

BC NDP Convention Minus 3 Days: How Do We Fix the Party?

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Tuesday, November 24, 2009

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[Yesterday I wrote about a number of popular reasons](#) why people believe the NDP isn't government right now. Here they are again. Below are my ideas about how to address these things, my goals in running for a Vice-President position in the BC NDP.

1. Carole James - bad leader, woman, not inspiring, lacks vision or passion, been around too long
2. Negative Campaign - smearing Cambell, Maui, COPE 378's ads, using the Liberals' tactics of getting elected when they largely point out how much the NDP sucks, relying on the Liberals' horrible policies to allow the party to phone in a campaign
3. The Platform - unfocused, not clearly promoted as positive alternatives, not communicated to members or the public
4. The Slogan - too many slogans, unclear slogans, slogan-based campaign
5. Party Disorganization - despite knowing when the election was to happen not having enough volunteers, money, key staff when required
6. Policy Reversals - Axe the Tax and supporting the Port Mann Bridge rebuild and Gateway which violated explicit party policy
7. Rogue Leadership - lack of accessibility and accountability through different elements of the party
8. Fear - throwing under the bus anything necessary to avoid/appease criticism
9. Not Developing Constituencies - lack of time, money, and resources to develop robust activists, fundraisers, and networks with progressive groups eager to mobilize members and supporters to stop the Liberals

OK, so #9 is a bit of a plant, as I wrote yesterday. That's what [Think Forward BC NDP](#) speaks to, but it's not a coincidence. In figuring out what Vancouver-Kensington wants to do for the next 3.5 years, we looked at these very areas that we need to develop further.

#8, Fear: This is a squishy one to explore. Fear of criticism, the past, public perceptions of our weaknesses, our actual weaknesses...all these fears and maybe more are relevant. But how do we combat fear as a political party or element of a social movement? Self-assuredness. And we get that with internal integrity, believing in and following our values, committing to ideals, motivating each other on an inspired path. The party is full of values, ideals and willing activists. We need to harmonize our efforts, but we can only do that if we're on the same page: our party policy, which is our roadmap for progressive social change. We also get self-assuredness by improving our relationships with other progressive groups. We support them and they support us. We call it solidarity. Ask Gandhi.

#7, Rogue Leadership: throughout the lead-up to the campaign and in the campaign many people spoke of confusion about who was in charge, how decisions were being made, how inadequate resources were being allocated, and a general breakdown in reporting out. The table officers meet monthly; their minutes should go to the entire provincial executive that meets quarterly before provincial council meetings, which gets executive minutes. Provincial council delegates report to riding executives that report out to

members. It's a great system that should work, and it does work. On paper, and maybe in some but surely not all 85 ridings. Every chain in that communication network is maimed or broken so that the vast majority of membership and non-member supporters have no idea what the party leadership is doing. And since no one should reasonably expect all members to attend riding executive meetings, we need effective communication [and accountability and transparency] systems in place that foster increased reporting out, not just indicating on paper that it should exist.

#6, Policy Reversals: The BC NDP has passed convention resolutions supporting carbon taxes and opposing the Port Mann Bridge rebuild and the Gateway project. If this party is to be meaningful to its members and all British Columbians, it must walk its talk. In the future, all elements of the party need to follow policy, or embark on an open process to amend it. If anyone wonders why members are leaving and canceling their donations, it is largely because the party changed into something the members didn't support anymore. That's it. In the future, there need to be more accountability and communication connections between caucus and the party and membership. Without that, membership apathy and even disgust will continue to grow and the party will implode. We'll measure this for 12 months starting in May 2010 when we watch memberships not renew. My goal is to make sure people feel the party is worth paying another \$10 next year to belong to.

#5, Party Disorganization: the resources and capabilities of all elements of the party from ridings on up, leading up to a known election date needed to be better organized. In the future, we need to ensure that candidates are in place at least 12 months before the election, not 10 weeks or less. We need to develop fundraising and financing goals and strategies that have approval of all elements of the party so there is no more internal competition for resources. We are all on the same team, so we need to all be at the table to ensure we all agree on resources. Without that, we'll have continued decay. With that, we will be able to demonstrate to members that investing in the party is an inclusive process.

#4, The Slogan: There were many criticisms of campaign messaging. This isn't just about consistency in slogans and the superficial symbolism of branding. Slogans are hollow if people's experience with them is not healthy. Having competing slogans demonstrates confusion and lack of self-identity. When members read a slogan and conclude that their personal experience in the party doesn't reflect the ideal in the slogan, the party alienates them.

#3, The Platform: I read the platform. It was inspiring. There were so many good ideas in there, but it ended up being a token document. We have to have a platform, but it was not the central focus of the campaign. The platform should be the nexus of ongoing party policy and circumstances leading up to an election. However much it was, it was not the focal point of the party motivating the public to support us. It was buried in other things so that members wanting to campaign on more than how awful Gordon Campbell is [and he's clearly awful] had a hard time quoting party messaging on doorsteps and in lunchrooms.

#2, Negative Campaigning: Criticizing incumbents is valid and not necessarily negative campaign. We must distinguish ourselves from the others to "make the bad man stop." But the proportion of criticism to constructive alternatives was very far from where it needed to be. Further, members expected the NDP to shine its policy light all over the province. And then members grew disillusioned when the party embraced what ended up appearing to be the same tactics the Liberals used to fuel our 2001 implosion: say as little as possible, then let the incumbent destroy themselves.

#1, Carole James: I have no intention of assessing the validity of criticisms I've heard about the leader; convention resolutions and debate are the appropriate venue for that. But of all the criticisms of her that I have heard before and after the election, valid or not, when I think of some hypothetical person who would have been more suitable to the majority of members and voters in BC, I can't see how we still could have won the election with the other things going wrong with the party systemically. Pulling the goalie or firing the coach are tactics that can bear fruit in the short term, but they do not address underlying problems. Even if Carole James were to step down this week inspiring a robust leadership race, upon getting a new leader we'd still have to go back and address all the other things above that prevented us from winning an eminently winnable election.

So where does this leave us?

It leaves us 3 days out of convention with some serious internal reform to take place. The constitution has some contradictory language left over from the last convention regarding how the leader is chosen. That needs some housekeeping. There also needs to be a process in place to pick and confirm the leader. These things will happen.

But these things are not the meat of what must begin at convention in 3 days. We must acknowledge the problems inside the party and we must begin a process of fixing them. And we need to do it in public so that the media, the Liberals, our members, our non-member supporters and all the other groups in BC's progressive social movement see that we are turning into the electoral wing we need to be to change the toxic neoliberal direction this province has suffered under for this whole decade.

I have no time for people who refuse to acknowledge anything is broken in the party. That kind of delusion is troubling and shocking.

We will endure intense criticism from the media and the Liberals and from a variety of other fronts. So, what's new. We absolutely have to boldly embrace our principles, vision and ideals and make sure we structure a party that can enact them. It's all about integrity. If we can't muster the fortitude to do that, the party is already over.