

## Gordon Campbell Fires Himself During the Leaders Debate

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Sunday, May 03, 2009

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I was thoroughly astonished at how effectively Gordon Campbell maimed his political career during the leaders debate. But really, I shouldn't be because of his utter inability to have any meaningful breadth of vision as a leader.

I can understand why the Liberals are hiding out and not attending all candidates meetings. Their record is so bad, that being perceived as arrogant and dismissive by not showing up is less damaging than having to answer to--or actually not answer to--their record.

But while Campbell is clearly afraid of having his empathy-free personality exposed in a debate with his NDP opponent Mel Lehan, he couldn't hide from the leaders debate.

And since his no-contest plea to drunk driving in Maui in 2003, after spending years hiding in an undisclosed location with his ego-inflating RCMP security detail, he has clearly lost whatever populist appeal he had in the 1990s as an opposition MLA. I've recently looked at the leaders debates going back into the 1990s and he's certainly lost even that edge. Unfortunately he hasn't lost that nervous hand thing where he holds his hands in front of his belly, palms facing forward, holding a non-existent soccer ball. In the 1990s, a friend suggested his hands looked like they wanted to strangle someone, but I have always believed Campbell thinks it makes him look pensive.

And tonight he showed us all some of the worst elements of his character while Jane Sterk took adequate shots at the front-running parties and Carole James calmly and empathetically addressed issues, asked fact-based questions of Campbell and showed real maturity in the face of Campbell's addiction to all things economic, and his chauvinism and condescension.

### **"It's the Economy, Stupid!"**

One of Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign epiphanies was all about getting elected on this: "it's the economy, stupid." Gordon Campbell, being obsessed with neoliberal economics, privatization, and reducing regulation, taxes, the government and all things public, spent much of the debate talking about how an issue or question affects the economy, no matter how far he had to drag the idea over.

Sure the Liberals have polled well on the economy, but he has drunk the neoliberal Kool-Aid so deeply that he still sees the global recession as a means to actually continue advancing his neoliberal agenda! It's like Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* is his play book.

He knows that the recession is caused by neoliberalism and he loves it. It means more of the same.

What he isn't hearing is that actual human beings enslaved by this global neoliberal economy are suffering under it since the economy doesn't currently exist for them. And it scares them. So every time

Campbell talks about how everything has to do with the economy, he just names their fear even more. Fear-mongers like Campbell hopes this translates into votes. But hope and optimism and positive suggestions for a better province and world negate that negativity.

There were plenty of examples of Campbell's obsession with economics. During the debate moderated by Russ Froese, he criticized Carole James for not having business experience. The assumption is that government is a business. That's actually an ideology skulking around inside neoliberalism called New Public Management. But there are other more philosophically sound ideas of what a government is than that, the Social Contract, for one.

The pathetic thing about Campbell's criticism is that elsewhere in the debate he reinforces what is commonly known about him, but seldom analyzed with his claim of being a businessman: he has spent the last 25 years in political life in municipal and provincial politics, so he himself has very little business experience. Whoops. George W. Bush may actually have more than him!

But to get a true sense of how economistic Gordon Campbell is, we only need to listen to the easiest softball question any politician could hope for, in the leadership category: what are three reasons why we should vote for you--and please answer without attacking or referring to your opponents. Sounds awesome. First, Carole James waxed eloquently about her resume and skill sets. To wrap up the trio, Jane Sterk did an good job of explaining sometimes vague experience, but right in the middle, Gordon Campbell failed his job interview:

"Well, Katy, that's one of the more difficult questions I'm sure all three of us have had to try and answer. First let me say this, I think this is a very critical time in our economy. I think it's important for us to have people with some business experience who can help deal with that. I think it's important to have real leadership as we move forward and take advantage of the Pacific Century. That excites me. I also think that it's important for us to have a government that's willing to deal up front with the hard decisions we have to make with regard to climate change."

Beyond the fluff of this nebulous Pacific Century, he went on talking about how the NDP did nothing to stop the pine beetle in the 1990s and why a new relationship with First Nations is important.

But the beginning of his answer showed just how rarely he thinks about what public service really means--and he's the premier! And he clearly wasn't listening to Carole James inadvertently yet utterly destroy his lack of imagination, insight and breadth of personality just before him as he claimed that all three leaders couldn't answer that question easily.

Still, if we are to take his current dubious First Nations policy seriously as a reflection of his leadership self-concept, we need to also remember that he stormed into office in 2001 and promptly embarked on a province-wide treaty referendum that was panned as purely racist and horribly worded to ensure the government could do whatever it wanted. Now **that's** a sign of a special kind of horrible leadership!

Later, in responding to his neglect of the poor by not increasing the minimum wage for 8 years, Campbell again dragged out how the average wage in BC is \$22/hour. My eyeballs swell with pressure every time he says this because he assumes we will all think we're ok with that so we don't need to care about the

poor. [But I wrote about that annoyance more here](#) and I can't go into it again or else I'd have to vomit.

And during his closing comment of the entire debate, the very first thing he said was that this election is about the economy and leadership. It's clear that he doesn't even have a vision of his own leadership and the issue around the economy is not whether the neoliberal government should continue to maim us during the recession, but whether we're fed up with an economy that abuses people so that we can build an economy that actually serves people.

And to close, from the economy he invokes his fear-mongering hobby by threatening thousands of jobs that are at stake if the NDP forms government. Sure, BC is leading Canada by thousands in jobs lost in the last several months, but he's hoping we're not paying attention to that right now.

The trouble is, we **are** paying attention to that right now.

### **Chauvinism and Condescension**

Aside from his reframing of everything into an economic lens, Gordon Campbell's dark and dirty side came out during the debate as well.

Gordon Campbell's first slip into condescension--or rather, insight into his character--came when Carole James asked him to justify his tough on crime stance with the cuts to prosecution and corrections officers in his February budget.

Campbell: "I think, Ms. James, you should understand...**I know this is a big job and it's hard to get it--a handle on it**, but the fact of the matter is we've added additional prosecutors to fight crime and fight the gansters, BLAH BLAH BLAH," and at that point nothing else he said mattered.

He just called her stupid!

And it wasn't like she said anything stupid. She was just asking about line items in his own budget. Of course he had no answer, so he just verbally slapped her on the top of the head. Eight years of bullying policies seem to fit nicely with his personality.

The second condescending gouge came when the three leaders were talking about addressing crime. Campbell was all about the variety of retributive justice and policing interventions. Carole James was talking about policing as well as the prevention programs while Jane Sterk spoke against a policing-only strategy, supporting prevention programs and decriminalizing illegal drugs.

To this, Campbell mumbles in response to the alternative perspectives, "it is a multi-faceted approach that is required of us."

This is one of those phrases people use to let their audience know that they are, again, too stupid to understand the complexities of it all. Yet Campbell has only a single-faceted policing/prosecution strategy, while both of the other leaders have a multi-faceted approach. So on top of his habit of insulting people to get them to shut up, he wasn't listening to what multiple approaches actually sound like.

It also means that Campbell is either unaware of the social determinants of crime, or he doesn't care about them. It's all about the hammer for him.

The next example of Campbell's chauvinism and condescension came when Carole James asked him whether he'd fund his pet hammer projects by transferring money from other areas like auto safety or community safety. After the question, the moderator, Russ Froese, said open debate time was up and Campbell would have to answer the question during his rebuttal time.

Campbell laughed.

Sure it could have been the nervous laughter of a child unable to adapt to a tense situation. Or more likely it's the typical behaviour of someone who enjoys demeaning others in the legislature. Unfortunately, he let that slip during a debate that more than a few people would be watching. It simply made him sound like someone who doesn't have the time for this nonsense.

It is also at this point that Campbell starts answering questions and issues by speaking to "Russ" by name. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, but with two female leaders attacking him, it sure looked like he was seeking a connection with the other male on the stage. It might be out of insecurity. It might be because he is playing to a male voter demographic that happens to dominate his party's base. It might be to marginalize the women on the stage by establishing the dialogue as a male-to-male context, thereby making the women interrupters.

Then, in a flagrant violation of the respectful tone of the debate so far, when talking about healthcare, Gordon Campbell got truly ugly.

His government pledged to build 5,000 new long-term care beds for seniors. It turns out they built almost 5,000 assisted living beds, which are useful but are far from the same level of intensive service of long-term care. Then George Abbott, in one of his first public bids to distance himself from the Campbell regime for a leadership run coming soon, ultimately agreed that they didn't actually build 5,000 beds, instead it was about 800.

So Carole James asks, "I'd like to ask Mr. Campbell, is his health minister telling the truth or are you?"

It was a classic catch-22. Campbell was screwed. So he did the best thing he could think of, attacking Carole James by saying, "no, you're not." And if you saw it, you'd know it was as transparent an attempt at dodging a tough question as Campbell could provide. And it had the added bonus of petulance and absurdity as her question was based on Campbell's own health minister's admission of facts.

Then on the environment, Campbell tried to spin his woefully inadequate climate change program with airy nonsense and unicorn tears by saying our grandchildren will thank us for making the hard choices and "building a bridge to the future," whatever that means, when the climate intervention program will fail miserably based on what scientists say is required.

Then Carole James replied to his nonsense by saying he is inconsistent on the environment with a pathetic carbon tax along with pushing for offshore oil and gas drilling, irresponsible fish farms, firing park wardens and reducing environmental protection. And during this description of Campbell's duplicity, a

man with a microphone turned on just laughed.

I doubt it was Russ Froese. If it was Campbell, such a laugh is useful for dismissing the legitimacy of someone's criticism. But in stating those blatant hypocrisies in Campbell's approach to all of the environment, there's nothing illegitimate about the criticism. The laugh just sounds like a desperate attempt to avoid the reality.

So, in an era where electoral reform will likely sweep BC's electoral system out of the 19th century, it is stunning that the leader of the governing party would allow himself to exhibit such despicable behaviour in public. But then again, for someone who has been in hiding since Maui, he seems to have forgotten that the soon-to-be passe rude and dishonourable behaviour in the legislature is part of the reason why people will vote for change this month.

And it's not useful to let that nasty behaviour show up in public!

It made him look even more misanthropic than he already is, especially when Jane Sterk was attacking the polarized blame game of BC politics and Carole James was presenting an enlightened, human-centred vision for what the BC government should make the economy do for people.

So in just over 59 minutes, Gordon Campbell's failure to relate to human beings, his obsession with the economy, and his rudeness, condescension and chauvinism will be a strong likely explanation for significantly increased voter turnout, a new electoral system, and an end to his days as premier.