

Premier Clark: A Gordon Wilson Liberal?

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Thursday, March 17, 2011

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I understand how people find politicians in the House of Commons and provincial legislatures to be rude and ill-mannered. But in our search for a higher ground, that doesn't mean we are to avoid evaluating and criticizing our public servants based on their records.

Yesterday's [Province](#) editorial "[We need to return respect to politics](#)" [below] adequately addresses politicians' decorum, but drifts off into an unfortunate place, revealing their bias for the BC Liberal party.

I was certainly a fan of Conservative MP Michael Chong's [private member's motion](#) to empower the speaker of the House to enforce more polite behaviour. Public servants should be held to a high standard of behaviour when debating political issues.

I have this crazy idea that question period ought to be a time when opposition politicians can ask critical questions of substance in an environment when the speaker can compel an actual answer. We don't have that, so we get questions designed to be TV sound bite zingers.

The *Province* editorial rolls out the decorum argument, then stunningly, ends with a demand that we all hold off on criticizing the new premier of BC as a demonstration of more polite discourse.

This, while not deranged, is an inconsistent leap to a completely different conclusion.

The *Province* editors assert a number of things:

1. Premier Clark is a centrist
2. She is being criticized by voters before enacting any legislation
3. She has promised that she'll listen to the public
4. She has pledged to be open and accountable
5. We should trust her and hold her accountable by judging her actions

These are all convenient positions to take with any random politician, but the editors' bias shows up because we would have to completely ignore her history in politics to be able to embrace these ideas.

I have seen no evidence that she is a centrist, whatever that word means to the *Province*.

Certainly, as a member of Campbell's cabinet, he ran the policy agenda and she chose to follow, so we should expect some differences from her as premier, but we need to remember a few facts about her time in cabinet before as minister of education and MCFD.

She was minister responsible for taking over the College of Teachers, closing dozens of schools and contributing to this decade's shame of Canadian leader in child poverty.

But she chose to follow that agenda. It was the party agenda. It was supported by caucus with everything else until about six months ago. If she didn't like it, she could have resigned. After all, Conservative MP Michael Chong [resigned from cabinet](#) when he disagreed with a policy stance.

And while it is reasonable to judge her premiership based on her actions, we must remember that her actions are rooted in her party's principles, which have been pursuing a neoliberal shock doctrine assault on the poorest 95% of British Columbians for almost a decade.

She is also responsible for holding together the coalition of federal Liberals and Conservatives in her party. Swing too close to a Gordon Wilson Liberal party of the late 1980s and early 1990s and she may cause an exodus of MLAs and supporters [and money, remember there is a provincial election coming]. Swing too far to the right into Kevin Falcon territory and she will...be just another Gordon Campbell.

If she does nothing to reverse the party's plan to cut corporate taxes to 0% on the first \$500,000 of revenue next January, we will see which side of that coalition she will embrace.

She will land somewhere on the spectrum between Gordon Wilson and Sarah Palin, who has been invoked regularly since the leadership race ended, sometimes in a puny and sexist manner. Clark will not demonstrate the more colourful aspects of Palin's personality, but she could easily stray towards her economic policy stances, in part because the BC Liberal party is in the neighbourhood already.

So while we may long for more decorum among politicians' behaviour, that is in no way a good argument for us to ignore Clark's record as a politician, the party principles she now leads and her responsibility to keep the right wing of the party from bolting to the BC Conservative party.

After all, the editorial says we should judge her by her actions. The truth is, we have seen enough actions already to start with an informed opinion instead of the blank slate the editors wish us to hold.

[We need to return respect to politics](#)

Canadians are sure a discontented and surly bunch these days when it comes to politics. While it's probably not the worst it's ever been — and everyone will have their own opinion on when it was — this collective anger extends to all levels of government. From the partisan fights around nearly every issue in Vancouver, to the highly inflamed debate over the HST in B.C., to the nasty tone of federal politics, the level of incivility among both voters and politicians is extremely high.

The worry is that we may be yelling our opinions so loudly that we're no longer hearing other points of view — and that can't be good for our democracy.

The situation in Ottawa has become so partisan that a parliamentary committee will begin hearings today to decide whether Stephen Harper's government is — for the first time in Canadian history — in contempt of Parliament.

Here in B.C., we have a new centrist premier in Christy Clark who is already being slammed by many voters before she's barely had an opportunity to take a breath, let alone bring in a piece of new legislation.

Clark promises to listen to the public and be "open and accountable," something politicians often say. But maybe we should hold her to her word, and see what she can do, before we rip her apart.