

NOTE: this draft has been prepared in advance of the election results on the assumption that the polls are correct and the NDP is likely to win. It will in no way jinx the outcome

Comment [gh1]: It is all my fault. I am so, so sorry.

British Columbia Election 2013: A Big ~~Win-Loss~~ for the Environmental Movement

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The big ~~loss~~win for Adrian Dix's BC New Democratic Party was a big ~~win~~loss for the BC environmental movement. British Columbia has just elected a government that is ~~opposed~~open to massive oil sands pipeline projects and pledged in its ~~platform~~ to "~~Renew BC's Climate Action Plan to meet BC's legislated greenhouse gas emission reduction targets, and lead the call for a national energy and climate strategy" (p. 41)-a massive buildout of LNG.~~ After running its ~~2009 campaign~~ on "~~axe the tax~~", climate leadership, the ~~BC Liberals~~ NDP pledged not ~~to raise the carbon tax for 5 years and Premier Clark openly speculated about the need to reconsider the province's legislated GHG reduction targets. only to retain the tax, but also to expand it to include vented CO2 from natural gas, and reorient some of the revenues to transit and other climate related programs.~~

~~[[If Weaver or another Green wins need a sentence or 2 here on that]~~Andrew Weaver made history by becoming the first elected Green Party MLA in the province, a sliver of silver lining in a devastating province-wide result.

The BC NDP does come with some environmentally troubling positions. Its enthusiasm for LNG, while less extreme than the fanciful Christy Clark vision of a "debt free BC", still ~~appears to conflict~~ with its pledge to meet the 2020 GHG emission reduction targets. Environmentalists managed to extract a late promise to conduct an environmental review of new coal exports, but the NDP's openness to coal generally is disconcerting for climate activists.

Despite these trouble spots, it ~~still had~~would have had to ~~have~~ been called remarkable that the BC election campaign, by politically dooming the two oil sands pipeline proposals for at least four years, had~~s~~ taken annual CO2 emissions of 175 million tonnes off the table. That's ~~almost three times~~ BC's annual emissions. ~~Instead, what turned out to be remarkable is Clark's shocking upset victory. Now these two massive carbon projects are still on the table, the climate target busting LNG strategy gets a clear mandate.~~

~~These bold changes~~This ~~stunning loss~~ can be clearly linked to the importance of ~~environmental~~economic issues to BC voters and ~~the lack of traction of the highly effective~~ campaigns of environmental groups ~~with the exception of some notable ridings (e.g, Vancouver Point Grey and Vancouver Fairview).~~

Environmental issues, especially around the two pipeline proposals, seem to have played a larger role in the campaign than the importance of the issue to voters as indicated in polls would have suggested. The environment ranked fourth in ~~polls~~ on the "most important issue" at 9%, behind the economy (31%), leadership (17%), and health care (13%). That high a ranking means that while it's not the primary driver of the campaign, it ~~is a~~ should have been a significant influence. ~~Instead, it appears that the much~~

higher salience of the economy overwhelmed environmental issues. As depressing as it is for this climate activist, to this political scientist, it should actually not come as a surprise that the party that had the advantage on the issue that dominated in salience won the election.

The Kinder Morgan Surprise

Perhaps the most significant thing to happen during the campaign was Dix's Earth Day surprise shift on the Kinder Morgan expansion proposal. After steadfastly adhering to the "principled position" that it would be inappropriate to propose a project before it had been formally submitted for regulatory review, Dix announced his opposition to the project. This change was both a surprise and a big risk. The purpose of the "principled position" was to insulate the party from attacks that it was anti-resource development, and the switch fed directly into the narrative the party had sought to avoid.

There were three important apparent benefits to this switch. First, it built support in certain key swing ridings (especially in Burnaby) where the tanker issue was significant. Second, it allowed Dix to profile his leadership (an important campaign "issue") and contrast his pre-election clarity both to Premier Clark's squishier-conditional pipeline position and her predecessor's fatal post-election reversal on the HST. Finally, Dix wanted to attract more environmentally minded voters and volunteers who were considering supporting the Green Party. Dix must have calculated that these three benefits outweighed the risks to those concerned about the economy, the most salient issue. It now appears that this roll of the dice proved to be a tragic mistake for the party. It fed directly into Clark's narrative about the NDP being "bad for the economy" and primed voters on the issue on which the Liberals had the advantage. The fact that the economic benefits of this particular project to BC are paltry was overwhelmed by the brutally effective messaging of the Clark campaign.

Another potential explanation is that Dix was "too early, too late" in his switch. Perhaps if he had made the move earlier, Dix would have been able to capture enough of the 8% of the votes that went to the Green Party to make a difference. Given that some substantial fraction of that Green vote could not have been recaptured by an even-greener NDP, the argument that the Kinder Morgan surprise simply backfired seems more plausible.

A Renewed Focus on Grassroots Mobilization

All three of these supposed benefits of the Kinder Morgan shift were in large measure created by a remarkably effective campaign by a number of environmental groups. Originated by the Dogwood Initiative, the focus on opposition to increased tanker traffic on the BC coast was enormously influential on Dix's decision. It was not just the apparent power of the issue that mattered, but the style of politics fostered by the movement leading up to and during the campaign. Rightfully criticized for becoming too bureaucratic and elitist, the environmental movement went back to the grassroots of door knocking and face to face conversations.

This grassroots mobilization was effective enough to convince Adrian Dix that he would benefit from taking his strong stand against the Kinder Morgan expansion. Environmentalists had developed enough clout in key ridings that if too many environmental votes went to the Green Party, the NDP could lose

winnable seats. With the Kinder Morgan switch, the NDP hoped to ~~locked~~ up the votes of many environmentalists and also get access to their volunteer energies to mobilize the vote in the end stages of the campaign. While these efforts appear to have been effective in several ridings, whatever benefit was gained was swamped by the broader province-wide wave of economic concern.

After so much hard work and confidence going into the election, the results are a stunning setback for the environmental community. To rub salt in the wounds, the shockingly low turnout is distressing to those who worked so hard to foster greater civic engagement through a renewed emphasis on grassroots mobilization.

There are still two massive pipelines with annual CO2 emissions of 175 million tonnes on the table. Environmental pressures were influential in moving Premier Clark to a more critical position on the two projects. It's time to regroup and plan how to refocus pressure on the government in power.