

DISPATCH: THE PREMIER'S CHANGING POSITIONS

Campbell's about-faces on key issues a gamble that seems to be paying off

JUSTINE HUNTER
JHUNTER@GLOBEANDMAIL.COM
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VICTORIA -- Political flip-flops are usually interpreted as a sign of weakness - at best. Think of Pierre Trudeau's promise never to impose wage and price controls. Jean Chrétien's vow to replace the GST. Brian Mulroney's opposition to free trade with the United States.

Premier Gordon Campbell has executed a few about-faces in his seven years in office, most recently with an election gag law that surpasses the one he once opposed as an "inexcusable" assault on democracy.

Mr. Campbell campaigned as a leader who would cut taxes, slash spending and shrink the size of government.

This week, his government enacted laws that create a new carbon tax, boost government spending and increase the number of provincial politicians.

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When he won the 2001 election, he declared the province would be a destination where people and businesses would want to move and invest. Cutting red tape would be a priority. "It's a British Columbia that's open for investment," he promised.

Today, climate change has taken precedence over the investment climate.

His was a government that flirted with offshore oil and mining in parks. Last month it announced, out of the blue, a moratorium on all uranium exploration.

Between such big changes and sometimes smaller, symbolic ones, investors are starting to see British Columbia once again as unpredictable terrain.

In an interview this week, Mr. Campbell endorsed a decision by his Environment Minister to essentially pull the plug on a \$350-million independent power project. The Run of River Inc. proposal on the Pitt River sparked strong public opposition but before it could even finish a consultation process, Barry Penner announced he would not allow the company to put a power line through Pinecone Burke Provincial Park.

"Open for business doesn't mean open for any business anywhere, any time," Mr. Campbell clarified. "The minister was trying to protect a proponent from a long process that had very little opportunity for success."

The proponent, Run of River's Jako Krushnisky, doesn't see the cancellation as a favour, and his investors have joined a growing club of disenchanted business people who suspect they misread Mr. Campbell.

The B.C. business community believed they had an ally in the West Annex when Mr. Campbell took office. Now they see an activist government wrapping them up in green tape.

But that disappointment doesn't yet pose much of a risk to Mr. Campbell's re-election chances. Business isn't going to turn en masse back to the New Democratic Party, blamed for the province's poor economic performance in the 1990s. And there is no viable party to the right of the B.C. Liberals.

So that leaves Mr. Campbell safe to focus on swing voters. And a recent poll suggests he has found at least one case where a change of heart can be politically profitable.

In August of 2006, slightly more than half of British Columbians polled identified the NDP as the best party for the environment. Fewer than one in five picked Mr. Campbell's Liberals.

In early 2007, the Premier latched onto climate change with an aggressive commitment to reduce greenhouse gases.

That seems to be paying off, pollster Greg Lyle has found. A recent Innovative Research Group survey of 853 British Columbians found the Liberals were up seven percentage points on the environment, while the NDP was down 15 percentage points. For those who can't swallow Mr. Campbell as an environmentalist, it seems, the Greens are looking better.

"This huge drop on the environment says something big is happening in terms of how the NDP is positioned with British Columbians," Mr. Lyle concluded.

There is territory where more change could benefit the Liberals. The same poll showed Mr. Campbell's strongest negatives are on social issues such as health care and poverty.

And that's a weakness that will be underscored in the coming weeks.

With the legislative session behind him this week, Mr. Campbell is now turning his attention to a cabinet shuffle that will set the tone for the next election campaign, less than a year away.

He'll need to fill the key finance post to replace the departing Carole Taylor, who has been one of the strongest progressive voices in his cabinet.

Three other cabinet ministers in the same camp as Ms. Taylor are either leaving or thinking about it. Employment Minister Claude Richmond and Labour Minister Olga Illich won't run again, and Attorney-General Wally Oppal is still debating whether he wants to stay in the game for another term.

At least part of that faction is frustrated with the lack of progress on social policy in Mr. Campbell's government. And if most or all end up out of cabinet because they aren't running again, it is hard to conceive that even the flexible Mr. Campbell will change his ideological spots on social policy.

Then and now

Third-party advertising

When the then-NDP government introduced legislation to limit third-party spending during election campaigns, Liberal Leader Gordon Campbell denounced the "gag law" as unconstitutional and a restriction of freedom of speech.

Yesterday, his government forced passage of a bill that not only limits third-party advertising during an election campaign, but also in the two months leading up to the campaign.

The number of MLAs

In 1995, Mr. Campbell and his party pledged to cut the number of MLAs to between 50 and 60. "I have yet to have any British Columbian tell me the answer to our problem is more politicians," he said at the time.

This session, the law was changed to add six more seats to a total of 85, with Mr. Campbell leading the charge for the increase.

Native treaty rights

Ten years ago, as leader of the opposition, Mr. Campbell mounted a fierce campaign against the Nisga'a treaty, calling it an "untried, impractical, bureaucratic nightmare" that would entrench "inequality based on race."

Now Mr. Campbell is a proud signatory to the Tsawwassen treaty that essentially mirrors the Nisga'a deal.

Sale of BC Rail

In the 2001 election campaign, Mr. Campbell promised "not to sell or privatize BC Rail."

Two years later he signed a

\$1-billion deal to sell BC Rail to Canadian National Railway Co.

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