

Revitalizing COPE Vancouver, Right Now.

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Monday, February 20, 2012

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Today is the first day of the rest of COPE Vancouver's life. Today is the day where the new executive needs to make its first priority revitalizing the party by building unity around progressive principles and policies, and moving past pettiness.

If it cannot get past the factionism, it simply is not a party with a political agenda, but a venue for personality feuds. I have no time for that, and only in part because such pettiness led to an AGM that took almost 6 hours yesterday.

COPE is not a party with any kind of balance of power between two factions. It is a divided party, with many of the elections at the AGM yesterday being decided by small margins, including two with 3 and 4 vote margins.

It is also a party that is well-known in Vancouver political circles as a party composed primarily of one side that favoured the partnership with Vision Vancouver in the last election and another group that opposed it. I've grown weary of listening to people talking about how we need to put a united front out to the public. We are not united. We have no time for optics and spin. We do, however, have time to address who we are, what we believe and how we are going to work together. If there is no common ground to work together, there is, again, no party.

Yesterday, the future of COPE depended on who got elected, how childish/divisive they choose to be and how they go forward to build unity. We are at a turning point as an organization. If we do not resolve our existential crisis, there is not much left.

Yesterday 7 from the incumbent slate were elected, including 6 to table officer positions. 4/5 of the at-large positions went to the other group who opposed the deal with Vision Vancouver. But thinking about slim majorities or numerical calculations is missing the whole point.

Starting today the focus must be for the executive to hold a series of general meetings so we can all figure out what makes up COPE. If we want to champion progressive policies, but cannot get past spending so much of our energy bickering, then the public will rightly decide that a progressive, inclusive, community-rich Vancouver is not our first priority. I have no time for such a party.

We need to build a consensus around progressive policies, we have to improve transparency and accountability in our processes, we must be far more inclusive of our members by empowering their voices. By doing this, we will build the trust and cohesion we need to survive and thrive as an effective voice.

Credible, progressive 21st century politics is one of democracy and inclusion. If COPE cannot begin reflecting that over the next 6 months or so, it will lose its legitimacy as a voice for a better Vancouver.

But I think we can do that. We are a political movement that has existed for two generations. We have survived many challenges in that time. This is, in some ways, merely the current one. The next one will be to build our support around Vancouver and return elected candidates to civic leadership in 2014.

This is where the executive needs to go, starting today.

Here's what else the executive needs to start facilitating [not an exhaustive list]:

1. **Community meetings:** let's make the area committees more robust with community meetings, starting in areas where we polled best, eventually up to 4 times/year. We know what areas of the city have our greatest support. We need to get on the ground there, hosting community meetings with our members and our 30,000 identified supporters. Our legitimacy comes from our ability to represent the political will of our people. We need to open up our process. Once we build our relationships in our core areas of support, we can expand to other areas of the city. And through all this, we can build our membership, while reminding everyone that our party is not in corporate pockets. We support it and we need to sustain it.
2. **The vibrant youth:** we need to be engaging with students at post-secondary institutions in Vancouver with campus outreach and events. We have already seen an injection of talented, focused and passionate young people entering our party. This is fantastic and healthy. But we need to reach out to them in their academic communities. They have the most invested in a better Vancouver. We need them to help us frame that vision. And we should not neglect high schools and other communities of youth.
3. **Engaging on the issues:** we need to explore a greater web and social media presence of commentary from COPE. We need to expand our city, school and parks committees as focal points of policy creation and engaging with civic issues. We need to build communication structures to allow far more members to take part in keeping COPE a relevant voice in civic politics.
4. **Occupy the future:** we need to engage with Occupy Vancouver to build on our common ground. The Occupy movement is not even 6 months old. It had a tumultuous beginning, especially in Vancouver, and it has gone through organizational growing pains at a stunning pace. It is re-emerging this spring with renewed focus. Ignoring obvious opportunities to work together with Occupy to reduce economic, social and political inequality in our city would be missing out on a unique opportunity for solidarity.
5. **Candidate advocates:** we should be nominating candidates at least 1 year before the next civic election to build their profile as advocates for city, school and parks issues. We cannot expect them to work for a year as hard as they will in the last several weeks before the next election, but particularly with only one currently elected COPE member, we need to allow our candidates to carry our message for a much longer time than we have in the past. They will be our spokespeople in the next election campaign. Let's start early and on our terms.
6. **Building community:** we need to expand the COPE pub nights, meet-ups and coffee gatherings to complement our more formal fundraisers. We need to provide opportunities for COPE members and supporters to gather and build our community. I once read something about someone not wanting to be part of a revolution that didn't have dancing. Building a better Vancouver for all means building a rich, human community. Putting a coffee time at the end of a regular community meeting is where the soul of our party grows.

We have a unique opportunity before us all. We have to figure out who we are and where we want to go. Too often organizations are crippled by complacency or disengaged communities. Our existential crisis demands that we start from scratch figuring out what we believe and who we are serving.

This can be a healthy, vibrant process that builds intense unity, clarity of vision, a robust and involved membership and a broad movement with a mission to make a Vancouver that cares for all.

Let's start today.