

Populist message + social media = great expectations for the Wildrose



Posted on [Mon, Apr 23, 2012, 5:01 am](#) by [Don Lenihan](#)

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Wildrose looks poised to win. If so, this would be only the latest in a long series of political upsets in Alberta's history. Populism has played a central role in this story and Wildrose is no exception.

But times are changing. If it wins power, Wildrose may find it much more difficult to be a populist government today than in past. In an [interview with Colby Cosh](#), Wildrose leader Danielle Smith inadvertently puts her finger on why:

“The sudden regime changes that Alberta is famous for seem to follow the evolution of new media... The 1935 election, the Social Credit election, was a radio election. [William] Aberhart won because he mastered a new medium. The 1971 election was a TV election. The baby boomers responded to a young leader, Peter Lougheed, who looked like them... And now I think we are looking at a social media election.”

The medium, as Marshall McLuhan famously said, is the message. More specifically, radio and TV are broadcasting tools, which means they send a message from one to many. The audience plays a largely passive role as receivers of a message that is crafted and delivered by the speaker.

As Smith notes, social media belong to a new era. Instead of broadcasting, they organize content and people in networks, so that messages travel from many to many. In other words, social media link the audience through a conversation. This makes the audience an active participant in the creation and transmission of the message(s) that travel around the network.

From a political perspective, this has consequences. Participants are increasingly unwilling to be cast as passive receivers of a message that flows from speaker to audience. There is a growing sense that the audience — the public — should have its say on issues. This view is reinforced by other trends, such as higher education, globalization, a more diverse population and, for present purposes, populism.

A clear narrative runs through Alberta populism: Political power is in the hands of an elite group, which, typically, is accused of wasting people's taxes, ignoring their concerns, and using its power to further its own interests. Populism calls on “ordinary people” to take power back.

In the age of radio and TV, this script called for a people's champion who would rise up to take on the elites. Thus, Aberhart used his Depression-era radio show both to preach the social credit gospel to a struggling population and to attack bankers and the federal government for feathering their own nests.

In 1971, Peter Lougheed used TV to present himself as a youthful, energetic leader, able to govern a prosperous, emerging province. Lougheed went on to use TV to position himself as the people's champion in his battles with Pierre Trudeau.

Wildrose is following the same script. The Progressive Conservative Party has been cast as an elite club, which, after 41 years in power, is jaded, insular and wasteful, if not corrupt. The party's call to ordinary people to take back power seems to be resonating, but this time there is a difference. Social media is changing how the script is acted out.

While Danielle Smith is the new people's champion, she is not acting alone. Thanks to social media, thousands of other Albertans are part of her campaign, engaging on another in dialogue about their grievances against the government. Their voices form a province-wide chorus, urging Albertans to join together to bring the government down. Smith is right: this phenomenon belongs to a new era. As a populist leader, it links her directly to her public in a way that Aberhart or Lougheed could scarcely imagine.

Now let's suppose Wildrose wins the election. What happens next?

The online dialogues will continue. Social media, like TV in the 1960s, is just getting started. But now the enemy will be gone, so the focus of discussion will shift. As the new government gets down to business, the public will join the dialogue, rightly expecting to play a meaningful role in it.

But Wildrose, we should note, contains many tensions: libertarian vs. conservative social values, urban vs. rural interests, white vs. blue collar economic priorities. This, in turn, raises the spectre of dissent and division. For example, Wildrose's direct democracy mechanisms might be used to challenge abortion or push for privatized health care. How would a Wildrose government respond?

Smith may have scored points with some Wildrose members last week for standing behind Allan Hunsperger and Ron Leech. (The two candidates expressed views that were widely condemned as offensive.) But by week's end, the party was paying a high price in the polls and [the writing was on the wall](#).

The lesson is that, as premier, Smith would have to find major departures from government policy intolerable. Action would be taken quickly to silence such voices, which, in turn, would be a clear betrayal of the populist principles Smith championed in the campaign.

This will not please all those Wildrose supporters who have bought into the populist message and whose hopes for more responsive government have been raised. Indeed, if they find that the

Premier's Office is silencing their champions in government, they may quickly become its fiercest critics. And they have a whole new generation of tools at their disposal.

In conclusion, Smith may be right that Aberhart had radio, Lougheed had TV, and she has social media. She may also be right that the new media are changing politics. But does she see that combining a populist message with social media raises expectations that a Wildrose government seems unable to meet?

Political parties have a long way to go in learning how to use the new tools to bring the public into governance, as opposed to simply enlisting their help in bringing a government down. Until that problem is solved, populism remains a risky strategy for taking power.

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