



All photos: Courtesy of the Office of Brad Wall

“We Need to Paint More Boldly!”

Brad Wall believes it is past time for more politicians of his generation to recapture the ability to think big.

Robin Sears profiles Premier Wall, from his formative political years as a political staffer – where some hard lessons were learned during the Devine years – through to his remarkable successes as premier. Sears finds a dynamic man who embodies Saskatchewan’s “ambition gene” and who believes it’s past time for more politicians of his generation to recapture the ability to think big. Ranking Brad Wall as the province’s third greatest orator, behind Tommy Douglas and John Diefenbaker, Sears wonders whether Saskatchewan’s premier might one day deliver a Canadian first by succeeding as a party leader at the federal level.

Robin V. Sears

Saskatchewan *is* different.

An improbable province, the only one with no natural boundaries, created merely by invisible lines of latitude and longitude sketched on rough maps by bureaucrats a hundred years ago, flat for hundreds of miles in every direction until you near

Saskatoon; with a stagnant and aging population, Saskatchewan in recent years sometimes appeared to be on an irreversible slide to irrelevance.

And yet the fewer than three percent of Canadians who live in this tough landlocked terrain have always had big ambitions –

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big dreams from the post-Depression era on, that caused more sophisticated observers in larger places to snicker at the delusions of dirt-poor farmers.

The central Canadian media's lazy shorthand that Saskatchewan is one of "Canada's three Prairie provinces" is unhelpful and mostly wrong. It is a club they are members of merely by geography not by either shared history or culture. There aren't three Prairie provinces in any event, as the plains only form small parts of each. Manitobans are the quintessentially moderate and modest Canadians. Albertans swing wildly between boom and bust, between "normal" prairie protest – the United Farmers of Alberta had cousins in several provinces – and lunatic visions like Social Credit, between iconic statesmen like Peter Lougheed.... and, well, Ralph.

Saskatchewan's big ambition could hardly be Manitoba modest, but its Ukrainian, Nordic and Celtic roots also meant it was never going to be Alberta boastful. It sometimes swung left and then right, but never to ridiculous. Brad Wall's sensible low-key grassroots political style would be a tough sell in Alberta, but Ralph Klein would never have risen above local TV guy in Saskatchewan.

Rescued from the brink of sovereign bankruptcy at the end of the Second World War, their short, loud and bellicose new premier insisted that they "Dream no small dreams!" Tommy Douglas, a bantam-weight boxer, and a figure of ridicule to many, helped inject this determination to aim high into the Saskatchewan DNA. His successor today carries the same mission, now bolstered by the province's half a century of success defying critics of their prairie pride.

Asked what it is in the water in Saskatchewan that has led generation after generation, leader after leader, to command national attention with big bold political dreams, Premier Brad Wall laughs. "Who knows," he muses, "Climate maybe, survival

in the tough early days, pride in our having done it..." He drifts off, before chuckling again at the memory of a favourite story he tells about his part of southern Saskatchewan, a parable that neatly captures his people's sense of irony and quiet confidence.

An English colonial bureaucrat, Colonel John Palliser was surveying the settlement potential of the vast prairie. Coming to what is now known as the "Palliser Triangle," his grim account to London was, "No one should have to live here..." Wall chuckles and says, "So now we name highways, schools and parks after the guy!"

This ease with over-reaching is part of Saskatchewan culture. It is amusing to imagine, for example, the astonishment that must have greeted the Tommy Douglas telegram to George Cadbury urging him to come to Regina to help advise his new social democratic government – the first ever elected in North America. Cadbury was the multi-millionaire heir to the chocolate fortune and a noted social democratic adviser to British Labour.

He'd probably never heard of Saskatchewan before the stunning result of the 1944 election. But he came.

Saskatchewan rallied leading surgeons and medical researchers to help establish the first publicly funded hospital system in North America. Pioneers in psychiatry and the use of psychedelic treatment came in the 50s. Timothy Leary won greater fame, but it was a group of Saskatchewan doctors led by an imported Brit, Humphry Osmond who did world-leading work on the use of psychedelic drugs to treat serious mental illness beginning in the early 50s. And the battle to create medicare in the 60s attracted doctors from across the Commonwealth.

The list of Saskatchewan firsts is almost embarrassingly long: Cobalt-60 medical treatment, debit cards, pioneering mining techniques for potash in the 70s and developing the richest uranium mines in the world in the 80s, and on and on. Each wave of innovation helped Saskatchewan buck the volatile price cycles for wheat and an array of agricultural exports. Delivering on these big dreams meant attracting dozens of top management teams and billions in investment to Saskatchewan year after year.

Premier Wall is proud to reel off his firsts, with special pride reserved for the launch of the world's first operating carbon capture, clean coal generator this year, a decade long struggle that was written off by experts from beginning to end. He has helped to transform the province from an economic might-have-been to a determined global player.

Brad Wall carries the Saskatchewan ambition gene, and says in some frustration that it is past time for more politicians of his generation to recapture the ability to think big. He puts it elegantly, "We need to paint more boldly."

Swift Current sits in the southwestern corner of the province, about 150 kilometres from both the U.S. and Alberta borders. Wall grew up there, worked there between political chapters, has represented it since 1999, and does the three hour drive to his home there from Regina at least weekly, sometimes daily. To describe him as a native son does not do justice to the depth of his roots. The town and the region have typically been a more conservative and Conservative part of Saskatchewan. So his political landing is not surprising.

He describes his political awakening as the night he came home to find his normally reticent Mennonite father cursing the prime minister on television. He sat down to find out what had

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led to the angry outburst. He was not yet ten. It was in the days of Trudeau's Anti-Inflation Board, an interventionist policy not likely to appeal to a conservative Saskatchewan farmer. He got an earful, he recalls.

He maintains his deep local roots. His grade six teacher, Dave Spencer, "still a good friend" fanned the political spark in Wall. It was at Fairview P.S. He still lives around the corner from the local school with his wife Tami. A couple of years later it was a trip to Disneyland that introduced him to Lincoln and to powerful political oratory.

From that traditional beginning, Wall followed the well-trodden path of many political neophytes before him: high school student politics, more political battles while he was doing his degree in politics and public administration at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, a stint as a young staffer to obscure Tory backbench MP Jeff Wilson in Ottawa, then return home and to political activism in the community as the "Vice-Chair for Western Canada, The Alliance for the Future of Young Canadians," his role in a self-created group of young free-trade enthusiasts.

He was rudely pushed off his comfortable path to political glory while still in his twenties, however.

Wall had been recruited into the second term Grant Devine government as an assistant to Graham Taylor, a senior minister. His next stint, as an aide to former Mountie, Minister John Gerich, changed his life and temporarily ended his political career. It also helped him re-anchor a moral compass that had gotten perhaps a little wobbly.

Gerich was among those 13 Devine MLAs, ministers and staffers caught up in a series of expense and fraudulent claims scandals. He was sentenced to two years in jail, a stunning sentence and outcome by the standards of Canadian political scandals. Wall admitted years later he had participated in some activities as a young staffer of which he was not proud, including drinking taxpayer-paid booze on the job, and making crude comments about opponents.

As a loyal political staffer who had sweated blood for his government, as ambitious young activists are expected to do, he had a ringside seat for the self-destruction of the Devine regime, crippled by this welter of corruption accusations and bitterness. It was clearly wounding. He also reacted with horror at the debts and deficits that the Devine ministry left the province. That spring he had been rejected by his own hometown for the PC nomination. Nonetheless, he battled throughout the summer and fall in the hopeless Devine re-election campaign.

For a 26 year-old Mennonite from small town south Saskatchewan the whole experience must have been wrenching. Asked why he then took many years away from politics, Wall downplays the impact of those embarrassments and defeats. "I was disheartened a little, with politics, I suppose," he says slowly. "Grant Devine was very charismatic, I was committed to our government." After a pause he adds, "The charges, the scandal...they stayed with me. They were powerful lessons."

"You know, the government did many good things" he adds, "but they were all cast into shadow. I learned two important lessons: your political integrity is just white or black; there are

no shades of grey. You show that you know your probity is all... or,” and then doesn't deliver the gloomy conclusion. “And,” he concludes earnestly, “Deficits are like the Frito-Lay slogan, ‘Bet you can't stop at one!’ is right. You can't.”

That it was painful is perhaps best publicly revealed by the absence of any details of his Devine years in his official bio. His emotional recall of those painful months, now more than 20 years ago, is a further clue. But he is one of those political survivors who learns from the scars, and puts their lessons to good use. His tough stance on personal integrity for everyone in his government today, and his consistent fiscal discipline have become part of his brand.

Wall heralds the fiscal legacy of the Douglas and Blakeney years, and says he was embarrassed at the mess that Roy Romanow inherited from Devine as his successor. He quickly adds though, that the current Saskatchewan NDP has lost touch with “their own tradition of fiscal credibility, promising to spend billions in the last campaign.” It was an election that he clobbered them in, winning almost two out of three votes and 49 out of 58 seats in 2011. Despite a roller coaster of revenue totals since his first election as premier in 2007, Wall has delivered consistently balanced budgets.

Following Devine's humiliating defeat, Wall left Regina a chastened political player and retreated to his sanctuary, Swift Current. One would not want to have been Brad Wall, trying to explain the Devine disaster at the dinner table with his stern Mennonite dad that winter. But within days he showed up in the mayor's office and said he wanted to be named the city's Economic Development Director. He was already a charismatic personality, persuasive in private, a confident interview on television, and a compelling public speaker. He got the job.


Over the next seven years he pushed his city of fewer than 15,000 residents to the top of the small business attraction tables, winning the title of Saskatchewan “economic developer of the year.” He set up his own private consulting firm, after the collapse of a small business venture. But his determination to climb back on the political train never really faded. He stayed in touch with political friends and colleagues, played a backroom role in the creation of the Saskatchewan Party in 1997, out of the ashes of the Saskatchewan Liberal and Conservative forces, and won the Swift Current nomination in 1999.

In its first run, the new party almost ousted the Romanow government, winning 25 seats. But it was hobbled by the memory of the Devine debacle. Its leader Elwin Hermanson, a Full Gospel College graduate, was a farmer from the village of Beechy, and no match for Roy Romanow. In the next round, the NDP trapped Hermanson into conceding he might sell off the province's Crown

corporations – another reminder of the Devine years. He lost again and quit as leader within days.

Wall digested the lessons of these frustrating political chapters well. He had watched the Mulroney government snatch its 1988 victory from defeat as a former staffer – only to see it explode into bitter fragments over the next five years. He had seen Devine go from Conservative star premier to a has-been so disgraced he was prohibited from seeking a party nomination. And he had endured 13 frustrating years, observing his friends fumble in opposition in Regina. He was not going to repeat those mistakes.

He was chosen unanimously as the party's new leader in 2004. Within months he moved quickly to ensure that the party



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could re-assemble the original Devine base, of conservative small town and city supporters with frustrated Saskatchewan farmers. He dragged the new party away from its hard-core Reform Party roots, and from its rural base into a contender for the majority of Saskatchewan voters – city folks.

Gone were weird promises to create “boot camps” for meth addicts; in came more progressive policies on health, justice and youth unemployment. He issued detailed economic and social policy platforms and climbed steadily in popularity, leading the party to a 38 seat victory in 2007.

Saskatchewan has served up dozens of great politicians and public servants to Canada. Tommy Shoyama ran the Finance department in Ottawa in its glory years, Al Johnson was the president of the CBC during its last golden years, and Wayne Wouters has just stepped down as Clerk of the Privy Council, among many others. And then there are the political giants from

Jimmy Gardiner to Douglas, Blakeney, and Romanow.

But its list of great orators is surprisingly short: Douglas and Dief.

Premier Wall cannot yet be counted among the political giants, but his position as Saskatchewan's third greatest orator is already secure. Funny, with a sense of timing that would stand a late night TV host in good stead, Wall has wowed many a surprised crowd. From church basement groups to the Ottawa elite at the Public Policy Forum dinner, to the Bilderberg Conference last summer, Wall has developed his speaking chops well.

At the Forum dinner, to a tough audience of more than a thousand well-oiled politicians, bureaucrats, journalists and lobbyists, Wall brought the house down. In between serious respectful anecdotes about the dinner's honourees and famous guests, he slid a series of side-splitting one-liners and tales. He has that rare political gift of knowing how far to push an edgy joke, and how to use self-deprecation to win an audience's heart.

"We Mennonites," he began, apropos of nothing, causing a few eyebrows to rise, "well we have a reputation for... [long pause]...knowing the value of a dollar." Relief in the audience, he wasn't going to do an off-colour Ralph Klein joke. Another pause, and then, "We are also known for how seriously we are admonished from having sex standing up" -- nervous gasps -- "because it may lead to dancing." Nervous titters followed by gales of laughter.

Speaking to a business audience, he can reel off a tedious list of Saskatchewan farm export numbers, job creation stats, economic achievement brags, and then end by saying, "But, for me that just isn't good enough." Shifting gear he recites how badly Canada is doing in trade with India, China and Indonesia, using more anecdotes and stats to pound home his "big dreams" message. He pushed the Harper government hard on opening India and China to Saskatchewan uranium exports and says with evident pride that the first tanker load "arrived in Shanghai last fall." He has formed a personal Asian advisory council made up of prominent Canadians -- something that doesn't exist in Ottawa or Toronto.

He signalled his determination not be seen simply as a loyal Harperite in the boonies early on. He has openly clashed with his Ottawa cousins over Senate reform, drugs and drug pricing, and on the emotional tripwire of murdered and missing aboriginal women.

But it was a ham-fisted effort to acquire a huge chunk of Saskatchewan potash assets that pushed Wall onto the national stage and established his credentials as an opponent you want to tangle with very carefully. Late in the summer of 2010, a year before both Wall and Harper's next campaign rounds, an attempt

to buy the assets of the Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan by the Australian/UK mining giant BHP Billiton was leaked to international business media.

This was a big deal by any definition -- nearly \$40 billion dollars and control of the largest single chunk of potash production in the world. It was also astonishingly badly executed by the prospective acquirer. A global giant -- but one who should have known better, rooted as it was in a federal state whose regional politics are the closest to Canada's of any in the world -- BHP engaged British and American financial and legal advisers to lead the deal. They counselled that the deal was a slam-dunk if Ottawa approved, and Ottawa would have to. There was no need to worry about Saskatchewan's support.

This dim-brained understanding of Canadian political realities was resisted by the tier of Canadian lawyers and lobbyists later brought onto the deal team, but neither the client nor its big New York law firm were listening.

While the client should have known better, and could have behaved differently, in the end it was the foreign advisers who gave very bad advice and killed the deal.

Recall Wall's deep immersion in the history and political life of his highly political province. He was a teen political activist when Alan Blakeney engineered the takeover of the province's potash industry to wide acclaim. He was a proud young staffer when Grant Devine successfully privatized it. It is hard to over-estimate the political power that this fertilizer component has in Saskatchewan.

In the days following the dramatic BHP bid, Wall demonstrated his keen awareness of its career-ending potential. Perhaps most revealing of his political skill, however, was his quiet outreach to non-Conservative and non-Saskatchewan elders for their counsel.



To a community forever economically battered as an agricultural price taker, potash is almost as iconic as oil is to Alberta. It not only provides an important chunk of today's revenues and jobs; it is a guarantee for the future in a province that had never before had one. When PCS was created they offered regular mine tours to locals and important visitors. The pride and emotion on the faces of aging farmers as they bounced for miles underground in the mines' vast chambers spoke volumes.

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The media reaction to the bid had been universally positive, with an instant assurance from the politically bone-headed business media analysts that the deal "Had to be approved!" Harper's was a pro-business, free-trade government, Australia was a friendly investor, the world was watching, etc. In Saskatchewan, the NDP and others to the left of the Wall government screamed blue murder about squandering the province's patrimony.

Apart from not calling Premier Wall to give him a heads up about the coming transaction – an obligatory protocol in large M&A deals – BHP did not arrange a CEO visit to the province – another must-do - until nearly six weeks after their launch. But the death knell was its authors' "too cute by half" claims about its financial impacts on the province.

The Saskatchewan government's finance department has been famous for half a century as being among the smartest and toughest in the country. If there is one iron rule in the high stakes world of large M&A transactions it is that you don't tell fibs to government officials, especially ones that are not credible even in the telling. BHP had seriously understated the potential tax revenue loss of

the transaction to Saskatchewan in their briefing of officials.

None of this was publicly known and BHP and their government relations advocates kept up the drum beat for the deal's quick approval. Wall, meanwhile, made several key phone calls. He reached out to former NDP Premier Roy Romanow and bluntly and candidly ran down the challenges with him. Romanow was quick to offer to help, and reinforced Wall's instinctive caution about the magnitude of his decision.

He also called former Alberta premier, Peter Lougheed, one of Canada's few living genuine statesmen. Lougheed is one of the pioneers in Canadian politics to understand that resource extraction must deliver citizens their future economic security. With Alan Blakeney, he was among the most battle-scarred warriors, in fighting Ottawa politicians and Bay Street money men on the issue of "who gets what share" when resource revenues are surging.

Despite being separated by a generation, and from provinces with very different political cultures, Wall and Lougheed were perfectly aligned in how they saw both the political and economic challenge.

Playing the role of mentor, when Wall asked what factors should influence his decision, Lougheed said, "Brad, who owns the potash?" Like the smart under-study he has been since school days, Wall responded immediately, "Well, the people of Saskatchewan, Premier?" "That's right, Brad. You remember that when you're deciding and you'll be fine," the sage of Canadian resource revenue battles responded, "Don't forget that."

The battle raged for weeks, mostly behind the scenes in Ottawa, Toronto, Regina and Australia. The loyalty of the entirely Conservative federal Saskatchewan caucus was key. Wall signalled quietly that they should be careful to follow his lead. Some media pundits suggested that if the deal went ahead half of the 14 MPs



Premier Wall talking to the media after touring flood damage in Melville and Carnduff, Saskatchewan, July 2014.

would lose their seats in the looming 2011 campaign.

One of the products of his consultations with Lougheed and Romanow and others was the decision to retain powerful legal and financial analysts as advisers. The Toronto accounting firm asked to examine the deal had come back with a clear rebuttal of BHP's claims about revenue impact. Wall was reportedly furious.

Wall's initial reaction when being informed of the deal by BHP advisers had been at best ambivalent. His soundings had persuaded him increasingly that the transaction was fraught with political and fiscal risk for the province.

Wall stunned his staff and colleagues in one of their final pre-decision brainstorming sessions. As good staff and officials do, they had inferred where their boss wanted to land, and prepared a variety of options for getting there. They had a long list of conditions essential for Saskatchewan's approval of the deal. They laid a clear path to get to "yes" as safely as possible, politically. He listened carefully and then said, "And what if the answer is 'No?'" He chuckles at the memory of the consternation he caused.

Wall has never previously disclosed one fascinating 'might-have-been' that emerged during the battle. He knew that if he had the endorsement of veterans of previous battles over resource revenue, he would be impregnable politically. He also knew that Saskatchewan voters had strong views about the deal and wanted to be heard. And perhaps he wanted to use the transaction as a means of putting a Wall stamp on the second most powerful political issue in the Canadian federation: "Who controls resource

development, and who gets the largest share of the benefits?"

He asked Lougheed and Romanow if they would be willing to be a two-man commission, conducting hearings across the province, then quickly reporting on the specific deal issues and offering guidelines on similar transactions for the future. It would have been a political masterstroke, confounding the NDP, Ottawa and the deal-makers instantly. The two statesmen, one from each tribe, endorsing the Wall approach to this eternal struggle would have been untrumpable.

Sadly, hours before he was to announce the plan, the former Alberta premier informed Wall that his law firm was concerned about conflict if he agreed to the role. Romanow told him that a one-man commission would hardly be useful. The idea was dropped.

If it had gone ahead, a Lougheed-Romanow commission's recommendations on the essentials for acceptable foreign investment in the Canadian resource sector would have been powerful. Even today, as he recalls the stillborn plan, Wall's regret at not having been able to launch such a potentially game-changing gambit is clear.

From there the endgame emerged rapidly. Wall said no, Ottawa fell in line politically, and BHP withdrew. The outcome of this fascinating struggle has been deliciously ironic. BHP fired its CEO and their new team came back and made a successful investment in Saskatchewan potash. They have become poster boys for smart successful foreign investors. The Potash Corporation, having been

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elevated to iconic status as symbols of all that was good about the Saskatchewan approach to resource development, tried to slide out of some of their commitments to investment, employment and community support, and landed in the doghouse. Wall has since brought them once again to heel.

Wall then went from triumph to triumph, winning a landslide victory in the 2011 campaign, decimating the NDP more thoroughly than any competitor in a generation. Any grumbles from the Harper inner circle about his ‘getting off the ranch’ politically were silenced despite his regular differences with Ottawa. He pushed hard on the importance of doing more in China. He travelled to India and South East Asia and began to regularly insert in his speeches how important those markets were to Saskatchewan prosperity. All of which has caused political insiders to muse increasingly publicly about what’s next for Premier Wall.

As any seasoned political pro would do, Wall instantly, but mildly dismisses speculation about higher office. “I have the best job in Canada,” he frequently claims. Asked about that undeniable signal of Canadian federal political ambition, studying French, he claims that he has loved studying language since his school days – where he did pursue French for many years. He does not cite his more recent hours of immersion.

One of the curses of Canadian politics that no one has been able to break, from Confederation days until now, is that premiers cannot make it to 24 Sussex. From Tommy Douglas to Bob Stanfield to Bob Rae, it is one of those strange rules of Canadian politics that voters will never endorse promotion from province to prime minister. It has no logic and it defies the practice of most democracies, where demonstrated government leadership experience is the key to higher office. Many of the most successful American presidents first demonstrated they knew how to manage

the public fisc at the state level. No one knows better the strains of our impossibly complex federal-provincial division of powers than a good premier.

Premier Wall will likely face his voters again in 2016, a few months after the next federal election. Even if he were to be re-elected in 2015, most observers believe that Stephen Harper is likely to hand over to a successor during the next Parliament. If he were to be defeated his departure would come much sooner. The Harper succession bench is deep. There are several capable and popular cabinet ministers already getting their leadership campaign ducks in a row.

But.

The Canadian Conservatives will face a serious family problem in choosing their next star. Many traditional Progressive Conservatives, in Quebec, Atlantic Canada and Ontario are increasingly grumpy about their marginalization by the Harperites. Party activists young and old know that the hard-edge, wedge politics so masterfully deployed during their decade of dominance in federal politics has also bequeathed a bitter legacy. The Conservatives cannot today be dismissed with the traditional slap as “the stupid party.” But the contemporary epithet is that they have become “the party of meanies” - a distinctly un-Canadian political brand identity.

Protecting the Western base, especially in the event of a defeat in 2015, will be an essential task for the next leader. Demonstrating for the first time since Brian Mulroney’s departure that the Conservatives understand and care about Quebec will be another. A strong national network based on many years of developing deep relationships with other premiers – even some like PEI Premier Robert Ghiz, from different clans – would be very helpful. A reputation for successful fiscal discipline and economic success, hardwired to a compassionate social justice record, would complete a powerful post-Harper package.

If that package came in the form of a powerful political orator, bilingual with a comfortable contemporary personal style, and an ability to tell funny compelling stories with the punch of a Jean Chrétien or a Tommy Douglas or a Brian Mulroney at their height, well....

So as a leader from the province of firsts, the community of Canadians always comfortable aiming high and dreaming big, maybe Brad Wall will be the one to break the curse... and deliver another Canadian first. ✦

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