

AN AMBIVALENT ELECTORATE

A Review of the British Columbia General Election of 1996

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THE BRITISH COLUMBIA PROVINCIAL PARTY system is in a state of transition. The collapse of support for the Social Credit party in October 1991 saw a third of the electorate turn to a previously moribund Liberal party. To no one's surprise, fifty-one New Democrats formed a new government, but, to the astonishment of even the seventeen new Liberal MLAs, the Liberal party became what could be described (not unkindly) as an "accidental" official Opposition. Five years later, the New Democrats have narrowly retained government office, with a loss of twelve seats, and the Liberals are the official Opposition, with thirty-three members in the seventy-five-seat Legislature. The Liberal 41.8 per cent of the total valid vote placed them 2.3 percentage points ahead of the NDP in popular support and may be read as the second stage on the way to a reconfigured two-party system. In the new realignment, the Liberal party would assume the mantle once held by the Social Credit party, and the NDP would again be relegated to its role as a permanent opposition party. It is as if the BC 1975 general election were being played in fast reverse, with Social Credit's old political and economic elites rallying under the label of the BC Liberal party rather than the other way round.

The evolution of British Columbia's party politics is unlikely to be so simple. The closeness of the 1996 election suggests that more significant political forces are under way than may be accounted for by a mere repackaging of party containers, and that any new party realignment may be some way off. The narrow margins in the 1996 electoral victories register the tensions of a continuing dealignment and an unaccustomed air of ambivalence towards the two main parties. Whether ensuing elections eventually result in a vibrant multi-party system or a in return to a two-party system, the 1996 outcome

suggests that a large proportion of BC voters has become unusually cautious in its political preferences and wary about abrupt policy change. Individuals have to make up their minds and choose one candidate, but overall voting patterns may express a collective ambivalence — a wish that things could go more than one way. This ambivalence is not to be confused with indifference or with the demise of policy partisanship. The BC electorate is as politically engaged as ever but seems to be sceptical about its political parties, their leadership, and their intentions. As Grace McCarthy observed, “Voters are far more sophisticated today than they have ever been . . . We have always said people don’t put a government in, they throw a government out, but today we know what we want in a government and we are not confident in any of the options.”¹

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Under the Canadian parliamentary system, provincial governments that wait almost a full five years before facing the electorate are, typically, in distress. The Harcourt-Clark 1991-96 NDP government was the third BC government to delay facing the electorate until after five years of office.² Like the 1928-33 Tolmie and 1986-91 Vander Zalm-Johnston governments, its hesitation reflected a nervous premier faced with the quandary of finding a propitious occasion upon which to call an election. Unlike 1933 and 1991, however, 1996 saw the return of the governing party.

The narrowness of the NDP’s electoral victory was indicative of many of the government’s pre-election difficulties and the discomforts of party dealignment. Premier Glen Clark’s rhetorical exclamation, “Was that close or what?” expressed the sentiments of most British Columbians during election night, 28 May 1996. Unlike Harcourt’s 1991 victory, which prompted his exhilarating call, “Let’s boogie,” Clark’s victory required a more qualified response. The New Democratic Party’s total share of the provincial vote fell from 40.7 to 39.5 per cent, and its representation fell from fifty-one seats (in 1991) to thirty-nine, just six more than the opposition Liberal party led by Gordon Campbell. Minister of Finance Elizabeth Cull and Small Business,

¹ As quoted by Justine Hunter in “The Liberal leader and his party, once far ahead of the NDP, have slipped badly and some wonder if he lacks the necessary magic.” Southam@Canada & CBC News PR, BC Election ’96, 20 April 1996.

² Prior to 1913 the maximum life of the legislative assembly under the BC Constitution Act was four years.

Tourism and Culture Minister Bill Barlee both lost their seats — Cull by 640 votes and Barlee, after a judicial recount, by twenty-seven. Two former Social Credit MLAs, including BC Reform leader Jack Weisgerber, were returned as BC Reform party candidates in the two Peace River districts, and the 1990-93 Liberal party leader Gordon Wilson, leading his own party, the Progressive Democratic Alliance (PDA), was also re-elected.

The 1996 Liberals absorbed much of the old Social Credit vote, and the non-Liberal-New Democrat proportion of the vote shrank from 26 per cent in 1991 to 19 per cent, while the Social Credit vote shrank from 24 per cent to 0.4 per cent. Third-party voting was fragmented among Reform BC, the PDA, the BC Greens, the other nine parties, and the independents (see Table 1).

TABLE I
*Percentage of votes and number of seats
BC general elections 1986, 1991, 1996*

PARTY	1986		1991		1996	
	% VOTE	SEATS	% VOTE	SEATS	% VOTE	SEATS
Liberal	6.7	0	33.3	17	41.8	33
NDP	42.6	22	40.7	51	39.5	39
PDA	0.0	0	0.0	0	5.7	1
Reform BC	0.0	0	0.2	0	9.3	2
Social Credit	49.3	47	24.1	7	0.4	0
Green BC	0.2	0	0.9	0	2.0	0
Other	1.2	0	0.8	0	1.3	0
Total	100.0	69	100.0	75	100.0	75

Source: Calculated from Elections BC, *Reports of the Chief Electoral Officer and Final Count June 14, 1996.*

In the 1991 general election, voters shattered the configuration of parties that defined the post-1952 party system. Support for the Social Credit party, which had governed for thirty-six of the previous thirty-nine years, was halved, the party dropping from forty-seven to seven seats. Previously, the New Democratic party had governed only for the three years, between 1972 and 1975. Though its total vote dropped to 40.7 per cent, under Mike Harcourt it formed a government with 68 per cent of the seats. The provincial Liberal party not only regained seats for the first time since 1979, but it was propelled into the role of official opposition with a third of the total vote and seventeen seats.

The scandal-ridden Social Credit government of Premier Vander Zalm had induced the electorate to break out of the confines of the polarizing two-party mould.

Subsequent Liberal by-election wins in Matsqui and Abbotsford, both traditional Social Credit strongholds, cemented the demise of the Social Credit Party. The Liberals won the February 1994 Matsqui by forty-two votes, but this narrow victory was particularly effective in heading off of a Social Credit renewal, as it denied a seat to long-time Socred matriarch Grace McCarthy. At the same time, the new Liberal leader, Gordon Campbell, entered the Legislature on the strength of his win in the Vancouver-Quilchena by-election. In May 1995, the Abbotsford by-election confirmed that the Liberals could readily absorb much of the old Social Credit base.

Volatility within the electorate was matched by continuing post-election instability within the opposition parties. Difficulties with his own caucus had forced Gordon Wilson to step aside and call a Liberal leadership contest in September 1993, at which time he was trounced by Vancouver Mayor Gordon Campbell.³ Wilson promptly left the party to form the Progressive Democratic Alliance (PDA). Former house leader David Mitchell had already left to sit as an independent, and the party's internal growing pains continued right up the 1996 vote, with the denial of renominations to two sitting Liberal MLAs and the resignation of another at the last legislative session. The Social Credit caucus had languished in third-party status, and in the spring of 1994 Jack Weisgerber and three other Social Credit MLAs joined the Reform Party of British Columbia, giving Reform official party status in the legislative assembly. By the end of the thirty-fifth Parliament, Cliff Serwa was the last remaining Social Credit MLA. The BC provincial Reform party, a renegade predecessor of its federal counterpart, hoped to ride the momentum of the Reform Party of Canada, which captured 36 per cent of the BC vote in the 1993 federal election. On 16 January 1995, Weisgerber was elected leader of Reform BC, with 58 per cent of 2,376 votes, on the first count of a preferential telephone ballot of all Reform members. Over the next two years, he brought Reform BC membership up to 18,000. Meanwhile, a more

³ For an analysis of the dynamics of the Liberal party, see Donald Blake and R.K. Carty, "Partisan Realignment in British Columbia: the Case of the Provincial Liberal Party," *BC Studies* 108 (Winter 1995-96): 61-74. Judy Tyabji, *Political Affairs* (Victoria: Horsdal & Schubart, 1994) provides an insider's account of the ups and downs of Gordon Wilson's relationship with the Liberal party and the subsequent formation of the PDA.

open membership policy brought Liberal membership up from 3,500 to 100,000.⁴

THE 1996 CAMPAIGN: PRELUDE

In a general sense, all election campaigns begin the day after the last election, as each party attempts to move public opinion in its favour. Sometimes, as in the turbulent years following the NDP's first election victory or in the years following the 1983 election and the subsequent Social Credit restraint program, one election campaign runs seamlessly and relentlessly into the next. The dramatic 1991 dealignment of voting patterns and the equally remarkable post-election restructuring of the opposition parties gave some respite to the Harcourt government. It took three years for an election watch and opposition pressure to begin in earnest.

Had a propitious occasion presented itself, the Harcourt government would certainly have gone to the electorate in the spring or fall of 1995. Fortune, however, conspired against it. It is said that the first mistake any premier can make occurs with his or her selection of cabinet colleagues. In April 1995, Minister Robin Blencoe, who had been accused of sexual harassment, was forced to resign, and the Environment Minister Moe Sihota spent May to August out of Cabinet after being censored by the BC Law Society for accepting a loan from a client and denied readmission to the Bar for eighteen months. Election preparations were also derailed by a government-sponsored \$128,000 televised open "town hall" meeting intended to help launch the 1995-96 budget. On this occasion, both the premier and the minister of finance found themselves confronted by a critical studio audience and panel of experts. This TV production also led to questions about \$5 million worth of contracts given to former NDP provincial secretary Hans Brown's Now Communications Company and about payments to a Washington DC consultant. Although Conflict of Interest Commissioner Ted Hugh's investigation into a radio reporter's and Reform party leader Weisgerber's charges of conflict of interest cleared Harcourt of any wrong-doing,⁵ the accusa-

⁴ For an analysis of the evolution of the BC party system between 1986 and 1995, see Norman J. Ruff, "Redefining Party Politics in British Columbia: Party Renewal and Fragmentation," in Hugh Thorburn, ed., *Party Politics in Canada*, 7th edition (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1996), 478-96.

⁵ British Columbia, Office of the Commissioner of Conflict of Interest, Opinion of the Commissioner of Conflict of Interest pursuant to section 15(1) and (1.1) of the Members' Conflict of Interest Act, Victoria, 1995.

tions touched him in a way that was to bear bitter fruit when a major scandal later began to unfold.

It had been known for at least three years that not all was well with the financial activities of the Nanaimo NDP's Nanaimo Commonwealth Holding Society (NCHS).⁶ Court action found four interrelated Nanaimo societies guilty of appropriating charity bingo funds. They were ordered to pay \$150,000 in fines and restitution, but no individuals were charged. In October 1994, the premier met calls for a full public inquiry by appointing forensic auditor Ron Parks to investigate the NCHS. The Parks Report was given to Minister of Finance Cull in June, but, after revealing its contents to a cabinet committee and some party officials, she took the advice of the deputy attorney general and did not release its contents, pending further police investigation and the investigation of the special prosecutor appointed 16 June. The NDP moved into election readiness after the end of the thirty-three day stand-off between Aboriginal protesters and police at Gustafsen Lake in September 1995. However, RCMP raids in connection with the NCHS, commonly referred to as "Bingogate," and the 13 October release of the Parks Report abruptly ended those prospects. The Parks Report revelations regarding the NDP's diversion of charity monies for political purposes, its corporate fund-raising activities, and its financial relationship with the NCHS⁷ brought intense criticism of Harcourt's government — criticism that grew more intense with the premier's reluctance to hold any party officials directly accountable. The criticism seemed further to undermine Harcourt's confidence and will to continue in office, both of which had already been shaken by the earlier accusations of conflict of interest. On 15 November 1995, he announced his intention to resign.

Harcourt's departure gave the NDP an unanticipated opportunity to regroup before facing the voters; this process, however, got off to a remarkably slow start, as most of the leading members of the Harcourt Cabinet declined to participate in a leadership contest. The members of the Cabinet's "gang of five" — Glen Clark, Dan Miller, Andrew Petter, Elizabeth Cull, and Joy MacPhail — who had been attempting to give more focus to the Harcourt government, were unlikely to run against each other. It was not until 9 January that Glen Clark finally emerged as the "establishment" candidate, running against former

⁶ Mark Hume, "Angry Charities cite 'raw deal' on bingo funds," *Vancouver Sun*, 23 May 1992, A9.

⁷ See Ronald H. Parks, *Investigation of the Affairs and Conduct of Nanaimo Commonwealth Society and Related Societies: Report to May 31, 1995* (Vancouver: Linquist, Avey, Macdonald, Baskerville, 1995), section 9.0, "NCHS and the New Democratic Party."

Cabinet colleague Joan Smallwood (who had been fired in October 1995 for publicly criticizing Premier Harcourt), a Thoreau-style Kootenay backbencher named Corky Evans, and two fringe candidates, Donovan Kuehn and Jack Macdonald. Clark's easy first-ballot victory on 18 February (802 out of 1,132 votes) was not just a new beginning for the party leadership, it was also the start of the first phase of the 1996 election campaign.

CAMPAIGN 1996: PHASE ONE

Premier Harcourt had already begun to articulate many of the NDP's main election themes in his attacks on Gordon Campbell early in 1995. His question, "Whose side are the Liberals on?" became the basis for the New Democrats' 1996 "On *Your Side*" electoral platform. Clark aggressively placed his own stamp on the party, asserting the need to protect "working people, the unemployed, women, children and the poor" from Campbell's agenda. The NDP platform asked British Columbians to consider which party would do the best job of protecting medicare and education as well as to consider whether their respective families would benefit from a \$1.1 billion corporate tax break.⁸ Harcourt's former press secretary Andy Orr observed, "The biggest thing he [Clark] has to overcome is to convince the electorate that they haven't made up their mind about this government."⁹

The Liberals lay in wait for the swearing in of Clark's Cabinet on 22 February. At that time they revealed the personal investments of senior BC Hydro executives and other "insiders" in a joint BC Hydro-private power project in Pakistan that involved a Cayman Islands tax haven.¹⁰ Clark's instant firing of the chair and the president of BC Hydro, however, favourably contrasted his new decisive style with that of his predecessor. Following the post-convention Cabinet shuffle and announcement that he would cut the size and cost of government, the new NDP premier instructed his ministers to get out of Victoria. Glen Clark then embarked on a series of daily policy announcements that promised freezes on provincial taxes, on college-university tuition, on BC Hydro rates, and on ICBC auto insurance rates. He also announced funding for health and environmental projects. Though strains in relationships with Ottawa were not subsequently exploited during the

⁸ BC NDP, *On Your Side; New Democratic Party Platform* (Burnaby 1996), 1.

⁹ Quoted in Bridgitte Anderson, "Here for a Good Time . . . But for How Long?" *Equity* 14 (March 1996): 34.

¹⁰ Gary Farrell-Collins, "Notes for a News Conference," 21 February 1996.

election campaign, Clark aggressively entered the debate over federal West Coast fisheries policy by offering a counter-proposal to the Mifflin Plan, a fisheries equivalent of the NDP's Forest Renewal Plan. While Clark captured the media's lead stories from Vancouver, Liberal leader Gordon Campbell engaged in an election-readiness tour of the Interior, passing up an opportunity to take advantage of the chagrined and largely by-passed legislative press gallery. The premier's twenty-minute televised address before the brief fifth session of the NDP-dominated Legislature in the Spring of 1996 was an openly election-orientated "infomercial" that promised a balanced budget and a "tax fairness package." The life of the thirty-fifth Legislature ended abruptly on 30 April on the heels of the introduction of a 1996-97 budget and legislation that prohibited public education- and health-sector strikes during the election period.¹¹ The \$20.6 billion 1996-97 budget promised a balancing of the books for the second year in a row and one-point personal income tax reductions in July 1996 and July 1997.¹²

The NDP had already begun demonizing the Liberal platform as a clone of the neo-conservative platforms of the Klein (Alberta) and Harris (Ontario) governments. For their part, the Liberals began their early campaign by portraying Clark as "Glenocchio," whose wooden nose grew with each allegedly broken promise. Though British Columbians are hardly strangers to partisan conflict, the highly personal focus of this negative attack came to be characterized as an unwelcome form of "Americanization," and was attributed to the influence of US negative-ad specialist, Phil Noble, who worked on the Liberal campaign. The ad was discontinued as the twenty-eight-day campaign progressed.

From the outset, the leadership-centred Liberal and NDP campaigns were exercises in the art of political communication, and they were mediated through the 6:00 pm BCTV television news. Strategists for both parties seemed intent on avoiding the pitfalls of the 1991 Social Credit campaign and were sensitive to the need to court favourable (or at least incident-free) media coverage. Both Clark's and Campbell's campaign media bus tours emphasized photo opportunities and rallies that were confined to bring-your-own-crowd audiences of party workers. Portable podiums were adorned with campaign slogans ("On

¹¹ Bill 21: Education and Health Collective Bargaining Assistance Act. It was the only one of seven government bills to advance beyond first reading and receive royal assent in the five day 5th Session, 35th Parliament.

¹² British Columbia, Ministry of Finance, '96 *Budget Speech*, Victoria, 30 April 1996.

Your Side” and the more ambiguous “You Deserve Better”) geared specifically to the television cameras. These adornments reminded any live listeners that the real target audience was the evening’s 600,000 television viewers.

The election was held under a substantially revised Elections Act, which improved access to the ballot box. It also imposed new reporting requirements and controversial restrictions on “third-party” expenditures (i.e., it put a ceiling of \$5,000 on non-party organizations and/or members).¹³ These restrictions were challenged by the National Citizen’s Coalition, which ran a series of “Radio and Television Free BC” advertisements on Bellingham (Washington) stations and established a “Cyber Resistance” web site.¹⁴ The BC Fisheries Survival Coalition also set up a web site to conduct its campaign against the government treaty with the Nisga’a.

The new act did not have an adverse impact on the voter’s range of choices, as the number of nominated candidates increased from 317 in 1991 to 517. Liberals, New Democrats, and Reformers each ran a full slate of seventy-five candidates, the BC Greens ran seventy-one, and the Progressive Democratic Alliance ran sixty-six. The Natural Law Party ran thirty-eight candidates, the same number as Social Credit; but Social Credit leader Larry Gillanders and three of his fellow candidates subsequently withdrew.¹⁵

In the first seventy days of the 1996 campaign, from its leadership change through the dissolution of the Legislature to 9 May (the date of the release of the Liberal Party’s “infomercial” and tax plan), the NDP underwent an astonishing renewal. Some of the party’s improvement in public standing may be attributed to Glen Clark’s active approach to governing, and some to his success in diverting attention towards the Liberal platform and away from the NDP record.¹⁶ Harcourt’s departure seemed to have exorcised the NCHS ghost and, with it, the taint of political corruption. A previous Liberal party lead of twenty or more points evaporated. And Reform BC was soon to find itself handicapped by turmoil in the federal Reform party caucus — turmoil that led to the disciplining of MPs Bob Ringma and David

¹³ Election Act, 1996, Section 236. As the chief electoral officer reminded the media in a 13 May 1996 memo, those conducting advertising in violation of the act were themselves liable to prosecution, as were their sponsors; hence, the NCC cross-border campaign.

¹⁴ www.freenet.calgary.ab.ca/populati/communit/ncc/ncitizen.html

¹⁵ One of whom later unsuccessfully attempted to withdraw the withdrawal.

¹⁶ This was particularly evident in two radio leadership debates broadcast on the Vancouver station CKNW, during which Gordon Campbell seemed to be the prime target of the other leaders.

Chatters for racist and homophobic remarks and the resignation of Calgary MP Jan Brown. Reform BC had expected to ride a federal wave, but, unfortunately for it, the tide had started to go out.

CAMPAIGN 1996: PHASE TWO

The sense that the campaign was being dominated by the NDP came to an end on 9 May, ten days after the election call, with the first BCtv showing of the Liberal party's thirty-minute television "infomercial." This ad attempted to soften Gordon Campbell's personal image and to blunt the hard policy edge of the Liberal "Courage-to-Change" platform. Character references provided by his family and supporters, and Campbell's own Bob Roberts'-style performance on guitar while singing a satirical composition ("Give me your money, I'm the Tax Man, call me Glen"), accompanied the release of a comprehensive sixty-six-page economic policy statement, "The Taxpayer's Plan." The plan promised protection for health care, education, and public safety with an average funding increase of 13 per cent over four years, while carrying out a two-stage 15 per cent reduction in personal income tax. The party's commitment to a \$3 billion reduction in the government's share of the economy was redefined as a \$1.4 billion cut in spending, with the other \$1.6 billion to be derived through economic growth. Direct provincial government debt was to be paid down by \$2.3 billion over four years. This redefinition of Liberal intentions effectively repositioned the party and posed a troublesome combination for its opponents. Meanwhile, it seemed as though the opening success of Clark's strategies had put the New Democrats on automatic pilot, rendering them unable to chart a fresh mid-campaign course. Then came the much-anticipated televised leaders debate on 16 May.

Since the 1960 US presidential debates between Nixon and Kennedy, televised debates among party leaders have acquired a reputation for providing the defining moments of many campaigns. British Columbians needed no reminder of this, since the 1991 Harcourt-Johnston-Wilson debate played a major role in legitimizing Gordon Wilson's Liberal party, making it an attractive alternative to Social Credit and the NDP. Wilson's 1991 performance unquestionably propelled the Liberals into official Opposition party status. Two days after 8 October 1991, Social Credit tracking of public opinion showed a jump in Liberal support from 15-20 per cent to 30 per cent.¹⁷ It was

¹⁷ "Leaders' Debate Could Be Pivotal," *Election Pollster* 10 (15 April 1996): 4-5.

unlikely that this feat could have been repeated in 1996, but, given the closeness of the 1996 Liberal-NDP standings, any small gain or loss during the debate could have provided a decisive tilt in public opinion. As it turned out, each leader showed some vulnerability. Campbell gave a hesitant response when his commitment to women's programs and post-secondary education funding was questioned, and Clark was pushed hard on financial management. Of the other three party leaders, who were included in the debate by virtue of holding seats in the previous Legislature, Weisgerber was questioned about controversial Reform party policies on Aboriginal rights and government cut-backs, while Social Credit leader Gillanders nervously floundered during his prepared statements. Gordon Wilson's debating skills again held him in good stead, but his comment on the reduction of the debate to personal squabbling, "This is just like 1991 all over again," might now be taken to be just as applicable to him as to anyone else. The debate drew the attention of just a third of the electorate (particularly former Social Credit voters) and retained only 40 per cent of its audience for the whole ninety minutes. In an Angus Reid poll conducted late in the campaign, 25 per cent said that Wilson had performed best, 21 gave the nod to Campbell, and 17 per cent to Clark. Weisgerber trailed, with 10 per cent rating his performance best; Gillanders garnered a token 1 per cent; and the category "None" took 19 per cent.¹⁸ All party strategists could take comfort in the fact that none of the leaders appeared to be *the* loser, but the *Vancouver Sun* headline, "The Great Deflate," fit the outcome.¹⁹

CAMPAIGN 1996: PHASE THREE

The third and final phase in the last week of campaigning was defined by the Liberal focus on the message: "A vote for anyone but a Liberal is a vote for the NDP."²⁰ This followed hard on the success of the Taxpayer Plan, which, while vulnerable in some details, matched attractive promises of debt reduction and tax cuts with a commitment to protect education and health services. The NDP campaign appeared stalled and unable to match the Liberal mid-campaign makeover with any fresh messages. It was also evident that Reform BC had been able

¹⁸ Angus Reid Group (Vancouver), BCTV/Vancouver Sun: *B.C. Election Study #3*, Leaders (06-1016-13) 23 May 1996, 4.

¹⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 17 May 1996, A1.

²⁰ For an example of a public statement of this theme, see BC Liberal Party News Release, "Campbell Says a Vote for BC Reform Will Re-elect the NDP," 100 Mile House, 18 May 1996.

to garner neither the resources nor the organizational base to which it had aspired. Outside of the Northern Interior, over two-thirds of the old Social Credit machine had already gone over to the Liberal party.²¹ However, one of the most bizarre series of events in recent electoral history reduced the Liberal momentum and enhanced the NDP and the Reform party's end-game.

As the last week of the campaign began, Social Credit leader Larry Gillanders announced that he had discussed with senior Liberal officials the prospect of withdrawing twenty Social Credit candidates if the Liberals would withdraw from the West Vancouver-Capilano district where he was running. Since Liberal Jeremy Dalton had won that seat in 1991 with 57 per cent of the vote, and since there was no indication of anything but a trivial Social Credit showing anywhere in the province, this seemed a dubious bargain. It is hard to imagine why senior Liberal strategist Greg Lyle met with Social Credit strategists, or why Liberal fundraiser Marty Zlotnik met with Social Credit past president Ben Hume. In any case, as various aspects of this story unfolded, the last four days of campaigning were permeated with the whiff of backroom deals. Those who accepted the logic of the Liberal admonition not to split the vote were probably not distracted by this episode; others, however, probably hardened their intentions not to move to the Liberals, having had their suspicions of old-style party corruption (and, for Northerners in particular, of crooked Lower Mainland politics) confirmed. Gillanders resigned as Social Credit leader on 24 May and urged other candidates to follow his example and withdraw in order to allow voters to opt for the free-enterprise candidate best able to defeat the NDP. Ordinarily, this episode would have been of minor passing significance. In the circumstances, however, this last-minute disruption of the closely scripted 1996 campaign, with a quarter of the voters still undecided, was of some consequence. It added a fresh dimension (and even some mystery) to the election, and give a late boost to Reform and New Democrat activists by confirming their view of the "real" world of BC politics. And so the campaign drew to a close.

²¹ Jack Weisgerber acknowledged in an election post mortem that Reform BC had been handicapped by a lack of resources and the one million dollars considered necessary for an effective province-wide campaign. The Liberals could afford to televise their hour-long infomercial three times, but, unlike Gordon Wilson, Weisgerber did not think it worthwhile to match it by "cobbling together" the funds for a close-of-election infomercial of his own. (Interview with Kim Emerson, Rogers Community Channel, *Voice of the Province*, 26 June 1996).

ISSUES AND LEADERS

The Liberal party was the first to set out its own policy agenda when it refined the platform "The Courage to Change" (first used in the Abbotsford by-election), setting out a policy mix of concern for mounting government debt together with Reform-style institutional reforms. This was distilled into a nine-point "Pledge" that was signed by each candidate. The Reform campaign similarly centred on a ten-point "Voters' Warranty," which would oblige a Reform government to "act honourably" in upholding its election promises during its first term in office. The NDP campaign was tightly focused on an elaboration of the "On *Your Side*" theme. Glen Clark scoffed at the warranties as political gimmickry, but, as the campaign progressed, he was drawn into at least an ad hoc promise to resign if he did not deliver on his budgeted tax reduction.²² Gordon Wilson's PDA platform "Blueprint in Brief" began with an emphasis on tax relief and was enlarged upon in his book, *A Civilized Revolution*.²³ The Greens were alone in giving priority to environmental issues, which, outside of concern for the fishery, were otherwise sidelined until the last week of the campaign.²⁴

The 1996 election campaign was unusual in that it made the Opposition platform, rather than government performance, the main target for debate. The early NDP lead in the polls appeared to rest, in part, on the government's successfully characterizing the Liberal party as being intent on instituting draconian debt-reduction measures along with tax concessions for the privileged. In the second phase of the campaign, the Liberal Taxpayer Plan broke this characterization and defined a specific budget-balancing plan within a wider social agenda. Some portions of its platform, however, remained problematic. Opponents exploited the ambiguity surrounding the Liberal plan's commitment to post-secondary education, the possible impact of privatizing BC Rail, and the implication of reducing the number of MLAs (this raised special concerns in the Northern Interior).

²² Jack Weisgerber told supporters, "In short we are prepared to put our election promises on the line and sign them in blood." *Reform BC Release*, 1 May 1996. All evidently wanted to forget Niccolò Machiavelli's precepts regarding princes keeping their word: "Since men would not keep a pledge to him, the wise prince need not keep his own to them where it goes against his interest or when circumstances had changed." (*The Prince*, chap. 18) Nineteen ninety-six Victoria was a long way from 1513 Florence.

²³ Gordon Wilson, *A Civilized Revolution* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 1996).

²⁴ This was due, in part, to the controversy surrounding BC Hydro's draining of the 30-kilometre Downton Lake north of Whistler.

All opinion surveys identified a consistent ranking of important issues in the minds of the electorate. The McIntyre & Mustel 22-23 May poll for the *Globe and Mail*, for example, showed that 40 per cent of respondents identified Government Spending/Debt/Taxes as the most important issue, 30 per cent identified Education, and 28 per cent identified Health Care. Unemployment placed fourth, with 19 per cent identifying it as being among the most important issues. There was general agreement among all party supporters as to what constituted the top four issues, but particular selections varied according to voting intention. For example, an overwhelming proportion of Liberals (60 per cent) identified Government Spending/Debt/Taxes as the most important issue, while few Reformers (20 per cent) selected either Education or Health Care. In contrast, almost equal proportions of New Democrats chose the top three (33 per cent chose Government Spending, 31 per cent chose Health Care, and 39 per cent chose Education). Reform choices were distinguished by greater attention to Integrity, Credibility, Honesty in Government and Politics (34.5 per cent) and to Native Land Claims (13 per cent) than were those of other parties. Only 9 per cent of NDP and Liberal respondents chose Integrity as a most important issue, and only 5 per cent chose Land Claims. It is moot whether policy issue concerns were driving party voting intentions or vice versa, but, whichever was the dependent factor, their interaction produced distinctive party mixes.

The substantial proportion (22 per cent) of voters that was undecided or intended not to vote was close to the NDP voters' configuration regarding important issues and closer still to the issue profile of the whole sample.²⁵ Typical in all other respects, the undecided registered persistent ambivalence about the choice they were being asked to make on 28 May. The poll also showed little voter confidence that either Clark or Campbell would keep campaign promises. Almost 60 per cent thought Clark would not deliver, and 56 per cent thought the same of Campbell. Still more remarkable, nearly a third of both NDP and Liberal supporters applied this cynical view to the leader of their own party. Two-thirds of the respondents looked for more accountability and agreed that leaders should resign if they broke key promises.²⁶

Party leadership is always a dominant focus in any election campaign. The marked contrasts in the backgrounds and personalities of

²⁵ McIntyre & Mustel Research, *Study #1M0906*, 22-23 May 1996, 1-2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-2. Reformers were particularly adamant, with 84 per cent supporting resignation.

the provincial party leaders made the 1996 election no exception (not to mention media coverage of such inevitable trivialities as Gordon Campbell's appearance in a plaid shirt). Clark was credited with invigorating his party and Campbell was regarded as being a far less persuasive communicator than his NDP counterpart. Public opinion polling confirms that Clark was more popular than Campbell (32 per cent picked Clark as the best premier, 25 per cent picked Campbell). However, all of the leaders, with the exception of Gordon Wilson, had less support than did their parties. Eighteen per cent of the electorate had no preference or did not know who would make the best premier, and many decided voters had reservations about their own party leaders. The overwhelming proportion of NDPers showed a very high preference for Clark (79 per cent), but just 54 per cent of Reformers thought Weisgerber would make the best premier. Almost two-thirds of the Liberals identified Gordon Campbell as the best premier, and nearly 20 per cent identified their ex-leader Gordon Wilson.²⁷ The standing of the two main party leaders changed little during the campaign. Wilson's support increased, while Weisgerber's declined.²⁸ Any positive Glen Clark "effect" had occurred prior to the election call.

THE ELECTION OUTCOME AND PARTY COMPETITION

The thirty-sixth Legislature has thirty-two new members and, although the number of women members only increased from nineteen to twenty, has become more pluralistic, with eighteen members coming from BC's minority ethnic groups (including British Columbia's first two Chinese MLAs). The overall closeness of the total vote for the two main parties was consistent throughout the province. As is shown in Table 2, the first-past-the-post system, with multi-party competition, allowed eight seats to be won by candidates who took 35 to 39 per cent of the vote, while quasi-two-party competition eliminated fifteen candidates who took 40 to 44 per cent of the vote. Ten Liberals, compared to just four New Democrats, captured a safe (more than 55 per cent) share of the vote. The four narrowest NDP wins occurred with margins of just 322, 511, 527, and 635 votes. The loss of fewer than 1,000 NDP voters to the Liberals across these four districts would have defeated the Clark government.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4-2.

²⁸ Compare above with McIntyre & Mustel Research, *Study #M0906*, 30 April and 1 May 1996, 4-2.

TABLE 2
Liberal and NDP proportions of the vote by district

PROPORTION OF VOTE	NUMBER OF DISTRICTS			
	NDP LOSS	LIBERAL LOSS	NDP WIN	LIBERAL WIN
under 25%	6	2	—	—
25-29	9	4	—	—
30-34	8	12	—	—
35-39	7	15	2	6
40-44	6	9	9	4
45-49	—	—	13	10
50-54	—	—	11	3
55-59	—	—	1	7
60-64	—	—	2	1
65 plus	—	—	1	2
Total	36	42	39	33

Source: Calculated from Elections BC, *Reports of the Chief Electoral Officer and Final Count June 14, 1996*.

The marked disparity between share of votes and share of seats was due not just to first-past-the-post rules but also to an outdated electoral map based upon 1986 census data. Uneven regional growth increased disparities in the number of voters represented by each MLA, and electoral victories in some ridings added far more votes to a party total than did victories in others. A win in Okanagan West, with 45,468 registered voters as of 14 May 1996, for example, added 15,575 votes to the Liberal total, while a win in Cariboo North, with 18,410 registered voters, added 5,533. Many such disparities can be justified by the need to provide effective community representation, but an updating of the electoral boundaries would seem to be overdue.

The 1996 election revealed distinctive regional voting patterns, with the Vancouver Island districts, for example, giving 47 per cent of their vote to the NDP, while the Delta-Richmond districts gave 54 per cent to the Liberals (see Table 3). The combined ten Vancouver city districts were more evenly divided, with 45 per cent of the vote going Liberal and 44 per cent going NDP (with a pronounced East-West polarization). Reform also showed a distinctive regional base, retaining its two Peace River ridings and maintaining relative strength in other parts of the Interior.

TABLE 3
Regional voting patterns: percent of regional vote by party

REGION	LIBERAL	NDP	REFORM	PDA
PER CENT OF REGIONAL VOTE				
Vancouver Island	38	47	7	5
Vancouver City	45	45	2	4
Delta-Richmond	54	32	4	6
South Fraser	45	33	5	6
North Fraser	41	46	6	6
North Shore	48	32	5	11
Thompson-Okanagan	41	33	14	9
Kootenays	34	41	18	2
North	35	42	18	3
Peace	30	25	40	2
Total	42	40	9	6

Source: Calculated from Elections BC, *Reports of the Chief Electoral Officer and Final Count June 14, 1996*.

The regional bases of the parties become yet more apparent if the share of the vote from each region is compared with the total number of voters in that region (see Table 4). The NDP had disproportionately more voters from Vancouver Island and fewer from the Okanagan. Reform was highly regionalized, with pronounced Interior and Fraser River South concentrations. The Liberal party had the least regional variation in its vote. This could give it an important advantage in its attempt to build a provincial base, but, as it learned on 28 May, the electoral system often gives an edge to regional concentrations.

The election revived the old argument about splitting the "free-enterprise" vote: if Reformers had voted Liberal the result would have been a fifty-four seat Liberal majority government, a twenty-plus-seat NDP Opposition, and one lone PDA member. However, there has never been a monolithic free-enterprise vote in British Columbia. CCF-NDP representation has peaked whenever there has been a strong third-party presence (i.e., in 1941, 1952, 1972, and 1991), and in 1972 and 1991 this helped to propel the NDP into office. This link did not hold, however, in 1963, when the NDP share of seats declined, or in 1979, when it increased. In the first instance, there had been an attempted Conservative revival, and, in the other, Liberal collapse. Much also depends on where the governing party and official Opposition garner their votes.

TABLE 4
Regional voting patterns: per cent of party vote by region

REGION	TOTAL VOTES	LIBERAL VOTES	NDP VOTES	REFORM VOTES	PDA VOTES
Vancouver Island	20	18	24	15	16
Vancouver City	13	14	15	3	9
Delta-Richmond	6	8	5	3	6
South Fraser	15	16	13	19	13
North Fraser	11	10	12	6	11
North Shore	10	11	8	6	20
Thompson-Okanagan	12	11	9	18	18
Kootenays	6	5	6	11	3
North	7	6	7	13	4
Peace	1	1	1	6	
Total		100	100	100	100

Source: Calculated from Elections BC, *Reports of the Chief Electoral Officer and Final Count June 14, 1996*.

In 1996 some of the Reform vote was rooted in suspicions about the Liberal party's free enterprise credentials, and both Reform and PDA votes, as much as NDP votes, can be characterized as a rejection of the Liberals. When pollsters asked voters to identify a second choice, the Reform party was the main beneficiary, capturing 51 per cent of Liberal and 13 per cent of NDP second preferences. This support was strongly reciprocated by Reformers, with 57 per cent going to the Liberals and just 8 per cent to the New Democrats. The NDP vote would have scattered more widely: 29 per cent to the Liberals, 13 per cent to Reform, 12 per cent to the PDA, and 11 per cent to the Greens.²⁹

Arithmetical games with electoral statistics and "majority party" reasoning may continue for as long as people see the NDP as a socialist bogeyman that must be kept out of office at all costs. If the above reading of the current ambivalent mood of the electorate has any validity, such stratagems may not win anyone many new converts. Complex demographic and economic changes over the next decade will make the BC party system more dependent on policy responsiveness than on rudimentary negativism.

The configuration of the old party system now being left behind took shape relatively quickly. In the early 1950s, optimism about the

²⁹ Angus Reid Group-Vancouver, *End of Campaign Poll: 06-1016-13*, 23 May 1996, 48.

prospects of a renewed provincial economy was overshadowed by an erosion of trust in the province's warring political elite. From the mid-1950s on, W.A.C. Bennett exploited both sentiments to build a political system dominated by Social Credit and bolstered by negative voting against the possibility of a CCF-NDP government. Seven successive Social Credit election victories identified a one party dominant system. The formula faltered in 1972, and after 1975 a genuine two party system emerged. The unravelling of that system in the 1990s has become a more protracted affair. Thus far, the Liberal party has out manoeuvred the BC Reform Party to capture much of the Social Credit vote. Having contained the decline in its own vote, the NDP continues in government. But the character of both parties has changed. Moderate liberal voices from the political centre seem muted and the left claims W.A.C. Bennett for itself. The 1996 election may have offered relatively clear policy choices among the parties but none achieved the blend of social, economic and financial priorities that might have marked a definitive political realignment. Until that occurs, the electorate is likely to remain ambivalent and the provincial political system unstable.