

BC NDP Convention Minus 6 Days: Defining the Party as "The Electoral Wing of a Progressive Social Movement"

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Saturday, November 21, 2009

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There was a profound summer lightning storm on Saturday, July 25, 2009, about 10 weeks after the election. Starting late in the afternoon Vancouver got soaked by a torrent of rain and a storm that circled the lower mainland counter-clockwise and competed with the fireworks that night. [Here is my highlight reel.](#)

That day was also the strategic planning session for the Vancouver-Kensington riding association. About 2 dozen members came together to plan the riding's goals. As we were wrapping up our day into some really focussed goals, the lightning storm started.

I took that as a good sign.

One of the final ideas we considered was how to build a social movement within the party.

While I'm more of a political economist than a political sociologist, I still have a pretty good sense of social movements. Obama, for instance, didn't get elected all on his own. It took more than the Democratic Party to do it too. A myriad of groups [social, political, labour, etc.] coordinated with a massive campaign on the ground to mobilize people.

The BC NDP is not doing that. On Monday, I'm going to write about a few of the reasons we failed to win the election, but for today I want to explain how social movement theory should show up in our party.

Let's take Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandala. Both were leaders of organizations pursuing social change. Neither was the leader of a massive network or coalition of groups and individuals, but they were dominant figures. Pursuing civil rights and the end of apartheid are both social movements.

Social movements combine the efforts of individuals, activists, academics, political groups, non-governmental organizations, labour and faith groups and many more elements in society. Often they have a leading personality, but the movement itself is characterized by components acting individually, but in an intentionally or complementarily coordinated fashion.

There is usually a certain degree of drift within organizations in a social movement. While there was significant intersection in the goals of groups closely aligned to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the goals of Malcolm X, there were key difference that reflect those groups' separation on the pendulum.

So how does this affect the BC NDP?

Right now there are thousands of groups in the province working towards social, economic, political, and

environmental justice. They generally gravitate around stopping the BC Liberal party from continuing its anti-social policies.

But what is the electoral focus of such a social movement?

I know the movement against neoliberal globalization advocates against NAFTA, the WTO and similar destructive planning, but in the end, there needs to be an electoral group that could win government at some point and actually cancel NAFTA.

Similarly in BC, there needs to be an electoral wing of a progressive social movement. The BC NDP, right?

I don't think so.

I've watched this party for decades now. I've seen little evidence that it really reaches out to the dozens or hundreds of groups in each sector of progressive action. We can easily blame that on a 20th century model of organization, when political parties were the place where people went to be politically active and there were few avenues outside parties to pursue political change.

But in the 21st century, people are doing politics all over the place.

Take the October 24, 2009 [Bridge to a Cool Planet](#) event on Cambie Bridge in Vancouver. It formed over several months from the dedication of a few core people, with a broad group contributing much more time leading up to the event. And in some ways it was like a flash mob in slow motion: a coalescence of activity culminating in a day, then dissipating. And while it's not gone, it had an arc of existence. There may be more actions, but maybe not.

There were NDP MLAs, members, staff and volunteers at that event and a nice NDP presence. That's nice. But has there been much evidence that the party is really embracing and engaging the thousands of groups working towards the same goals of all the NDP policies?

Not really.

There may be that kind of engagement, but why keep it secret? Why not come right out and hold wide open meetings for each progressive sector and issue an open invitation and let the groups flock to a central place for a Saturday to chat so everyone can get on the same page.

What will we find? That we're already mostly on the same page. Comparing NDP policy passed at convention with mission statements of groups that show up to such meetings would lead to a pretty easy time building a consensus statement.

Then when it comes time for the election, the NDP is running with thousands of groups endorsing its actions and mobilizing its members to vote for the party that reflects the progressive goals.

This is what it means for the BC NDP to be the electoral wing of a progressive social movement.

And frankly, the 20th century mode of political organizing doesn't really mix well with this focus. In the last century, there were not so many random groups with a political focus. Now, any party that ignores building networks cannot get elected.

Like the BC NDP.

And while there are lots of reasons we blew off the last election, not effectively networking with like-minded groups was a critical flaw.

And those party members who wish to keep the independence of the party by not engaging in networks and coalitions with progressive groups are dooming the party to irrelevance and mortal insularity.

There are thousands of progressive activists in BC who refuse to join this party because it is not responsive to the broader progressive social movement. The party does not play well with others, or at all in many cases. And in recent months there are many members who are leaving the party because it has shown itself incapable of such engagement.

The membership drift will continue. The party's debt will continue to expand. The alienation and dwindling policy integrity will continue until the party implodes.

Except we have Convention 2009 next week. This is the time for the party to signal to its members, its non-member supporters, progressive activists, citizens and the range of groups comprising the progressive social movement in BC that the party is open to representing the demands of everyone working for social change.

And I've seen indications from caucus that our MLA critics are interested in expanding connections with groups working in each of their sectors. This is great. I hope it continues.

But what about the party? If the party itself doesn't engage with all the thousands of allied progressive groups in BC, it will spiral into irrelevance.

We cannot let this happen.

So, I'm running for a Vice-President position on the BC NDP Provincial Executive to start this process of turning the BC NDP into the electoral wing of a progressive social movement. The movement is already there. If it can't use the NDP to get electoral and policy change, the province will continue to suffer.

And, frankly, it's obvious to us all that we've suffered enough already.