

BC NDP Convention Minus 2 Days: Improving Internal Party Democracy

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Wednesday, November 25, 2009

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Internal party democracy matters. Despite the fact that it exists in the constitution, it is not functioning well. And if democracy isn't working, it doesn't really matter that there are democratic structures in the party.

A core idea in the [Think Forward BC NDP](#) dialogue over the last few months has been about enhancing democracy in the party:

2. *We must enhance democracy inside the party:*

- Progressive politics is about accountability and transparency throughout the party to build trust and commitment between members and the elements of the party: constituencies (executives, MLAs, candidates, members, non-members), the provincial party (convention, party policies defined by convention, provincial council, the provincial executive, the table officers, staff), and caucus (leader, MLAs, staff).

- The Goal: more regular communication as well as formal and informal relationships need to take place from caucus and the executive to provincial councils, constituencies and members to increase transparency and accountability. There must be a clear process laid out and followed for decision-making which takes into account, but does not get hamstrung by communications management.

Democracy means inclusion. And it means pro-active inclusion. The thousands of party members need to be assertively included, not passively included.

What does that mean, though? Let's look at a representation example. There are 5 levels of activity in the party from the member to the table officers.

All party members belong to riding associations. Those associations have a delegate to provincial council that meets quarterly and is in charge of the party between conventions. The provincial executive also meets quarterly; their meeting minutes go to the provincial council. The table officers meet monthly; their minutes go to the full provincial executive.

There are constitutional structures and relationships in place to ensure members know what is going on. The problem is that these relationships don't work.

Meeting minutes do not flow smoothly from the table officers to each level down to members. Communication systems in ridings vary in effectiveness across the 85 ridings. There are many reasons for this, but in the end, if the systems in place for communicating party activities do not work, it is incumbent on the party to fix that.

Who is the party that is responsible for fixing that? Everyone. Ridings can't just ask the provincial office for more resources and the provincial executive can't just say that ridings have to get their act together. We can solve this kind of problem by getting people from all the levels of the party together, figuring out what communication needs to take place, what is in place now to accomplish that, what is broken, what needs to be fixed and what other solutions are possible. It's everyone's responsibility.

Currently, in a sad irony, there are not many ways of facilitating this kind of discussion.

There are other examples of breakdowns in internal party democracy, but many of them can be addressed by creating some structures for dialogue about improving democracy.

Another category of democracy weaknesses in the party is in the relationship between caucus and the party. There is precious little in the party's constitution that expresses a relationship between these two bodies. In reality, caucus can operate in significant isolation from the party, from members and from convention-sanctioned policies.

Many members I have spoken with before and after the election, as well as many non-member supporters, are under the mistaken impression that there are firm accountability relationships between MLAs and the party structures. Thus, people are seriously confused when caucus acts against party policy or what members believe the NDP does or should stand for.

The choice to oppose the carbon tax and support the Port Mann Bridge rebuild and the Gateway Project reflect such breakdowns. Section 15.03 of the party constitution contains this:

It shall be the responsibility of MLAs, when they consider there are problems in the clarity, applicability or feasibility of existing Party policy, to bring these problems to the attention of the appropriate policy committees or to the chairperson of the Policy Review Committee.

Where policy revisions are considered appropriate and urgent or where the problems are unable to be resolved in discussion with the policy committees, the matter shall be directed to the Provincial Council for decision in accordance with this section.

It sounds like this creates a system whereby caucus can dialogue with the party about policy changes. How extensive is this happening? Did it happen with the carbon tax, Port Mann Bridge and Gateway Project? If so, then provincial council should be required to sign off on significant policy amendments or reversals. And if they do, then as the governing body of the party between conventions, they are responsible for the effect of those policy changes.

Those 3 policy reversals alienated droves of members and contributed to us losing the election in May.

Democracy matters. Structures need to be in place to ensure democracy takes place. If the structures are missing or ineffective based on how the party is operating, there is a breakdown in democracy.

This cannot continue. Losing this election is a signal to the party that its internal democracy is quite maimed.

And now it is the job of everyone in the party to pull together to figure out what kind of democracy we want, what it looks like and how we ensure we get there.

So in running for a Vice-President position on the provincial executive, one of my goals is to make sure the party's democracy improves every month from now to the next election and beyond.