



BC Opts for Continuity, Not Change

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British Columbia General Election

Dr. Roger Gibbins,
President and CEO

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Provincial elections are usually of great interest to provincial residents, but of more limited interest to those living elsewhere. Tuesday’s election in British Columbia, however, is of wider interest for the light it sheds on the broader political scene in Canada. Voters and politicians across the West and the country should take note.

Although the re-election of an incumbent government is an intrinsically less interesting news story than the election of a new government and new premier, a number of important themes emerged from the BC election results.

Staying the course in troubled times

Premier Gordon Campbell’s Liberal government was the first in Canada to go to the polls since the full onslaught of the recession. He asserted that he was the best choice to lead British Columbians through these challenging times, making economic management the cornerstone of his election campaign. He argued that his New Democratic challenger, Carole James, lacked the experience and ability to manage the province during a recession.

Voters responded to the Premier’s argument by rewarding the Liberals with a solid majority government, and the first “threepeat” in the province in 26 years. Even in good economic times, this would have been an impressive accomplishment and suggests that “it’s the economy, stupid” may be the focus of upcoming elections elsewhere in the country.

The bottom line is that almost nothing changed from the 2005 election outcome apart from the addition of six seats to the provincial legislature, three of which went to the Liberals and three to the New Democrats. The distribution of the popular vote remained unchanged,

Figure 1: BC Election Results

| | Seats | | Popular Vote | |
|-----------------------------|-------|------|--------------|-------|
| | 2005 | 2009 | 2005 | 2009 |
| Liberal Party | 46 | 49 | 45.8% | 46.0% |
| New Democratic Party | 33 | 36 | 41.5% | 42.1% |
| Green Party | – | – | 9.2% | 8.1% |

Source: CBC News Online Note: Results as of May 13, 2009; some recounts will be held.



and the potential Green Party threat to the partisan status quo became an increasingly remote threat. Despite BC's well-deserved reputation as Canada's greenest province, the leader of the Green Party, Jane Sterk, finished third in her own riding with only 17% of the vote. Clearly, green votes can be captured by parties without green in their name.

As the recession continues to unfold, there has been speculation that tough economic times may shake the very foundations of the Canadian political system. In BC, however, the electorate was barely stirred, much less shaken. Carole James nicely summed up the election outcome: "Clearly the economy was a strong concern for people, and they were looking at not changing horses in a tough time."

While it is risky to speculate, there may be some parallels between Prime Minister Stephen Harper and a provincial premier often described as aloof and not excessively people-friendly, and criticized for governing from the right, yet running successfully as an effective economic manager.

One thing is clear: it is risky to extrapolate partisan results in BC to the national stage. BC parties have at best a loose connection to their national counterparts, particularly because there is no significant Conservative party in the province. (The provincial Conservatives, not to be confused with the federal Conservative party, won only 2.1% of the vote.) If there is a lesson for national parties, it may be that the electorate's appetite for change should not be over-estimated. To paraphrase James, changing horses in mid-economic stream may have little appeal.

Lessons from the carbon tax

The Liberal government in BC was the first to introduce a comprehensive carbon tax, and the first to face the potential wrath of voters. However, what wrath there was appears to have been directed by environmentalists at the New Democrats for their pledge to "axe the tax."



Admittedly, it is difficult to say how much of a role the carbon tax played in the outcome of the campaign, and it would be premature to conclude that carbon taxes are the road to electoral *success*. Still, the carbon tax clearly did not bring down the Campbell government. Indeed, the Premier is hopeful that the actions he has taken on the environment, including the carbon tax, will encourage other leaders to do the same. Campbell spoke on election night of his environmental record in the following terms: “This can be done, it should be done, and it must be done for our children and grandchildren.” BC, of course, is a unique place with a unique electorate. Nonetheless, those who argue that a carbon tax will never be accepted by Canadians will have to either explain away the BC result or change their tune.

Elections are always murky events to interpret. What did 1.5 million BC voters really mean when they scrawled their **X** on the ballot? Were they voting for one party or against another? Was their vote driven by perceptions of the competing leaders, particular policy issues, or longstanding partisan loyalties? What role, if any, did local candidates and issues play? The basic answer is we don't know, and ultimately it is up to the winner to declare just what voters were trying to say. In Campbell's case, the mandate is clear: keep BC strong by strengthening the provincial economy.

Although BC politics in the past have often been very polarized, this was not the case in 2009, in part because the attack on the carbon tax came from the New Democrats and was opposed by many in the mainstream environmental movement, including David Suzuki. In his acceptance speech, the Premier reached out to both James and Stark, saying that “we must find a way we can listen to one another and learn from one another.”

Resource development

BC has enjoyed a substantial oil and gas boom in recent years, and thus a major industry concern going into the campaign was whether the election outcome would sustain or hamper this boom going forward. The potential impact was dampened somewhat during the campaign by party platforms that differed largely at the margins, and on a relatively



small set of issues. For example, the Liberals sought to encourage, and the New Democrats to limit, private sector involvement in new hydro developments. The Liberals favoured—and the New Democrats sought to cancel—residential “smart meters.” Only the New Democrats proposed a moratorium on coalbed methane.

On balance, it appears that BC’s energy trajectory will not be significantly affected by the election results. Shale gas development in the Horn River, Montney, Bowser and Nechacko basins will be encouraged, planning for an energy corridor terminating in a LNG terminal in Kitimat will go ahead, attempts to develop commercially-viable ethanol production from beetle-ravaged trees will continue, and the province will gradually evolve away from coal-based power imports.

Death knell for electoral reform

In 2003, the Liberal government created the Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform with a mandate to “assess all possible models for electing MLAs, including preferential ballots, proportional representation, and our current electoral system.” The 160 members of the Assembly, with a Chair appointed by the legislature, were chosen *at random* from across the province. This diverse group of citizens engaged in extensive discussions and public hearings over the course of 2004, and in late October of that year, recommended the replacement of BC’s first-past-the-post electoral system (a.k.a. single member plurality) with a customized single transferable vote (STV) system to ensure greater proportional representation in the legislature.

A provincial referendum on the BC-STV electoral reform proposal was held in May 2005 in conjunction with the provincial election. The referendum asked: *Should British Columbia change to the BC-STV electoral system as recommended by the Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform?* In order to pass, the referendum had to receive support from 60% of voters and majority support in 60% (48 of 79) of the electoral districts. The 2005 referendum was supported by a majority in all but two of the 79 electoral districts, and overall 57.7% voted in favour of switching to the new system. However, this was 39,262 votes shy of the 1,020,681 votes needed to carry the day. Thus, while there was broad—indeed majority—



support for the recommendation of the Citizen's Assembly, it did not quite reach the 60% threshold.

Newly re-elected Premier Gordon Campbell interpreted the referendum results to mean that there was a strong desire in the province for electoral reform even though the referendum did not pass. Given this, it was decided that the *same* referendum question with the *same* success thresholds would be rerun during the next provincial election, which was indeed the case.

The results, however, can only be described as a crushing defeat for the proponents of electoral reform. Those supporting the STV proposal fell from 57.7% of voters in 2005 to only 38.8% in 2009, and the proposed reform won majority support in only seven of 85 constituencies (five in Vancouver and two in Victoria). Nor did the presence of the referendum question on the ballot spur greater voter participation; the turnout rate fell by 8% to 50%, a new provincial low. If the BC election is a barometer of citizen engagement during these tough economic times, Canadian democracy is in bad shape. If Canadians are not spurred to go to the polls when issues like a carbon tax and how we elect our leaders are on the table, what will get them off their couches and down to the polling stations? Clearly, more effort to engage voters is needed in BC and across the country.

It is difficult to explain this precipitous drop in support for electoral reform, although economic uncertainty may have played a role. In any event, the issue is now dead, dead, dead in BC, and is unlikely to be taken up by other provincial governments any time soon. BC voters, who initially led the charge for electoral reform, have now driven a spike through its heart. Canadian politicians now need to find another way to get more voters more engaged in their democracy.



Regional and national engagement

For much of the 50 years leading up to the 2001 election, political leaders in BC adopted what might best be described as an introspective approach to western Canada, and indeed to the country as a whole. The province was, more often than not, a bystander on the regional and national stage, which in turn allowed Alberta to punch well above its demographic weight as the voice of the West.

This positioning changed fundamentally with the election of the Liberal government in 2001. Premier Campbell became an active player on the national stage and an advocate for greater regional collaboration among provincial and territorial governments in the West. His government brokered TILMA—the Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement—with Alberta, and is now well-positioned for similar negotiations with Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall. There is little chance that Premier Campbell and his government will retreat behind the mountains, particularly with the Winter Olympics showcase only eight months away. This bodes well for the region and for a more open and efficient regional economy.

Implications for Canada

In the wake of Barack Obama's presidential victory in the United States, and in the midst of a global recession, there is a great deal of speculation about whether Canadian politics will swing to the left or, less likely, to the right. In BC, there was no swing at all as the electorate barely quivered.

As a consequence, it is impossible to read policy directions from the election outcome other than the desire of voters to hold the course and to concentrate on economic management. At the same time, the absence in tough economic times of any significant backlash against climate change and environmental policies is important to note.



Historically, BC has been a maverick province on the Canadian political stage. However, the nature of the times leaves little room for mavericks. If anything, the re-elected Liberal government is firmly lodged in the centre of Canadian politics, and from there is well-positioned to be an influential player in the West and nationally in the years to come. ■



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A dynamic and prosperous West in a strong Canada.

Our Mission

A leading source of strategic insight, conducting and communicating non-partisan economic and public policy research of importance to the four western provinces and all Canadians.

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In 1970, the One Prairie Province Conference was held in Lethbridge, Alberta. Sponsored by the University of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge Herald, the conference received considerable attention from concerned citizens and community leaders. The consensus at the time was that research on the West (including BC and the Canadian North) should be expanded by a new organization. To fill this need, the Canada West Foundation was created under letters patent on December 31, 1970. Since that time, the Canada West Foundation has established itself as one of Canada's premier research institutes. Non-partisan, accessible research and active citizen engagement are hallmarks of the Foundation's past, present and future endeavours. These efforts are rooted in the belief that a strong West makes for a strong Canada.

More information can be found at www.cwf.ca.

Canada *West*
F O U N D A T I O N

Head Office:
#900, 1202 Centre Street SE
Calgary, AB T2G 5A5
Telephone: 403.264.9535

British Columbia Office:
#810, 1050 W. Pender Street
Vancouver, BC V6E 3S7
Telephone: 604.646.4625

Saskatchewan Office:
604 Braeside View
Saskatoon, SK S7V 1A6
Telephone: 306.373.8408

Manitoba Office:
#400, 161 Portage Avenue East
Winnipeg, MB R3B 0Y4
Telephone: 204.947.3958

www.cwf.ca