

One Million BC Activists Can't Be Wrong, Aren't Wrong

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Friday, November 12, 2010

<https://politicsrespun.org/2010/11/one-million-bc-activists-cant-be-wrong-arent-wrong/>

The most exciting statistic I have ever seen in BC politics, particularly in regard to the health of our democracy, is that 25% of us self-identify as activists. Anyone who cares about social change at all absolutely must read Evi Mustel's piece in *The Province* from Wednesday. This statistic means the entire structure of political, economic and social systems in BC is undergoing a paradigm shift. Here's why.

Well, it turns out that one in four of us in B.C. actually considers him or herself an "activist." And activists can cause a lot of distress for politicians — and anyone else who tries to tell them what to do.

via [Guest column: Internet has mobilized new wave of activism.](#)

Mustel correctly concludes that opposition to the process of introducing the HST is strong. It actually rivals opposition to the tax itself and spans the political spectrum.

She also notes how the blowback about Vision Vancouver's Hornby bike lane is linked to the party's relatively miniscule consultation process compared to the Burrard bike lane project. Despite the opposition to process, the network of bike lanes is really the only great triumph of Vision Vancouver, and future usage statistics will bear that out, but Mustel's point is still sound.

So what do we have now in BC:

- a [Liberal party](#) that has such low membership numbers distributed around the province that they will need to amend their constitution to ensure democratic representation in their leadership vote; that's what happens when you ignore member development.
- an NDP with some party controversies that are very difficult to measure in traditional means by looking at party structures. It's about a 3:1 count of riding associations supporting to opposing the leader, but that might not measure the nature of how activists and members are really positioned.
- Voter turnout dropping below 50% for a provincial election for the first time in BC history, reflecting how more than half of eligible voters reject all choices available.

And what do we see across Canada:

- In early January 2009 a [quarter million Canadians joined a Facebook group](#) to oppose Harper's self-centred prorogation of parliament. Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament, which was initially a protest click to join a group, transformed into dozens of protests around the country in late January 2009, then transformed into a [movement of movements](#) and [Canadians About Political Participation groups](#) in dozens of cities.
- The anti-constitutional G20 security regime in Toronto last summer reflects a government that is

terrified of the tens of thousands of Canadians who have been mobilizing in the streets in the last decade against participation in the neo-conservatives' Iraqi invasion and occupation and anti-democratic neoliberal economic meetings like the [FTAA](#), [WTO](#), [G8/G20](#) and the [SPP](#).

- While the Reform Party embraced right-wing populist organizing models on the coattails of American right wing and libertarian organizing before the internet really took off, The Wild Rose Alliance and Rob Ford have inherited the momentum in this internet age, as well as Naheed Nenshi in Calgary with his relative mastery of social networking, thereby not surprisingly demonstrating how engaging with actual people can pay off politically.

All this spells populism.

Not pandering populism, though there is definitely an element of that, but an authentic populist movement of people caring about an issue and seeing avenues to express their policy choices.

Mustel addresses this in her piece by exploring the nature of representative democracy compared to direct democracy:

Concerns about the costs of public consultation has led some to ask: "What happened to the idea of electing leaders to make informed decisions on our behalf?"

Others will argue such consultation keeps public officials in check more than they've ever been, and so is worth paying for.

The notion that we elect leaders in a representative democracy to rule until we give them the next mandate is horribly obsolete, particularly when parties lie when leading into an election and opposition parties in majority parliaments have virtually no ability to affect policy. This is part of what is helping Canadians become more enamored with minority parliaments.

Moving out of a strict tradition of representative democracy, people are drifting towards direct democracy: an environment where people have more input and actual authority in between formal elections. This is why the initiative and recall functions are in play right now, with recall campaigns against BC MLAs beginning as early as this month.

People are more engaged politically. They identify themselves as activists. Political, economic and social organizational structures that do not acknowledge and respect that will suffer. Again, the low voter turnout in BC in May 2009 is a testament to that.

[Judy Kirk, a communications veteran who specializes in consultation with the public] correlates increased involvement with higher education rates. "People believe they have a right to be involved in decision making and expect that government will listen," she says. "People have always had a desire to voice their opinions, but they are now more literate about the ways to be involved," Kirk says. More than ever, it's clear, politicians have to listen — or face losing their jobs

Gordon Campbell is now the poster child for what it takes to lose one's job for not listening. Granted, it's

taken a decade of abusing British Columbians, but in the last month not a cabinet shuffle, TV address, nor a gratuitous tax cut could buy him out of a record-setting 91% disapproval rating.

I became a teacher 17 years ago because I wanted to inspire people to engage in society more effectively. I left to fight back politically when the Liberals' neoliberal sledgehammer began destroying the education system. Years later, I am starting to see how various elements of society have led to more people declaring their activist identities.

Smart people will begin engaging more with the people right now. Very smart people have been doing so for some time now. But those who continue to ignore the will, power and intent of the people will pay the price because the people have the power and are starting to find more effective ways of wielding it.

In the end, I'm hoping that we can see a flowering of [democracy, accountability, transparency and member engagement](#) in political and social organizations. And I'm still working to see the BC NDP become the electoral wing of a progressive social movement in the province.

And with almost a million self-identified activists in BC, it is definitely time for us to [organize for a better BC](#).