

Local

## Power players

Behind every successful leader is a team of unsung heroes



By: Mary Agnes Welch, Dan Lett and Kristin Annable

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JOE BRYKSA / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

The Golden Boy statue atop the Manitoba Legislature.

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In the coming days, the writ will be dropped, and so, too, will the gloves.

Voters will see an endless barrage of television ads, candidate brochures, news stories and maybe even a debate highlight reel as candidates take their best shots. There will be plenty of power plays, a few cheap shots and several unsportsmanlike penalties. What you won't see is the special teams behind the scenes — the strategists, mad men and policy experts. Those people matter more this election than normal. Only one leader — Premier Greg Selinger — has done this before. No party has yet to fully find its game, though the Tories may be close. The outcome April 19 is anyone's guess. Here's a look at who is running each show, including the surprising number of players recruited from out-of-province.



MIKE DEAL / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS  
Premier Greg Selinger

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In past elections, finding out who was running the NDP campaign simply required a slow drive down Portage Avenue to see who was chain-smoking outside the party's headquarters. This election, following the party's implosion during the leadership battle, there's a whole new crew trying to get the NDP's puck in the net for a fifth time. And, many are imports.

## Jeremy Read

**Role:** Campaign director

**Backstory:** Selinger's chief of staff for the last year, he was brought in following the exodus of senior staff in the premier's office. Before that, Read was the right-hand man to former University of Winnipeg president Lloyd Axworthy and served time in provincial ministries as a policy analyst and staffer. He's seen as capable and able to smooth over some of many lingering tensions, but he has never been a top player in past central campaigns.

## Kathleen McCallum

**Role:** Running the target team, including the central phone bank and the rapid response door-knocking crew called the "poll cats."

**Backstory:** A Selinger loyalist and former mid-level legislature staffer, McCallum served as the co-campaign manager for Selinger's bid for re-election as leader.

## Gerry Scott



JASON PAYNE / THE VANCOUVER PROVINCE FILES  
Gerry Scott, the NDP's Senior strategist.

**Role:** Senior strategist

**Backstory:** With deep roots in British Columbia's NDP, Scott was among the key architects of the party's dramatic win next door in Alberta last year. In Alberta, he was Premier Rachel Notley's campaign director.

## Rosann Wowchuk

**Role:** Chairwoman of election preparedness

**Backstory:** The former cabinet minister and Swan River MLA retired from politics last election. Tough and well-respected, but typically spent most past provincial campaigns working in her riding.

## Keith Bellamy

**Role:** Provincial secretary

**Backstory:** A talented riding-level campaign manager, Bellamy managed former NDP MP Pat Martin's office and ran twice for city council. This is Bellamy's first time in the central war room.

## Stratcom

**Role:** Polling and strategic communications.

**Backstory:** Stratcom is the left's go-to fundraising and strategic communications firm based mostly in Toronto and Vancouver. It's also the pollster to the federal NDP and provincial parties in Alberta and British Columbia. Stratcom, a pretty hip bunch, took over polling duties after the NDP parted ways with Winnipeg-based Viewpoints, the party's longtime pollster.

## MediaStyle

**Role:** Communications and advertising.

**Backstory:** The Ottawa-based firm is run by former federal NDP press secretary and pundit Ian Capstick as well as Ewald Friesen, a former speech writer for former premier Gary Doer and for the late Jack Layton. This is the first election MediaStyle has done ad work for the provincial NDP, including the new "We haven't always gotten it right" ads.

## PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVES

Leader Brian Pallister is widely seen as a micro-manager, and his very small inner circle of key players seems to bear this out.

## David McLaughlin

**Role:** Campaign manager

**Backstory:** He served as chief of staff to former prime minister Brian Mulroney and former finance minister Jim Flaherty and served as a key figure in New Brunswick politics. More recently, he's been a columnist and political strategist. Sources say he has a calming effect on Pallister.

## Jim Ross

**Role:** Operations

**Backstory:** Ross is a young, Toronto-based political operative, former federal political staffer and voter-contact expert.



MIKE DEAL / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS  
Leader of the Opposition Brian Pallister.



THE CANADIAN PRESS/SEAN KILPATRICK  
David McLaughlin, PC's campaign manager.

## James White

**Role:** Pallister's chief of staff

**Backstory:** White worked for several years for Conservative MP and former cabinet minister Steven Fletcher and in polling and market research.

## NRG Research Group

**Role:** Polling firm

**Backstory:** The Winnipeg-based firm has long been the pollster-of-choice for Manitoba Tories.

## Harris Greenaway Communications

**Role:** Ad firm

**Backstory:** Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall's favoured ad firm, run partly by his former senior adviser, Terri Harris. The firm has produced all of Pallister's ads recently, including the close-up Pallister "priorities" ad and a series of anti-NDP attack ads, including the one about Selinger's PST hike.

LIBERAL



MIKAELA MACKENZIE/WINNIPEG FREE PRESS  
Liberal leader Rana Bokhari.

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Unlike the other parties that have brought in heft from outside the province, the Liberals seem to be losing key players to the federal team. And, many of the people around in the 2011 election, including former provincial party president Sachit Mehra, are not actively involved this time. Leader Rana Bokhari appears to lack a provincial campaign manager, and in recent months much of the election infrastructure — the policy committee, the candidate search and vetting committee, the election-readiness committee — has essentially fizzled.

## Mike Brown



**Role:** Director of communications, but his influence is much wider than that.

**Backstory:** The former television journalist worked in former public safety minister Vic Toews' regional office before moving to be Pallister's director of communications. He also ran for the PCs in 2011 in St. Vital. Last summer, Brown switched parties and became Bokhari's spokesman and a key Liberal strategist. He is also known for his chippy partisanship on Twitter.

## Spencer Fernando

**Role:** Chief of staff

**Backstory:** The 27-year-old was a junior staffer in the PC caucus in 2014 before being fired for a blog post in which he gently called for a

Mike Brown, the Liberal's director of communications.

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national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women. He also managed Liberal Rebecca Chartrand's campaign for city council in

2014.

## Sam Dixon

**Role:** Field officer and training consultant, essentially acting as the point man responsible for riding-level races and candidate support.

**Backstory:** Dixon has been a party board member, helped with election readiness early in the process and worked regionally for the federal Liberals in last fall's election.

## Danais Technologies

**Role:** Pollster

**Backstory:** Owner Gerald Danais, who is involved with the federal party's Manitoba operation, does automated and voice polling and typically provides the raw data to Liberal staff for analysis.

*Read more by Mary Agnes Welch, Dan Lett and Kristin Annable.*