



Lougheed (left) and Crawford; Sindlinger: outside, a flag-draped coffin

ALBERTA

When the few outskated the blue

Wayne Gretzky and the Oilers are Edmonton's number one attraction. Tom Sindlinger is a sports fan who is also the sole independent member of the Alberta legislature. And last week he turned to hockey to explain how the province's weak five-man opposition suddenly had Peter Lougheed's mighty Progressive Conservative team skating in circles. "We've out-skated and stick-handled them, and scored so many goals they've decided that the only thing to do is to turn out the lights in the arena and go home." For Sindlinger, it was a particularly pleasing boast. The Calgary economist was bounced from the Tory caucus a year ago for disagreeing with Loughheed's constitutional stance.

The irritated Tory government did indeed switch off the lights, when Attorney General Neil Crawford invoked closure for the first time in Alberta's 76-year history. Only that drastic move allowed the 73-member government to escape from a legislature session that set records for length, controversy and the number of embarrassments suffered by the usually unflappable Lougheed administration.

Two months of confrontation reached a climax when Crawford slapped a seven-day time limit on the filibuster—dubbed the "defence of the Alamo"—that had stalled the approval of \$400 million worth of Heritage Savings Trust Fund spending. The use of closure led to a marathon overnight debate that dragged on for 14 hours until, in mid-

morning, Crawford called a halt so that his bleary-eyed colleagues could stumble, an hour late, into their weekly cabinet meeting.

It was a rare moment of drama, and the Opposition made the most of it. Outside the legislature, 50 protesters stood vigil in sub-zero weather, carrying candles and a flag-draped coffin which they said symbolized the death of free speech in Alberta. Opposition supporters wearing REMEMBER THE ALAMO T-shirts crowded the public gallery long past midnight. For their part, Sindlinger, NDP leader (and sole MLA) Grant Notley and Social Credit members Ray Speaker, Walter Buck and Fred Mandeville* followed a carefully prepared, 52-step strategy to delay the final vote. The plan was so complicated that Opposition aides, aware that government MLAs would pounce on any procedural mistakes, sent a stream of notes to the five "defenders" to make sure they spoke at the right time and on the right amendment. The tactic was such a success that there were still 23 steps left to go when the Tories finally threw in the towel.

Not since the young, aggressive Peter Lougheed hounded and harassed the aged Social Credit dynasty into the political wilderness 10 years ago has there been such opposition in Alberta. They are strange bedfellows. The Socreds and Sindlinger are cut from the same conservative cloth as the Tories. But Notley

*Socred leader Rod Sykes has no seat in the legislature. Ray Speaker is House leader.

is a socialist—the only true opposition voice among the 78 MLAs. They do not often agree, but years of frustration and leaked documents combined this fall, at last, to forge their unusual union.

The session was transformed when Sindlinger received a plain brown envelope containing a confidential warning from Auditor General Doug Rogers to the government about management problems in the \$10-billion heritage fund. Inadequate investment records, Rogers cautioned, create "scope for collusion and fraud." Sindlinger, who has made his reputation as a foe of trust fund secrecy, was particularly bothered by the auditor's inability to explain fund deals that have lost \$60 million over the past three years.

When Provincial Treasurer Lou Hyndman refused to hand over a complete set of the critical "management letters," Sindlinger persuaded Notley and the Socreds to join in the filibuster. The aim: to stall trust fund legislation until Hyndman turned over the documentation. Hyndman was unmoved. He still insists that there was no wrongdoing, but the long debate revolutionized the Opposition MLAs. For six weeks they questioned cabinet ministers in minute detail about parks, dams and other projects on which the trust fund money is spent. Crawford and Hyndman at first said they welcomed the thorough debate. Then, they changed their stance when Tory back-benchers grew restless, and strategies including a "reverse filibuster" failed to break the logjam. When Crawford finally invoked closure, 17 of the 24 trust fund expenditures remained to be approved, and the Opposition's five Wayne Gretzkys floated home to dream about their next face-off with the big blue team.

—PETER GORRIE