

Influencing policy and policy influence: Connecting the dots on May 17th

We can't all be experts in all areas of public policy. **Andrea Long** relates some techniques for getting informed for May's provincial election.

WITH A PROVINCIAL ELECTION on our doorstep, many British Columbians will be thinking about influence—the theme of this issue of *SPARC BC News*. How can we, as individuals, influence the outcome of the election? How do the people we elect influence the direction of the political process? How do our governments' policy decisions influence us?

In May, British Columbians have a chance to register what they think about the ways in which the provincial government has chosen to exercise its influence over the past four years. Evaluating the policy decisions made by the province is an important part of this process. Policy decisions touch all aspects of our lives, from setting conditions of employment, to governing the use of our natural resources, to establishing regulations for the programs and services on which we rely.

So what can we do to determine whether provincial policies are helping us to realize the outcomes we want, while avoiding those that we

do not? While it certainly is not possible for each of us to become an expert on all policy issues, we can make some general considerations to help us guide our thinking.

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Policy Goals

To identify the direction a particular policy pushes, we need to first consider the goals of that policy. The first source for this information is the province itself; look for short summary materials available on government websites (including press releases), or large policy documents like the Speech from

the Throne, the provincial Budget, or election platform materials. Goal statements contained in these documents give us a first checkpoint that we can use to evaluate whether a policy is designed to deliver outcomes we want to achieve.

Unfortunately, nowhere is the phrase ‘the devil is in the details’ more apt than in translating general goals into concrete policy and legislation. ‘Big picture’ policy pitches are crafted in appealing, popular language. They tend to cap-

ture sentiments with which few people will disagree, but that can be pursued through such a wide range of specific actions that there is little to look to for guidance.

Take, for example, one of the five goals articulated in the recent B.C. Throne Speech—"To build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, those with special needs, children at risk, and seniors." While it is difficult to disagree with this statement on its surface, it tells us nothing about what kinds of improvements we need to make to get "the best system," what kinds of supports are considered to be "the best," or why only the four groups mentioned here deserve "the best" supports.

Answers to questions like these will give British Columbians the information they need to understand how the province intends to act on broad policy statements. These answers, however, are more difficult to find, but savvy voters can start their search with Ministry Service Plans. All Ministries produce an annual document setting out goals, objectives, and performance measures for each area of Ministerial responsibility. These Plans are a good starting point for looking beyond broad policy goal statements, and for asking candidates to explain their interpretation of 'big picture' commitments on the ground.

Opportunity Costs

'Opportunity costs' is economics language for the argument that if you spend all of your money buying apples, you won't be able to purchase oranges as well. The same thing applies to policy choices. Money spent in one area is unavail-

able to cover needs in other places. Infrastructure developed to support one course of action may be inconsistent with other approaches, making it more difficult to head in a different direction in the future if we learn that better options are available.

Consider an obvious example: a decision to cut taxes. Tax reductions decrease government revenue. Governments cannot fund the same level of services with less revenue, so tax cuts often are accompanied by cuts to programs and services. So an opportunity cost of tax cutting is the loss of those programs and services we can no longer pursue as a result of lost tax revenue.

The tax example helps us begin to see how one policy decision can help pave the way for other choices by making them appear more pressing or reasonable, just as cutting taxes can help governments argue for program and service reductions on the basis of affordability. In the

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A POWER ALTERNATIVE

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B.C. context, twin commitments to tax cuts and maintaining health and education funding have diminished social services spending over the last four years. This decrease has, in turn, motivated what is often described as a *targeted* approach to service provision—an approach in which priority access to support programs and services is assigned to certain ‘target’ groups (as compared to designing programs around a principle of universal access). Recall the Throne Speech goal of ensuring that the best supports are available to *persons with disabilities, those with special needs, children at risk, and seniors...*

Some of you may agree with basing social policy on targeted assistance, some of you may not. Regardless, we can all understand the way in which this approach is connected with, and

motivated by, other policy commitments chosen by the administration. In effect, reviewing policy performance in the light of opportunity costs helps us connect the dots between policy decisions, and to understand how choices in one area help make options appear more or less appropriate and feasible in others.

Conclusion

Our decisions as voters should be guided by a vision of the kind of British Columbia we want to have, and the kinds of communities in which we want to live. The goals we set for the policy process, and the opportunity costs we determine to be reasonable, are choices on which we have influence. Choose to exercise your influence on May 17, 2005. ■



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