

ISSUES & IDEAS

Clark: Just another premier or agent of change?

Signs that the province's new leader isn't beholden to any Vancouver-anchored special interests give reason for optimism

BY ADAM LEAMY AND JAMIE LAMB

What do you call a single mom who runs for the leadership of the B.C. Liberal Party? You call her Premier Christy Clark, and you tell yourself that in British Columbia, everything is possible.

Indeed, the ascension of Clark to the province's top political job is one of those divergence points where B.C. can continue on as ever and always, or it can embrace a welcome development that seems timely and right and a potential door-opener for so much more. Why the hedge? Why potential door-opener?

The hesitancy comes from the manner in which the job vacancy was created. Government caucus members, tired of being told by their boss what to do and how to do it, decided that such hierarchy, such discipline, and the person behind it, had to go. And gone he is.

But the architects of that departure remain, and thus become the proverbial elephant in the room. Their new boss is the single mom who, with next-to-no caucus support, earned the leadership of the B.C. Liberal Party. To say that the various members of the government caucus might have been surprised by the performance of a former colleague, one who not too many years ago was a caucus staffer, is classic understatement. Picture Wile E. Coyote, three feet off the edge of the cliff, the canyon bottom hundreds of feet beneath him, an open Acme Tools crate nearby, with that "But I ... but I ... but I ..." look on his face before gravity, or perhaps more appropriately, reality kicked in.

But Wile E. never did give up trying, did he? So let's assume no difference from within at least some quarters of the government caucus, especially now that Clark has determined her cabinet, and has gone with a smaller, more streamlined model which, to those of us on the outside who foot the bill, seems just right for these post-recession times. Still, there had to be more than a few members of government caucus watching the rollout of the new cabinet model wondering, "But where's my cherry?"

For those on the outside though, in whose voting hands the tenure of the governing Liberals rests, Clark represents a rarity in B.C. — a leader who owes little or nothing to B.C.'s traditional lobbies or interests. And that's the key to whether the swearing in of Clark as premier is merely a destination reached, or the beginning of a new journey and a grand new way in B.C. politics. We hope it's the latter.

It should be. For starters, she is beholden to absolutely no one in the government caucus.

Yep, some folks got cabinet postings, but if they don't perform, she has no reason to keep any one of them in. Never mind she's not the leader they had in mind. She's the leader, and now they all need to get down to work,



Vancouver Whitecaps part-owner and NBA point guard Steve Nash and B.C. Premier Christy Clark attend the MLS team's opening match against Toronto FC March 19 in Vancouver.

something we'd all appreciate after all this fuss.

Let's draw the line, however, at suggesting, as some have, that if those in the government caucus don't like the new leader and the new organization, they don't have to run in the next election. That's a little too passive for our liking, especially given how that elephant can make its presence felt. After all, how likely are recession-weary voters to embrace a premier in her byelection bid if the lead-up to it or the campaigning for it are marked by ongoing blunders from her caucus and cabinet members feeling their new-found freedom?

The potential for damage caused by that elephant in that one way alone makes the best case for an early general election for them all over a hasty byelection for one.

But electoral victory alone will not determine if Clark represents a milestone at the leader level, welcome as it is, or something bigger — the start of genuine change in how our government works.

If British Columbians like what the new premier represents — and there's mounting evidence to suggest this is true — then in her efforts and her achievements lies the opportunity for them to find their place, or to advance from their place. It's time for those people to step up because the chance to do so is upon all of us.

For British Columbians under age 30, Clark may well be the youngest premier they'll see for a while, offering the possibility that elected politics might be something good to do instead of something to deride, based on common preconceived notions that politicians aren't young, political leaders aren't female, and they just don't "get" me or my interests. We'd all benefit from more of these young voices around any caucus table and in our agencies, boards and commissions.

Putting an end to B.C. politics as just the same old business-as-usual guff may finally pull greater numbers of those over age 60 or 70 into elected provincial public service, people who've learned and worked and

provided and survived the ups and the downs of a life lived. Clark's early actions show a drive to dispense with all the political claptrap these experienced British Columbians have been accustomed to and have learned to hate. It's time we derived greater benefit from their greater experience. We need more of them at the caucus table, too, and helping to steer our government's bodies and agencies.

If all British Columbians benefit from Clark's lack of IOUs to caucus, so too do they benefit from the lack of IOUs the premier has to the lobbies and interest groups who traditionally orbit around the B.C. government looking to advance their causes. After all, most of them backed one of the boys. At a stroke, these old-guard groups have been reduced to relative equivalency, with nobody able to say they have a special relationship or inside track with the government. Is that the smell of Old Spice? Yes it is, but not so much in Victoria any more.

Indeed, a lot of these groups and companies — invariably led by men

wearing dark suits with matching condescending tones — faced the media after she was premier-designate Clark, and then Premier Clark, and told us how the new premier would need to pay attention to their particular cause and how they'd be willing to step up and counsel the little lady on weighty provincial matters. It's as though a premier with the name "Christy" must naturally be adrift and only male captaincy can bring the ship safely into port.

These traditional insiders ignored the fact that this is one premier who prefers and, more importantly, who has the skills, to go directly to the end payer — the individual British Columbians and the families who are impacted by the actions of these groups and companies, or by a B.C. government that acts on their recommendations. Because of her ability to make these real connections with real people, she doesn't have to listen to the dinosaurs if she doesn't want to; she's astute, though, so they'll never know it.

What's more, because of the lack of caucus support for her leadership, the new premier is not particularly beholden to any Vancouver-anchored special interests. She is free, if she wants, to reject the traditionally self-important interests of Vancouver in favour of other B.C. centres or regions. Oh, they will receive polite hearings but there's no pressure to place their needs or demands over the needs and demands of other B.C. centres or regions. Rural B.C. can be excused for thinking they've got their best chance in decades to be heard, provided what they say, and what they want, is good for all of B.C. and all B.C. families.

It could all go wrong, of course, and fast. Experience tells us that special interests don't give up their insider status easily, if at all. The old blisters who've fished, golfed, or hunted with premiers past will no doubt attempt to regain paradise if Clark wanders into trouble, or is carried there by the pachyderm in caucus, or if the public feels her pledges don't connect with reality. That's always a risk that attends anything new in politics where politicians come and go but the way politics is conducted never seems to change.

New beginnings — genuine new beginnings — don't come around here very often, so we British Columbians have a choice: Either embrace the opportunity that's in front of us and participate in and help drive new ways of doing things in Victoria, or stand by while the Old Spice set recaptures the ship of state and steers it back into the shallow waters of the way things have always been done.

That would be a shame. Real opportunity to make change at the provincial level is literally a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

Seize the day, we say.

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