

## **COPE: A Tonic for NPA Dispossession**

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Tuesday, April 25, 2006

<http://politicsrespun.org/2006/04/cope-a-tonic-for-mpa-dispossession/>

The Solidarity Notes choir performed three songs before the Annual General Meeting of Vancouver's progressive political party, the Coalition of Progressive Electors on Sunday, April 23, 2006. The second was about Coca-Cola and accusations of how the company uses Colombian para-military death squads to murder union organizers. Two lines were spectacular: "Some folks say it's the nectar of the gods / But Coke is the drink of the death squads."

This song set a tone that I hoped would be reflected in the first AGM after COPE's substantial defeat in the fall 2005 civic elections and after the centrist Vision Vancouver councilors, COPE-Lite, split from COPE-Classic.

Throughout the AGM, through elections and reports from elected COPE members, the party charted a firm, resolute course into the future.

Two informal slates of candidates vied for positions on the executive. All but two table officer positions were acclaimed. However, the smaller informal slate that consisted of four COPE members contested some positions. This smaller slate promoted a strategic view that COPE should "lay the foundation for a broad centre-left coalition to defeat the NPA."

While also interested in rebuilding COPE's internal policy, this smaller slate, however, was more interested than the other slate in strategically connecting COPE with other progressives in the city, like Vision Vancouver, the Civic Greens, and the Work Less Party. But Kevin Millsip, former COPE school board member, board member of the progressive Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Check Your Head activist, added, unity is important, but not at any cost.

A year ago, six months before the fall civic election, unity between COPE-Lite and COPE-Classic was important, but not at any cost, as COPE members ended up leaving to form Vision Vancouver.

As I see it, a leftist, progressive party like COPE could more actively embrace centrist groups for strategic gains. But to do so would mean diluting the more left-wing policies and ideologies and embracing a more centrist vision, thereby moving the city's political pendulum to the right. This would have meant last year doing whatever the Vision Vancouver members demanded to keep the coalition together, thereby leaving Vancouver governance not with a left, centre and right presence, but with a right and centre/centre-left presence.

This is the attrition battle of the right. Co-opt the left or move further to the right to force the left to move to the centre. This is bad. COPE members felt it was bad last year when they didn't go all the way to keep the Vision Vancouver members in the party.

[Last July I wrote about the lie of non-partisanship](#) that the NPA perpetrates. To not embrace the authentic

partisan ideals of COPE would be to dilute its existence and insult the city's electorate.

On city council, as it turns out, COPE councilor David Cadman votes with the centrist Vision Vancouver councilors almost all the time as it is. So a de facto voting coalition exists on council.

The COPE elections resulted in Millsip being elected as a Member-at-Large and Donalda Greenwell-Baker being re-elected as Internal Co-Chairperson. The other two candidates on the smaller strategic connection slate lost in competition for table officer and Member-at-Large positions.

This seems to indicate a mood amongst the members that seeking unity so steadfastly can be too internally divisive for maintaining the party's core beliefs. Anne Roberts described the alternate view eloquently: COPE can be strong in principle and make alliances on issues, perhaps as Councilor Cadman is doing when he happens to vote with Vision Vancouver members.

Roberts' view requires strengthening COPE core policy and expanding membership to capture those who oppose and are hurt by the NPA, which is an expanding group of disenfranchised citizens in the city.

This list now includes more renters and homeowners, the homeless, those receiving parks services, those who benefited from the child/youth advocate, and many who don't speak English. The NPA has decreased business taxes while increasing homeowner taxes, thereby regressively shifting the tax burden more to homeowners and indirectly to those who rent.

The drastic increase in market housing in the city, particular southeast False Creek, at the expense of affordable housing hurts the homeless. The NPA doesn't lose much here because with the extent of marginalization of the homeless our society has accomplished, those thousands of people typically haven't voted or have been sufficiently impeded from voting in the past.

In its principled attempt to cut services because cutting services is good, the NPA is cutting parks services, the child and youth advocate position disappeared and stunningly, city telephone services for Vietnamese, Spanish and Punjabi speakers is cut. So much for community engagement and accountability.

In exploring and developing its principles, acclaimed External Co-Chairperson Pat Davitt spoke about the importance of going into our community to spread the COPE ideals to the citizens because COPE can't match the money the NPA raises. This is better, more vibrant politics anyway. While it's harder to do because it is more time consuming, requires more person-to-person contacts and cannot use the mass media to a large degree, it is more meaningful because it engages the community with those who wish to govern them and the issues that affect them.

New acclaimed Corresponding Secretary and former councilor Tim Louis added to this sentiment. He said that rebuilding COPE means getting COPE back into the community, in part by cosponsoring events with other community groups. In contrast with the other slate's view of building a broad centre-left coalition, this method allows COPE to engage in promoting its own beliefs while working with other groups on an issue-by-issue basis, similar to Anne Roberts' words.

So what is the future of COPE? It lies in soundly responding to the already idiotic rule of the NPA and a

restoration and re-commitment to COPE's ideology.

Elected COPE members provided the AGM with a window into the foolishness that is this NPA governance structure today.

In shades of the un-intellectual lockstep that comes from the American Republican conservatives and now Prime Minister Harper's message control PMO, Councilor Cadman noted for the AGM that NPA councilors are now often reading from scripts to keep on message. When talking points take the place of real human beings discussing and debating with one another, we have reached a new low. But in a world where message control defeats transparent and accountable governance, individual thought—even from your own party's elected officials—is too risky.

He also mentioned the mental dismay that councilors can thrust upon NPA councilors by merely suggesting amendments to motions. Varying from the plan shouldn't be this debilitating.

In their assault on the civic fibre of the city, the NPA tried to end all the citizen advisory groups in the city. Also, three of the school board's five standing committees that are supposed to meet monthly have met a total of three times since the NPA was elected.

The NPA-dominated Parks Board works by floating plans and watching out for citizen backlash instead of pro-active consultation. COPE Parks Board Councilor Spencer Herbert described a time when an NPA councilor threatened to marginalize anything he said if he continued talking to the media about issues, as if that were somehow illegal, disloyal or just plain wrong.

Ultimately, we can credit rookie mistakes with many NPA foibles in their first half year of governance. But mistakes from ignorance do not explain the kind of restricted dialogue that comes from constrained message control. Lack of NPA transparency and accountability combined with broader disrespect for the citizenry will be a broad target to help COPE develop political capital.

The COPE group that met to debrief the 2005 election came up with a number of visionary statements that can guide COPE to developing tremendous support in time for the next election in the fall of 2008. It recommended building links with like-minded groups in the city. This should be increasingly easy as the NPA wrecking ball carves a developer-friendly swath through the city, dispossessing the majority of citizens who cannot own upscale, high-density condos or Point Grey homes on large lots.

The group also argued that COPE must be flexible and work with others. Flexibility matters, but COPE was right last spring when it would not appease all the demands of Vision Vancouver. COPE must re-commit to its core principles to keep from wavering on them. Beyond those, flexibility is useful. Being flexible with all principles would create a COPE chameleon that would mean nothing to citizens.

Re-committing to its core beliefs leads to two more recommendations: building a strong platform for 2008 and providing venues to explore key political issues. Policy soul searching must be on the agenda so the post-Vision Vancouver COPE can communicate clearly who they are and what they want for our city.

Finally, the campaign analysis group addressed the internal climate of the party by recommending that COPE develops a culture of respect in its internal workings by recognizing that while members have

differences, differences can be a strength in building an inclusive, broad and welcoming coalition. While moods of betrayal surfaced at meetings before the Vision Vancouver split, members need to rise above the personal disrespect that resulted if the party is to be a united core.

As the NPA struggles to pretend to be non-partisan and as it alienates those uppity citizens who merely seek responsiveness and accountability from government, COPE can increase its membership, its vitality and its relevance in a city gearing up for the Olympics orgy of hyper-consumption and marginalization. Reinforcing its core values will allow COPE to most effectively present a sound alternative to the NPA disaster we are only now beginning to witness.

If Coca-Cola is the drink of the death squads, COPE can be the tonic for those under the NPA's steamroller.

Podcast at <http://dgiVista.org/pod/2006.04.24.mp3>

Podcast feed at [http://dgivista.org/pod/Vista\\_Podcasts.xml](http://dgivista.org/pod/Vista_Podcasts.xml)