

19 February 2013

British Columbians will soon vote in BC's 40th provincial election. Undoubtedly, your party will release a platform for voters to consider. IntegrityBC has a few ideas about what should be in it.

Our ideas don't have multimillion dollar price tags or naturally suit themselves to photo-ops, but they'll go a long way to helping restore the trust that all British Columbians must have in our political system. And because of that they are the most important commitments your party can make during the campaign.

IntegrityBC proposes a two-prong approach:

1. Reforming BC's Election Act and Local Government Act

Electoral finance reform

"(I)n this province, there are no rules to break...The Wild West approach to campaign donations fuels public cynicism and invites special-interest groups with lots of money to buy political influence." - Times Colonist

It's time to take big money out of BC politics by banning corporate, union and out-of-province donations. The fundamental principle must be: if you can't vote for a candidate or party, you can't write out a cheque to it. Individual donations must also be capped to ensure that deep pockets don't drown out other voices.

Comparable reforms must be introduced at the local level. When one person donates \$960,000 to a municipal party, as was done in 2011, there is a serious problem with local democracy.

Newspapers and opinion leaders across BC – and the political spectrum – have endorsed these or comparable proposals.

An inclusive approach

Those who ultimately play by the rules should not write the rules. It's why IntegrityBC advocates that other electoral reforms, including those highlighted below, be addressed through an arms-length, non-partisan advisory panel such as, or mirrored on, a Citizens' Assembly.

Their work should also include consideration of partial reimbursement of candidate and/or party election expenses tied to a minimum popular vote, as has been in place at the federal level since the 1970s; and approaches for reducing the fundraising restrictions that are placed on independent candidates seeking provincial office.

Third-party election advertising

"(The government's definition of election advertising) captures virtually all political expression regardless of whether such is intended to influence the election..." - BC Court of Appeal Justice P.D. Lowry, October 2012

British Columbians have the right to speak out during an election on issues that affect their communities without

fear of violating the Election Act. The current definition is too broad and the rules too heavy-handed.

Party operations

*“The integrity of an election to such high public office (B.C. Legislature) must be guarded with assiduity.”
- BC Supreme Court Chief Justice Bauman, 2011, Heed v. the Chief Electoral Officer of BC*

The behaviour of publicly-traded corporations and the integrity of the stock market is no more important than the operations of political parties and the integrity of our democratic system; yet, legislative oversight of companies is far more rigorous than it is of political parties.

Political parties are not private clubs. For many citizens, they represent the entry point to public office and how they operate must be as democratic as we expect our system to be. Party operations – particularly in the areas of candidate nomination meetings and leadership races – require greater independent oversight.

In BC, a political party can be registered with the signature of only “two principal officers,” less than half the number required to form a non-profit society. In Alberta, registration requires signatures from 0.3 per cent of the eligible number of voters, roughly 7,000 citizens. Not surprisingly, BC has the largest number of political parties in Canada.

British Columbians have the right to expect a higher threshold from new parties seeking to represent our trust and the right to expect that they should be required to put forward more than two candidates every other election to avoid deregistration.

Local Government Act

“Recently released reports of crazy spending in Vancouver’s 2011 civic election should trigger a serious call for spending limits and donor restrictions in municipal campaigns.” - Business in Vancouver, 2012

In March, 2012, the Attorney General assured IntegrityBC that the “Government has committed to implementing the recommendations of the (Task Force on Local Government Election) before the 2014 local government elections.” Last week, Minister of Community, Sport and Cultural Development Bill Bennett announced that the Task Force’s 31 proposed changes will not be introduced during this session.

The Task Force tabled its report in May 2010. Since then, there has been one province-wide local government election. Reforms to the conduct of local government elections are long overdue and should include oversight of local elections by Elections BC.

2. Cleaning up government

Whistle-blower protection

*“Whistle-blowers need an element of protection in regard to the fact that they are coming forward with this information, and at the moment there is very, very limited [protection] that’s afforded.”
- BC Auditor General John Doyle*

Legislation to protect whistle-blowers must be introduced and passed in BC.

Access to information

Access to information requests should not degenerate into tussles between government departments and citizens. A renewed commitment to transparency in government should be among the first orders of the day. The Act’s scope should be broadened to include political staff whose salaries are paid for through the Legislature.

Legislature officers

Officers of the Legislature such as the Auditor General, the Chief Electoral Officer and the Conflict of Interest Commissioner should be appointed by at least two-thirds of all MLAs in a free and open vote, and not a sub-committee of five meeting behind closed doors. Changes to the terms of such officers should be the result of a thorough legislative review to determine the best approach for BC.

Committees of the Legislature

BC's legislature will be far more effective through the introduction of permanent standing committees that meet as required and independently from government. As the first order of business, committees should undertake an exhaustive review of existing legislation for anomalies and contradictions resulting from piecemeal amendments.

Finally, if the electorate does not perceive the process by which individuals are elected to the Legislature or City Hall to be legitimate, or the process by which legislation passes as a result of those elections, the democratic process itself is called into disrepute. And the consequences of that can be great. As Canada's Finance minister noted in 1993: "The underground economy is not all smugglers. It is hundreds of thousands of otherwise honest people who have withdrawn their consent to be governed, who have lost faith in government."

In BC's 40th election campaign your party's platform has the chance to help restore the faith of British Columbians in their government. We hope it does.

In addition to our ideas, your party may have others to put forward in these areas and we hope you do. If you'd like to discuss any of these issues in greater detail, please contact us.

Sincerely,

Dermod Travis
Executive Director

PS: Closer to the election, we will be sending all parties a questionnaire for your response.