

## Rebranding Political Parties in BC Politics

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Thursday, May 18, 2006

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It's always nice to go to the hyper-conservative, Socred-infused Okanagan. Peachland's *Westside Weekly* has a column by the now city councilor Jim Nielsen. We all remember Jim Nielsen from the late twentieth century Socred glory days. He was a long-time cabinet minister before the Socreds were reduced to two seats by the NDP in the 1991 provincial election, much like the federal Liberals destroyed the federal PCs to two mere seats in 1993.

The biographical sketch below former MLA Nielsen's column lists his provincial political history. I wondered why his bio didn't list the fact that he's a current Peachland city councilor. Perhaps that's just common knowledge. When I phoned *Westside's* editor, Pat Bulmer, he said Nielsen's column's focus is mostly on provincial and federal issues, so his provincial political history is all that they include, though Bulmer had no qualms about adding his municipal political status. No other Peachland civic politician has a column in the paper. Nielsen's column certainly gives him a higher than otherwise profile when it comes time for municipal reelections-however much that may help beyond his provincial political status.

Nielsen's May 17, 2006 column, "Poll gives Libs a few moments of happiness," comments on May polling putting the provincial Liberals comfortably ahead of the provincial NDP a year after the election. This wasn't hard to do as the NDP spent a year hiding under the radar. The NDP may as well be keeping Carole James in an undisclosed location to avoid media coverage. The party is desperately irrelevant, despite having fifteen times more legislative presence than between 2001 and 2005, when their 1990s majority was decimated to 2 seats: notice the pattern again.

Nielsen suggested that the voters sometimes feel like it's time for a change, so they trounce the ruling party. This feels somewhat true. Also true, however, was the intentional dilution of the NDP's ideological stance as they drifted towards the mushy middle at their 2003 leadership and policy convention, during the formality of Carole James' coronation. This was a wise strategic move as appealing to the centre is the first rule of BC politics, as it is traditionally polarized. The cost of this move has been an alienation of various ideological and left-wing, progressive strains within the party. This, I think, also explains why they've been hiding from the public spotlight in the last year: they have nothing passionate to say beyond responding to whatever insufficient investigative journalism BC's media publishes.

Nielsen's column is premised, however, on the idea that a "new" party takes over when the voters reject the rulers they're tired of. Sadly, that's a flawed and perhaps intentionally misleading concept for him to float. When the Socreds were destroyed in 1991, Gordon Wilson's centrist BC Liberal party stole a key segment of their vote. Since the Socred brand was toast, the party machinery floated over to the BC Liberals. They eventually squeezed out Wilson with the neoliberal Gordon Campbell. They spent some time as an opposition, merely waiting for the voters to tire of the left of centre ruling NDP. The fast ferries nonsense and Glen Clark's porch helped the voters become weary with a leftist political party.

Enter 2001 and we see a revitalized right wing party that practiced astonishingly good message control in

the campaign and merely ran candidates in all the ridings, leading to what Nielsen described as the changing of the guard.

And while most of the old Socreds have retired from provincial politics, creepy fellows like former ghoulish Socred Education Minister Stan Hagen remain, haunting Hansard TV in committee hearings. And the glum Claude Richmond stares dully at MLAs from the speaker's chair. The rest of the right wing political machinery in BC funds and runs the Liberals, much to the chagrin of the federal liberal party who aren't so radical and reactionary and who like to play down how neoliberal their fiscal policy really is. In reality, since provincial parties can succeed at being more radical than federal parties, BC has gotten away with a polarized political history. The radical pendulum swings cause whiplash. The NDP have rebranded [as the Socreds did] as the New Democrats-even neoLiberal Premier Gordon Campbell refers to them as that. And as the NDP is trying to give a massive group hug to the middle, they have toned down radical messages. They have also abandoned the left, leading me to wonder how long the disaffected left wing of the provincial NDP can bear to exist with a centrist party that Tommy Douglas would have sighed at in a cloud of melancholy. How long will it take for an authentically left wing BC political party to reemerge?

When that happens, someone let me know.

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