

Those feisty Alberta voters

In terms of federal electoral support only Alberta compares with Quebec in a consistent bent of favoring one party over all others. Thereafter, resemblance disappears.

Quebec has overwhelmingly favored the Liberals (and thus the governing party) since the turn of the century. Even the minor aberrations of '35 and '58 only point up this favoritism. Alberta voters since 1908, when there were Alberta seats for the first time, have only four times in 20 general elections chosen more government-supporting MPs than others — in 1908, in 1917, in 1958 and 1962. Sixteen times, Albertans have voted for federal parties and elected more MPs (usually many more MPs) into opposition. And on 10 of those times, the majority of the MPs have represented third or fourth parties, not the two old parties.

Such data tell us that Albertans are not in a party pattern found elsewhere in Canada. It indicates they tend to be more homogeneous in political outlook than other Canadians, and that it has never been terribly appealing to them to get on the government's side. This latter is one of the oldest of partisan pitches made by confident government parties. Of course, it has been of special interest this past year in Alberta because the twin argument of the Liberals, since Jack Horner switched to the government side in early '77, has been that Trudeau was a certainty in the coming election, and Alberta simply must continue to have representation in the cabinet (i.e. Horner) and some more weight in the Liberal caucus.

One of Alberta's 19 seats is held by Joe Clark. Horner the Defector is the only non-Tory MP from Alberta. In the next election Alberta will have 22 seats. While no one has anticipated drastic Tory losses, there was a feeling in mid-winter that Horner and his mooted recruiting drive, and the low popular state of Clark and the Tories across Canada, meant a Liberal upswing, certainly a hard test at home for Clark.

Several other items of politics were in the swirl. For example, the anti-Clark antics of Stan Schu-

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macher, a friend of Horner who out-pushed Clark for a redistributed riding, then lost his own nomination. For example, the rumors that Premier Lougheed and his ministry was not happy with Clark's federal performance. For example, the Clark record against hanging, when Albertans seem more in favor of hanging than any other Canadians.

Where do federal politics in Alberta stand at the moment with Trudeau and Liberals flat or, more fairly, stalled, nationally, and with Clark, himself, looking stronger nationally, more like a man who just might become prime minister?

It seems clear Horner has not been able to recruit any outstanding candidates, whereas the Tories have nominated three good ones in David Kilgour (John Turner's brother-in-law), Bill Yurko, a minister in the Alberta cabinet, and John Thompson, a prominent oil industry figure.

Horner remains in difficulty in his own riding (a new one) up against young Tory MP Arnold Malone. Horner's sister, Jean Roen, has stuck with Malone.

One friend of Horner has told me that the delay of the election is likely to help Horner, largely because a June or early July vote would have lost him the riding. With more time, more judicious use of his ministerial power, and his own vigorous presence in the province, he may be able to turn the riding around.

My source says there's been a remarkable, almost total polarization in the area. On the one side, the "down with the turncoat" mob (which seems larger); on the other side, the loyalists who have sworn, and still swear, by Jack Horner. Horner insists locally that he's still a Conservative, that Trudeau is too, that Clark is renegade to Conservative principles. One man told me he knows of four families in the Hardisty area who have split over Horner, husband against wife, and father against sons.

Lougheed has helped lift Clark a bit by being so often, so consistently stressing Albert in provincial and regional terms. He's wiped himself out as a prospective federal leader without in any way seeming to be critical or denigrating of Clark. Here it is worth remembering that never in modern times has Alberta had a governing party of the same stripe as the one governing in Ottawa. A Clark-Lougheed combination would be unique.

If Clark brings it about in the next year it will almost certainly mean, that behind him from Alberta will be most of the dozen incumbent Tory MPs who'll be running again.

Next column we'll look at the choices such men put upon Joe Clark as cabinet-maker and policy-setter.