day, winning day, join the winning way today", despite its awkwardness, clearly resonated amongst members. When the votes were counted that night he had won an overwhelming victory; securing 67 percent of the votes on the first ballot compared to Schuler with 21 percent and Waddell with 12 percent respectively. An obviously pleased Gary Filmon (who had remained officially neutral throughout the race, as had Stuart Murray) commented "it's a new generation and a new opportunity for the Party" (CBC, April 29, 2006, online edition).

The 2007 Election Campaign

McFadyen was less than a year into his new job when the Party was faced with a provincial election. Nonetheless, there were reasons to be hopeful heading into the campaign. Not only were the Conservatives confident that, in the natural order of things, it was "their turn" to govern, but they also had a new, young leader with fresh outlook (in contrast to the considerably older leaders of both the NDP and the Liberal Party). And indeed, the PCs had begun to rebound in the polls; shortly after McFadyen's win they had surpassed the governing NDP in popular support for the first time since 1999 (Winnipeg Free Press, July 6, 2006). The NDP government had also begun to fray around the edges, suffering a series of minor blows over issues related to the Crocus Investment Fund, problems within its handling of Child and Family Services which had resulted in the death of a young child, and the public's ongoing frustrations with the province's health care system.

The Progressive Conservatives banked their electoral fortunes on several assumptions. The first of these was the idea that parties in Manitoba are only entitled to two majority governments after which the electorate will vote for change. Certainly, there was some historical justification for this assumption. Since the late 1960s, when the NDP under the leadership of Ed Schreyer became a major force in the province, Manitoba voters have typically alternated on a fairly predictable basis between the NDP and the Progressive Conservatives (Peterson, 1978; Dyck, 1996). And it was a safe bet that in

today's more volatile political climate, voters are less quick to give any political party a resounding blank cheque on governance, let alone an incumbent government that had already been in office for eight years. This was a common refrain heard not only within Conservative circles, but even NDP insiders admitted to hearing this view expressed in their internal research. "The scariest thing we heard in focus groups before the election was, 'well, maybe we should give the other guys a chance'", said an NDP pollster after the election campaign (Winnipeg Free Press, June 17, 2007, B5).

The Progressive Conservatives also assumed that a change of leadership would be enough to reinvent their Party, in the absence of other changes to improve their competitive position. As Stewart and Carty (1993:313) maintain, it has become conventional wisdom in Canada that changing leaders will pay an electoral dividend since a new leader provides a new face for the easily jaded electorate. This is particularly the case for a party that is in trouble, since it is presupposed that "a new leader will represent new policy positions and establish a new persona and, in doing so, allow it to escape its record." Despite the questionable validity of this assumption, however, it nonetheless reflected the thinking of many of those that had supported the call for a leadership review at the PC Party's November 2005 Annual General Meeting. Those members who had spoken out against the resolution had argued that the Party should be focusing its energies on fighting the NDP, rather than squandering it on questions of leadership just a few short months before an anticipated election call; for others, a change in leadership was viewed as the panacea for the ills that plagued the Conservatives. As one Party member put it, "the feeling going into the election was almost one of okay, we've gotten rid of Stu, all of our problems are over now that we've got a new leader" (A9, 2008).

It is possible that the leadership gamble could have paid off for the Progressive Conservatives in the 2007 campaign if it had also been accompanied by a renewed sense of what the PC Party of Manitoba now stood for. But the fact that the Party had still not done the heavy lifting in terms of clarifying its vision and establishing itself as a clear and viable alternative to the governing NDP was reflected in its inability to draw support during the campaign. As one Party insider commented, "we failed on policy in the campaign. Not only did we not have a good platform, we didn't even have a core set of ideas to wrap around our supporters" (A6, 2008). With the polls showing a virtual dead-heat between the parties a month before the election was called, the Conservatives needed to give Manitobans a reason to vote for them; a clear ballot question that would have put the New Democrats on the defensive. As Thomas (2007: 7) maintains, this was "the NDP's election to lose." While the NDP had been in office for eight years, and had undoubtedly begun to show some wear and tear, they had nonetheless provided competent government. Even the Progressive Conservative Party's internal polling was showing that most Manitobans still liked Doer, and were satisfied with the direction that his government was taking the province (A5, 2008).

McFadyen's campaign message of "together we can", derivative of Barack Obama's theme that had resonated so well south of the border, failed to have the same kind of impact in Manitoba. When carefully elaborated and accompanied by strong leadership, this kind of message could inspire Manitobans to vote for change. When it is poorly

articulated and not linked to a specific theme or plan, however, it falls flat (Serfaty, 2008). As one observer commented, what was missing from the Progressive Conservative's election platform was a clear message which would be reflected in all other policy statements. "We should have said, 'we're doing OK (as a province) but we could be doing better, OK is not good enough. Here's our plan, in our first four-year mandate we'll do this, and then we'll do that. But we have a plan, so just stick with us and we'll get there'. Instead, we got off track because people still liked Doer and we didn't know to sell it" (A5, 2008).

The Progressive Conservatives also made the mistake of letting the NDP take the initiative in the campaign from the outset, and not adequately going on the offensive to promote their policies. From the moment the NDP dropped the writ, a few hours after the Winnipeg visit by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to announce funding for the Canadian Museum of Human Rights (during which Harper heaped praise on Doer for his leadership on the issue), the NDP set the tone for the rest of the campaign. The Progressive Conservative strategy was based on five main planks, which would be released each week of the campaign period. The first week they announced their plan to cut the PST by one percent. However, instead of defending the benefits of this proposal, "we just backed down. Doer said it's not reasonable and we didn't fight back" (A5, 2008).

It was during the second and third weeks of the campaign, however, where the Tory campaign seemed to become irrevocably derailed. With the release of their crime and punishment platform, the Conservatives had hoped to tap into the fears of Winnipeggers regarding rising crime rates and the image of the NDP as being weak on law and order issues. As an NDP strategist commented, "if there was going to be an issue that brought us down, this was it" (Winnipeg Free Press, June 17, 2007, B5). But it appears that the Progressive Conservatives panicked when the polls didn't begin to move in their favor; this led to the idea to bring back the Winnipeg Jets hockey team as a way of spiking the polls (A5, 2008; A8, 2008). The Jets announcement came to dominate the rest of the election campaign, and overshadowed any traction the Conservatives might have been able to pick up with the rest of their campaign announcements. As one campaign worker argued, in the aftermath policymaking became developed on the fly. "Instead of spending 10 days explaining and defending the Jets idea, we got scared and ran away from it" (A6, 2008). As such, the Jets issue effectively let the NDP off the hook from having to debate other issues and defend their record on matters related to crime, taxes, and health care.

The end result was a historic achievement for Gary Doer and the NDP on the night of May 22, 2007. For the first time in the province's history, the Manitoba New Democrats won a third straight majority in the provincial legislature. Indeed, such a "threepeat" had occurred only once before in Manitoba, when Duff Roblin led his Progressive Conservative party to three straight majorities in the 1960s. While keeping their hold on power was certainly an accomplishment enough, the NDP also managed to pull off the seemingly impossible by actually increasing their number of seats by one. Having entered the election with 35 seats to the Progressive Conservatives' 18 seats and the Liberals' two seats, by the time the votes were counted on election night the NDP had managed to increase their seats to a total of 36.

While the election was historic for the NDP, it was also represented a new record for the Progressive Conservatives – albeit a less than stellar one. While the Party’s popular vote increased slightly, the PCs went down to 19 seats – the lowest number of seats for the Party since 1953. At the same time, while the PC’s electoral strength dropped, whatever gains the PCs had made through the 1990s in Winnipeg collapsed. Not only did the NDP hold on to their traditional strongholds in the north and central regions of the city, but they also managed to pick up seats for the first time from the Progressive Conservatives in such affluent suburbs as Southdale and Kirkfield Park; constituencies long considered to be safe for the Tories. The net effect of the 2007 election was a further shrinkage of the Progressive Conservatives’ base of support down to the rural ridings outside of Winnipeg, where the Party not only hung on to their existing seats but managed to return to the Tory fold the riding of Brandon West (albeit by a scant 58 votes).

A Great Renewal?

“Renewal” was once again the theme when the PC Party faithful gathered in Brandon in April 2008 for its Annual General Meeting; the first such gathering of the membership since the Party’s disappointing showing in the 2007 election. In his letter to delegates, McFadyen proclaimed that “this year’s AGM will be far different than what you’ve experienced in years past”. He announced that it would be the beginning of a two-year policy development process, designed to reinvigorate the membership and to guide the future direction of the PC Party and the province. “I believe that Manitobans want and deserve a government that sets out bold objectives, while mapping out a viable and sustainable path to meet those goals”, McFadyen stated.

Yet despite McFadyen’s enthusiasm, the future of the PC Party of Manitoba will depend on a number of critical issues, some of which lie beyond its immediate control. From a purely strategic point of view, the Progressive Conservatives must find a way to defeat at least ten NDP MLAs in order to win a bare majority in the next election. Almost all of these seats are in Winnipeg (which has 31 seats total, but will likely gain an extra seat when the province’s electoral boundaries are redrawn prior to the next election). Hence breaking through the NDP’s “fortress Winnipeg” must remain a key objective for the Conservatives, if it hopes to appeal to more than just its traditional base of supporters. In order to achieve this however, the Party must find a way to upset what Allan Mills has aptly referred to as the “perfect calm” that appears to still hold for the NDP, even after a near decade in power.

The question, of course, is how to achieve this. Several of those interviewed for this project argued that McFadyen and the Progressive Conservative caucus must take a more aggressive stand on issues if they ever hope to break through in Winnipeg. As one individual commented, “we don’t realize the opportunities we miss to go after the NDP. We’re not forcing Doer’s hand on anything; it’s like we’re scared of him” (A8, 2008). At the same time, given that the road to political victory goes directly through the city, the Party would do well to develop a strong urban platform. “We need to give Winnipeggers

a reason to vote for us”, one Party member declared. This really hasn’t happened yet, another added, because of the fact that the Progressive Conservative caucus continues to be dominated by the rural wing of the Party. “Those guys don’t know how to win Winnipeg, which is not surprising because that’s not their frame of reference. But politics has changed from the old days when we could just rely on our rural base to win elections” (A10, 2008). In the eyes of some, the Party continues to be plagued by an identity crisis. Since Gary Filmon left power, the Party has not managed to define what it stands for. This remained a challenge under Murray’s leadership, and appears to persist under McFadyen. As one former political staffer from the Filmon days stated,

It’s not the 1990s anymore; we can’t just talk about debt and the need to shrink government and cut taxes. That might have worked for Filmon, but the times were so different. People truly were worried about jobs and the state of the economy then. Now things are good, Manitoba is doing well economically, the NDP have been seen as doing a good job. Sure things could be better, but there isn’t a groundswell of Manitobans demanding change (A10, 2008).

The challenge for the Progressive Conservatives, then, is to find the issues that define them in the 21st century. At the same time, however, in redefining themselves the Party must be cognizant of striking a balance between policies that maintain the support of their rural base while at same time speaking to issues that appeal to urban and suburban voters. As Wesley’s (2005) analysis of political party attitudes in Manitoba reveals, the Tories have always struggled in their attempts to balance out their more “progressive” and more “conservative” wings, which have tended to reflect the urban/rural divide within the Party. Spanning this spectrum, the Party has swung between these two pillars depending on the leadership. Hence, while under popular and progressive Premier Duff Roblin “the state became an active partner in economic change”, under Lyon’s leadership the Conservatives were “clearly on the ideological right in fiscal, social, and constitutional matters” (Serfaty, 1996:183, 185).

Finding this middle ground in the modern era, however, will be difficult. On the one hand, the Party will be expected to continue to espouse the traditional values upon which it was built (and which continue to appeal to the right wing of the Party): fiscal management, individual freedom, smaller government, lower taxes, and law and order. At same time, however, the Party cannot afford to alienate or scare off potential voters in the urban areas that remain wary of the federal Conservative brand. “It would be a mistake to move too far to the right; to become the provincial wing of the federal Conservative Party”, commented one former MLA. “You should always protect your base, but this won’t win us seats in Winnipeg” (A4, 2008). In reconciling its progressive and conservative aspects the Party will have to fight for ideological space that has already been claimed by Doer’s NDP; a position that has so benefited the NDP because of its reflection of Manitoba political culture. As Paul Thomas (undated:9) argues, “history, economic, social and political circumstances have combined to produce a moderate, small “c” conservative political culture in Manitoba. From the days of Duff Roblin, successful parties and Premiers in the province have been pragmatic and cautious in their

policy approaches. Provincial elections are always close with the winning party usually having only a handful more seats than the opposition parties. “This has encouraged centrist policies designed not to cause polarization among voters”.

In addition to the issue of vision is the question of leadership. As one Party member argued, “I don’t buy the idea that all of our problems are due to a lack of vision. Who has vision? Certainly not Doer” (A9, 2008). For him, the problem facing the Party is one of leadership. “It’s really not about whether Hugh is the right guy for the job or not. It’s more about developing the tools of leadership - how to manage the message; how to lead a team; how to put together an image of strength and resolve. Leaders need to be built from the ground up. Neither Filmon nor Doer started out as strong leaders, but they developed the tools of good leadership”. Others add that it is important that McFadyen create his own image before it is created for him. There is the sense that McFadyen himself still remains an unknown quantity to many Manitobans. “People still don’t know what he believes, why he wanted to be leader in the first place. What is he passionate about? He needs to find personal issues that people can connect to, beginning with his own members” (A6, 2008).

While the PC Party can overcome the challenges of vision and leadership, much of the Progressive Conservatives’ fate rests with that of NDP leader Gary Doer, both in terms of when he decides to retire and who his replacement will be. While rumors abounded immediately after the last election that it would be Doer’s last, there remains the possibility that he will decide to run again. Like Filmon in his time, Doer has built the modern-day NDP in his image, and at this point there is no obvious successor. Upon Doer’s departure this could leave a vacuum within the NDP, similar to the state of the Tories in the absence of Filmon. It could also lead to internecine battles within the NDP, as the left wing seeks to reassert the traditional social democracy ideals of the Party against those who would want to continue with Doer’s centrist and pragmatic style. With the popular and charismatic Doer out of the picture, the Progressive Conservatives’ prospects will automatically improve.

In the months leading up to the spring AGM McFadyen undertook a number of initiatives designed to strengthen the Party, and to remedy some of the ills that had plagued the Party in the last campaign. It was also, undoubtedly, an attempt to ward off any challenges to leadership, not surprising given the Party’s poor showing in the last campaign and the events that had led to the ouster of Stuart Murray. Included in the revitalization plan were personnel changes (notably the hiring of a new CEO of the Party, a 30 year old lawyer who had worked with McFadyen on his leadership bid); a revamping of the Party’s fundraising process; and plans to both bolster the party’s lagging constituency organizations and permeate Winnipeg’s ethnic communities and inner-city groups. The Party also unveiled a new policy development process that would see each riding association designate a Vice President of policy that would in turn relay ideas to the central leadership. Whether these measures will reinvigorate the grassroots of the Party, which some maintain continues to languish (A7, 2008; A8, 2008), remains to be seen.

As part of its renewal process the PC Party also unveiled the first of a series of mail-outs designed to woo Winnipeg voters and reinforce some of its 2007 central campaign themes; including crime, the closure of ER services in rural hospitals, and the NDP's proposed changes to the balanced budget law. It also launched a provincial leader's tour to draw attention to the NDP's proposed new Manitoba Hydro transmission line from northern generating stations down the west side of the province. Calling it "the worst policy decision in Manitoba history", McFadyen intends to make it the biggest issue of the next provincial election. But it is questionable whether this will be the issue that will capture the imagination of Manitobans and propel the Tories over the top in 2011. While McFadyen is right to point out that this decision will have a profound impact not only on the publicly-owned utility but on the province's economy as a whole, there is no clear indication this is an issue that has broad appeal amongst voters. More recently, the Conservatives also scored some significant points in the spring 2008 session of the Manitoba legislature, when through an effective combination of public relations, efficient use of the rules of the legislature, and old-fashioned filibustering, they forced the government to bring in amendments to a number of key pieces of legislation (including Bill 37 on the Elections Act; Bill 38, the balanced budget law; and Bill 17, the hog barn moratorium).

While the fortunes of the PC Party are difficult to predict, there are some positive signs on the horizon. Opinion polls from July 2008 showed that while the NDP continues to outpace the Progressive Conservatives throughout the province, the Tories are beginning to see some increase in their support in Winnipeg. The Party has also begun to rebuild itself financially; in 2006, its donations outpaced the NDP and once again reached the \$1 million mark. And despite some frustrated rumblings following the last election, it appears that McFadyen's leadership is secure. With one election already under his belt, and no likely challengers waiting in the wings, many believe that McFadyen will only continue to grow into the role of leader. There appears to be the general realization that the Party would be foolish to repeat the mistakes of its past and put itself through yet another leadership crisis. As one longtime Party member commented, "If he can continue to get himself known to Manitobans, and provide a better sense of who he is and what his Party stands for, there's no reason why McFadyen can't be premier one day" (A10, 2008).

As well, demographic shifts occurring within the province may also provide further opportunities for the Progressive Conservatives (Adams, 2008, 18). In 1999 the NDP drew more of its support from younger and middle aged voters, while a majority of those over the age of 55 supported the PCs. By 2007, this pattern seems to have reversed somewhat; with the Progressive Conservatives seemingly pulling away some of the youth (age 18-34) vote away from the NDP (41 percent for the Tories compared to 37 percent for the NDP). At the same time, older voters, those aged 55 and older, appear to be moving from the Tories and towards the NDP (34 percent to 51 percent respectively). Whether these trends represent a bizarre blip or an indication of a deeper realignment occurring within the province, is difficult to ascertain at this time.

Notes

¹ This paper is also a reflection of my own observations and past experiences with the PC Party of Manitoba.

² This focus on the “conservative” as opposed to the more “progressive” end of the PC spectrum led Kevin Lamoureux, Deputy Leader of the Manitoba Liberal Party at the time, to remark that this was “not the same Gary Filmon we saw eight years ago” – Winnipeg Free Press, March 12, 1996, A8.

³ Indeed, Party lore has it that before he announced his intention to run for the leadership of the NDP, Doer seriously contemplated joining Filmon’s Progressive Conservatives over the course of a weekend spent at Filmon’s cottage in Gimli. According to the story – which remains unsubstantiated by either Filmon or Doer - the discussion broke down when Filmon refused to promise Doer a cabinet position in any future Conservative government.

⁴ The PC Constitution calls for an automatic leadership review after an election in which the Party fails to form government. A leadership vote can also be triggered in two other ways: by the leader himself, requesting the Party’s executive council to hold a vote of confidence, or by member of the Party moving a motion at an annual general meeting asking for a vote of confidence. In order for such a resolution to move forward, it must be passed by a simple majority of the membership in attendance at an annual general meeting. Constitution of the PC Party of Manitoba, Constitution, 2008, p. 18.

⁵ In 1985, in a story that has become legendary amongst the Conservative faithful, Filmon managed to survive as leader only when a snowstorm prevented many rural delegates from attending the party’s AGM in Winnipeg that spring. Following the Party’s loss in the 1986 election to Howard Pawley’s New Democrats, Filmon faced a further revolt, scraping through a leadership review with 63.8 percent of support; largely spared because he had tied the NDP in popular vote in 1986. Even in 1988, with a minority win, he still faced internal rumblings.

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