

**The New Left, ratepayer conservatism  
and the collapse of the Coalition of Progressive Electors**

Last fall, the Coalition of Progressive Electors, Vancouver's second-oldest political party and one of only three ever to govern the city was annihilated. Its mayoral candidate won the support of a mere one-in-six Vancouverites and all of its twenty candidates were defeated, the party placing fourth, in the case of council and parks board, and fifth in the school board election. From 1968 to 2013, with the exception of a three-year period in the 90s, COPE had held at least one seat in Vancouver's municipal government, typically comprising the second-largest delegation of elected representatives. As with a number of other serious political fiascos in this region in the past twenty-five years, I was involved in this embarrassment and got to see first-hand both the ways in which human error contributed to this rout and some of the structural forces underpinning the party's long-term decline.

To comprehend the demise of COPE and assess its significance in the political life of the city, it is necessary to place the party and its recent history in context. The first, most obvious context, that of the peculiar recent history of the Vancouver left, its factions and alliances is one that has been exhaustively examined in Vancouver media and the polemics of the various small factions of activists that comprised COPE a decade ago but, by 2014, had formed into four, possibly five separate parties.

More rigorous work to understand COPE's demise within the broad sweep of Anglo-American municipal politics, the work of this paper, is work that has been, in relative terms, neglected up to the present. In a party that prides itself on a materialist, structuralist analysis, it is curious just how often COPE's Marx-informed strategists chose to comprehend adverse

developments in terms of individual moral failings of individual bad actors, rather than using sharp analytical tools at their disposal.

This analysis begins by picking up some of those neglected tools, especially the recent work of Marianna Valverde, *Everyday Law on the Street* covering Toronto municipal politics and Ira Katznelson's classic *City Trenches*. Both focus on the dynamic interaction between culture, law and institution in their analyses, as York political scientist Denis Pilon exhorts all scholars studying electoral outcomes to do.

Every major North American civic government was assailed in the 1930s by reformers calling themselves "progressives" who sought to substantially reform municipal voting. With ideas coming from the right wing of Rooseveltian progressivism and the business elites of America's National Civic Federation, as distinct from Robert La Follette's left-progressivism, reformers saw widespread voter participation and democratic institutions as impediments to the progressive goals of eliminating corruption and establishing rational, technocratic governance. Their recipe for ending what they perceived as widespread graft, mismanagement and a spoils system of patronage was to amalgamate single-member municipal wards into enormous, high-population multi-member districts, reductions in the number of city councillors per capita and the transfer of most planning and governance functions from the elected council to a local Mandarinate headed by a senior civil servant called the "city manager." Taken together, this system was called "commission governance" and was advanced as an alternative to the parochial ward systems that had emerged in the nineteenth century.

The City of Vancouver must be understood as exceptional in the North American context in the durability and totality of the victory of its right-progressives in the 1930s. Unlike reformers in other major Canadian cities, Vancouver reformers got everything they asked for and

then some. Because of their alignment with a local anti-socialist provincial “Non-Partisan” movement, progressive reformers had their proposals alloyed with other measures even more effective at depressing voter turnout and limiting voter choice: unlimited spending and fundraising and a multi-member plurality voting system. While all North American cities made steps towards the progressive ideal of commission governance, Vancouver was one of tiny handful of cities that completed *and retained* these reforms throughout the postwar era.

One of the most important upshots of this was the marginalization of local ratepayer groups. Whereas cities that used proportional voting systems like Winnipeg, or maintained or slightly adulterated their single-member plurality wards, like Toronto, continued to have an important role for ratepayer groups, Vancouver pushed these groups to the margins, resulting in them dying out completely in certain areas. Even the wealthy and influential West Kerrisdale had no residents’ association until the 1990s. Not only were neighbourhood groups of property owners maladapted to function as political actors in a city-wide voting system, especially in the one-party state that Vancouver was from 1937 to 1972, other functions of these groups were absorbed into the state itself. A system of community centres was developed that turned local residents’ groups into QuaNGOs (quasi-non-governmental organizations); neighbourhood groups were given the right to administer civic facilities, raise funds to expand them and dispense civic largesse in running their programs through whatever mixture of volunteers and employees they found suitable.

By effectively converting most ratepayer groups into dependent clients of the city’s “non-partisan” bureaucracy, these groups ceased to be the powerful political force they remain in cities like Toronto. Of course, that is not to say that some groups of rate-payers were not able to win preferential treatment for their neighbourhoods as Vancouver’s political system matured.

Shaughnessy, West Point Grey and other wealthy areas enjoyed favouritism because of their residents' disproportionate presence in the organizations that truly mattered, like the Vancouver Club, Terminal City Club and, of course the Non-Partisan Association board of directors: organizations whose relevance stemmed from their brokerage of large donations from Vancouver's wealthiest citizens and largest corporations to the candidates who formed majorities of city council.

As in all Anglo-American cities, Vancouver's governance model was substantially stressed during the 1960s and 70s. Generational and cultural shifts associated with the Baby Boom, New Left and Counterculture, manifesting first in the expanding university system challenged various loci of intra-elite consensus. If one were to generalize the various currents of social movement activism, academic thought and political demands associated with the 70s New Left into a single word, that word would be "participation." Both the formal state and the institutional apparatus surrounding it faced calls to become more participatory, more interactive. Following the intellectual trail blazed by Jane Jacobs' challenge to early Cold War theories of healthy communities and urban space, New Left activists and civil servants came to see more citizen-government interaction and more intra-citizenry interaction as a clear public good.

Paradoxically, however, institutional, process and policy changes with a goal of increased participation were paired with a renewed emphasis on right-progressive ideas of non-partisanship and technocracy. Problems of gendered, racialized and class-based inequity inherent in processes that demand substantial investments of volunteer hours and leisure time were to be solved through an intensification of patron-client relationships between civic bureaucracies and marginalized groups. While technocratic paternalism continued to structure those parts of civic administration built by early twentieth-century progressive reformers remained, key values came

to be inverted: the technocratic state's distant, transparent, seamless, managerial face was to be replaced with a warm, consultive, local, available one. This warm, consultive face, Katzlenson observes, reinstated clientage relationships between citizens and government, lost in the assault on the ward boss, spoils system of patronage. But this new kind of clientage was far more vertical in character: New Left patrons needed nothing from clients, their legitimacy and authority conferred from the city manager from above, not local citizens from below.

The mayoralties of John Sewell in Toronto and Art Philips in Vancouver in the 1970s were part of a broader, continent-wide period of generational intra-elite power shifts between factions of the educated bourgeoisie centred around questions of participation. And this conflict split continues to shape the politics of most major Anglo-American cities. However, the way this split had shaken down in Vancouver is rare and highly distinctive, owing to the extent and durability of the institutional, cultural and legal framework of commission government.

First, organized labour plays a much more important role in Vancouver's partisan political system. Multi-member plurality voting and an absence of election finance reform has meant that the contribution of volunteer labour, typically extracted from ratepayer groups, individual donations, typically extracted from ratepayer activists and organizational infrastructure, typically extracted from this same constituency, are dwarfed by the contributions made by, on the right, elite business associations and cabals and, on the left, organized labour, particularly labour unions whose employees are direct employees of the municipal government. While Vancouver's conservative and liberal media cover ratepayer activists and groups as though they are major players in our city's politics, in part because they are in most other cities and, in part because they are the main activists engaged on civic issues outside of election periods, these activists are essentially bystanders in our political system. When these groups

succeed at altering the course of city policy, it is not, primarily, through local groups like the Grandview-Woodlands Area Council or West Kerrisdale Residents' Association but through the work of allied business, labour and, more recently, environmental group contacts. While these groups are powerful civic political actors in culturally-similar cities like Toronto; they, and their leadership actually exert more power provincially and federally, where donations and spending are capped, single-member wards have been retained and local infrastructure micro-spoils remain part of the system

This difference has caused Vancouver politics to diverge substantially from other cities in the past two generations of efforts to bridge the intra-elite divide between advocates of an impersonal, distant technocratic state and advocates of a clientage-based participatory technocratic state. Throughout Anglo-America, there has been a gradual convergence of ratepayer organizing and New Left organizing because of both cultural and material convergence. As Baby Boomers have become the most significant group of property owners and ratepayers in our cities, the inherent elitism of the New Left's love affair with Athenian democracy has cohabited well with the kinds of technocratically-brokered consultation processes built by the new Mandarins of the 70s. Calls for "community consultation" and "neighbourhood governance" are increasingly seamless with the material interests of educated, white property owners with a New Left, New Age cultural aesthetic. Hailing from the same original, pre-1784 British North American elite, the Vietnam War resisters and Family Compact heirs of Toronto look equally good in their corduroys and tweeds at town hall meetings, secure in the knowledge that the meeting facilitator at the front of the room is one of them.

But in Vancouver, the story is somewhat different. Continent-wide educational and cultural convergence between the technocrats of right-progressive municipal mandarinates and

ratepayers has been challenged, at the institutional level, by the irrelevance of ratepayers in civic politics and the political hegemony of the real estate industry, with brief and occasional interruptions by labour-backed insurgent regimes. Equally importantly, the right-progressive non-partisan ideology of real estate elites at the top managerial levels of civic government, and the New Left, Jane Jacobs sensibility of most urban planners and civil engineers has engendered a divided civil service, the bottom of which forms an important part of Vancouver's labour-backed parties. It is through these parties that junior technocrats can concurrently represent their material interests through the kinds of conservative labour syndicalism we see in doctors' and lawyers' labour organizations and their ideological position. It is out of this kind of syndical organizing that COPE staged its political comeback in 1999 under the leadership of disgruntled, ex-Mandarin whistleblower David Cadman.

The party system that obtained in Vancouver from 1980 to 2005 was one in which an unwieldy, unstable coalition was assembled around the substantial donations of CUPE, the union representing civic workers, VSTA, the unions representing Vancouver teachers and the Vancouver and District Labour Council. In 1980, this coalition was able to wrest control from the right-progressives of the Non-Partisan Association with the support of the new property owners of the Baby Boom generation, ratepayer activists, leftists and working class voters. From 1980 to 1993, this coalition comprised three political parties: the leftist, union-backed COPE, the Civic New Democrats and TEAM, a collapsing coalition of Liberals and New Democrats that had governed the city briefly in the 70s; but, more importantly, it enjoyed the support of a broad, incoherent coalition with little in common beyond a shared enmity for the conservative real estate elites of the NPA. The coalition was able to govern for its first six years, largely because of the Arbutus Club factor, embodied in leader Mike Harcourt.

Vancouver's main associational hubs for civic elites have traditionally been the Vancouver Club, Terminal City Club, Board of Trade, Royal Vancouver Yacht Club, Shaughnessy Golf and Country Club and Vancouver Lawn Tennis Club (whose receipt of a substantial grant of expensive real estate helped to bring about the perfect storm that defeated the NPA in 1980). The Arbutus Club emerged as a rival locus in West Shaughnessy in 1964, admitting newcomers and members whose racial, lineage and class backgrounds did not make the cut at the other key loci of associational power, focused more on professional class rather than investor class forms of networking. Arbutus Ridge resident, human rights lawyer and former civil servant Mike Harcourt epitomized that group and put them at ease with his otherwise-problematic coalition. Early in his mandate, the decision to institute traffic-calming for the region surrounding the club, while rejecting it elsewhere in the city, enabled him to retain the support of wealthy, professional Liberals until his departure for provincial politics in 1986.

From the coalition's defeat in 1986 through 1993, a gradual process of ideological and institutional consolidation and formalization began. While ratepayer groups remained peripheral in the processes of creating and running the big-tent party COPE became in 1993, through its formal amalgamation with the other forces in the Harcourt coalition, messaging that paid lip service to these groups became the basis of COPE's new brand identity, with its adoption, in 1992, of the slogan "It's About Neighbourhoods." From 1992, until its election to a majority government in 2002, COPE's decision-makers primarily comprised city workers seeking a syndicalist relationship with the city, regional labour leaders and provincial NDP heavyweights. But the party's messaging was designed to feature ratepayer discourses, personalities and policy concerns.



When people write about Vancouver civic politics from 2002 to 2005 and the collapse of the city's first and only COPE majority government, narratives of personal betrayal and resentment come to the fore. These stories tend to efface the broader structural reasons for the party's rapid loss of political power as well as the basic structure of business community and capitalist political organizing in Vancouver. Vancouver's NPA was formed in the 1930s as a municipal affiliate of N-PIG, the disastrously-named provincial political party that foreshadowed the successful creation of "the Coalition" later in the decade. The NPA and the Coalition, unlike the original N-PIG, understood that the most volatile, influential and valuable members of anti-left coalitions in BC are members of Canada's Liberal Party. Whereas the Coalition, which governed BC from 1937-52 was a formal locked alliance that gave the Liberals a permanent majority of cabinet and caucus seats, this was encoded informally in the structure of the NPA. Because Liberals can make short-term and situational alliances with social democrats, and because they comprise the majority of Vancouver's oldest and most influential gentry lineages, they maintain their positions as the dominant partners in anti-left coalitions because they retain the option of forming so-called centre-left alliances. Combined with the Arbutus Club scene, this group has withheld power from the NPA and installed itself at the head of centre-left coalitions on three occasions: in 1972 with Art Philips and TEAM, 1980 with Mike Harcourt and his coalition and in 2002 with prominent Liberal Larry Campbell at the head of COPE. In each case, this was a consequence of a Conservative insurgency seizing control of NPA, most recently, with Conservative Jennifer Clark's deposition of Liberal Mayor Philip Owen at the head of the ticket.

Leftists and labour leaders in COPE, between 2002 and 2005, were faced with the same choice that has faced Conservatives in the NPA on many occasions: recognize the Liberals as the dominant partner or risk them backing the other team. Most COPE voters and funders chose the

former option; but most COPE members chose the latter, resulting in an impoverished and disorganized COPE. From 2005 to 2013, COPE was controlled by a rump of NDP and labour-syndicalist organizers who functioned as brokers of the party's access to NDP workers and trade union funds. And from 2008 to 2013, the party functioned as the junior coalition partner in a Vision Vancouver majority government, the party that retained the lion's share of labour and NDP resources and personnel.

In 2011, I became involved in efforts to restore COPE to the position it had held from 1968 to 1980, prior to its incorporation into the Harcourt coalition. During that period, COPE functioned not as a centre-left brokerage party but as a hard-left opposition party built around the personality and organizational acumen of lawyer and city councillor Harry Rankin. My allies, a curious mix of long-time left-leaning COPE members such as Mel Lehan, Mike O'Neill, Tim Louis and Anita Romaniuk and young, entryist sectarian Marxists like Tristan Markle, Kim Hearty and Sean Antrim, drew a surprising proportion of their strength from unexpected allies: ratepayer activists. The importance of this group in the team I joined was not initially apparent to me; while Tim and Mel spent an inordinate amount of their political efforts on pandering to this group, I figured that ratepayer activists could not be *that* important a part of the coalition. After all, who was representing them at the meetings of our secret cabal at Louis's house in Kitsilano?

Of course, the answer to that question is contained in its last four words: *Tim's house in Kitsilano*, Louis's *1.99 million dollar* house in Kitsilano to be precise. In 2011, while claiming to comply with COPE's electoral cooperation agreement with Vision and, in one case, campaigning as a COPE candidate, Louis, Romaniuk and their friends had done their anti-Vision organizing work through Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver, a party that epitomized the ideological and material confluence of ratepayer and technocratic syndicalist organizing in

the person of the professional Baby Boomer homeowner. The group's leader, Elizabeth Murphy, another disgruntled Mandarin unhappy with the subordination of the civil service to a city manager clearly in the pocket of real estate interests, withdrew the party from the 2014 election to avoid splitting the vote with COPE and other fringe parties courting this vote like the Cedar Party.

NSV formed as a consequence of Vision's election to three back-to-back majority governments beginning in 2008 because it immediately became necessary for Vision to jettison the party's neighbourhood empowerment window-dressing and embrace the development agenda of the city's real estate industry and investor class. And, because ratepayer pandering had, since the 1980s, functioned not to mobilize a powerful or relevant social movement or political constituency but, instead, as a dog-whistle to reassure the Arbutus Club scene and the larger sweep of upper-middle class property owners that their interests would be catered-to, it was very easy for Vision Vancouver to turn its back on this powerless, high-maintenance, fractious sliver of the population.

Politically homeless yet convinced, by two decades of COPE propaganda, of their pivotal importance in the city's body politic, ratepayer activists have attempted various political strategies to find purchase in Vancouver politics since 2008. This paper does not speak to their efforts to reanimate the corpse of TEAM, to maintain NSV as a viable party, to make common cause with excluded Conservative, elite and real estate interests in the NPA but instead concludes with the fiasco that followed their efforts to seize control of COPE.

There is little evidence that the former socialists who populate this movement are self-conscious about the ways in which their ideology, with respect both to public policy and enacted micro-level politics has followed their changing class and material conditions. And this is to be

expected. The absence of self-consciousness of one's class position and social context is well-understood to be a magnifying factor in our rightward drift in the neoliberal era.

The faction I joined, Independent COPE, understood its purpose to be the emancipation of COPE from its alliance with Vision Vancouver so it could pursue a Rankin-esque hard-left political course and re-adopt the Rankin leadership style which mixed Marxist democratic centralism with charismatic grievance politics. Yet, there seemed a curious mismatch between the issues championed by Rankin's former confederates and the politics of COPE's deceased patriarch. The issues that animated the senior members of iCOPE were heritage property preservation, championing the rights of property owners to protect the aesthetics, character and income mix of their neighbourhoods, increasing and institutionalizing the power of local ratepayer groups, creating more exhaustive and demanding and, hence, exclusive public consultation processes, opposing Vision's nationalization of community centres in favour of returning their governance to fee-paying private clubs and opposing big-ticket rapid transit development.

The counterweights to the more senior members of iCOPE were, supposedly, representatives on its *ad hoc* governing body of younger and less white, Marxist and anarchist activists who seemed to possess a greater clarity on fundamental equity and democracy questions. But, as time went on, what became increasingly clear was that, like some of the less wealthy Baby Boomers who also sat on iCOPE, the votes of these individuals were constrained by their direct financial patronage by the wealthy, white Ché t-shirt-wearing property owners who controlled the group. The violent, sectarian cult, MAWO also known as Fire This Time, the subject of major exposés by *Macleans Magazine* and Ivan Drury, a presenter in the next conference session, was held in place through direct financial contributions by Louis, as well as

the provision of in-kind administrative services for which Louis paid the token anarchist on iCOPE (along with all of his own database and computer work). Other members were paid on commission for their cold calling and canvassing work, either individually, or, in the case of two members, donations to their own non-profit leftist society. These shockingly brazen and formal cash-for-signups, cash-for-calls, cash-for-rent-a-crowds and cash-for-votes relationships were made possible through the patron-client relationships immanent in the current neoliberal economic order, magnified by the Vancouver real estate bubble that is intensifying generational wealth disparities. New Left activists who settled in the kinds of hip neighbourhoods of which Jane Jacobs would have approved have enjoyed the biggest financial windfalls in this social context and are best able to utilize their newfound class privilege to re-describe defenses of their propertied interests as a project of emancipation and democratization, leavened by the elitism already implicit in New Left participatory democracy. As happens so often in our workplaces in the postsecondary sector, the most dangerous and frightening people are those who exhort us to help them “stick it to the man,” unconscious of the fact that they *are* The Man.

As soon as iCOPE seized control of COPE in 2013, my allies and I were the first of the former allies of the ratepayers to be set upon as we had no financial relationship with them and were not attracted to or dependent upon offers of minimum-wage labour and small sales and attendance commissions. Other activists with more tenuous financial links to iCOPE’s patrons ended up fighting them to a draw, first financially emancipating themselves from their former patrons and then out-organizing them for a series of meetings. However, this groups has, in turn been vanquished. With trade unions unwilling to donate to a rogue party committed neither to a substantive equity agenda nor willing to make common cause with labour’s new real estate industry allies, and with ratepayer activists either withholding their donations or concentrating

them on Louis and other COPE candidates with whom they could work, party finances dried up during the election. And, in order to finance the lawn signs, the young Marxists who were attempting to steer the campaign convinced COPE's mayoral candidate to covertly solicit donations from a real estate developer to pay the sign printer. In the aftermath of the electoral disaster of 2014, this crew has been pushed out in disgrace and the party has finally become the undisputed political home of Vancouver's ever-irrelevant ratepayer activists, a voice for aging wealthy home-owners who, for some strange reason wear Ché t-shirts and lionize a long-deceased hero of the civic left, who, I imagine, would have little more use for them than would the Cuban revolutionaries they imagine themselves to be.