

Privacy, Integrity, Passwords and the BC NDP

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Friday, March 04, 2011

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I want to belong to a political party that privately and publicly exhibits the moral integrity to be a beacon in society for progressive social change, including advancing the rights and privileges of citizenship for all.

I think personal privacy, and the kind of interpersonal respect that underlies our Charter protections of our privacy are critical.

So when the BC NDP leadership decided that leadership candidates had to turn over to the party their social media passwords, a number of people started questioning the principles the party holds dear. Many have concluded this to be an intolerable position for a political party to take.

But it appears to many that just vetting candidates by looking at their Facebook pages is not enough; remember Ray Lam? The party wants passwords so they can peek inside candidates' social media existence to see what isn't easily apparent to others.

I can understand the logic of wanting to do this, but it's unreasonable when we consider the bigger issues, not the least of which is the compromise to privacy the party is now endorsing.

Below I'd like to examine reasons against this plan, and what's wrong with some of the arguments justifying it.

Murray Langdon explored some solid arguments about why this is an inappropriate move for the party. The one most compelling is that a leadership candidate handing over passwords allows the party investigators to see private communication **from** others to the candidates without asking their permission.

Powell River MLA Nicholas Simons says he will not turn over those accounts and passwords. Mr. Simons says not only is it a violation of his privacy, but also anyone he's connected to. And you know what, he's right.

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In the case of Mr. Simons, he is not an unknown to the party having represented his area in the legislature for 6 years. Why they feel that now is the time to pry into his life (or his friends' lives) is anyone's guess. But even so, why should a candidate have to put his or her entire life and social network on display or up for scrutiny?

For those who say they have no problem releasing their accounts and passwords, I hope they check with their network first because I'm not sure they want someone snooping around their private lives either. They didn't give permission for a third party to look into their lives, nor

should they get it.

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But if this is the only way a party feels it can adequately get to know its candidates then the party is in dire straits. Privacy and someone's private life should not be on display because a political institution is insecure about the potential for embarrassment.

- via [Murray Langdon's Comment](#)

Beyond these compelling reasons to oppose giving up passwords, let's look at some of the justifications floating around out there:

[No one is forced 2 run 4 leader & satisfy rules](#)

This is a disturbing argument. Essentially it means that an organization could develop whatever rules it likes for its leadership and if people don't like them, they can choose to forgo running for the leadership. Accepting this privacy invasion would not be all that different from the party requesting passwords to candidates' personal email accounts. After all, something embarrassing in Facebook could get out, but people's personal emails can also be leaked. Another easy extension would be a request that candidates declare which people and organizations they have contributed money to, to make sure that they don't have "inappropriate" connections.

One consequence of this is a chill effect on participation. I have spoken with 2 bright, talented people in the last 2 weeks and a few more in recent months who have explicitly stated how they would not run for political office at any level because of the inappropriate compromises to privacy in our political culture right now. It's one thing to expect political fallout to something like drunk driving in Maui, but it's quite another to lead a "normal" life, but fear the psychological and emotional consequences of character investigations/dirt-digging by the press, but perhaps worse, by the party you wish to run for.

Have you ever broken up with a boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse? Have you ever been on welfare? Have you ever had a picture taken of you with a beer bottle in your hand? Have you ever seen a psychologist? Have you ever been in a 12-step program? Have you ever had an email conversation with someone where you have been critical of an important public figure?

Do you want the answers to those questions [and others] to be determinants of whether you wish to give of yourself to public life before your political party will accept your candidacy?

It's also akin to the argument that since I'm not a terrorist I shouldn't mind whatever draconian nude body scanners the government decides to make me walk through to get on an airplane. If I don't like the invasion of privacy, I can choose to not fly, which shows up in this unfortunate argument:

[Only if something 2 hide RT @ilovethearts: handing over pw won't help. Just infringes on privacy Solution is nothing problematic on sites](#)

If you aren't fluent in Twitter-speak, one person argued that handing over passwords won't help and only infringes on privacy, with this response: only if someone has something to hide. This is the justification for a police state. It is simply unacceptable.

And here's one last unfortunate argument in favour of turning over passwords, that [99.99999% of people are not running for the leadership of the BC NDP](#). This suggests that most people are not being subjected to this invasion of privacy. The reality is that the candidates and everyone who has communicated with them are affected by the rule even though only 5 people are running for the leadership.

There is a core notion of justice that everyone ought to be treated the same way. Certainly people running for public office should reasonably expect to be held to a higher social standard; they are offering themselves as leaders, after all. But I don't think it's an acceptable argument to say that since a party is only violating the rights of less than 1% of the population, that's OK because the number is so small. There are reasons why it is wrong to ask people's religions in job interviews. Everybody deserves privacy protections, not almost everybody.

I fully expect that if the BC NDP had sufficient resources to investigate to a great degree, if it feels it is appropriate vetting of leadership candidates to ask for social media passwords, in the next election the 85 candidates and everyone running for riding nominations would be bound by the same demand. This could stop many people from even bothering to try to run.

And in this case, the chill effect ensures that anyone wanting to be an MLA would have to be willing to allow the party leadership to evaluate their personal communications. This means potential self-censorship for those considering running for office in the future, and since the internet never forgets, a number of potential candidates who have ever said "unacceptable" things cannot retroactively sanitize controversial statements and may decide to never bother running for anything. What kind of talent would we lose then?

What is most sad, however, is that because Nicholas Simons is questioning the demand to turn over his password, there has been at least one query about [challenging his nomination or kicking him out](#); though it's unclear whether the call is to kick him out of the party or the leadership race. Should there be these kind of repercussions for someone who engages in dialogue about a privacy violation? If so, then we will need to tolerate more of a chill over public participation.

In the end, I want to belong to a political party that values respectful dialogue, recognizes personal rights and freedoms, and doesn't promote a tone of forced obedience to potentially arbitrary and/or undetermined standards of vetting of personal communications.

Nicholas Simons is right to refuse to submit personal passwords. The BC NDP needs to abandon this leadership requirement.