

AMBIVALENT ALLIES:

Social Democratic Regimes and Social Movements

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INTRODUCTION

A SOCIAL MOVEMENT IS COMMONLY DEFINED as a relatively durable, extra-parliamentary ensemble of groups that seeks “to transform the values and institutions of society” (Smith 2005, 12). Certainly, British Columbia has had its fair share of such collective actors – whether in the field of environmental, Aboriginal, labour, or gender politics – and its culture, politics, and economy have been shaped, and reshaped, by the ongoing contestations among movements, the state, and the business community. In this article, we focus on one major aspect of the social movements research that we have conducted in the Lower Mainland area of Vancouver, British Columbia, since the 1980s: the relationship between social movements and the New Democratic Party (NDP), the province’s social democratic party. In reflecting on the dynamics of that relationship across a quarter of a century, we also consider the implications for social democrats and movement activists in British Columbia today.

Our research spans the period from 1983 to 2007. From a social movements perspective, this era begins with the union/community-based Solidarity Coalition that rose against the first wide-ranging neoliberal political program in Canada,¹ introduced by the Social Credit government in 1983. It continues through the decade of NDP governance (1991–2001), during which time the relations between movements and

¹ By “neoliberal” we mean the political paradigm, exemplified in the late 1970s by Thatcherism, that “emphasizes market mechanisms and individual rather than collective approaches to solving or handling economic or social problems,” thus restricting the scope of “politics” and expanding the reign of the market (McBride 2001, 14). See Magnusson et al. (1984) for a collection of analyses of the Social Credit “restraint program” of 1983 and the popular opposition to it.

party became increasingly ambivalent. It concludes in a time of renewed government attempts, under the mantle of the Liberal Party of British Columbia, to curb the power of the labour movement and to assemble a network of allies (including, potentially, some movement groups) around its market-centred social vision.²

As Howard Becker (1967) asserted four decades ago, all social science proceeds from specific locations and standpoints in the world: there is no God's-eye view of humanity. The standpoint we take up here is that of social activists, many of whom we have interviewed at length, who are critical of the inequities of contemporary society and who are committed to a politics of democratization, equity, and ecological health.³ This standpoint differs from the perspective of pro-capitalist think tanks such as the Fraser Institute, which take for granted the dominance of private capital in human affairs and view society largely through the lens of private business. Our standpoint enables us to see the political realities of British Columbia as emergent, contingent, and shaped significantly by struggles among movements, parties, business interests, and other groups. To take up the standpoint of social movement activists is not to become a mouthpiece or unreserved partisan for them; on the contrary, it can entail trenchant critiques, some of which we develop below. If Becker was right, the view of political contention that we get from taking a movement standpoint can enrich our understanding of contemporary British Columbia and of the challenges facing those actors in civil society who advocate social change.

In examining the struggles that both linked and divided various social movements, we seek to clarify the difficulties faced by a social democratic regime attempting to fulfill a mandate for reform amidst competing social movement demands and the pervasive effects of economic globalization. We draw upon Antonio Gramsci's (1971) problematic of "hegemony" to elucidate relations between state and civil society over this politically volatile period. Our account of the tenuous relations between social movements and the state in neoliberal times concludes with recommendations for achieving greater strategic coherence among

² Discussion of the three series of events referred to in this article is synoptic and focuses on developing strains in the movement-party relation. For more descriptive details of the first two periods, see Carroll and Ratner (1989) (re Solidarity Coalition) and Carroll and Ratner (2005) (re NDP decade in power). We wish to thank the hundreds of government, trade union, and community people who granted interviews over the twenty-two-year span of our field research.

³ For a contemporary discussion of standpoints and sociological methodology, see Frampton et al. (2006).

social movement activists and for restoring the faded vitality of social democratic politics.

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was a political theorist and social activist who participated in and reflected on the tumultuous transitions that brought both corporate capitalism and a fascist state to Italy in the first decades of the twentieth century. As a political theorist, Gramsci's key achievement was to offer a mode of analysis that rejected economic-determinist versions of Marxism but retained the insight that capitalist societies are historical formations deeply structured by class relations that also provide bases for fundamental change. For Gramsci, the analytical imperative to transcend economic determinism was fuelled by a practical need for subordinate groups and movements to move beyond a narrow, defensive understanding of their immediate interests, to create their own *hegemonic* conception of the "general interest," capable of guiding a transformative politics. Gramsci famously emphasized the growing importance of civil society as a site distinct from both state and capitalist production, upon which an expanding array of social and political identities are forged and social movements organized – a site for political mobilization and coalition formation (Urry 1981). With this in mind, he developed the concept of *historic bloc* to indicate the way in which a class "combines the leadership of a bloc of social forces in civil society with its leadership in the sphere of production" (Simon 1982, 86). A successful historic bloc enables a dominant group to secure the consent of aligned groups by means of a relatively durable network of alliances reaching into civil society, which are sustained via material and symbolic concessions that are often state-mediated.

Gramsci likened the cultural power of the bourgeoisie in the West to a formidable system of earthworks and trenches, obliging the left to construct its own, alternative historic bloc, an alliance of progressive social movements, including the labour movement, united not by momentarily converging interests but by a shared social vision of a world beyond capitalism. It is precisely in this sense that hegemony can be understood to cut both ways. It signifies not only the *organization of consent* – the practices and forms in which loyalty to bourgeois leadership in economics, politics, and culture is secured – but also the possibility of *organizing dissent* (Carroll 1997) and, ultimately, of constructing a counter-hegemonic bloc around labour and its allies in other social movements and cultural currents that is capable of effecting socio-political change.

The temporal context for our research has been an era in which the historic bloc that had organized consent during the post-Second World War boom visibly dissolved in a protracted crisis of accumulation that narrowed the scope for the expansive, state-mediated concessions that had been integral to that boom. During the boom, a distinctive “class compromise” had been struck between capital and labour, according to which both sides reaped the benefits of mass production for mass consumption. Within this Fordist historic bloc, high-wage, unionized workers became (at least to a point) integral constituents of capitalist accumulation as their ever-increasing demand for consumer goods provided the markets for industry. Concomitantly, the Keynesian welfare state served to stabilize and prolong the economic expansion by progressively redistributing income and boosting aggregate demand in recessionary periods (Teepie 2000). Although the concept of social democratization can be usefully extended to include “the deepening of democratization” – understood as “both the further spread of rights downwards and as the progressive decolonization of social and cultural spheres by the economic one” (Mouzelis 2001, 454) – the conventional meaning of social democracy aligns it closely with the Fordist-Keynesian paradigm of class compromise that flourished during the postwar boom (Przeworski 1985).

As global capitalism evolved in the 1970s, however, the structural premises for class compromise were undercut. Increasingly internationalized circuits of investment and trade severed the close relation between domestic mass production and mass consumption and intensified international competition. Within the new international division of labour, high wages won through collective bargaining were seen not as moments in a virtuous cycle of demand-led growth but as fetters upon the supply-side investment that fuels globally competitive enterprise (Przeworski 1985; Teepie 2000). By the same logic, high-wage, unionized workforces were threatened by capital’s enhanced structural power to locate in zones offering the post-Fordist combination of low wages, no unions, and high productivity (Gill and Law 1989).

Throughout the capitalist democracies, a so-called “lean state” displaced the comparatively beneficent welfare state, stripping it of many of its social provisions and preparing the workforce for capitalist-imposed austerity and privatization. The hegemonic project of the new right – neoliberalism – dramatically undermined the reforms won by labour and social democratic parties during the postwar boom and dissolved much of the Fordist-Keynesian bloc in favour of an alliance of

“possessive individuals” (McPherson 1962) pursuing personal affluence within deregulated markets.

Against this new institutional framework, the social democratic left failed to conceive new political alternatives, thereby defaulting to the social movements,⁴ who became the new collective actors that set the agenda and mobilized support for social change. As Howlett (1989, 41) states, “Social movements have become a new locus for political activity ... This is at least in part because of the failure of revolutionary, as well as reformist, left-wing parties and regimes, and the crisis of social democracy in all parts of the world.” The new social movements (NSMs) that evolved in the 1980s offered the promise of a new, creative kind of decentralized politics that might also rebuild the left from the grassroots. Occupying an intermediate zone between parliamentary process and an autonomous “culture of resistance,” they exposed the timidity of the parliamentary left. The influence of these movements, however, has been sharply limited by sectoral fragmentation. As a result, despite articulate critiques of the capitalist system, they have largely failed to overcome the power of the corporate sector. The familiar postwar adaptation of labour and social democratic parties to agreements circumscribed within the parameters of Fordist class compromise left scant space for developing a new hegemonic project based on convergent sectoral interests. Thus, the new social movements that arose in the 1970s and 1980s were, as Lafontaine (1992, 23) notes regarding Europe’s NSMs, “profoundly anti-institutional and impregnated with a deep distrust of the capacity of institutionalized politics to solve real problems.” Consequently, the social movements of that period eschewed dominant political organizations, adopting the “grassroots” model as more responsive to particular constituencies than were political parties. Although the NSMs “proved that mobilization was still possible and that reforms were still winnable” (Panitch 2001, 5), there was a continuing dearth of new political institutions on the left that might broaden the possibilities for self-determination and economic democracy. Nevertheless, the active constituency for social democratization plainly encompassed the labour left, the new social movements, and progressive state actors; however, the question was how to hold such a diverse coalition together in a long-term reassembling of the political left, if only to promote social democratization as a project embedded within an advanced capitalist

⁴ Among these, primarily the environmental, women’s, Aboriginal, and anti-poverty movements as well as the disability and gay/lesbian movements. The labour movement largely persisted in its role as an ally of the established political left.

system. We examine some of the difficulties hampering realization of that objective against the background of two distinct trajectories of events that precipitated and furthered the province's drift into the ideological vortex of neoliberalism.

POST-KEYNESIAN PROGRAMMATICS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

The first historical conjuncture to which we refer recalls the 1983-84 Solidarity Coalition – a defensive mobilization of labour and social movement groups assembled in response to a series of bills introduced by William Bennett's Social Credit government; the bill attacked long-standing collective labour rights and initiated a considerable dismantling of the welfare state.⁵ The Bennett government brought forward a Thatcherite program of deficit reduction through austerity, the withdrawal of trade union rights for state employees, and the weakening of safeguards for human rights. The austerity program signalled an abandonment of the project of class compromise and social reform, providing a conjunctural basis of unity between organized labour and a wide array of popular-democratic forces that included the radical left and NSMs.

Particularly in British Columbia, the extraverted pattern of accumulation via the export-oriented resource sector provided a precarious basis for the politics of class compromise. The worldwide recession that began in 1982 hit British Columbia especially hard, as the collapse of world demand for resource products combined with labour-shedding transformations at the point of production to produce unemployment levels above 15 percent. Although social democratic economists argued that the solution to the crisis lay in Keynesian stimulation of effective demand (Allen and Rosenbluth 1986), for the Bennett government the exigencies of fiscal crisis in 1982-83 furnished the pretext for a phased abandonment of Keynesian-style economic management, including its material concessions to lower-income and working-class citizens.

The upshot of this rejection of the postwar historic bloc was unprecedented mass protest. The impact of the government's package of twenty-six bills galvanized a tactical unity between organized labour and a host of popular-democratic forces that included the radical left and the NSMs. A broad alliance of organized labour and community

⁵ On 7 July 1983, a newly elected Social Credit government introduced a budget and a package of twenty-six bills, which, "in one devastating blow ... sought to liberate capital from the fetters of the post-war settlement" (Palmer 1987, 23).

grassroots groups was assembled under the banner of the Solidarity Coalition; however, despite a series of escalating strikes, the coalition collapsed when its core labour groups, led by Jack Munro (International Woodworkers Association, regional vice-president) accepted a settlement (the infamous “Kelowna Accord”) that met most of their own demands for job security but set aside the social and human rights agendas of the various community groups.⁶ In the absence of open debate over the Solidarity Coalition’s strategic objectives, the stage was set for the opportunistic prioritization of demands.

Thus, the 1983 Solidarity Coalition, although it began auspiciously by allying the social proletariat of state employees with the clientele of the Keynesian Welfare State as well as with the radical left and NSMs, and although it carried the hope of a counter-hegemonic politics, proved to be little more than a defensive mobilization that was betrayed by the tactical goal of its core constituent – labour – which sought to preserve remnants of a Fordist historic bloc that had already been disavowed by capital. During this period of strife, the NDP parliamentary opposition tried to give the extra-parliamentary opposition more time to push for withdrawal of the legislation by filibustering a “dirty dozen” of the twenty-six bills, but the government showed no sign of compromise. What was most conspicuous about the demeanor of NDP opposition members throughout the 1983 legislative offensive was their desire to appear circumspect and to avoid being clearly identified with extra-parliamentary actions and with radical trade union or grassroots politics, presumably in the vain hope that Sacred excesses would broaden the NDP’s electoral base.⁷ The NDP’s traditional ally – organized labour – was also concerned about electoral proprieties and, at the height of the protest campaign, refused to order a general strike, fearing that to do so would hurt the NDP should the Solidarity Coalition run its own political candidates in the upcoming election or should the NDP become associated in popular consciousness with an “unruly” labour movement. A craven labour leadership that had “failed the test of class struggle” (as many observers and participants remarked) was seen as the chief reason why the Solidarity Coalition “ultimately proved impotent when confronted with the forces and resources of the capitalist order” (Palmer 1987, 103). The state succeeded in exploiting the vulnerabilities of the

⁶ The Kelowna Accord restored provincial government workers’ seniority rights and their right to negotiate working conditions, but it consigned tenants’ and human rights to hesitant (and ultimately unsuccessful) processes of consultation.

⁷ That strategy backfired as the NDP was resoundingly defeated in the 1986 provincial election, which resulted in a lowering of public consciousness and willingness to mobilize.

Solidarity Coalition, granting reprieves from the most odious measures affecting labour but ignoring most of the legislative grievances expressed by the NSMs.

In essence, the 1983 Solidarity Coalition campaign illustrates the problem of alliance-building on the left in the absence of a counter-hegemonic principle. The liberal, social democratic, and radical constituencies of the coalition were united only in their shared resistance to the neoliberal project. The decision to create as broad a popular opposition as possible, while neglecting to prioritize issues around a counter-hegemonic theme, limited coalition's basis of unity to the realm of contingency, and this basis easily dissolved in the hard bargaining at Kelowna. By July 1984, the Solidarity Coalition was reduced to a provincewide network of activists who commemorated the first anniversary of the austerity program with small-scale gatherings around the theme of social justice. By the summer of 1986, the Solidarity Coalition was formally disbanded as organized labour geared up for a provincial election. A deep and pervasive distrust between organized labour and social movements, punctuated by labour's ineffective attempts to assimilate the new movements' sensibilities, became the legacy of the once heady days of mass protest in British Columbia.⁸

DECADE IN POWER

The decade between 1991 and 2001 serves as a virtual laboratory for the study of tensions between ruling relations and social reform as the NDP government sought to reconcile the tasks of state management and social democratization. After the collapse of the Solidarity Coalition, the Social Credit Party was re-elected in 1986 and continued to implement its neoliberal agenda, most notably with a revamping of labour legislation in 1987 (Panitch and Swartz 2003). However, Michael Harcourt's NDP won a clear majority in the 1991 election, replacing William Vander Zalm's scandal-ridden Social Credit government. The questions, in retrospect, are: (1) did the ensuing decade of NDP rule spur the denouement or the revival of social democracy in the province and (2) did a confluence of

⁸ Four years after the collapse of the Solidarity Coalition, Palmer (1987, 93-94) makes the following observation: "Recent attempts to whitewash the history of Solidarity and claim that the BC Federation of Labour has been transformed into a 'centre-left' entity ... ignore the devastation wrought within trade union circles, skirt the fundamental losses experienced in the fields of human rights and social policy, and bypass the disillusionment that currently immobilizes many whose first taste of politics and resistance soured their once enthusiastic mouths."

the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary left create a new template for social change?

In answer to these questions, it must be noted that the moment of exhilaration brought about by the 1991 election victory – when the new premier invited activists (and the public generally) to stream through the legislative buildings and make the government’s headquarters their “home” – was also the moment of breach and disaffection as the heretofore unsolicited “new” social movements almost immediately began vying for government favour. Whereas the previous Socred government had typically excluded social movements from decision-making processes – regarding them negatively as “special interest groups” – these same social movements now had a seat at virtually every NDP decision-making forum.⁹ And, in one case, a new ministry (the Ministry of Women’s Equality) was created to represent NSMS directly within the state. The effect of this new-found representation, however, was to throw various social movements into competition with each other (e.g., labour, environmental, and Aboriginal), each one “trying to get their oar in the water first.” The NDP, composed of people who themselves possessed social movement credentials, initially felt obliged to represent all the groups who were often in conflict with one another – notably their constituencies in labour, small business, and anti-poverty – attempting to address their issues either separately or by forging broader coalitions that would produce win-win situations. The social movements, however, fearing that “reasonableness” would be tantamount to a loss of effectiveness, did, indeed, act like special interest groups in vigorously defending their own agendas and in displaying, from the government’s point of view, a lack of political realism that often contrasted with the political sensibilities of the business community.¹⁰ To the government’s frustration, the propensity of the social movements was to function as flat, or horizontal, organizations in which no one predictably called the tune; consequently, there was no assurance that

⁹ As well as enjoying increased access to cabinet ministers – some of the ministerial assistants advising cabinet ministers were themselves strong political activists – movement representatives participated in an innovative series of government summits and forums beginning in June 1992. In Harcourt’s words, “These summits were the blueprints for an entirely new way of governing. Gone was the arbitrariness of governments and bureaucrats putting policy together behind closed doors to citizens” (Harcourt and Skene 1996, 132). Clearly, efforts were made to ensure that social movement voices were “inside the tent.”

¹⁰ Based on her stint in government, NDP finance minister Elizabeth Cull concluded: “Social movements have unrealistic expectations for what governments can actually do. It’s more than just a communications issue. I tried to sit down with them and show them the range of options that I have, but they were unwilling to listen to my problems. They just wanted funding for what they wanted to do” (interview, 26 April 2002).

its members would adhere to any announced policy. Indeed, the rank-and-file movement members seemed to prefer protesting on the lawn of the legislature to being *in* the Premier's Office,¹¹ a tendency accentuated by the government's efforts to recruit informal leaders of the movements and import them into government circles, thereby separating them from their constituency base and causing further resentment among the rank-and-file.

As this dynamic unfolded, the government gradually took on an "establishment" aura – even coming to be described as "the enemy" amongst some movement activists who had become increasingly impatient with perceived government attempts to block or moderate their specific agendas. In response, the government portrayed itself as engaged in a "balancing act," its purpose being to govern the whole province, and it tried to persuade the social movements to appreciate this synergistic task and to be more "political" about the nature of their own grassroots activity. In the process of aggregating competing interests under larger interests (i.e., the common goal of the *public* interest), a "brokerage mentality" prevailed, in which the government shifted from principles to bartering solutions, attempting to maintain economic stability while avoiding sheer expediency.¹² This politics of the "art of the possible" – flexible, gradualist, incrementalist, and non-exclusionary – became increasingly difficult to implement, however, since it required increasingly "elegant" solutions that called for more resources than were available.¹³ At its worst, it came across as a compromised ideology

¹¹ In his memoirs, Harcourt conveys a sense of exasperation over social movement recalcitrance expressed during his regime. For example, "As a communication opportunity for our government's enthusiastic plans, the March 22 [1993] opening of the Legislature turned into a serious farce. A rowdy bunch of eco-thugs staged a militant protest ... making the front page of the newspapers, becoming the lead story on the six o'clock TV news and obliterating our government's Throne Speech message" (Harcourt and Skene 1996, 108). Of the Clayoquot Sound protests later that summer, Harcourt recounts that, "despite the protest, the arrest of almost eight hundred protestors and the Greenpeace-inspired boycotts, I was not about to give into the protestors. I was not about to give in to the forest industry. I was not about to give in to aboriginal demands ... We had a good and fair plan for Clayoquot" (112). By 1993, the relationship between the NDP government and social movements involving environmental and First Nations concerns had already become somewhat fractious.

¹² The mix entailed a melding of potentially contradictory objectives: pursuing the social values agenda of party policy ("principles"), accommodating the competing interests of stakeholders ("pragmatism"), and staying in power ("opportunism"). The shift to a less principle-driven bartering occurred in the second half of the ten year period when the government had lost political capital and suffered declining groundswell support.

¹³ For example, attempts to create a forest practices code galvanized tensions over competing claims of diverse stakeholders – business, labour, environmentalists, and Aboriginals – none of whom the government wished to alienate. More generally, government ministries found the pragmatic mode difficult to carry out since they were strapped with growing budgetary restrictions, which left them with fewer resources.

devoid of fundamental principles – a clear provocation to the NDP’s social movement allies. For the government, the stricture of not alienating the business community became paramount in the political environment of an ascendant neoliberal ideology, especially in the absence of any countervailing power (which had formerly been represented by organized labour).

In sum, the Harcourt period of NDP governance was one in which the influence of social movements quickly reached a peak, after which these movements subsided into relative marginalization. The experience of social activists in the NDP government was therefore mixed, contradictory, and, ultimately, disillusioning. Many wound up feeling disempowered and cynical about the ability of government to serve as a direct agent of change.¹⁴ To the degree that social movement representatives were included (on boards, given ready access to ministers, etc.), they proved to be unaccountable and uncompromising.¹⁵ Certainly, the movements could muster little confidence in the government’s brokerage mentality. Harcourt tried to accommodate competing stakeholder interests through frequent consultation, community and regional controls, and open management policy. While his approach generated an uncommon degree of consensus around some desired reforms such as land-use planning, clean water initiatives, and parkland expansion, it also contributed to loose management structures (e.g., budget overruns and the Nanaimo Commonwealth scandal [known as “Bingogate”]), which, in the jaundiced eye of the corporate media, brought an end to Harcourt’s leadership before the close of one term. Modest expectations and low-profile initiatives were the parameters of government amidst clashing agendas, as the *modus operandi* of “extensive consultation” buckled under myriad demands.

In the 1996 election, Harcourt’s successor, Glen Clark, won a razor-thin parliamentary majority yet attempted to practise a “politics of conviction” rather than follow the Harcourt formula of laborious consensus-building. But, aside from a few specific infrastructural initiatives, such as fast ferry construction (a subsequent fiasco) and rate freezes on university tuition, auto insurance, and BC Hydro (where

¹⁴ This feeling was particularly acute in the women’s movement, even though the Harcourt government had established an independent women’s equality ministry. As one women’s equality activist put it, “The NDP only empowered the women’s movement to the extent that it survived, but not thrived.”

¹⁵ One provincial secretary of a major NDP section spat out his views in memo form: “Single issue groups. One. Never come through for us. Two. Their agenda is not our agenda. Three. As soon as we come to power, they piss all over us. They don’t have any broader perspective than their own single issue” (McLeod 1994, 22).

Clark had to overrule his own cabinet), the bold class rhetoric soon faded as governmental perceptions of political possibility were routinely filtered through a “business lens.” Although Clark’s “command and control” style of governance initially captured the populist imagination, the failure of highly publicized megaprojects and his embroilment in a casino-licensing scandal reduced him to media fodder and brought about his resignation. His political demise demonstrated once again the dangers of crossing the business community.

In the 2001 provincial election, the NDP was ousted by a consolidated party of the right – the Liberals, led by Gordon Campbell – and was cut down to a parliamentary rump of two sitting members. The party that had governed for ten years was now in virtual cold storage, and its touted social movement allies were in disarray.

AMBIVALENT ALLIES

In retrospect, it can be said in the NDP’s favour that, despite the serious economic, bureaucratic, and communicative obstacles faced during its years in power, it *was* more open, democratic, and consultative, widening the input spectrum and taking risks on behalf of marginalized communities. There *were* “empowering” engagements with social movements, although this fell off in some ministries during the second mandate, when more limited resources, media debunking, and stiff resistance from the business community forced the government into periodic “crisis” mode. Still, more linkages were established between government and civil society, and sensibilities were changed to some degree around the importance of specific policy issues, transparency in decision making, and the role of the state in assisting people to become economically independent. In these respects, the NDP government did a commendable job at a time when other jurisdictions had gone backwards. At the same time, the failure or inability to follow through on some of the announced policies, and the mismanagement of others, aggrieved many of the party’s social movement constituencies. Disability and anti-poverty groups felt no better off with the NDP: they expected much more from the government by way of overcoming housing and labour market disadvantages. Certainly, the NDP did not significantly narrow the gap between the rich and the poor over the course of its two terms in office, and the promotion of “brokerage politics” between government and stakeholders proved insufficient to engage the wider public – a deficit not remedied by the dubious reliance on opinion polls.

So while the NDP tried to be all things to all people in its efforts to capture the “centre” vote, it eventually meant very little to anyone, as the results of the 2001 election showed. It failed to hold its own coalition – in great part owing to the inability to develop parallel economic and social policies – and by the time of its second term in office, its social movement allies had become disenchanted and were less inclined to come to the table to bargain with the government or to support it. Although government leaders insisted that the social movements were neither marginalized nor co-opted by the NDP but, rather, were given structured opportunities to influence government, the social movements were not nearly as influential as they would have liked, usually playing second fiddle to the labour groups that bankrolled the NDP.

In sum, the social movements shifted from coalition partners and unambiguous allies in the “honeymoon” phase of NDP rule to “ambivalent allies” in the fractured solidarity of the later years of NDP governance, when the limitations on weaving social democratic threads into the fabric of the advanced capitalist state once again became transparent. Some spaces had opened for social movement actors, and some formerly disenfranchised stakeholders were drawn into the orbit of state politics, but only in limited and truncated ways. The optimistic Gramscian reading that envisioned a robust social democratic government in which social movements would come to play an influential role in “extending the sphere of politics” and of political participation (Simon 1982, 89–92) gave way to the pessimistic vision of limited social reforms that upheld rather than challenged the political tenets and institutions of bourgeois dominance.

Many factors contributed to this dissatisfying outcome, including the “silo mentality” of countless ministry bureaucrats who were indifferent to issues beyond their administrative unit¹⁶ and a monolithic media functioning under the mantle of business interests.¹⁷ But perhaps the

¹⁶ For example, the preoccupation of senior-level forestry officials with revenue-generation over eco-protection or the wars over ownership of the domestic violence portfolio between the attorney-general’s and the women’s equality ministries. Certainly some ministry bureaucrats welcomed new initiatives, but, in general, policies outside a relatively narrow band were suspect and frequently resisted. Each ministry had its own culture (if not diverse cultures), prided its independence, and projected a quid pro quo mentality (“give us this and we’ll get you that”). Whether a given ministry accepted and implemented change depended very much on the political will and mobilization skills of its minister.

¹⁷ A recent study of the press in British Columbia concludes that news coverage and editorial opinion is largely controlled by one or two corporate media outlets and is influenced by a handful of reporters who unabashedly defend business interests (Edge 2001). See Harcourt’s own biting account of the mass media’s ideological proclivities and anti-NDP bias in particular (Harcourt and Skene 1996, chap. 5).

most salient factor was the inability of the NDP to consolidate the ranks of its movement allies (particularly among environmental, disability, anti-poverty, and women's groups) in order to garner more widespread popular support. Indeed, from the time of the Canadian Labour Congress-Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CLC-CCF) merger in 1959, which formed the NDP, there had been concern about whether a labour-based political party would be dominated by a disciplined union movement "moving the new party away from its 'movement' roots and into narrow electoral and reformist politics" (Bernard 1999, 45). Over time, the NDP did come to rely on its labour constituency for electoral and material support, with intermittent concerns about whether labour's periodic dalliances with coalition politics might threaten both labour's and the party's effectiveness (McLeod 1994). Conversely, critics of the labour movement argue that a major impediment to a more movement-oriented politics has been a timorous labour bureaucracy unwilling to exercise the class power at its command.¹⁸ Consequently, community social movements are typically bereft of the material resources needed to form potentially effective cross-sectoral coalitions, with the result that their members' critical understanding seldom extends to other sectors and issues (Howlett 1989, 42). Indeed, the persistently sectarian nature of social movements was another issue troubling the NDP leadership since a general perception of the movements as "special interests" tends to result in a loss of broad electoral support for the NDP (Bernard 1999, 47).

Given these unresolved structural contradictions, it cannot be said that, in its ten years in power, the BC NDP succeeded in creating a "new reality" or a new "historic bloc" significantly attuned to the interests of both traditional and contemporary social movements. Certainly, the labour movement has contributed to this failure: from the Kelowna Accord of 1983 onward, its leadership gave the appearance of a "special interest" group at odds with the new common sense of "free markets" and failed to articulate a general interest, beyond a defence of the existing wage relation, that could include the popular movements. And, as those movements came to regard both the labour bureaucracy and the NDP as spent institutions unable to address the harmful effects of the global economy, many movement activists repaired to a strictly extra-parlia-

¹⁸ Adam Przeworski (1989, 107) comments pithily on the general situation: "The paradox is that those working-class movements that may have the political muscle to bring about socialism by legislation have no incentives to do so, while those movements that have much to gain by nationalizing productive wealth have no power to do it. Hence, socialism without quotation marks, socialism as the program of public ownership of productive wealth, is the political project of only those movements that cannot bring it about."

mentary role, in some cases, amply supported by their own extensive funding base (e.g., Greenpeace). This dissociative tactic enabled some social movement groups to coalesce on a national scale, mobilizing a mass base of constituents that could more aggressively advance non-capitalist alternatives and shrug off the ideological inhibitions of encrusted reformers and social democrats (Naylor 2002; Clarke 2002). Such transformative coalitions as have emerged represent important experiments in counter-hegemonic politics,¹⁹ but it remains to be seen whether high-profile campaigns (including those that emanate from the World Social Forum) can be effectively rooted in local groups and organizations, and whether shared political sensibilities among networking activists can suffice to challenge the corporate agenda. Party stalwarts, of course, are more likely to see such coalitions as threats, competing with partisan political action and undermining the party's authority.

For much of the decade of NDP rule, therefore, the relationship between the NDP and the popular movements was in a delicate flux. The social movements upheld the value of democratizing responsibility, and, though deprecating NDP electoralism, they recognized the value of a strong political voice in Parliament. The NDP, on the other hand, though wary of the movements' "single-issue" politics, knew that they must combine their political power with the movements' zeal in order to achieve a winning symbiosis. As Lafontaine (1992, 28) soberly observed: "The creative tension between real politics and protest, between responsibility and utopia, between the power of the state and the social movements, must be sustained by the left in government. This is easier said than done. Given the formidable challenge of such an undertaking in the face of corporate power, it should not be surprising if either government or movements circumvent the task."²⁰ Indeed, the NDP, toiling amid the pressures of an unpredictable world economy, and without a reliable ideological compass to forge its way through the undulating political terrain, found it difficult to avoid frequent surrender

¹⁹ Examples of such coalitions are the Action Canada Network founded in 1987 to oppose the free trade agreements, the Council of Canadians founded in 1985 to protect Canadian sovereignty and natural resources, and, more recently, the Structured Movement against Capitalism and Rebuild the Left, which, among other objectives, explored alternative economic strategies, occupying a declared political space somewhere between a coalition and a political party. Of these, only the Council of Canadians survives.

²⁰ On the government side, Sigurdson (1996, 319) opines that, given the dominant capitalist ethos, even the social democratic governments in Canada do not "regard themselves as enjoying a mandate to transform radically the relations of class power. In fact, any such bold redistributive initiative would be electoral suicide."

to the dictates of the business community and its acolytes in the state bureaucracy and the media.

After years of consultation and networking, the government failed to solidify the grassroots democracy that graced its earliest vision, and few of its democratization measures survived the transition to the Liberal right-wing government. As the various social movements, including the labour movement, regressed into more disparate single-issue interest groups, their agendas were more easily co-opted by capital, confining social change within the limits of “passive revolution.”²¹ Unable (and unwilling) to cement a durable historic bloc, the NDP in power was reduced to mild reform initiatives that were palatable to at least certain fractions of capital while moderately improving people’s lives and hopefully securing a stronger base for further activism.

SHIFTING HEGEMONY

Following their overwhelming electoral victory in 2001, the BC Liberals embarked on a steep program of social spending cuts, privatization initiatives, and attacks on the public-sector unions marked by wage freezes and back-to-work legislation.²² Some unions resisted, but the ferryworkers’ strike in December 2003 and the health care workers’ strike in May 2004 ended in ignominious union defeats entailing wage rollbacks, contracting-out provisions, and other vital concessions. In the latter instance, a last minute memorandum of agreement between executives of the Hospital Employees’ Union (HEU), the BC Federation of Labour, and the hardline Liberal government forestalled an escalating political strike. Most of the health workers felt betrayed by the provisions of the agreement, which exacerbated feelings of mistrust between labour and its potential community partners, and within the trade union movement itself (Cariou 2004, 9). Moreover, HEU members were insulted by the contrived argument that escalating strikes would undermine growing support for the NDP in the coming provincial election. The labour lead-

²¹ Gramsci defined “passive revolution” as a process through which “the bourgeoisie is ... able to ‘revolutionize’ society ... reorganizing and changing elements, according to its own plan ... [Thus] the dominance of the bourgeoisie can be reconstituted in new forms, implying a reorganization of the economy and the maintenance of an historic bloc supporting the existing state” (Sassoon 1982, 114).

²² These measures were defended as necessary in order to eliminate deficit spending, despite the fact that the provincial budget was not in deficit in the latter years of NDP rule. A massive deficit was created, however, when the Liberal government, shortly after taking power, introduced a 25 percent general income tax cut, although some revenues were quickly regained through increased consumption taxes and user fees.

ership's capitulation was described by the organizer of the "Fightback Solidarity Caucus" as "a failure as significant as the 1983 sellout of the Solidarity Movement" (McGuckin 2005, 6).²³ Indeed, the parallels between 1983 and 2004 are remarkably close. In both cases, an escalating political strike was halted by a labour leadership more concerned with NDP electoral fortune than with strategic gains that could be won through militant mass action. As Rosa Luxemburg (1970 [1906], 190) observed a century ago in her analysis of the mass strike, consistent and resolute political leadership can inspire self-confidence and a desire to struggle, but "a vacillating weak tactic has a crippling and confusing effect upon the masses." In 2004, the situation was especially propitious since (1) a solid majority of public opinion at the time supported the striking hospital workers and (2) the BC branch of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Canada's largest trade union, was fully prepared to escalate the job action. In both cases, capitulation enabled a neoliberal government to persuasively claim both victory and the moral high ground in maintaining "public order." Capitulation was thoroughly demoralizing for thousands of activists, for whom the lesson was clear: militant protest is futile.²⁴ With assistance from a right-leaning mass media, the public memory of these events was sanitized in such a way that the democratic challenge to neoliberalism was excerpted from the narrative as the government succeeded in putting a temporary quietus on public-sector unions, which comprised the bulk of organized labour ranks in British Columbia.²⁵

Before long, however, the government's attacks on provincial employees and its resolute paring down of social programs angered large swathes of the electorate and paved the way for an NDP resurgence in the May 2005 provincial elections, which boosted its legislative caucus from two to thirty-three. The new leader of the NDP – Carole James – set out to forge a broad coalition of interests embracing labour, business, and community groups in order to strengthen the party's centrist appeal. Despite a reduced legislative majority, the Liberals

²³ See Gene McGuckin's (2005) candidate's report on the 2004 BC Fed Biannual Convention – "Fightback Solidarity Caucus Rocks the Fed" – which unveils the Solidarity Caucus Statement of Purpose and presupposes the kind of labour movement needed to stem the neoliberal tide. Also, see David Camfield's (2005a) "An Analysis of the Hospital Employees' Union Strike of 2004," which examines the attack on HEU as an expression of global capitalist restructuring in the project of building a "lean state."

²⁴ See Camfield (2006) and Cohen (2006) for analyses of the HEU strike and the government response.

²⁵ The gravity of this moment is underscored by the fact that "public sector unions have been at the forefront of resistance to neoliberalism generally" (Camfield 2005b).

persisted with their “lean state” agenda against the 40,000 strong BC Teachers Federation (BCTF), whose last contract had expired in June 2004. When the government imposed a zero-wage increase contract through June 2006, with no attention to demands regarding working conditions, the teachers began escalating strikes in October 2005 and defied legislative and court orders to return to work. After two weeks of civil disobedience, with the teachers enjoying high levels of public support, the government reluctantly appointed a mediator whose initial set of recommendations brought the teachers back to the classrooms. Again, neither the BC Federation of Labour nor the NDP lent more than cautious support to the striking teachers as neither wanted the situation to evolve into a general strike and possibly alienate what their leaders took to be an expanding NDP constituency. Yet the steadfast manner in which the teachers waged their struggle – even in the face of court orders, heavy fines, and loss of strike pay – eventually forced the government to compromise and may have persuaded the Liberals to show a more “human face” in subsequent contract negotiations with the public sector.

No doubt this pragmatic turn in Liberal policy was more attributable to the windfall revenues from the resource sector than anything else. With natural gas prices soaring after Hurricane Katrina, the provincial coffers were overflowing,²⁶ and it was now feasible for Liberal finance minister Carole Taylor to spread \$5 billion in wage and benefit improvements over the coming four years to the 300,000 public-sector workers voting on contracts in the spring of 2006. A further \$1 billion “signing bonus” was offered to unions that reached a deal by 31 March of that year, with another \$300 million to unions that signed four-year deals (through 2010). The \$3,500 individual lump sum signing bonus proved irresistible to most of the unionized civil servants as all 137 contracts were negotiated before reaching the bonus deadline. Although the contracts seemed generous compared to the wage freezes of previous years, the salary and benefits increments amounted to little more than the cost of inflation. More important, the four-year contracts ensured labour compliance until after the 2009 provincial elections and the 2010 Olympics, removing much of the unions’ political leverage.

In fact, the magnitude of the economic boom enabled the Liberals to pursue a hegemonic project that went beyond buying labour peace and attended to the aspirations of other movements and currents. The September 2005 Speech from the Throne stressed the government’s

²⁶ Earlier estimations of a \$1.3 billion surplus had now risen to \$3 billion for 2005-06.

commitment to make British Columbia first in education, healthy living, social support, environmental management, and job creation. In that vein, the Liberals struck a well-publicized “New Relationship” pact with First Nations and an agreement with environmental groups (i.e., the Great Bear Rainforest Accord) that was intended to moderate their pro-business image and to pledge support to Aboriginal and ecological interests. The Liberal cornucopia soon came to include promises to boost welfare shelter stipends, increase affordable housing, and restore funding to previously cut social programs affecting women, children, and seniors – these projects to be accompanied by a further income tax cut. By June 2006, polls indicated that Campbell’s innovative strategies appeared to capture the much-coveted centre of British Columbia’s political spectrum. Many of the “fresh alternatives” that might have been championed by the Opposition had been pre-empted. Concerned with establishing a more temperate House discourse and ensnared in the uninspiring rhetoric of “third way” language, the NDP offered no discernible social vision; moreover, their posture of civility was ultimately rebuffed by the government’s cancellation of the fall 2006 session of the legislature, compounding the sense of drift.

In sum, as unwitting beneficiaries of a resurgent economy, the Liberals were able to adjust budgetary priorities, numb the opposition, and smooth their path to the next provincial election. The Liberals’ apparent turnabout cast social activists into a state of “double ambivalence” – not only towards the NDP and its labour subsidiary (due to past disappointments) but also towards the “softened” Liberal government, whose new image, measured against past performance, could prove specious and illusory. The “New Relationship,” for example, that promised co-management and sharing of land, revenues, and resources, is already sowing doubts among some First Nations, who are finding that developers continue to flout the “consult and accommodation” understanding regarding land-use decisions supposedly ingrained in the pact. Meanwhile, environmentalists who rue the fact that the Great Bear Rainforest Accord protects only 30 percent of the best and most productive forest areas in the region, now dread the prospect of voluminous carbon emissions spewed by the Pacific Gateway initiative’s road and bridge expansion. And while the government’s highly touted P3s (public-private partnerships) may yield some initial savings on capital projects through greater cost certainty, the long-term effect portends not only declining state revenues, as budget surpluses are devoured by to private partners, but also an incremental transfer of public wealth

into private hands (Murray 2006). Finally, the BC-Alberta Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA), which came into effect on 1 April 2007, puts British Columbia back at the cutting edge of neoliberal initiatives. Negotiated in private and implemented without parliamentary debate, TILMA forbids provincial and all lower levels of government (e.g., municipal, school boards) from adopting policies that “impair or restrict” investment or trade, and it empowers private panels modelled on NAFTA’s dispute-resolution process to fine errant governments up to \$5 million (Gould 2007). Given the fast emerging surfeit of ambiguities and grievances, the social movements may reluctantly swing back to “the devil they know” or, as is already the case for growing sectors of youth activism, operate entirely outside the spheres of traditional politics, thus widening the rift between state and community.

CONCLUSIONS

Six years after the electoral debacle that nearly wiped out the provincial NDP and chilled the political climate for social activism until Liberal stringencies backfired, the NDP years appear as a largely negative example of government, offering several noteworthy lessons relevant to the party-movement relation.

First, going back to the earlier period of the structural fragility of the Solidarity Coalition and then moving on to the cooptation and subsequent marginalization of social movements over the NDP years in power, the failings we find underscore the importance of identifying and embracing a counter-hegemonic principle in order to unite social movements and to sustain a concerted movement-building. The predominant challenge is to harness the vitality of the various movements (i.e., their diverse identities, practices, and beliefs) into a principled politics of social justice guided by tenets of material equity, cultural recognition, and ecological survival. Ultimately, this cannot be achieved without the formulation of an alternative economic strategy that entails substantive if not fundamental reforms of the capitalist order (Lebowitz 2006).

Second, and to stress the obverse of the above, participation in broad-based coalitions cannot substitute for a political party. Social movements serve as modernity’s laboratories for inventing and trying out new ways of life (Melucci 1989). They are able to catalyze processes of change by creating independent organizational bases that mobilize resources,

develop and popularize alternative social visions, and act outside the established structures of state, parties, and interest groups.²⁷ However, it is the role of a political party to evolve a *coherent set* of policies that does not represent a mere (and ungovernable) aggregate of diverse social movement agendas.²⁸ It is only through productively synthesizing the demands of social movements, consonant with the shared values implicit in a counter-hegemonic principle, that political authority and grassroots democracy can prove mutually viable. Lafontaine (1992, 26), skeptical of the proliferation of contemporary movements, underscores this criterion:

In comparison with social democracy, the new social movements suffer from the loss of their sense of utopia. They are not sustained by the general idea of a better order toward which society may progress. The ideologies of the new movements vary with the coming and going of new tendencies. What they foresee for the future is as limited as the issues motivating them, and they lack the tenacity which is nourished by a sense of utopia ... Contrary to what is claimed by these new movements, social democracy must take a stand with regard to universal values.

Thus, the undeniable importance of dialogical relations and equitable alliances between movement activists, trade unionists, and social democratic governments interested in establishing progressive values within and beyond the parliamentary sphere and forging a disciplined coalition that creates the momentum for transformative social change.²⁹

²⁷ See Day (2005) for an interesting discussion (if motivated by improbable expectations) of new community-based forms of social activism that contest neoliberal hegemony without taking on any semblance of a state or party form.

²⁸ Sanbonmatsu (2004, 11) weighs in trenchantly on this point: “Observing the strivings of nations and peoples toward recognition, Hegel observed: ‘In world history, only those peoples that form states can come to our notice.’ Today, similarly, we might conclude that without a perceptible form or shape, existing social movements have little reality for the majority of human beings. To the extent we can still speak meaningfully of a global ‘left’ at all, it is *gestaltlos* – ‘without form.’ But without a ‘body’ through which to appear in the temporal world, movements are doomed to roam the earth unperceived – like spirits of the dispossessed whose rumored appearances, mysterious and fleeting, occasionally startle the living but have no effect on the course of human events.”

²⁹ Some commentators disagree with this view, and their observations deserve more consideration than we can afford in these pages. Wood (1998, xiii), for example, equates the radical pluralist bent of new social movements with “the postmodernist destruction of all political foundations,” which fragments anti-capitalist opposition instead of unifying it under the auspices of “class” (i.e., labour) (see also Wood 1997). Gitlin (2003, 84) rails against contemporary social movements as self-encapsulated identity groups – “This is narcissism wearing a cloak of ideals” – incapable of addressing majoritarian issues and collective goals. For Gitlin (2006, 95), the “popular culture” that such groups represent is an impotent politics that vitiates broad citizen

Governments must not sacrifice vision and principle for a reified “pragmatism” that takes for granted practical impediments that can, in principle, be mitigated if not overcome. Equally, social activists must come to recognize the interdependencies of political issues and struggles, and they must strive for political synergies across received identities, accomplishing the critical shift from single-issue identity politics to a “politics of differentiated universalism” that inculcates “solidarities based on the respect of difference” (Williams 1999, 684). In working collaboratively with a broad assemblage of social movement groups, a governing party must be informed but not ruled by its affiliations. Indeed, to abandon the concept of a political party standing, ultimately, on its own policy agenda, is to surrender a possibly progressive vision of the state to one that is now, in fact, reasserting itself in the name of capital.

Finally, it is important to recognize that building a counter-hegemonic bloc calls for a transformative politics that extends beyond the local and even national state and that requires linking local, regional, national, and international groups into a transnational historic bloc.³⁰ Indeed, capital’s more fully internationalized form means that only through creating post-capitalist sensibilities and values on a global plane is a radically transformed future possible (Robinson 2004). One manifest challenge, therefore, to social movements and to progressive states involves harmonizing anti-globalization struggles with priorities of governance in ways that do not divert movements and send them down the path of tepid reform. Ironically, in this endeavour globalized circuits of capital and communications provide resources to the left. Labour, for example, can begin to practise a movement unionism, emulating capital’s transnational organization by coordinating struggles across borders and by reaching out to popular movements struggling for social justice.

engagement and ends up echoing the logic of capitalism. In our own formulation, although labour would continue to play an important role in the new “historic bloc,” it is doubtful that, given the steady decline of union influence under neoliberalism and the emergence of other compelling issues emblemized by the new social movements, labour can be expected to regain a central and dominating station. Likewise, the nexus between “citizens” and political parties, so frayed by the ubiquity of venal interests and public apathy, can only be revitalized by those groups most unaffected from established political channels but still willing to mobilize for change; thus, the indispensability of the new social movements.

³⁰ Practically, this raises the problem of whether the tasks of coordination and resourcing will prove too massive to build and sustain such a bloc across specific conjunctures and beyond the predominantly anglophone advanced capitalist centre of the world system. The World Social Forum (wsf), founded in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, with four official languages (Portuguese, French, Castellano, and English), presents an interesting experiment in transnational counter-hegemony, or “globalization from below” (Carroll 2007; Conway 2004; Wainwright 2005; Waterman 2004. On the politics of “translation” at the wsf, see Santos [2005]).

In British Columbia, and elsewhere, the structural defects of neoliberalism have yet to galvanize this dynamic; undoubtedly, the economic imperatives of global capitalism make it difficult for social movements to forge effective alliances with social democratic parties and organized labour. Nevertheless, if the time for convergences is not propitious, the dangers of spreading destitution amidst unparalleled affluence – most evident in the surge of homelessness – constitute a prescription for radical change and for a regionally based politics that might evolve into a comprehensive vision of a just society. If social democratic governments are to draw us towards the fulfillment of that vision, then they will surely need to gain the trust and commitment of their bedrock, yet ambivalent, allies.

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