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The New Kingmakers

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Behind the election of two rookie premiers in the space of six months lies a little-known Calgary PR firm. Suddenly, Spotlight Strategies stands at the fulcrum of political power in Western Canada

*By Jack Danylchuk
Photography by Bookstrucker*

Premier Ed Stelmach's move to limit third-party election advertising carries a taste of irony that only true insiders to the Alberta Conservative party's resounding victory could fully appreciate and savour. Mention of the attack ads run by Albertans for Change, a clumsy front for a coalition of labour organizations, brings peals of laughter from the partners in Spotlight Strategies, a small and, outside Conservative political circles, largely unknown public relations company based in Calgary.



Seated around a boardroom table in a borrowed office

overlooking downtown Edmonton, Randy Dawson, Susan Elliott and Jason Hatcher appear an unlikely trio of disparate styles, ages and backgrounds: a comfortably rounded and middle-aged Canmore wine merchant, an ebullient, fire-haired media relations adviser to the expansion-era National Hockey League and a non-practicing lawyer from Newfoundland with the build of a marathoner.

They are in Edmonton as guests of the premier, to celebrate the swearing in of the 72 Conservative MLAs that Spotlight had no small hand in electing. Born out of a lifetime of working behind the scenes from Alberta to Ottawa, Spotlight is suddenly the most politically connected public relations firm in the west, with close links to the deputy prime minister and two premiers.

After a long afternoon, they are aiming for an early dinner at Il Pasticcio, a trattoria frequented by Ralph Klein when he was premier and kept a condo a few doors down on 100 Avenue. Not that the Spotlight partners were ever part of Klein's entourage. Elliott and Dawson have deep roots in Alberta politics; they claim Peter Lougheed as their political mentor. When Lougheed retired, Dawson worked on Don Getty's leadership campaign and then as executive assistant to Dick Johnston, provincial treasurer. Elliott worked for the Edmonton Regional Airports Authority. Throughout the Klein years, both focused on federal politics. Dawson worked with Jean Charest, then reconnected with Elliott who was Joe Clark's national director through the final days of the federal Progressive Conservative party.

What brought them all together was Jim Prentice and his outsider's bid for the leadership after Clark stepped down. Prentice, an unknown Calgary lawyer who worked with the Indian Claims Commission, had no public speaking skills and couldn't work a room. His only previous political bid had ended in defeat.

"He finished second," Dawson recalls, a wry grin creasing his face as he adds, "thanks to David Orchard." Orchard was the Saskatchewan maverick who threw his support to Peter McKay in exchange for a promise that the Conservatives would not join with the Canadian Alliance. When the merger came six months later, Prentice did

not challenge Stephen Harper for the leadership. Instead, he offered his seat in Calgary Southwest, Dawson said, "because we had taken the position early on that it was time for Conservatives to stop fighting. He demonstrated words with action and gained a profile that was far beyond what he had before he took the outsider's chance. People were very surprised."

The merger left Hatcher and Elliott without work. They talked about forming a partnership, but around Ottawa, "companies like ours were a dime a dozen," says Hatcher. With some prompting from Prentice and an invitation from Dawson, they moved to Calgary, rented an office and, through a process of elimination, arrived at a name for their new company.

"People who come to us want to get into or out of the spotlight," Hatcher says, prompting another gale of laughter from the partners, who in addition to advising politicians offer experience gained through politics to private-sector clients in the areas of media training, managing issues, communications and government relations.

Though it highlights the partners' long immersion in western politics, you wouldn't know from the company's website about Spotlight's most recent election work for the Saskatchewan Party, its involvement in the Alberta Conservative leadership race or Ed Stelmach's surprising election victory last March. The firm started work on the Saskatchewan campaign more than a year in advance of the election, working with a simple template drawn from experience: good research into the mood of the electorate and a good ground game are a winning combination, says Elliott.

"The government had been in for a long time, and the public perception was that it was tired. We heard over and over again from voters that, 'This was not the party of my grandparents or Tommy Douglas.'"

The messaging was simple: it's time for a change. It was planted on doorsteps throughout Saskatchewan, a year before voters went to the polls. "If you get everyone singing from the same songbook and you really are consistent, people believe in it," Hatcher says. Pre-writ television advertising showed the youthful Brad Wall in a sober business suit looking ready for the premier's office. It ran for more than a year while the Saskatchewan Party waited for the election call. Once the writ was dropped, the advertising took aim at government policies and programs.

One of Elliott's favourites was filmed with the camera on the dashboard of a car. "The bouncing image showed the terrible condition of the road while the voice-over talked about how much the government took in with the gas tax and how little of that was spent on highways."

"The message was established before the writ was dropped; that gave them a chance to get some specific platform planks out," Hatcher says. Elliott finishes the thought: "We had negative ads in the can that we never used because the electorate was ready to hear an alternate message, a positive message, about what we were doing."

Rich Vivone, retired publisher of a newsletter on Alberta politics, remembers Dawson as one of the brash and abrasive young Conservatives who arrived with Don Getty: ideologically driven, "impatient with public servants, and fully persuaded that political will was the answer for every issue." Vivone retired and sold his interest in the newsletter a year before the Conservative leadership, but he watched, fascinated as front-runner Jim Dinning stumbled before the finish line.



"You have to look at the people around Dinning for the reasons," says Vivone. "They were strategic. He realized too late that he couldn't do it alone, that despite all the caucus support, he couldn't win on the first ballot. He failed to make an alliance. He took on Ted Morton and alienated an important group of potential supporters."

"Dinning surrounded himself with people mired in the past – Rod Love, Hal Danchilla and Allan Hallman – and motivated purely by self-interest," Vivone wrote on a blog site during the campaign. He was surprised to learn that the person managing Dinning's campaign was Randy Dawson.

Stelmach's win was no less surprising to Vivone. "In the previous 10 years, I can't remember him doing anything

interesting. It may be that he was just smart, laid low and played everything safe. But there is nothing in his record that suggests leadership. When he won, he didn't seem to expect it. It was like he shocked himself; he had no transition team."

Dawson doesn't regret working with Dinning "in any way, shape or form. After 30 years in Alberta politics, we had common ground. We agreed on where the province should be going and how it should be done, how issues should be managed and the whole question of leadership." As to the reason the campaign failed, Dawson confesses, "I learned the hard way – never underestimate Ed Stelmach. He is smarter politically and intellectually than a lot of people give him credit for."

Leadership contests are bitterly fought and divisive affairs. Compromise candidates don't often fare well, Elliott acknowledges, but Stelmach handled it differently. "He wanted quality people, regardless of who they worked for. He made it clear to us and to others that he wanted our help."

"Reaching out is key," Dawson continues. "Ed Stelmach chose to reach out to someone who was his chief competitor. That sent a strong signal to the party. They approached me and I spent an hour with him alone. I walked out of the room very impressed. I thought he was smart, strategic and thoughtful."

With a mandate to chair Stelmach's first election campaign as premier, Dawson spent the summer thinking about the team. Stelmach went through the list drawn from all the leadership campaigns "person by person, position by position, checking background, experience. He didn't change one name.

Stelmach's choices for cabinet were harshly greeted in the cities where some portrayed him as a latter-day Harry Strom, the last premier in the faltering Social Credit dynasty. The campaign got a critical reception in the print media, which Elliott interprets as "a desire for a more competitive race. Some media outlets and personnel were prepared to really stretch things to fit that vision." The media are no different than anybody else, Hatcher continues. "There was a strong sense that a change of some sort was needed. Some construed that as against the government, and that wasn't what the electorate was saying."

Stelmach's campaign slogan was Change that Works. The strategy from the outset was to identify Stelmach as the agent of change. But who was Ed Stelmach? He did not have a high profile in the Klein government. Elliott's read on Albertans is that "even if they don't like you, they will vote for you, but first they want to know who you are."

Dawson and Elliott considered ads that placed Stelmach in a town-hall meeting, answering questions, but rejected the setting and approach as formal and distant. They wanted the viewers and Stelmach to get close. The more intimate space of Higher Ground, a coffee shop in Calgary, allowed Stelmach to answer questions in one-on-one encounters. "We put together five ads and ran them through the first two weeks of the campaign," says Elliott. "The political scientists didn't like them – they were too chatty – but they ended with Ed looking the viewer directly in the eye, and that is what you have to do."

While the ads gave voters a look at Ed Stelmach many were seeing for the first time, the man himself was touring the province by bus, pressing the flesh and honing media skills that his predecessor had used to advantage. Stelmach's own uncertain delivery had drawn scathing reviews. Dawson used the time in the weeks before the party leaders' debate to give him "some real live, media training in three daily scrums with reporters who were trying to trip him up.

By the time the debate rolled around, he was ready."

What many portrayed as the incendiary issue of the election simply wasn't. The question of whether big energy companies were paying too little in oil royalties was overshadowed in the public mind by concerns for health care, says Dawson. "The media thought it was important, and some oil executives, but it wasn't a valid question for most people."

"What the voters were really saying is, 'We're worried about daycare spaces, potholes,' real nuts-and-bolts issues," says Elliott. "Stelmach was talking about exactly the kind of change the voters wanted. I'm not sure the journalists caught that. Nothing in the polls suggested that voters were unhappy or angry. They were saying, 'fix the potholes.'

"They were also prepared to give Stelmach the benefit of the doubt, that he had inherited some of the issues, and made tough decisions on the Royalty Review, and dealt with the unfunded liability in the teachers' pension, an issue that went back to the 1960s."

There was a sense among voters, Elliott says, that "maybe Ralph had let things go a little too far. Ed came in and said I'm going to fix all these things and I'm the guy who can manage the boom. That's what people wanted to ask themselves and that's the answer they came up with when they voted."

The Albertans for Change attack ads presented Stelmach as a leader without a plan, but they had the opposite effect. Focus groups wondered who was hiding behind the name. Why wouldn't they step up? "Albertans don't like that stuff," says Elliott. "What irked them most was the whispery voice that said, 'No plan.' We took that clip and started our ad with it, and said there are a lot of people who'll tell you what they're against, but here's what we are for, and there was Ed, in the coffee shop, looking people right in the eye."

Dawson recalls the ads with relish: "a perfect example of how not to do it, from start to finish. The money they spent is outrageous. We can't put a number on it, but from watching the penetration and the programs they

chose, we know they spent a lot of money, much more than we did. It will be interesting to see how that is disclosed.”

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