

# Uniting the left

Can a new political party save Alberta's floundering opposition?

Published May 22, 2008 by [Adrian Morrow](#) in [News](#)



Soft-spoken and grandfatherly, David Swann doesn't seem like a maverick. But the Calgary MLA has a history of political upsets, from the time he embarrassed the provincial government by endorsing the Kyoto protocol while serving as a top medical official, to his 2004 landslide victory for the Liberal party over a veteran Tory. Now, in the wake of the Liberals' disastrous showing in the March 3 provincial election — an election where they were supposed to pummel the ruling Progressive Conservatives — Swann is rocking the boat again.

"Fundamental change is needed, or we're headed for real problems in Alberta," he says. "Everything's on the table. I've... raised the question of whether it's time for a new party that is more inclusive of centre-left values."

In the last few weeks, Swann has been meeting with fellow Liberals, as well as NDP, Green Party and disaffected Tory supporters to gauge support for forming a new party to take on the Conservative government. Over the summer, he's planning to meet with more people to see if it can happen.

Some observers say the move is necessary in light of Alberta's historical resistance to the Liberal name, fuelled by its associations with the national party, always perceived to favour Ontario and Quebec over Alberta. Many of Swann's fellow MLAs also acknowledge that something has to change in light of the party's disastrous showing at the polls. Others, however, warn that he faces an uphill battle in building a new party, and changing party names is nothing but rearranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship.

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The Liberal party hasn't won an election in Alberta since 1917 and, from 1971 to 1986, was completely shut out of the legislature. Chaldeans Mensah, chair of political science at Edmonton's Grant McEwan College, says that re-branding the party is necessary to

break the Liberals' bad fortunes and disassociate them from the national party. "I think that is a very important step among the voters, in terms of shaping (the party's) image," he says. "A name change can bring to the fore that the party has new policies." He argues that the Liberals also have to re-jig their platform to focus on moderate, pragmatic policies and reach out to rural voters.

It wouldn't be the first time that a name-change boosted an unsuccessful party. In Saskatchewan, the scandal-plagued Progressive Conservatives hooked up with some disaffected Liberals in 1997 to form the Saskatchewan Party and, just two years later, came within a few seats of defeating the governing NDP. The party then swept to power in the province's election last year.

In Alberta, several upstart political parties have become successful on both the provincial and national stage. Social Credit, founded in depression-era Alberta, maintained a stranglehold on power until 1971. The Reform Party started from scratch and, capitalizing on dissatisfaction with the federal Progressive Conservatives of Brian Mulroney, became the official opposition less than 10 years after it was founded.

Paul Hinman, leader of the right-wing Wildrose Alliance and a veteran of both the Reform Party and Social Credit, built his own party from the ground up. By holding town hall meetings — a technique similar to Swann's — Hinman and his Alliance cohorts were able to build up a modest following and came close to winning in a handful of ridings.

While Swann's fellow Liberal MLAs have mostly adopted a wait-and-see approach to his push, they acknowledge that the party has to be open to anything, including a name change. "We as Liberals have to put all the options on the table," says Kent Hehr, the newly elected MLA from Calgary Buffalo. "As long as I'm comfortable with the policies, we can call ourselves the Minnesota Vikings."

Harry Chase, MLA for Calgary Varsity, wants to see the Liberals make deals with the other opposition parties not to run candidates against each other in certain ridings. "After 37 years of wandering the political wilderness, there has to be not only a stronger opposition, but a new government" he says. "I've met with representatives of other parties about the possibility of coming under the Liberal banner or forming a new banner."

The Green Party is also open to building a coalition. If Swann's proposal comes to anything, leader George Read says he'll take it to the party's membership. "Do I want to co-operate with the other parties? One hundred per cent, yes," he says. "(Our priority is) what's going to advance the Green values, what's going to support the Green agenda."

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Other opposition parties, however, might not be as interested in co-operating. The NDP, Alberta's second-largest opposition party, is considering making an arrangement with

the Liberals not to run in some ridings where the Grits are stronger, but it's unlikely the NDP would abandon its name or its policies in order to co-operate with the Liberals. "A merger would require sacrifices from the NDP," Mensah says. "My sense is that the NDPs aren't there to win political power."

And without forming a coalition, starting a new political party from scratch would be a tall order, cautions Hinman. "It's very difficult and slow to start a party," he says. "Politics is about the message and the money and the time you have to get the message out."

Even if the Liberals are successful in changing their name or brokering a coalition with other opposition parties, they may have bigger problems to deal with. The party made several blunders in the last election campaign, including not doing enough door-knocking, not co-ordinating its volunteers in some ridings and not conducting polls, says Keith Brownsey, a political scientist at Mount Royal College. "The Liberals just ran an awful campaign," he says. "At the provincial level, they gave people nothing to vote for." He says it doesn't make sense to re-name the party or form a new political entity when the Liberals can't run a good campaign with their current party.

Darshan Kang, Liberal MLA for Calgary-McCall, agrees that the party was badly organized during the election. While he went door-to-door religiously, he says many candidates didn't, and some of them didn't even have offices or phone lines until two weeks into the campaign.

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For his part, Swann acknowledges the obstacles in the way. "There isn't much enthusiasm for walking away from the guts of the Alberta Liberal Party and going to a brand new party and starting up from scratch in 83 constituencies," he says. However, if there's significant interest, he's willing to push forward with a new party even without his fellow Liberals.

For now, he's meeting with anyone who's shown interest in uniting the opposition and will make his decision by the end of summer. While some of his fellow MLAs will take part in the discussions, others will wait on the sidelines to see what happens.

"I guess what I am is a bit of a provocateur," says the unlikely maverick. "I'm provoking my own party, and I'm provoking the citizens of Alberta to examine what it is they want, because this is fundamentally about a peoples' government."