

Lessons from Vancouver: Labour and Greens can get along

Sawatzky, Karen . Sawatzky, Karen.

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The Greens, too, knew there was nowhere to go but up, and in early 1997, the party leaders began talking. Not that it all came together smoothly. COPE forces were demoralized, and floated all kinds of drastic options among themselves. Wilson credits the Vancouver and District Labour Council for standing firm in its support of the party.

"When all of that disarray was around us, creating confusion and disillusionment, at a certain point the labour council said, 'No, there is going to be a campaign. COPE is our traditional ally and we're committing the labour movement in Vancouver to get COPE back into civic government.'"

"[The alliance] wasn't an easy sell," Kisby said, "because a lot of the people in the Green party tend to stick with their policies. They're more interested in, say, their policies succeeding than electoral success itself. There was a worry that if we entered into some sort of alliance that our policies would be watered down."

Cadman, widely agreed to be an articulate spokesperson for the coalition, said the main point that activists can take from the Vancouver experience, and one that applies from Victoria as well, is that labour and environmentalists are better off cooperating than competing. He hopes Vancouver's Voice can serve as an example of how to do that.

"Pulling together this progressive coalition, if you will, of both COPE, Greens and independents is part of beginning to build a grassroots political movement -- and beginning to make change civically," he said. "For far too long, we have conceded city hall to business interests."

FULL TEXT

The Green Party and Vancouver's long-standing left party, the Coalition of Progressive Electors, decided to work together for the first time last year, to fight the November, 1999, civic election, and though the alliance had its share of tense moments, the results were unexpectedly rewarding.

Both COPE and the Vancouver Greens had been shut out of the civic election in 1996 -- a discouragingly familiar situation for the Greens, and a devastating defeat for COPE, which was struggling to gain on the one council seat and two places each on the school board and park board it won in 1993.

Starved of civic representation, it's been a grim three years for Vancouver progressives. While anti-poverty groups protested, there was little else they could do as the right-of-centre Non-Partisan Association used its monopoly to push through such measures as an anti-panhandling bylaw that opens the door to levying fines on "aggressive" beggars.

Cope-Greens Win Six of 27 Seats

But now there's reason for at least limited optimism. The COPE-Green coalition, calling itself Vancouver's Voice, won six of the 27 local government seats. COPE was the biggest winner with candidates Tim Louis and Dr. Fred Bass elected to council and Adrienne Montani, Al Blakey and Allan Wong elected as school trustees. But the Greens had a breakthrough as well, with Roslyn Cassells elected as a park commissioner.

Although celebration of Cassells' win was muted by her decision to split from coalition just days before the November 20 election, she was still elected as a Green, and efforts to repair the rift are underway.

Despite the setback, both camps say the alliance was successful.

"We had really low expectations going in, we thought if we got one person elected to school board, it would likely be COPE, and that would be a breakthrough, that would be great," said Steve Kisby, campaign strategist for the Greens. It was really the dismal results of the 1996 election that paved the way for the COPE-Green alliance.

"You hate to put it in these terms, but it was in many respects a make-or-break year for COPE," said Fred Wilson, campaign co-chair for the coalition.

The Greens, too, knew there was nowhere to go but up, and in early 1997, the party leaders began talking. Not that it all came together smoothly. COPE forces were demoralized, and floated all kinds of drastic options among themselves. Wilson credits the Vancouver and District Labour Council for standing firm in its support of the party.

"When all of that disarray was around us, creating confusion and disillusionment, at a certain point the labour council said, 'No, there is going to be a campaign. COPE is our traditional ally and we're committing the labour movement in Vancouver to get COPE back into civic government.'"

The decision to work together was reinforced by a poll commissioned in early September, which showed that a joint COPE-Green slate would attract more voters than just the sum of each party's own supporters. "The combination of the two [parties] genuinely made sense to people," Wilson said.

The poll also showed that Vancouver's left voters weren't looking for a totally new party. They were still attached to COPE, and with the help of the Greens, the party fought its way back from near-extinction without "changing the flag" as Wilson put it.

"Sometimes the left gets on hard times and there's no shortcut back," he said. "So I think there is a bit of a lesson there for us."

Focusing on Values Rather than Detail

Although the two organizations are unevenly matched in terms of size, budgets and traditions, something both share is a tendency to attract members fondly described as "policy wonks" -- and this, too, presented challenges.

"[The alliance] wasn't an easy sell," Kisby said, "because a lot of the people in the Green party tend to stick with their policies. They're more interested in, say, their policies succeeding than electoral success itself. There was a worry that if we entered into some sort of alliance that our policies would be watered down."

Partly in response, campaign organizers decided to de-emphasize detailed prescriptions and focus instead on values and priorities. The coalition--plugged increased public transit, better schools, open government, safer neighbourhoods and cleaner air and drinking water as its main issues.

The final verdict on the degree to which either party's principles were compromised is not yet in. Certainly some Green Party members feel their fears were justified, Kisby said, but ironically, it was mainly the newer members of the party who were most resistant to the alliance. The older members, who had negotiated terms with COPE, had to sway the newer members who were nominated as candidates.

Broadening the Alliance

The strategy was always to broaden the alliance beyond the boundaries of just COPE and the Greens. With the governing NPA portraying itself as the fount of stability and competence and taking credit for a drop in the city's crime rate, COPE and the Greens wanted to avoid getting pegged as fringe. That led to the controversial decision to give two of the ten coalition council slate spaces to independent candidates. One of them went to incumbent councillor Nancy Chiavario, previously dumped from the NPA slate during its nomination process. Chiavario had a reputation as a maverick who was sometimes willing to stand up for social issues, but she was still perceived as centrist.

"The relationship with Nancy really was one, to some degree, of convenience, in that we wanted to broaden our slate somewhat and she had no place to go, said Ruth Herman, a COPE campaign cochair. "We were quite particular with her in terms of getting her to agree to take certain positions in order to be on our slate."

There were some people, obviously," she added, "who weren't keen on us making an alliance with someone who had come from the centre." But, she said, "we thought that the political message was key, that we all have to learn to work together with other people who share the same broad perspective that we do."

The inclusiveness strategy was only partly successful, however, because several progressive candidates, including some who had previously run for the Greens or COPE, ran either as independents or with their own brand-new slates.

"One of the things we're obviously going to be trying to do is to look for a broader base of unity over the next three years that will really unite an alternative," said David Cadman, an environmentalist and union activist who was the coalition's mayoral candidate.

The prospects for unity are enhanced by the fact that, despite the glitches over competing press releases and allocation of a budget that came largely from COPE's traditional allies in the union movement, goodwill between the two parties is intact.

"Going into this, I did personally expect more problems than there were," Kisby said, adding that he'd like to continue the relationship. Working together between elections would likely make future joint campaigns smoother, at least internally.

"It was a very sort of a loosey-goosey agreement we had," Kisby explained. "We just didn't have time to flesh it out, so we found ourselves actually in the election dealing with stuff that could have been negotiated earlier." Most important, he said, would be to establish a means of resolving policy conflicts when faced with a deadline.

"That's the biggest recommendation because that's where we had problems."

Victoria, too

Meanwhile, the Greens are looking across the water to their sister party, which formed a looser alliance with the NDP-affiliated Victoria Civic Electors. Although that campaign was not as tightly integrated as Vancouver's, the Greens placed one of their own on city council and the VCE snagged two seats for themselves. It's the first time the Greens have won a council seat in a major B.C. city and it will mean a significant boost in profile and credibility.

Cadman, widely agreed to be an articulate spokesperson for the coalition, said the main point that activists can take from the Vancouver experience, and one that applies from Victoria as well, is that labour and environmentalists are better off cooperating than competing. He hopes Vancouver's Voice can serve as an example of how to do that.

"Pulling together this progressive coalition, if you will, of both COPE, Greens and independents is part of beginning to build a grassroots political movement -- and beginning to make change civically," he said. "For far too long, we have conceded city hall to business interests."

Karen Sawatzky is a Vancouver free-lance journalist.

Photograph (Mayor Owen, David Cadman, NPA councillor Gordon Price)

DETAILS

Subject:	International; Political parties; Politics; Elections
Location:	Canada; British Columbia Canada; Vancouver British Columbia Canada
Company:	Green Party of Canada
Classification:	9172: Canada
Publication title:	Canadian Dimension; Winnipeg
Volume:	34
Issue:	2
Pages:	17-18
Publication year:	2000
Publication date:	Mar/Apr 2000

Publisher:	Canadian Dimension
Place of publication:	Winnipeg
Country of publication:	Canada
Publication subject:	Political Science
ISSN:	00083402
Source type:	Magazine
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Feature
Document feature:	Illustrations
Accession number:	SFLNSICDI1102CDJB899000080
ProQuest document ID:	204194513
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/central/magazines/lessons-vancouver-labour-greens-can-get-along/docview/204194513/sem-2?accountid=5705
Copyright:	Copyright Canadian Dimension Mar/Apr 2000
Last updated:	2014-05-18
Database:	Canadian Business & Current Affairs Database, ProQuest Central

LINKS

Database copyright © 2025 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)