

Forum

British Columbia: Playing Safe is a Dangerous Game

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The New Democratic Party in British Columbia has not incurred the wrath of its main labour supporters as its counterpart in Ontario has done. But the mood of the electorate, judging by the polls and the results of the federal election, is decidedly hostile. When this government came to power it had to contend with the very polarized nature of BC politics. While federally the NDP, until the last election, was well represented in BC, provincially there has been a strong preference on the part of voters for right wing governments. Social democrats perhaps account for one quarter of all voters. In order to get elected, then, the party felt the need to give assurances that it was not about to change things dramatically, and that it was not a socialist party. It has been fairly consistent while in power in maintaining this careful approach. And with so little promised, the social democrats in the party have not been excessively disillusioned (as they have been in Ontario) by the lack of sweeping change. The party's perception that many people were voting for an NDP government not because they wanted social democracy, but because there wasn't really an alternative, is probably correct. Yet, rather than using its opportunities to promote a social democratic vision, the government, as it increasingly faces competition from the Liberal Party, appears to be pandering more to the right.

The election of the NDP in BC, unlike Ontario, was no surprise, and this was the major advantage for the party in its preparation for governing. The Social Credit government of William Vander Zalm faced scandal after scandal with ministers forced to resign on a regular basis. When the Premier himself finally faced a court charge of corruption, the election win for the NDP was all but assured. Throughout the self-destruction of the Social Credit government, the NDP, as the opposition party anticipating election, made no dramatic pledges. They promised honest government; a boring, but stable leader (after Vander Zalm's "charisma" this had a certain appeal); and a determination to get the province's finances in order by eliminating the debt. Mike Harcourt consistently reminded the electorate that the party was "not promising any miracles," and consciously distanced himself from the style associated with Dave Barret (Premier of the last government formed by the NDP in BC). One lesson the party felt it had learned from the Barret government of the 1970s was that slow, careful changes might be tolerated, but going too far, too fast would lead to a one-term government. The other lesson was that trade unions must be kept on-side if their members were to be counted on to work, rather than stay home and watch, the next time around. This NDP government was planning ahead and its objective was to be more than a one-term government.

The only surprise in the 1991 election was the last-minute success of the Liberals. As a third party, the Liberals had little public exposure and even less experience. The turnaround in their fortunes was the result of a strong performance by their leader, Gordon Wilson, in the candidates' televised debates during the election. However, the furore that erupted as a result of the love affair between the Liberal leader and his designated choice as party leader in the legislature discredited his leadership, and whatever criticism existed in the legislature toward NDP policy evaporated from public view. With the organized opposition in disarray, many talented and experienced people in cabinet who had held the opposition portfolios and knew their issues, and an economy which was not doing as badly as the rest of the country, the NDP was well placed to build public support for a new approach.

From the beginning Mike Harcourt assumed a surprisingly low profile and his more flamboyant ministers, particularly Glen Clark (Minister of Finance) and Moe Sihota (Minister of Labour and the key person in the Cabinet responsible for the negotiations for the Charlottetown Accord) and later Elizabeth Cull (Minister of Health), became the media stars. The strategy seemed to be to keep Harcourt in the background because of his unfailing tendency to get things wrong whenever he spoke in public. Yet, though publicly the superstars appeared to be in control, there is no doubt that Harcourt was the true head of the caucus and insisted on the tone and direction of appeasing the business sector, avoiding radical departures from the status quo and, above all, appearing moderate.

Soon after the election, some members of popular sector groups who had supported the party during the election held several meetings to discuss their role now that their party was in power. These were groups who were uneasy with each other and who had not worked together since the sorry end of Solidarity, so their coming together was significant. While each group had close links with the party, many of their members, particularly those on the left, were worried about the conservative rhetoric of the new government. This tone had been evident not only during the election, but also as the government prepared the public for its first budget. In one of three documents that were presented to the Minister of Finance, Glen Clark, this issue was addressed directly:

We are concerned that the new government has adopted conservative rhetoric and programs in its attempts to address problems facing the economy. International competitiveness and deficit reduction are the mainstays of conservative administrations and ideologies and they should not be replicated by the NDP...

[W]e believe that the NDP government must engage in a campaign to popularize progressive economic alternatives and help to create a climate for their implementation.... Unless a new approach is pursued, the government will be caught in the rhetoric of the right and find that deficit reduction and competitiveness continue to be its major focus.

The people of British Columbia need information about alternative possibilities, so that we can all be part of the debate about the future. The NDP government of BC should provide leadership for that debate to occur. Popular sector groups can play a major role in such a debate.¹

The popular sector in British Columbia worried not just about the language the government was using, but the way in which this language would constrain government actions. While the government would say, privately, that it was "co-opting" the rhetoric of the right to pursue its own policies (beating them at their own game), not many of its supporters were convinced that this was a wise or desirable strategy; others were more cynical and found it simply an excuse for pandering to business and the right. There were opportunities for presenting new visions and new directions while the BC economy, though not immune from problems, was not facing the crises apparent in other provinces. The political climate was favourable too, since there was little organized party opposition to the NDP once it took office, and people were expecting this government to behave differently from the last one.

The strategy of appeasement did not, in fact, work very well. Even minor policy changes, like increases in the minimum wage or small increases in taxes on large corporations brought fiery responses from business. Business expected the worst from the NDP, and these measures were taken as evidence that the government was not on their side. The actions of business leaders in both BC and Ontario confirm what many NDP critics have long argued - i.e., that this sector will never support an NDP government, but will merely take advantage of their position to badger and bludgeon until the government is gone.

Labour has certainly fared better in BC than it has in Ontario.² Soon after the government was elected, the contract with the BC Government Employees Union (BCGEU) was settled, giving members a substantial pay raise. Because this is the largest union in the BC Federation of Labour, the contract went a long way toward cementing labour's bond with the government. The government, however, did not want to appear to be in labour's pocket, so not all labour's battles

were settled in its favour. In particular, the teachers and health care workers have not received the support they had expected. Teachers were actually legislated back to work, and, although there was accommodation for some health care workers, this was a struggle. The reality is that the health care sector is experiencing fairly serious "downsizing," in the guise of a shift to community control, with a large number of health care workers losing their jobs.

The main public support for the government comes from the BC Federation of Labour and the major players in this organization are the International Woodworkers of America (IWA)³ and the BCGEU. The government may be less concerned with the alienation of the teachers (who are among the more progressive unions and are *not* a part of the Federation), but it is extremely careful with the IWA. This causes fairly serious problems for the government as the IWA's interests conflict with the demands of environmental groups.

While the NDP tried to convince itself that "sustainable development" was possible and need not cause major rifts between its environmental supporters and its union backers, the whole Clayoquot Sound problem⁴ - an issue which simply will not go away and continues to plague the government - provided evidence to the contrary. Images of old women and children defying the law and being convicted appeared in provincial and national newspapers. The protesters maintained their vigils and as the trials of the seven hundred people arrested during the summer proceeded, with excessively harsh sentences imposed on many of them, public sympathy was aroused.

This is one case where the attempts to maintain union support seriously undermine government credibility. It may look as though the environmental political problem is there because the government is supporting MacMillan Bloedel. The fact that the government recently became a share-holder in MacMillan Bloedel seems a decided compromise in its commitment to environmentalism, since both the company and the government now stand to benefit financially from increased logging. Of course, this support dovetails rather nicely with the government's desire to please the IWA.

The anger of environmentalists over Clayoquot Sound certainly has added to the drop in public support for the government. The NDP's popularity has declined steadily, and Harcourt now has about the same level of support (according to polls) that Vander Zalm had when it became clear he would have to go.⁵ But Clayoquot is not the whole of it and this disaffection, coming from both the left and the right is, on the surface, puzzling. As one woman, a farm leader and longtime NDP supporter, said, "I can't see what Harcourt has done that's that bad." This is pretty much the prevailing sentiment among party stalwarts and the obvious comparison with what is "that bad" is the Bob Rae government.

Much of the disaffection with the government comes from the right, which never really wanted an NDP government in the first place. This opposition was fuelled by the attempt in the last budget to impose a school property tax surcharge on homes valued over \$500,000. The media came to the rescue of these homeowners. Stories flourished showing how horrible this would be for the cash-strapped elderly, who through no fault of their own, wound up with very valuable pieces of property. These people, it was claimed would be forced to move. While the government quickly withdrew the proposed tax, the image of the NDP as tax grabbers remained.

But probably the most significant issue responsible for making the public wary was the way the government handled the whole issue of the Charlottetown Accord. Initially, supporting the Charlottetown Accord appeared to be a good thing, politically. For the first time in the nation's history everyone (except the people) seemed to be on-side: all the political parties; the governments of all the provinces, including Quebec; and the official organizations of most labour, native, and business groups supported the Accord. The NDP in BC purports to be an open government, and frequently holds public consultations on a variety of issues, but the sessions on the Accord were not intended to solicit views divergent from those of the government, views which had been established by the federal NDP. While the Accord was being negotiated, the government was secretive about what it was trying to achieve. Women could get no commitment on equality issues, and though the government's

rhetoric on maintaining social programs was strong, it simply refused to deal with the real concerns that were raised about what the devolution of powers to the provinces would entail. Harcourt was out of the issue altogether, and when he once filled in for Moe Sihota during the negotiating process, he made a very serious blunder (well reported in the papers) that seemed to assure BC would get less in future transfer payments than any other province. Apart from the ineptness of the Premier, however, the main issue was how out of touch the government was with the people and, even more disturbing, how determined they were not to tolerate dissent within the party.

All organizations are alarmed by dissent within their own ranks, but stifling divergence is a tradition which is particularly endemic in left organizations. When these organizations face a world which is hostile to their objectives, there is a desire to present a united front, and any internal criticism is treated as treachery, particularly if it becomes public. Under a parliamentary system, divergences of opinion within a caucus are easily controlled, as we saw when Stephen Langdon dared to voice publicly what just about everyone in the NDP was saying about Bob Rae's Social Contract, losing his job as finance critic in the process. But this kind of control, and the strong disapproval that anyone who differs with the party's position experiences limits the party's ability to grow and understand either what people want, or how new directions can be formulated. There certainly are risks involved in allowing criticisms from supporters to reach the public because the media treats them as evidence of weakness and often magnifies them far beyond their real significance. But the worst danger is alienating the very people the organization is serving: it must, then, rely entirely on its elites to decide what is best and then demand loyalty from everyone else.

The progressive organizations that have not only survived, but have grown and become stronger are those which listen to their members and change their practices to accommodate them. The best example of this is the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, an organization which has come to terms with diversity and has grown, over the years,

to recognize the strength this adds to the organization. The criticism the organization has received, from people who either were in the organization or were part of its natural constituency of feminists, has been at times a decided embarrassment, and at others a threat to its stability. But if these voices had not been heard, or had been excluded and confined to the fringes of feminist activity, the movement would never have been able to change its direction so that it could begin to become more inclusive.

The NDP, both federally and when in power in the provinces, has severely misunderstood the significance of suggestions for new or different directions in public policy which emanate from progressive groups. It is this narrowness which alienates its supporters. This myopia is not just evident in the party's treatment of the Charlottetown Accord. When the BC government encountered resistance to its deficit-cutting language, it treated all dissenters as enemies. Gideon Rosenbluth, an economist who was chair of the party's economic policy committee, was fairly careful in his criticism of the deficit-reduction rhetoric. He discussed this within the party and among trade unionists and popular sector groups, confining his message to party supporters. His aim was to stimulate debate within the party and to convince the government that its focus on the deficit was unnecessary and wrong. This was simply not tolerated and he was removed from his position by the party leader.

The NDP sees no room for discussion on the deficit. Here again, they are making a large mistake. BC does not really have a deficit problem, since less than six percent of its revenues are devoted to paying the interest on the debt (as opposed to about 35 percent for the federal government). But, rather than trying to convince the public that there are other, larger issues on which to focus, or providing a strong campaign to convince people of the importance of the public sector to social well-being, the government has, instead, spent considerable time and effort in trying to convince everyone that there is a "structural deficit" which can only be rectified by eliminating the debt. This appears to be in line with their strict adherence to the strategy of using the language of the right, while pursuing progressive measures. The

two budgets the government has presented so far have been mildly progressive, in a middle-of-the-road liberal sense. In a time when other NDP governments have been taking dramatic budgetary measures, the NDP in BC have brought forward budgets which have increased taxes on the wealthy and have not reduced spending on social services.

In other ways, the government has also been mildly progressive. It introduced lunch programs in some schools; it rescinded some of the most miserable aspects of the Social Credit labour legislation; it raised the minimum wage; it appointed women and minorities to boards and commissions so that they comprise at least half the membership of each; and until the last cabinet reorganization, it appeared to be sympathetic to the problems of the poor and actually eliminated some of the more petty requirements those on social assistance faced. But it has not yet produced anything substantial on daycare. Pay equity still has not materialized, after two years. Should it come into effect during this term, it will fall far short of the pay equity legislation which was introduced by a Liberal government in Ontario some time ago. The BC government has publicly been very critical of the FTA and NAFTA, but it would not join Ontario in the court case challenging federal infringement on provincial rights that are a result of these trade initiatives. If this measure, which was urged by its anti-free trade supporters, had occurred either before the federal election campaign, or at least in its early stages, free trade may have been more of a focus for debate. This could possibly have given the federal NDP a better chance in the election.

The NDP in BC has not been a social democrat's dream and it routinely disappoints its more progressive supporters. But it has not lost its core support within the party, as has occurred in Ontario. But this could be changing. The spectre of the Liberal Party is looming large, now that Gordon Campbell (the popular mayor of Vancouver and until recently a Social Credit member) has become party leader.⁶ The government is panicking and is pitching its rhetoric even more to the right. This was particularly evident in last year's cabinet shuffle, where progressive ministers in key areas were replaced with conservative ones, or party "yes" people. Most

significant were the changes in the education and social services ministries. The major message Harcourt wanted to convey along with the cabinet change was that his government was going to go after "welfare cheats." In his press statement announcing the cabinet changes he said,

This government will take a much harder look at how it operates. We've asked average working people to sacrifice enough. It's time for government to re-examine its priorities and rethink its spending. We must first look to those budgets that have grown the most. As an example, we must do even more in social services to make sure money is going to the people who need it most and is not being wasted on welfare fraud and bureaucratic waste?

This is extremely disturbing to the community of the poor, as might be imagined.

Equally disturbing to the education community was the appointment of Art Charbonneau as Minister of Education. Charbonneau's preference for moving public services into the private sector is well known, as is his dedication to getting education "back to basics." In his press statement Harcourt noted that the objective of education was to "learn the skills necessary to compete in the global economy," and that meant "keeping our schools open." Together with Charbonneau's appointment, this sent the sure signal that teachers' objections to changes in education will not be tolerated.

In announcing the new directions for his government, Harcourt admitted mistakes, focusing on how efforts to manage forest resources "have never been fully explained;" how it was wrong to assume that "everyone who lives in high-priced homes also has high incomes;" and his mistake in giving his Cabinet "a great deal of responsibility and independence." He is going to change all of that: "what I have learned is that I must provide more direct, focused leadership. I must set the priorities, establish a plan and demand accountability." In doing this, he listed a number of fundamental priorities, the first of which makes it clear social democrats will have even less influence with his government in the future: "This government is responsible to all the people of British Columbia - not to special interests, the bureaucracy, or partisan politics."

Cohen/NDPs in Power

The Harcourt government has not learned that it must counter the ideology of the right. Rather, it has decided that acquiescing to it is politically safer than opposing it. The government has had, and continues to have, opportunities to sound and behave differently but, as one party supporter remarked, they have tried to play both sides. Her message was that they must learn that they need to choose which side they are on. The Harcourt government is by no means a neoconservative government and it is not likely to pursue policies which will alienate labour as the Ontario NDP has done. But its attempt to be a government for "all the people of British Columbia" indicates that it will not accomplish reforms which go beyond liberal bounds. Playing it safe politically may well be a dangerous game since it is unlikely to attract support from the right and will certainly lead to disaffection among traditional supporters.

Notes

1. This document, "Popular Sector Groups and Economic Policy," was prepared by myself, Sid Schniad and Ken Novakowski. The other two "Maintaining service to people," and "How dreadful is the dreaded deficit?" were prepared by Gideon Rosenbluth. The three were presented to the Minister of Finance in June 1992.
2. For a discussion of how labour has fared in Ontario, see G. Ehring and W. Roberts, *Giving Away a Miracle: Lost Dreams, Broken Promises and the Ontario NDP* (Oakville- Mosaic Press, 1993).
3. Ken Georgetti, the president of the federation comes from this union.
4. Clayoquot Sound, located on the west coast of Vancouver Island, contains some of the country's oldest and largest trees, and is one of the last stands of ancient coastal rain forest. Since the government decided to let MacMillan Bloedel begin logging in the region, protest against it has enlisted support from environmentalists around the world.
5. The poor showing of the NDP in BC during the last federal election (reduced from nineteen members to two) is probably not solely a result of Harcourt's unpopularity, as the press interpreted it. The desire to remove the Conservatives from government was likely behind the strong showing of the Liberal Party in the province.
6. Gordon Campbell was a member of the Social Credit Party until recently and is decidedly on the right of the Liberal Party.
7. News release, September 15, 1993.