

## The First Hurrah: Edmonton Elects a Mayor, 1983

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Volume 13, Number 1, June 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018145ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018145ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Lightbody, J. (1984). The First Hurrah: Edmonton Elects a Mayor, 1983. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 13(1), 35–41.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1018145ar>

Article abstract

This article by a participant-observer describes the four-part winning electoral strategy of Laurence Décore who was elected the thirty-first mayor of Edmonton on 17 October, 1983. Since the war, Edmonton's local elections have been dominated by purely local "nonpartisan" slates and like-minded independents. The 1983 campaign represented a dramatic re-affirmation of anti-party sentiments in the municipal electoral process of the city.

# The First Hurrah: Edmonton Elects a Mayor, 1983

James Lightbody

## Résumé/Abstract

*Cet article d'un observateur-participant décrit les quatre étapes de la stratégie électorale victorieuse de Laurence Decore, élu trente-et-unième maire d'Edmonton, le 17 octobre 1983. Depuis la guerre, les élections locales à Edmonton se caractérisent par la présence de groupes «non partisans» et de candidats indépendants. La campagne de 1983 réaffirme avec acuité cette tendance anti-partisane à l'intérieur du processus électoral municipal.*

*This article by a participant-observer describes the four-part winning electoral strategy of Laurence Decore who was elected the thirty-first mayor of Edmonton on 17 October, 1983. Since the war, Edmonton's local elections have been dominated by purely local 'nonpartisan' slates and like-minded independents. The 1983 campaign represented a dramatic re-affirmation of anti-party sentiments in the municipal electoral process of the city.*

"Gentlemen," Skeffington said. "A grand day to start the ball rolling. As well as heads. What's on the schedule, Tom?"<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

Even the self-styled national press noticed! "Liberal makes good in Toryland," read the front page headline in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* of 22 October, 1983. And yes, on 17 October, 1983 Laurence Decore captured 61 per cent of the mayoral vote to defeat a six-year, two-term, incumbent. This was an impressive personal victory for a federal Liberal partisan in a province whose voters regularly produce a legislature, and parliamentary delegation, with the same ideological vitality as Paraguay's. What had happened?

Decore, a lawyer and private entrepreneur, assembled his core campaign team eleven months before the vote. This gang of eight had first to come to grips with the base problem: Edmonton, in fact and in mind, is two cities (Note Figure 1).

The population in the southwest quadrant is largely middle-class, property owners, and disproportionately WASP. Since the war, this area of the city has voted for civic candidates who represent a view of the city that Banfield and Wilson have labelled the "middle class ethos."<sup>2</sup> In brief, local politics is viewed as a cooperative search for the specific policies that conform to an objective public interest identified with the community as a whole, and authority should be exercised by 'qualified' political leaders who are honest, efficient and impartial. This area of the city had been the natural turf for the incumbent mayor, Cecil Purves, small-time businessman and mormon lay minister, since his first mayoralty attempt (a defeat) in 1974. The Purves campaign strategy emphasized managerial themes, a desperate attempt to latch on to the Lougheed coat-tails (Purves had been prominent in the Social Credit movement until it collapsed)<sup>3</sup> and a massive, blaring, print and electronic blitz intended for a city-wide audience, along the lines of the approach one normally associates with furniture discount stores. There was no obvious evidence that the mayor had assembled the personnel to man a large campaign 'machine.'

There is another Edmonton. Its focus lies in the northeast of the city, in the working class, and among the non-anglo ethnic communities which now constitute a majority of citizens (Table 1).

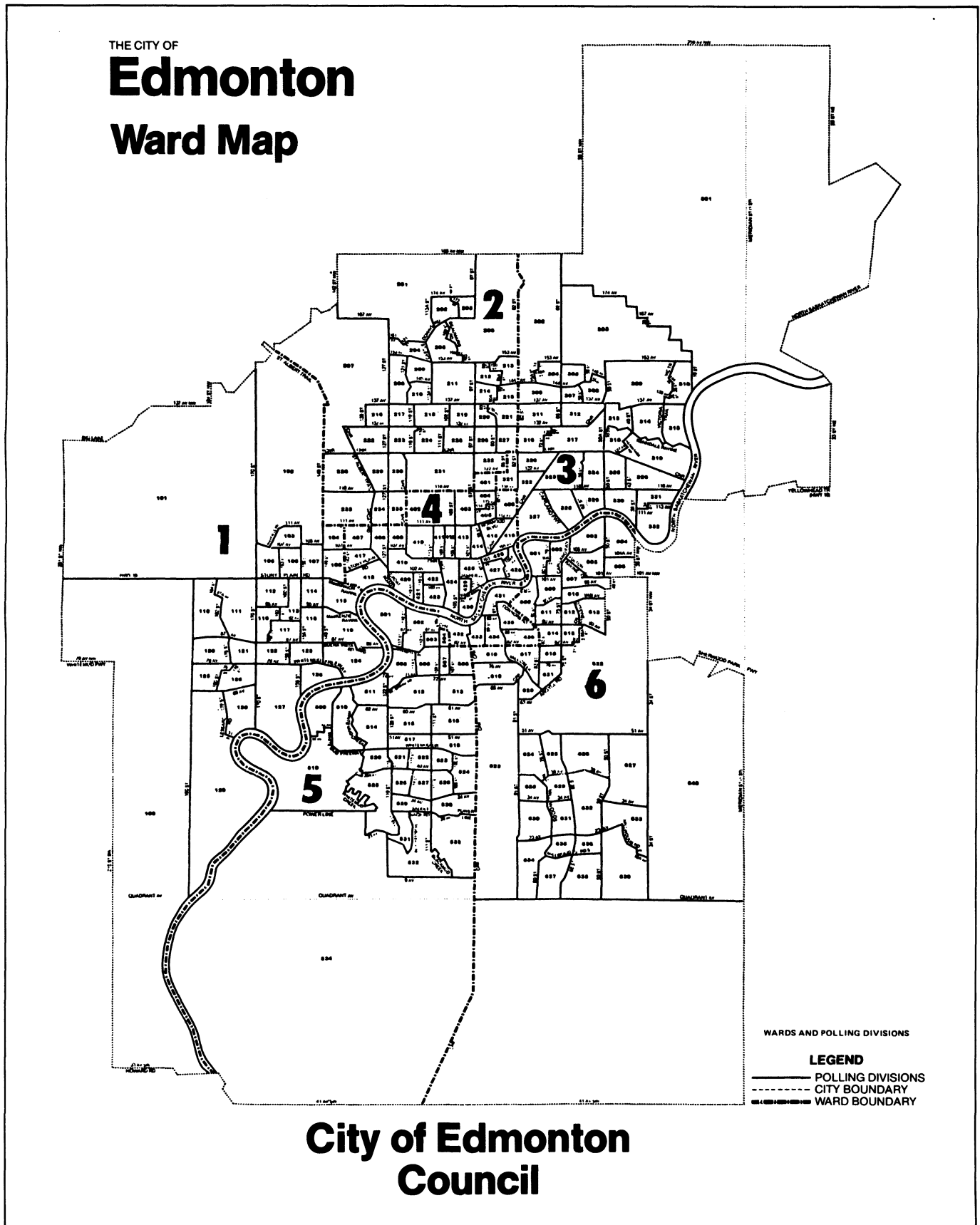


FIGURE 1. City of Edmonton Ward Map.

SOURCE: City of Edmonton

**TABLE 1**  
**Major Ethnic Groups**  
**In Metropolitan Edmonton (1941-81),**  
**by Percentage**

Ethnic Group	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981
British	66.9	56.2	45.8	44.7	44.9
German	5.0	7.4	12.3	12.6	*
Scandinavian	4.3	5.3	5.3	4.7	*
French	5.3	5.9	6.7	7.2	6.9
Ukrainian	6.5	10.9	11.3	12.6	*
Dutch	1.6	2.2	4.1	3.4	*
Polish	3.1	3.5	3.8	3.4	*
Jewish	1.5	0.9	0.6	0.6	*
Other	5.8	7.7	10.1	10.8	48.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>93,817</b>	<b>173,075</b>	<b>337,568</b>	<b>495,915</b>	<b>564,990</b>

SOURCE: Calculated from the Census of Canada.

Note: \* Not specified as a group.

It has a different concept of the city as an amalgam of communities, neighbourhoods and constituent groups, each of which has legitimate but competing claims in civic politics. This is populist country and, normally, in no election since the war with a competitive mayoralty race has it voted in concert with the southwest. It won with Ivor Dent (1968), Bill Hawrelak (1974) and of course with Decore. It lost to Vince Dantzer (1965) and Purves (1977).<sup>4</sup> The only factor complicating the equation in 1983 were the new subdivisions which accommodated the 50,000 plus residents who had arrived since 1977 (Table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
**City of Edmonton Population**  
**(1941-1981)**

Year	Population
1941	93,924
1951	158,912
1961	275,998
1971	436,264
1981	532,246

SOURCE: City of Edmonton.

The basic Decore strategy was simple. The northeast base must be protected *and* motivated to vote (See Table 3). Hence the sole task of one member of the core group, a Canadian of Italian descent, was to define the minority ethnic communities, to identify opinion leaders and to devise turnout tactics for each. Decore, for three years, had served as chairman of the Canadian Consultative Council on Multiculturalism and was extremely active within, and protective of, these communities. Obviously this direct personal acquaintance with community leaders helped the campaign effort.

**TABLE 3**  
**Edmonton Electoral Turnout**  
**(1947-1983), By Percentage**

Year	% Turnout	Year	% Turnout
1947	24.5%	1960	17.7
1948	14.5	1961	37.1
1949	30.6	1962	25.3
1950	30.0	1963	56.3
1951	41.9	1964	46.7
1952	12.6	1966	59.2
1953	11.2	1968	39.2
1954	16.7	1971	37.6
1955	11.2	1974	48.1
1956	10.0	1977	38.2
1957	35.0	1980	21.4
1958	12.8	1983	42.1
1959	34.2		

SOURCE: City of Edmonton Election Office.

To break out of the northeast base, a second critical campaign strategy developed from the pluralist perception of the city. A second core group member was exclusively charged with identifying the "special publics" of the city (e.g., professional associations, demographically defined groups, special interests), assigning a priority based on electoral importance and devising the tactics of an approach (i.e., letters or phone calls, or negotiations with group leaders). In one aspect of this endeavour Purves had helped. On 28 November 1982, he had directed the city's chief commissioner to terminate some 977 civic job positions in order to reduce the budgetted property tax hike to eight per cent.<sup>5</sup> Edmonton employs some 12,000 permanent staff; and generally speaking they were not pleased with the incumbent.

The third strategy had to deal with a political problem and this was the candidate's own task. Recently, the Alberta electorate has not been friendly toward Liberals, and the Decore family heritage lies in the Liberal party. Decore moved early and personally to involve prominent Conservatives and New Democrats at senior levels in the campaign structure (the finance chairman was a prominent Conservative fund-raiser, for example). Issues in the election were addressed in a manner calculated to appeal to the city's strong non-partisan traditions. In short, there would be no rising to the red herring bait: there would be no Liberal or Conservative way to pave streets.

Other members of the core group were responsible for headquarters organization and operations, the platform and policy developments, and for directing the area chairmen in each of seven geographic divisions of the city. Ultimately, 1,400 volunteers worked on the campaign, each name having been entered into the campaign computer with relevant personal details (such as languages spoken, hours available,

car ownership, etc.). The basic plan and time-line was in place by March and the announcement of candidacy made May 30th. Throughout the summer, Purves, the incumbent, basked in the exuberance of Universiade, Klondike Days, various major cultural activities and in the reflected glory of the Premier at the official opening of the new convention centre.<sup>6</sup>

The final stage of the campaign began in September. The first phase had to be *name recognition* given the population changes in Edmonton and that Decore had not been openly active in the civic political arena for six years. Historically, Edmonton's civic campaigns have begun on nomination day, one month prior to the election, when candidates file their papers and deposits. On the advice of the campaign chairman, and to seize the initiative, the first Decore media advertising and lawn sign salvo began two weeks earlier on the Monday of the Labour Day weekend. This defined the campaign for the media as a contest between Decore and Purves: the third credible candidate, school trustee Jim Wiebe, was never taken seriously. Serious media attention to the debate of policy issues was also diverted to the mayoralty candidates, at the expense of the aldermen, despite the fact that the mayor has but one of 13 council votes, and that there were 54 aldermanic aspirants. By the end of the campaign about 18,000 Decore lawn signs had been erected, three times the number of the incumbent.

The second phase developed as the candidate outlined a small group of *new policy initiatives* prior to the release of the official platform. Thus, Decore advocated the creation of an executive committee for council, the abolition of the commission board structure, boards of directors to manage the city-owned utilities and the creation of a Mayor's Council on Edmonton's Living Heritage. No policy announced would require significant outlays of civic tax dollars.

The third phase, two weeks before the election, called for a *clarification of the public record*, as the Decore campaign understood it. Therefore, the candidate charged that business taxation and civic debt had doubled during the incumbent's administration, that the incumbent had voted in favour of every tax and utility rate increase for six years and that the convention centre had accumulated a \$50 million cost over-run on a \$32 million project. All of the changes had the virtue of being true. This coincided with the city-wide, door-to-door distribution, of 220,000 copies of a detailed campaign platform. The incumbent, Purves, responded that he was proud of his city, that he had the experience to promise and produce a zero per cent property tax increase in 1984, that the convention centre was bigger and had more furniture than originally conceived, that the executive committee idea was illegal and impractical (eventually this issue became so confused that no one really understood it) and that Decore was a Trudeau Liberal.

This rebuttal came at the same time as an expensive series of newspaper ads sponsored by a non-resident businessman who called himself "People for Independent Alderman (sic)." This series of ads claimed that "The investment community shudders at the lack of fiscal judgement displayed by the Urban Reform Group of Edmonton (URGE) and Edmonton Voters' Association (EVA) *minority* on Council approving wasteful expenditures at a time when funds are scarce."<sup>7</sup>

URGE and EVA are purely local parties, rather along the lines of the Electors Action Movement (TEAM) and Committee of Progressive Electors (COPE) in Vancouver. For a long period beginning in the depths of the depression, Edmonton's municipal politics had been dominated by a business-oriented electoral slate, the Citizen's Committee (a.k.a. Civic Government Association C.G.A.), which campaigned aggressively on non-partisan themes.<sup>8</sup> Prior to this period the city was split geographically (in electoral terms) with the north and east predominantly with the labour minority and the south, centre and west with the C.G.A.<sup>9</sup> This small cadre of some two dozen men, focussed their efforts upon winning local elections, in which pursuit they were extremely successful. From 1934 to 1960, 87.5 per cent of winning candidates were on the slate and, until well after the second world war, they were drawn primarily from the dominant British community (in excess of 80 per cent). Although attempts were made to dislodge this local multi-partisan hegemony by the C.C.F. (1942-44), by Social Credit (1935-36) and by purely local groups, the Committee generally swept the field. Between 1945 and 1959 the Citizens' held *all* council seats. Throughout the 1960s, the group employed a variety of names but the candidates, policies and their majority position on council remained unchanged. By 1971, not even purely local slates openly contested the election.<sup>10</sup>

But during the early 1970s, a wide range of articulate citizens had been mobilized into political action by the civic administration's designs to develop a comprehensive system of freeways throughout the city. Increasing cynicism with the decision-taking process prompted electoral action and partisans of all three national parties were associated with the formation of the Urban Reform Group of Edmonton in 1974. The group won two seats in 1974, three in 1977, four in 1980 and two incumbents were ultimately returned in 1983. The Edmonton Voters' Association was formed in January 1957, to speak politically for the Edmonton and District Labour Council, but a lack of electoral success caused activities to cease in 1960. An independent alderman, elected in 1974, re-activated the EVA in the mid 1970s. Five EVA candidates ran in 1977, three in 1980 and five in 1983, and one person in each of the last two efforts was elected. In 1983, the 'Citizens' came together again as the Responsible Citizens' Committee (RCC), nominated nine candidates, elected two and received but 24 per cent of the vote.

In this 1983 election, the three URGE aldermen were labelled as “socialists” (in the real world these extreme centrists might better be identified as ‘bikepath liberals’) and the PIA ads declared that Laurence Decore would be their leader. One veteran councillor, a former provincial Conservative candidate, chose not to seek re-election in order to devote his energies to campaigning against ‘left-wing sympathizers.’ He said: “The Citizens for a Better Edmonton has not yet decided whether it will support a candidate for mayor, but several of us are very uncomfortable about Decore’s past record on Council and his close affiliation with known socialist-leaning groups, URGE and EVA.”<sup>11</sup> And, at various points in the campaign, Decore was labelled a “champagne socialist” by another rightwing alderman and a “social liberal” whose motto was “Tax, tax; spend, spend” by the mayor.

These tactics may well have been counter-productive for the Purves supporters. There exists about a 25 to 30 per cent NDP base vote in Edmonton (33 per cent in the provincial general election of 1982), which does tend to turn out for every election unlike many of the nominal Tories who support Peter Lougheed for mixed reasons. These ads identified *their* candidates and, in the absence of a leftist mayoralty candidate, Decore became the electoral beneficiary. URGE organizers reported an increased flow of donations and volunteers.

The fourth phase of the Decore campaign, taking the *positive policy initiative*, began in the last week, the day after Thanksgiving. It began with a news conference at which he announced a plan for fiscal management, called for an end to confrontational politics on council and elaborated on a program for downtown revitalization. Decore campaigned on these themes for the last five days. On October 14th both the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Edmonton Sun* gave their editorial endorsement to Decore. The mayor’s frantic response was a letter to the *Journal* beginning, “I detect the URGE-inspired pen of William Thorsell in your editorial with respect to who should be the next mayor of Edmonton.”<sup>12</sup>

It was also at this stage that callers to hot-line shows, questioners at forums, and columnists, began to question the mayor about his past speculations in land and other dealings with the city. In May 1982, a Court of Queen’s Bench justice had cleared the mayor of charges of conflict of interest in proceedings initiated by the council because of a vote with respect to land he owned and which subsequently was annexed to the city. In essence, during the campaign, Mayor Purves’ answer became, “I did nothing wrong and I won’t do it again.” His conduct, however innocent or naive, may well have cost the mayor dearly among his middleclass voters.

Mayor Purves’ last desperate gambit was an attempt to link himself to Lougheed and Decore to Prime Minister Trudeau. Employing the provincial Conservative blue and orange



FIGURE 2. Mayor C. Purves with Premier Lougheed at the opening of the Convention Centre, 22 June 1983.

SOURCE: James Lightbody

colors throughout the election, his campaign team inserted a glossy four-page tabloid into the week-end editions of both daily newspapers and launched an intensive electronic media saturation campaign. The tabloid’s portrait photographs were skillfully executed to accentuate the mayor’s facial likeness with the Premier. The message, on a blue backdrop, was: “We have a choice between a Liberal or Conservative approach. I stand for a *Positive* and *Conservative* approach.” The word “Liberal” stood out in red; “*Positive*” and “*Conservative*” were in orange. Purves had been a stalwart *opponent* of local partnership until the summer of 1983 after Laurence Decore had announced his candidacy. But, evidently, his group thought they could capitalize upon the apparent neo-conservative mood in the country. In the first week of September the Gallup organization reported that Progressive Conservative support nationally stood at 62 per cent. It should also be observed that all 21 of Alberta’s federal MPs and 75 of 79 provincial legislators are conservatives. The Purves team sought to add the mayoralty to this consecutive cornucopia.

In Purves’ mind, there was an eastern Liberal-conspiracy working against him which undoubtedly affected his cam-

paign's direction. In a statement his campaign manager "claimed many of Decore's 'hard core workers' are Liberals, and said calls came from Ottawa urging Liberal workers to help Decore. (He) would not say who called. 'I promised I wouldn't release it publicly.'" Provincial Liberal leader Nick Taylor put the whole thing in perspective: "We have enough trouble trying to get them (Ottawa) out here to elect MPs . . . I think Purves and Pocklington are exaggerating their importance."<sup>13</sup> The conspiracy was apparently widely based: on 6 October 1983, Purves' publicity director filed a complaint with the CRTC against the local CBC outlet claiming it "gave a biased, non-objective and blatant editorial in the body of the news cast . . . it was incredibly slanted against the mayor of this city."<sup>14</sup> Incredibly, the day following the editorial endorsements of Decore, Purves charged on a widely-heard radio talk show that "both newspapers are controlled by the eastern Liberal establishment." The associate editor of the *Sun* observed: "I must pass his statement about the *Sun* being a Liberal newspaper along to columnist Lubor Zink. He'll have a stroke."<sup>15</sup>


But, evidence of a Decore victory began to mount in the last week. Unsolicited cheques began to come in to the cam-

paign and senior managers at city hall phoned to volunteer policy information in confidence. Perhaps more importantly, word began to circulate that the 'matrons of Mayfair,' a privileged private golf and country club and bastion of the older, conservative, anglo-elite, had swung to Decore. Moreover, the street odds were even for the first time in the campaign.

The most bizarre occurrence of the campaign came on the last weekend when the oft-times flamboyant financier, Peter Pocklington, placed full page newspaper advertisements over his own signature. Beneath the caricature (*Journal*) or photo (*Sun*) of a 'benign' Prime Minister, the text read: "Pierre Elliott Trudeau would love to see a fellow Liberal like Laurence Decore as mayor of our capital city. Would you? Help retain free enterprise in Edmonton. Please vote Cec Purves for mayor on October 17, 1983" (See Figure 3).

Political gladiators in the intensity of a campaign have a tendency to lose touch with the real world. In the Decore camp, whose last rolling polls had shown a 13 per cent margin of victory, the question was, "Would it work?"<sup>16</sup> If it produced the result intended by Purves-Pocklington, the mayor would likely be re-elected by a whisker; if it backfired it would yield a landslide for Decore.

Laurence Decore won 228 of Edmonton's 232 polls with 61.2 per cent of the popular vote. Cecil Purves, the incum-



**PIERRE ELLIOT TRUDEAU WOULD LOVE TO SEE A FELLOW LIBERAL LIKE LAURENCE DECORE AS MAYOR OF OUR CAPITAL CITY. WOULD YOU? HELP RETAIN FREE ENTERPRISE IN EDMONTON. PLEASE VOTE CEC PURVES FOR MAYOR ON OCTOBER 17, 1983.**

**PETER H. POCKLINGTON**

FIGURE 3. Edmonton *Sun* advertisement, 16 October 1983.

SOURCE: Edmonton *Sun*



FIGURE 4. Mayor Decore at his inauguration, 21 October 1983.

SOURCE: James Lightbody



bent, lost his deposit. Some 17,840 more votes were tabulated in the mayoralty race than in the aldermanic and the turnout of 42 per cent of the city's 382,083 electors was the highest since Hawrelak's last resurrection in 1974. The margin of victory for Decore was some 54,000 votes, the largest ever recorded by an Edmonton mayor. This election was clearly not a plebiscite on national politics. The fifth phase of this stage of the campaign occurred late during the victory celebration: the policy advisor handed mayor-elect Decore the *transition* documents. The first hurrah was over; the business of running the city begun.

#### NOTES

1. Edwin O'Connor, *The Last Hurrah* (Boston: Little-Brown, 1956), 41.
2. E. C. Banfield and J. Q. Wilson, *City Politics* (Harvard University Press, 1966), 330.
3. Purves, as an alderman, sought a provincial Social Credit nomination in 1971 but failed to gain it. He served that year as master of ceremonies for the party's major Edmonton election rally. John J. Barr, *The Dynasty* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 230-1, 245.
4. For more detail turn to James Lightbody, "Edmonton," in *City Politics in Canada*, ed. Warren Magnusson and Andrew Sancton (University of Toronto Press, 1983), 255-290. For the period prior to the second world war see, primarily, John P. Day, "Edmonton Civic Politics, 1891-1914," *Urban History Review* VI (February 1978): 42-68.
5. *Edmonton Journal*, 1 December 1982.
6. The Premier, who says nothing without considering every consequence, said this: "It's a credit to you Mayor Purves . . . for hanging in there and overcoming the big hurdles. You truly deserve the plaudits of the citizens gathered here. Well done, Mayor Cec Purves." *Edmonton Sun*, 23 June 1983.
7. *Edmonton Journal*, 5 October 1983. Emphasis added.
8. For detail see George M. Betts, "The Edmonton Aldermanic Election of 1962," (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Alberta, 1963), 26ff.
9. James Lightbody, "Edmonton," 260-262.
10. James Lightbody, "Edmonton Politics: Business as Usual," *Canadian Forum* LII (December 1972): 8-9.
11. *Edmonton Journal*, 20 September, 1983.
12. *Edmonton Journal*, 16 October 1983. Thorsell is Assistant Editor of the paper.
13. *Edmonton Journal*, 17 October 1983.
14. *Edmonton Journal*, 24 October 1983.
15. *Edmonton Sun*, 16 October 1983.
16. In a letter to the editor referring to the ad, E. Rowe wrote, "As some of my English students would say, about whatever: 'Megatacky!'" *Edmonton Journal*, 20 October, 1983.