

## **Why the BC NDP Lost the Election**

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Tuesday, May 19, 2009

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The BC NDP hasn't joined the 21st century. Because of that, we missed a chance to pivot British Columbia into a healthy social, economic and political future.

The BC NDP entered an existential crisis 6 days ago. This election loss, a voter turnout shamefully below 50%, the loss of meaningful electoral reform: all these things were preventable with some vision and observing how the world is broken today and what new ideas are required to fix it.

The NDP missed all that and we'll all suffer for it. And while there are a myriad of reasons to explain the loss, here are some key issues.

### **Why the NDP was a viable party for government**

I read the policy book. There was solid work in there. And I know most citizens would never read it, but many of its highlights made it into the campaign, though without the earned media the Liberals knew they'd enjoy.

I've watched Carole James grow as an effective speaker, debater and government critic in question period for over 5 years, particularly in the leaders debate. The knives haven't come out yet and they may not.

We laid out sound arguments as to why Gordon Campbell is destroying the social, economic and political fabric of the province, its most vulnerable, its reasonably vulnerable and--let's face it--the poorest 95% of the province.

The public had the opportunity to toss the government out in favour of a hopeful replacement.

### **Where the NDP failed**

#### **The economy**

The NDP, though, while marginally mentioning the lousy economy in the last 2 quarters did not want to pin anything on the Liberals because talking about the economy meant letting the Liberals punch the notion that the NDP can't manage the economy. The NDP didn't go into how Gordon Campbell's neoliberalism has caused the global recession we are in. The NDP didn't spend the last 8 years trotting out the data of both a marginal and significant budget surplus in its last 2 budgets before Campbell took over.

The party may not actually have solid economic advice, though at times I see signs of it. There is no shortage of capable economists and political economists in the party and the country who are progressive. Does the party hear them? Do their suggestions carry weight? If so, why won't/can't the party promote this vision of an economy that serves people and not global capital? Is the party really economically

progressive or just blandly centrist? Members who aren't bland centrists are tired of a party that isn't at the forefront of re-framing a local, provincial and global economy.

### **Policy opportunism**

The Liberals' carbon tax was awful. It was designed to be matched with income tax cuts, which is sound green economics, but only at the start. Thus, it will become a regressive tax. That made the carbon tax part of Campbell's cynical, greenwashing PR stunting designed to let him shake hands with Al Gore and the Terminator. It inadequately deals with rural British Columbians without access to the transportation alternatives I have in Vancouver. And it is woefully inadequate to stop the threat of climate change.

The NDP opposed it because it polled well to oppose it. While some of the above arguments had some play, their profile was never high enough.

Policy opportunism is all about committing to something that will wedge you above the government. It isn't about doing what is right. Right would be to look at the massive interventions in our society we need to do to remove carbon from our energy paradigm. Or else. Even Al Gore is calling for the USA to be off carbon in just over 9 years, not just a little down on carbon.

The right approach for the NDP would be to take the lead in starting a dialogue in creating a 21st century green economy. That didn't happen. I fear that would be too radical. When the Arctic ice melts a few summers from now, all notions of "too radical" will be moot.

It also didn't happen because the party chose to support doing anything to the Port Mann Bridge for no reason except to keep or gain seats in Surrey with people who want to commute by car into Vancouver. There appeared to be no other reasons.

It also didn't happen because the party chose to support [the Gateway project](#) for some reason. Trying to make global capital like the NDP? Maybe. Pandering to construction unions? Perhaps, but there are greener infrastructure projects than that. And global capital will never support the NDP, no matter how much they leap towards some "middle." As it is, global capital is struggling with its own problems: the perfect storm of a neoliberal recession, and imminent peak oil and massive climate crises since we aren't doing everything we can in the last 5-10 years we have left to stop our rapacious economic model from irrevocably maiming our ecosystem.

### **The NDP's relationship with media**

The NDP paid only token attention to non-traditional media, let alone engaging with citizens. Leaking its platform to CanWest/Global--as if they would ever not endorse Campbell after being his PR department for 8 years, and sinking reams of cash into TV ad buys sadly reflect 20th century large-campaign style sub-contracted politicking. Sub-contracted politicking is all about using mass media to get the message out.

It's dead. Get on with it. Politics must be about actual people.

Vision Vancouver signed up thousands of new members 12 months ago when the party didn't even have

an identity, solid policy or governing experience because they engaged with people at Skytrain stations and all over with the offer of something new in city politics and a posture of being responsive to people, actual human beings. This was them embracing the Obama bump.

Obama as president has a database of 3 million people he can mobilize on 12 hours notice--all from his human-centred mobilization efforts.

The BC NDP bought 30 second TV ads and expected the party vibe to trickle down to the masses. It didn't put cash, people and resources into helping members meet citizens who are almost all suffering from Campbell, listen to what they need, then let them know we care about them. The party ignored the citizens of BC on their doorsteps perhaps as much as right wing parties do. Why should they turnout to vote for us?

### **Throwing STV under the bus**

The NDP committed to following the wishes of the electorate in the STV referendum. Many elements of the party, however, were actively and passively trying to destroy electoral reform. Most majority governments in this decade and into the future have not enjoyed and will not enjoy the legitimacy of 50% of the popular vote. If the Green Party supported STV in 2005, they'd likely have seats in the legislature right now.

Voter turnout dropped below 50% last week. Four days of advanced polling did not signify a resurgence in voting, suggesting that change is rolling, but rather people merely organizing their voting time more efficiently. For voter turnout to roll into the shame zone and for STV not to pass is paradoxical. I would think dissatisfaction would lead to a movement to change the electoral system.

Instead Gordon Campbell's carnage has destroyed hope in anything better, in the NDP as a viable alternative, and in the possibility of civil politics in Victoria. So apathy reigns and it always favours the incumbent.

We now know that electoral reform is a massive, revolutionary act. Its near-success in 2005 can now be explained by people not yet having had a chance to become scared of change.

The NDP's lack of support for STV was a choice to risk certain suffering under 4+ more years of Gordon Campbell for the hope of earning a majority government now or in 2013 to rule as all majority governments do: without real opposition. Supporting the STV, even though it isn't the best proportional representation system, means moving away from our horrible first-past-the-post system. It means recognizing that neither of two parties in BC do not--cannot--represent even 50% of the population.

The era of legitimate majority governments is over, federally and provincially. Holding out for more is not only illegitimate, it is also so 20th century.

But there were certainly other factors outside the NDP that helped them lose.

### **The lie of attack ads**

The NPA, the Non-Partisan Association party of conservative voters in Vancouver, is all about not being formally linked to other "partisan" political parties, unlike leftist civic parties. From this lie of lacking bias they hope to gain votes from people looking for that mythical beast: [the neutral politician](#). Similarly, the Republicans in the USA and the Liberals in BC have succeeded in convincing people of the lie of attack ads.

It goes like this: if a party criticizes someone else's policies or facts of governing, it's an attack ad. This is garbage, but it has stuck, to the point where people, including Liberal supporters on Facebook, have been calling on the NDP to stop criticizing the Liberals' policies and results, and offer constructive suggestions for improvement. More garbage. It is irrational to not assess a track record in deciding who to vote for.

Not that there weren't attack ads in this campaign. The drunk driving premier and other politicians/operatives with criminal charges and driving problems were fair game. And it seems the attack ad rhetoric has played since a solid minority [at least] of British Columbians are fine with twice re-electing a premier convicted of drunk driving.

Maybe that's a very 21st century thing. Maybe NDP Premier Mike Harcourt [who is now a functional shell for the Liberals] shouldn't have stepped down over Bingogate in the 1990s.

### **CanWest/Global**

I was hoping CanWest/Global would go bankrupt 4 months ago. Their stock closed last Friday at 36 cents, down from \$15 four years ago. They are going to stop publishing the perennially profit-phobic *National Post* on Mondays "for a short time" which will likely convert to forever, and now Victoria's *Times-Colonist* will lose its existence on Mondays. I still have this gut feeling that the redundant daily CanWest paper in Vancouver [whichever one that is] will close soon, now that the election is over and the Canucks are golfing. [People have finally started using the Internet more than newspapers in the USA](#). Canadian figures are likely similar. Combine that with the global neoliberal recession and we see carnage in print media.

Sadly for us, and the democracy that a free press is supposed to encourage, CanWest/Global still exists. It is impossible to imagine how Gordon Campbell could have been re-elected in 2005 if real journalism were allowed in BC. So CanWest/Global certainly get some credit for keeping the NDP from winning the election last week.

### **The future of the BC NDP**

I joined the NDP 2 years ago. I have been an ardent supporter since Ian Waddell was my MP in Coquitlam 20 years ago. I finally joined because waiting for the party to perfect itself finally seemed futile. So I joined to see if I could help.

I'm proud of the work I've done, but there is a long way to go. And I'm not ready to give up on the party after 2 decades until I know it is beyond hope. I will be, however, much closer to abandoning the party as hopeless if the elements that are keeping it stuck in the 20th century are still around in a while.

I spent hours last Tuesday night at the Burnaby Hilton's NDP party talking to people expressing profound grief and serious irritation at all manner of things. Mostly, people were angry with decisions the party made before and during this campaign. Armchair quarterbacks are legion, but this kind of angst was existential, despite it coming hours after a key election loss.

People want to roll up their sleeves to make sure our party reflects what we need it to. If it cannot enter the 21st century, it will perish with the Socreds, the federal Progressive Conservatives, and the federal Reform/Conservative Party, whose arc is in decline and at the mercy of the federal Liberals' fundraising health and internal polling.

I'm tired of the rhetoric that we are going to hold the government to account as a strong opposition. The carnage coming from Gordon Campbell over the next 4 years will ignore democratic debate as it has for the last 8 years.

If we cannot remake the party very soon, while it is early in opposition, so that we can show a new face that actually involves citizens and their real and pressing needs, we will have nothing to offer in the next election.

I've watched my new MP Don Davies hold a handful of public meetings since being elected just over 6 months ago. It's effective, open, a tonic for politically cynical citizens and not brain surgery to organize. It's one model for what it means to talk to people about what they care about and are afraid of, and to hear where they want to feel hope.

And since the NDP has to convince people it can manage the economy, we need to do that by telling people how we'll make it work for them, not by buying ads on CanWest/Global media and hoping people will give us the benefit of the doubt. We have sound economic policy. It can be improved and our ability to let people know it exists must be a high priority. We simply can't be afraid of the Liberal rhetoric that we're bad on the economy, or we've already lost the next election too.

In the end, the BC NDP will now take stock of itself, look honestly at the electoral context of 21st century BC and decide it can operate in our actual time. If it can't do all of that people will leave en masse, especially young people. I guarantee it.