

# ISSUES & IDEAS

## B.C.'s new power town: Your community

New paradigm of politics spreads control around the province, away from bureaucracy in Victoria



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When Christy Clark was sworn in as Premier of British Columbia on March 14, 2011, she inherited a caucus of Liberal MLAs whose interests were their own, not hers. Her ability to appoint fresh faces to cabinet was limited, making that structure largely inherited, too. She inherited a public service leadership of deputy ministers largely appointed by previous heads of the public service, and of whom carry-over ministers had their favourites and were possessive.

In short, Premier Clark had little to work with, particularly in Victoria. The only thing smaller than the appetite for change in Victoria was the premier's power to effect it.

Then came May 14, 2013. And with it, a government for Premier Clark — her own government — with the opportunity, and the challenge, to stand on its own, freed of the freight that all but paralyzed her first two years of inherited government.

It's going to be an interesting ride.

Traditionally, a new premier actively works to extend a media honeymoon for a new government. Premier Clark, however, doesn't have to cater to, or heed the pronouncements of the usual suspects, so thoroughly discredited in such spectacular fashion have they been.

The pollsters got it wrong on the election, and the press, commentators, and academics showed us the value of adding ego to bad polling.

While the premier was reading the public, the political experts were reading fiction.

So for now, not much of what these experts say these days is of value to this premier and to British Columbians in their communities.

For Premier Clark, the only arbiters of good policy and politics are the people in their respective communities. It's not likely that any time soon, this premier — and those in communities who embraced her jobs-and-economy messages — will look to the B.C. politics-and-election experts to tell them whether or not the premier or her government are measuring up. Communities will know it by the premier's responsiveness to their issues; the premier will know it by communities' responsiveness to her economic actions.

Being right is a powerful motivator for a premier. Think back to Premier Clark's comment last May about polls in general and Angus Reid polls in particular — "polls are getting less and less accurate, and



Christy Clark's decision to run in Kelowna reflects her view that power and policy should come from communities rather than the bureaucracy in Victoria. Westside-Kelowna MLA Ben Stewart, left, announces he is stepping down on Wednesday.

I also think that these Internet polls that some of the companies are doing now are the least accurate of all."

No one called her prescient back then. But she was right. And it may well be that for over-campaigner Clark no political or policy situation poses challenge, provided she maintains the ability and opportunity to go into the community to suss it out and address it herself.

And if a premier is this right, when so many others are dead wrong, we'd all be advised to listen more carefully to her when she speaks.

Recall Premier Clark's comment last September about the "sick culture" of Victoria? She was speaking about legislative bodies and structures, not the city. In the same way that when we decry what's happening in Ottawa over, say, taxes, we're not blaming the Smiths, who live on Jones Street in Ottawa, but the parliamentary bodies and structures that set taxes and report on them.

Still, a few members of the media decided that the premier's "sick culture" comment was a slam on the city, with the expected result. But in clarifying the comment, the premier offered a direct insight to her approach: Politicians have to spend less time inside the Legislature and among its entitled structures and privileged bodies, and more time in B.C.'s communities.

Again, just so we're clear, if the premier had listened to these expert voices in and of Victoria, she'd not be premier

today; she'd have conceded defeat the day the writ was issued, if not before.

So for those who listened to her "sick culture" observation, who really heard it, it would come as no surprise that the premier chose to unveil her cabinet to the public in Vancouver instead of inside Government House in Victoria.

But what of the Legislature, with its press gallery, bureaucracy, political operatives, and those long retired from all three worlds but who insist on still trying to be part of the show, and for whom the choice for a Victoria licence plate motto would surely be "The most entitled place on Earth"? Well, for this premier, the less time spent in and around this environment and these people, the better.

In short, power is moving out of Victoria.

Premier Christy Clark — not the old one struggling under the weight of Mr. Campbell's tired luggage, but the new one flush with a mandate and power finally her own of her own making — will not govern through the filters of the Legislature and environs. This premier will deal directly with the people in their communities.

That's what winning teaches a winner: My way works.

She also takes office with the purest policy mandate of any government in recent memory — jobs and the economy. If an issue is not directly about jobs and the economy, it can safely be shuffled to the side under the rubric that only with good jobs and a strong and humming

economy can government generate the revenue necessary to address all issues requiring government funding, i.e., health, education, social programs, pretty much everything without a revenue component.

It means things get much simpler and much more direct for the premier: Deliver jobs and economic growth, and make sure communities see how both have been delivered in their backyard. Take that community achievement and provincial success on to future election victory.

And it's that pure policy mandate that offers the Legislative press gallery and others a way back into the public's confidence: Deliver just-the-facts reporting and analysis on how and where jobs and economic growth have been delivered in B.C. in comparison to where B.C. stood on both counts on May 14, 2013.

Indeed, the media has the potential to set the bar here. By identifying the precise number of full- and part-time jobs in B.C., and recording every job gain and every job loss against them provincially, and at the community level, and setting the output against accepted measures of economic performance, the media can judge the success of the Clark government on job creation and economic performance on pure numbers.

A premier focused on job creation and economic growth, and a media relentless in determining and reporting on the premier's progress on both

fronts will drive British Columbia. And along the way, British Columbians who get the jobs and all of us who benefit from the services and programs that jobs and a growing economy make possible will benefit.

And to up the ante in the challenge to the premier and the media? Any premier who attends to the creation of new jobs only, and not the preservation of existing jobs, is doomed.

If B.C. government policy doesn't support jobs already here, especially in smaller communities where a small number of jobs is as important as is a large number of jobs in larger communities, then the potential, let alone the value of new jobs is severely compromised.

So sectors and industries that didn't receive the attention they were legitimately due under the premier's first two years of inherited government and the policy paralysis that came along with it, today warrant due care and attention, by the media and the premier, especially those that show grassroots and community support.

Premier Clark won with a grassroots campaign, and it will be the grassroots that decide her government's success. Communities — their local spokespeople, their local media — have instantly achieved a greater voice in government policy with the election of Christy Clark's government.

Power is moving out of Victoria. It's moving to wherever Christy Clark is, no matter where she is in B.C. It means the notion of a Victoria-based

public service producing long and drawn-out policy initiatives as a form of Victoria self-perpetuation is a non-starter.

More likely, the job of the bureaucracy will be to assemble, or reassemble, the elements needed for a policy or action as a result of interaction between the premier and a council, or a community dialogue, or even citizens on Main Street.

Government by the grassroots and for the grassroots means taking good ideas or initiatives from the grassroots, even at the last moment, and putting them into action. As has been written on these pages often — especially by B.C. business leaders since 2008 — survival and the future belong to those who are nimble, and can adapt quickly. And as has been written on these pages in the aftermath of the B.C. election, people in communities might not take a stand on an issue until the last minute, or until they have a clear alternative to react to, or against.

Welcome to the era of just-in-time government.

It won't be an easy transition for everyone, least of all the entitled environs of government and its structures and organizations back in Victoria.

Others will have troubles, too. Witness Enbridge announcing that it was willing to meet with the premier to discuss its Northern Gateway pipeline, mere days after the premier's government was re-elected.

Come again? The premier won the election, but not her own seat. Always in campaign mode, the B.C. premier still has to go before the public — now in a byelection — and ask for their vote. And Enbridge acts as if, flush with provincial electoral success, she'll jettison the commitments that won her government its victory?

Look what happened to Gordon Campbell and Glen Clark when, post-general election, their respective stands on the HST and a balanced budget changed — a rather painful slide out of office into new careers. Surely Enbridge has to know the Premier isn't going to move off her Northern Gateway mark without progress on the five conditions? Because to demonstrate such hypocrisy — even if she wanted to — would turn her into just another dead B.C. premier walking.

No, the transition to this new style of government won't be easy for some.

For others, like Enbridge, a company unable to comprehend and keep up with what makes this province, its premier, and its people tick, it will be that much harder.

But for Premier Clark, it really is a new beginning. For B.C. and its community grassroots, it's a whole new day. For all of us, it's going to be quite a ride.

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