

ISSUES & IDEAS

Americans are meddling in B.C. politics

Election Act does not restrict activities of foreign groups in provincial political affairs, but maybe it should

VIVIAN KRAUSE



On Saturday, members of the B.C. Liberal party will choose a new leader who will immediately become the provincial premier, replacing Gordon Campbell. But who will those Liberal members be?

The party's membership has recently tripled, to 90,000 from 30,000. Bob Simpson, an Independent MLA from Cariboo North, points out that there's no guarantee that these people are real, that they are registered B.C. voters or even Canadian citizens.

There have been calls for Elections BC to take over the membership lists for all provincial political parties.

While a lot of fuss has been made over a cat and a hockey team that ended up on the Liberal party's membership list, there is a much bigger issue: A foreign-funded project called Organizing for Change.

Under the umbrella of Tides Canada, this project is a coalition of 10 environmental organizations: The B.C. Sustainable Energy Association, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, the Pembina Institute, Forest Ethics, Ecojustice, the Sierra Club, the Georgia Strait Alliance, Westcoast Environmental Law Research Foundation, the Dogwood Initiative and Wildsight.

Organizing for Change explicitly aims to influence the leadership picks of both the B.C. Liberals and New Democrats. The campaign is directly funded by the Wilburforce Foundation, based in Seattle, through the U.S. Tides Foundation (Tides USA), based in San Francisco. Their plan is clever.

"If you received this message, you live in a provincial riding with very few Liberal party members, probably less than 400," says an email from Organizing for Change.

My research into U.S. tax returns shows that since 2003, Wilburforce has paid Tides USA a total of \$329,000 that was specifically designated to support Organizing for Change, or its predecessor, the Environmental Resource Centre.

In 2010, Wilburforce paid Tides USA \$60,000 for "mapping of conservation values in British Columbia." One wonders what they mapped. In 2005, Wilburforce granted funds specifically for a "youth voting initiative" that would "give B.C. environmental groups access to a segment of the population that they are otherwise not usually exposed to."

At its own website, Wilburforce doesn't say that Organizing for Change aims to sway the political process in a foreign country, which is against the rules. Wilburforce says that this project is "to support and promote collaboration among environmental organizations."

Another Tides Canada project is Open Media, the group that claims to have mobilized 400,000 Canadians to oppose user-based Internet billing.

That was "the largest online action in Canadian history," says Open Media.

This shows just how powerful one of Tides Canada's Internet-mobilization projects can be.

"We're not encouraging one party or



IAN LINDSAY/VANCOUVER SUN FILES

American influence in B.C. politics is rampant, but Elections BC has said that there is 'nothing to investigate.'

the other. It almost doesn't matter," says Organizing for Change.

That misses the point.

The issue here is not only about whether a registered charity is non-partisan. The issues are foreign influence and ethics.

This campaign even prompted outrage from veteran B.C. leftists such as Murray Dobbin. In a recent commentary in *The Vancouver Sun*, he called the strategy "profoundly dishonest" and "an insult" to progressive activists everywhere.

The reason Dobbin objects is because environmental organizations, which he supports, are encouraging voters to join the Liberal party just so that they can vote on the new leader — even if they have no intention of voting Liberal in an election.

"It is essentially political fraud," he wrote.

"That progressive groups would do this is truly disgusting" and a betrayal of the "highest possible ethical standards. What on Earth were these groups thinking?" he asked.

It's not what these groups were thinking that is most worrisome: It is what the American funders of Organizing for Change are thinking that is cause for concern.

Back in 2001, Wilburforce paid the B.C. Environmental Network "to facilitate a strategic and coordinated response to political change in B.C."

In 2002, Wilburforce paid Tides Canada "to construct an ongoing entity similar to the League of Conservation Voters or the Washington Environmental Alliance for Voter Education that would enhance the effectiveness of B.C. environmental organizations through enhanced membership

lists, targeted messaging and capacity building."

The member organizations of Organizing for Change are paid well over \$1 million per year from five U.S. foundations: Wilburforce, Brainerd, Bullitt, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. All five foundations fund projects that would block Canadian oil exports to Asia and give the U.S. a virtual monopoly on Canadian oil exports.

Wilburforce is funded by James Letwin and his wife, Rosanna, friends of Bill Gates, and part of the original group that gave rise to Microsoft.

Since 1999, the Letwins have given \$80 million to Wilburforce, including nearly \$54 million in Microsoft shares.

The only part of the entire west coast of North America where Wilburforce funds a large-scale "environmental" initiative is the north coast of British Columbia — right smack where tankers would need to travel if Alberta oil is to be exported to Asia. One of the members of Organizing for Change is the Dogwood Initiative, based in Victoria.

Wilburforce specifically paid Tides USA for the Dogwood Initiative "to devolve control over land in B.C.'s central coast to first nations."

Since 2001, Wilburforce has paid a total of \$2.5 million to Tides USA and Tides Canada.

Of that, \$94,000 was explicitly for the Dogwood Initiative which has 70,000 members in its No Tankers campaign. When the Dogwood Initiative tries to sway the Liberal and the NDP leadership nominations through Organizing for Change, Canadians need to ask where their funding is coming from — and why. Wilburforce support goes far beyond its grants for specific projects.

For example, Wilburforce bought laptops for activists for Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, Tides Canada and others.

Over the same period, Wilburforce paid Greenpeace for a project titled Consolidating the win in British Columbia.

What win?

Since 2007 alone, Wilburforce has paid more than \$120,000 in "leadership awards" (\$5,000 to \$10,000 each) to individual environmentalists.

Wilburforce also funds a program called Training Resources for the Environmental Community, granting \$7.6 million since 2000. Most of the training seems to be for online advocacy and media relations, Facebook and Twitter.

The website of Organizing for Change is by Groundwire, a Seattle-based organization. Since 2000, Groundwire and its predecessor, One Northwest, have been paid \$1.8 million by Brainerd, Bullitt and Wilburforce.

In 2009, Groundwire handled 60 websites and 44 database projects, according to its tax return. Another way that foundations support their agendas is through consultants. In 2009 alone, Tides USA and Tides Canada paid consultants \$14 million and \$56 million, respectively. Tides Canada isn't saying who they are or what their consultants do.

One would think that Elections BC would look into this attempt by an American foundation to meddle in B.C. politics. Surprisingly, Elections BC has said that there is "nothing for Elections BC to investigate."

The Election Act does not restrict the activities of foreign groups in B.C. political matters. It should.

Vivian Krause is a researcher and writer based in North Vancouver.

Reduced waiting times are good for our health

BRIAN DAY



As we, and those vying for political leadership in British Columbia, debate the merits of the HST, let's accept that while none of us likes to pay taxes, it is logical that a single tax is simpler and cheaper to administer than multiple taxes (GST and PST).

For me, the biggest reason to support the HST in the upcoming referendum is our government's promise that any extra revenue generated by HST will go into health care.

That commitment offers B.C. the opportunity to create Canada's best and most comprehensive health system — one without waiting lists for necessary consultations, tests and procedures.

That can only happen if the increased funding is linked to transformation of the system. I propose reforms, based partly on the Swiss and Dutch health systems, that would give all B.C. residents not only basic Medicare, but an added guarantee of timely access, supplemented by extended health coverage for drugs, dentistry, physiotherapy, braces and ambulance.

In B.C., more than two-thirds of our residents already have extended health coverage. They are insured through employer-supported benefits, independent private plans, the armed forces, Worksafe BC, the RCMP and even the federal prison system.

About half of the remaining 1.2 million residents do not purchase coverage, even though they could afford to.

Under the proposed plan, they would be compelled to insure themselves in a manner analogous to the current requirement for MSP coverage (or car insurance).

The remaining 600,000 individuals — about 200,000 families — cannot presently afford to buy extended health insurance. In our current system, they are underinsured, underprivileged and have unequal access to health care. Under the suggested plan, their premiums would be funded by government at an estimated annual cost per family of \$125 a month.

This would total about \$300 million a year (two per cent of B.C.'s annual health budget). As a condition of participation, the health-insurance companies will not be able to turn down high-risk applicants, nor charge higher premiums based on risk. As a benefit, they will get over one million new policy holders.

All extended insurance plans would be expanded to include a care guarantee for patients who wait longer than 90 days for a "medically necessary" investigation or procedure. After that time, the plan would cover care up to a prescribed annual maximum of \$5,000.

Patients could choose where to go (in or out of province, public or private). A similar care guarantee has been proposed previously by the Kirby Senate Committee and the Canadian Medical Association. It has been a vital component linked to patient-focused funding in England.

Under this scheme, B.C. would have by far the best health system in Canada. It would be truly comprehensive, universal, accessible and portable.

The increased funding from the HST, supplemented by the large additional infusion of private capital into the health system, would slow the relentless and unsustainable rise in health spending by governments.

Time spent suffering and waiting for treatment robs the economy of workers, both patients and caregivers.

A Canadian Medical Association study on the cost of waiting times in Canada revealed that the cumulative economic cost, in the short term, of waiting for treatment across just four areas — joint replacement surgery and MRIs for instance — in 2007 was \$14.8 billion. The health and timely treatment of Canadians is not only important in itself, but should be a key priority in the overall economic strategy of governments.

The lack of timely treatment in Canada explains why studies that compared our health system with those of 29 European countries with universal care placed Canada last in value for money. (We were close to the top in overall spending.)

Dr. Brian Day is a former president of the Canadian Medical Association and an orthopedic surgeon practising in Vancouver.

B.C. environmentalists engaged in voter education

BY LISA MATTHAUS

Our crystal ball is malfunctioning. Yet there are those who seem to think we've got access to divine foresight. It's been asserted in a few opinion pieces that we have been planning since 2007, or maybe 2003, to influence the outcome of the current leadership races. If only we were so clairvoyant.

The real story? On Dec. 6, 2010, Carole James stepped down as leader of the Opposition. With her resignation, British Columbia's two major political parties were suddenly in concurrent leadership races. After seven years at the helm for James, and 17 years for Gordon Campbell, they both decide to call it a day within a month of each other.

Organizing for Change (OFC), a project of Tides Canada, recognized a unique opportunity to undertake a non-partisan, voter-education initiative. We let supporters and the public know that this was an unprecedented chance to make environmental issues a key topic of debate for both parties.

We sent four emails broadly and also

emailed the 12 leadership candidates (of both parties) requesting responses to key environmental questions. This was a largely online endeavour with minimal cost, yet we reached out to over 100,000 British Columbians encouraging them to engage all candidates who want to lead our province on issues of environmental concern.

The objectives of OFC in general are to convene strategic discussions among its member organizations and to increase civic engagement regarding environmental issues. These objectives are determined by OFC and its members, all leading B.C. environmental organizations, as are the plans to achieve them. Suggestions that OFC's funders — both Canadian and American — are influencing OFC or the B.C. political process are unfounded.

We're working to close what polls show is a big gap between the strong environmental values held by British Columbians, across the political spectrum, and the environmental issues addressed by government.

Ideally, all parties, all politicians, need to see their environmental performance as a key measure to which

they will be held accountable in every election.

Just as all parties recognize it's imperative to be seen as competent managers of B.C.'s economy, they also should feel the need to demonstrate their abilities as stewards of our precious environment.

One of the ways we do this is through voter education that encourages people with strong environmental values to have a bigger voice in a whole range of civic forums available to British Columbians.

We do not donate to political parties, as do lots of corporations. Our role is to inform and encourage voters to engage in the political process, at a time when more and more people are opting out, and to take their environmental and social values into the voting booth with them. Hardly subversive.

International boundaries are artificial when it comes to the environment. Rivers, and the fish that inhabit them, cross borders; air-sheds mingle; biodiversity — both animals and plants — migrate without passports; and global warming is, well, global.

As well, B.C. remains a place of

unmatched opportunity for environmental protection given the large tracts of intact ecosystems (compared to the rest of North America), species diversity and environmental awareness.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that support for environmental conservation also crosses borders, seeking out the best opportunities for protection and improvement. This is particularly appropriate as capital flows are increasingly global, and fewer and fewer of B.C.'s and Canada's big resource companies can be said to be exclusively "Canadian."

If there's a "fair question" to be asked, it might be more usefully focused on the financing and control of resource companies and the political donations they make, rather than on activities that encourage the citizens of British Columbia to bring their environmental concerns to the attention of those who wish to lead us.

Lisa Matthaus is provincial lead for Organizing for Change. OFC worked with its members Dogwood Initiative, Ecojustice, Georgia Strait Alliance, West Coast Environmental Law and Wildsight on this voter education initiative.

COMMENTARY

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