

We're Fine with Klein

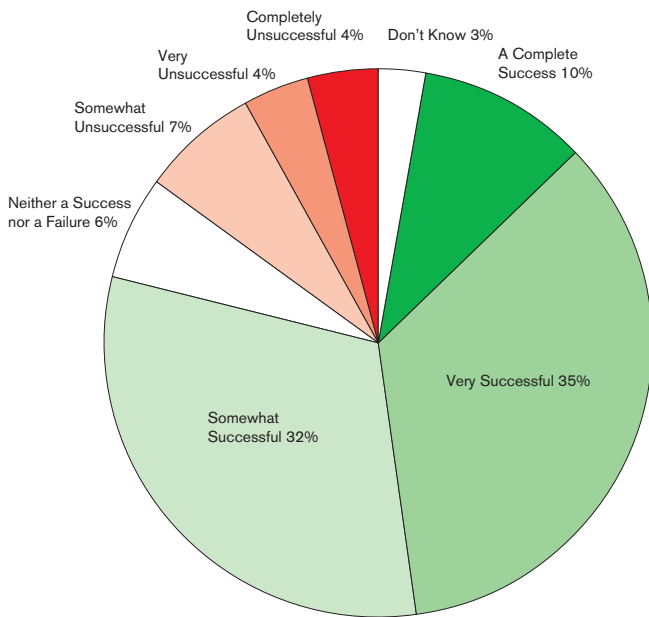
Even if we're unsure what he did.

By MARK DICKERSON AND GREG FLANAGAN

The Klein era was a period of exceptional volatility, controversy and change. Most long-in-the-tooth governments end up with very low approval ratings, often their lowest. After 14 years as Premier, however, Ralph Klein amazed pundits with his strong support.

For a forthcoming book on the role of the Klein regime in developing Alberta, we commissioned Ipsos Reid to survey the Alberta public's views of that period. Conducted in January 2007, just after Ralph Klein had resigned as Premier, the survey polled 800 randomly selected Albertans distributed evenly by geography, age, sex and occupation. The results are remarkable, and may provide some clues as to the future of Alberta politics.

Albertans' Perceptions of the Klein Government



Our first question asked for a general impression of Klein's success. "Ralph Klein served as Premier of Alberta for 14 years, from 1992 to 2006," it read. "Overall, how would you describe the record of the Klein government in serving the interests of Albertans?"

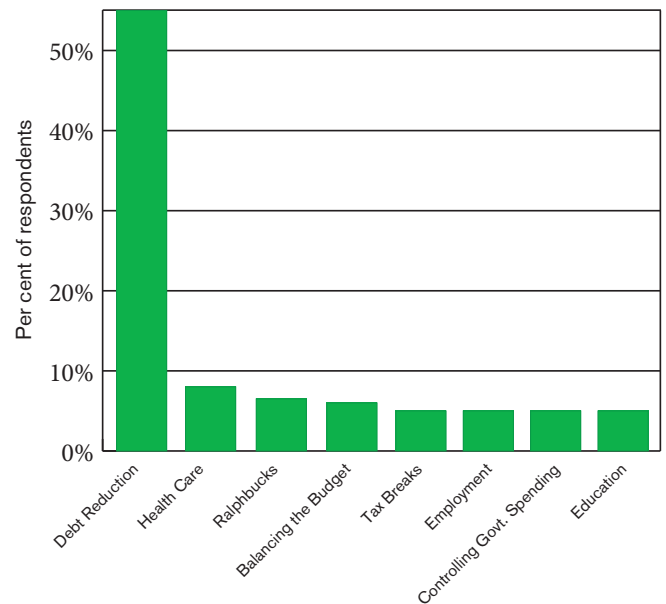
We provided a selection of answers ranging from "a complete success" to "completely unsuccessful."

Ten per cent chose "a complete success," 35 per cent "very successful," and 32 per cent "somewhat successful"; in total, 76 per cent of respondents gave Klein's government one of the top three success ratings. This percentage is relatively uniform across the province. It's lowest in Edmonton, and highest—by a slim margin—in southern Alberta.

OUR SECOND QUESTION WAS OPEN-ENDED. It was meant to elicit a spontaneous response from Albertans on what they perceived to be the government's most important accomplishment under Klein.

Not unexpectedly, there was very strong result for debt reduction. The government had bombarded the populace with the message that debt elimination was vital and that the government had been successful in achieving it, so it was no surprise that this loomed large in people's minds. More than half of the respondents cited it as Klein's most important accomplishment.

The Most Important Accomplishments



The list of perceived policy achievements is of considerable interest, especially since so many Albertans believe that the Klein government successfully served the interests of Albertans. Beyond debt elimination, the most striking feature is the dearth of perceived accomplishments. Fully a third of the respondents failed to identify anything this government achieved in its 14 years under Klein. Almost 22 per cent could

not come up with any one accomplishment, while 6 per cent felt that nothing had been accomplished at all.

Such numbers ought to be of grave concern to any government, but the general perception of success implies that Klein's personal rapport with Albertans had a far greater impact than anything the government actually did. For example, health-care reform was a major preoccupation of Klein's government, but only 8.5 per cent of respondents perceived any success in this important policy area.

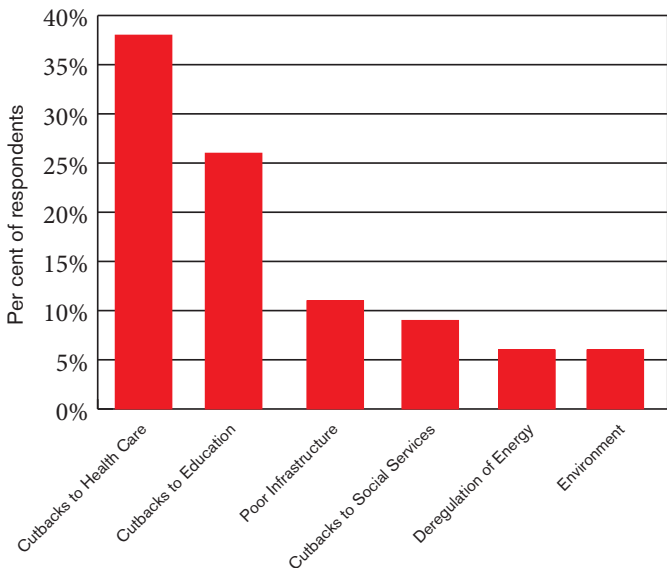
The next-highest rating, at 6.2 per cent, is the \$400-per-person distribution of royalty revenue. In the 5 per cent range we find other policies related to debt reduction: balancing the budget, controlling government spending, tax breaks, employment etc. Education, arguably the most important government responsibility after health care, received a success rating of less than 5 per cent.

A MUCH STRONGER REACTION was elicited by the opposite question: "What are the three most important failures or disappointments of the Klein government?"

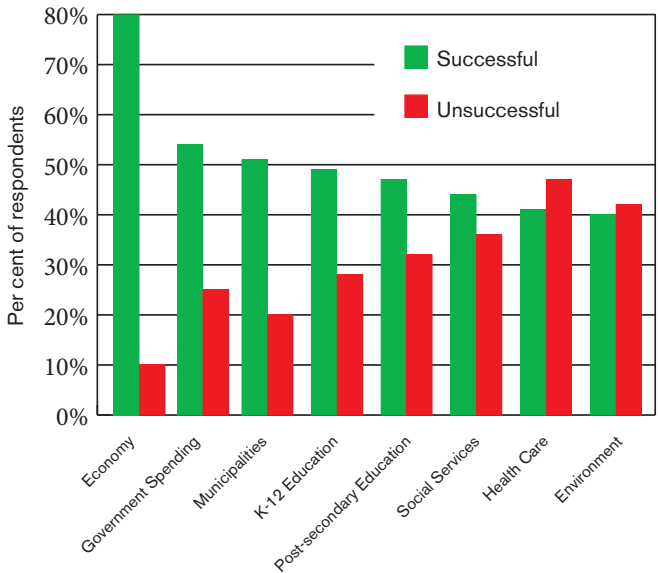
Cutbacks to health care were cited as failures by 38 per cent of the respondents, while cutbacks to education were mentioned by 26 per cent. These numbers reflected the low success ratings that health care and education had received from survey participants.

At 11 per cent, poor maintenance of the province's infrastructure was the third-most-listed failure. Next came cutbacks to social services (8 per cent), deregulation of energy (6 per cent) and poor protection of Alberta's natural environment (6 per cent).

The Most Important Failures



The Relative Policy Success of the Klein Government



THE THIRD PART OF THE STUDY asked about specific policy areas: the economy, government spending, municipalities, K-12 education, post-secondary education, social services, health care, and the environment. Respondents were asked to rate government performance in each of these areas. Health care and the environment are dominated by negative responses. The results for K-12 education, post-secondary education and social services suggest serious concerns. The Klein government was perceived to be strong on the economy, government spending and municipalities.

Taken all together, what might be inferred from this survey? Albertans could not spontaneously come up with any major accomplishments from the Klein era, aside from debt and deficit elimination, and they seemed to recognize serious policy weaknesses. However, they were able to overlook these shortcomings when Klein led the Conservatives. This may mean that Albertans will become much more receptive to the policy positions of alternative political parties, and to the merits of individuals who seek positions as their MLAs. Arguably, one manifestation of this is the recent by-election victory of Liberal Craig Cheffins in Ralph Klein's former riding; another is the declining popularity of the Conservatives under Premier Ed Stelmach. The next election could be very interesting if Albertans consider policy and candidates instead of taking the "just vote for Ralph" approach. ■

Greg Flanagan and Mark Dickerson's book, There Was No Plan, is expected to be published in spring 2008.