



The Vancouver skyline. The Liberals won 17 seats in BC, up from only two in 2011, while the Conservatives were reduced from 21 to only 10.  
Istock photo

# The B.C. Battleground that Wasn't: The View From the Wet Coast

Greg Lyle

*In the final days of the federal election campaign, more than a few analysts were predicting that British Columbia could prove to be the 905 of 2015—the crucial piece of the electoral map that would put the Conservatives over the top. In the end, the landslide that swept the rest of the country didn't stop at the B.C. border. In fact, the election was called for Justin Trudeau's Liberals before the polls even closed on the country's Pacific coast. As pollster Greg Lyle writes, it wasn't just about fuzzy math.*

Once again, the promised election night spotlight was snatched away from British Columbia voters. Despite Elections Canada changes to more closely synchronize voting hours across the country, the networks had already called the election for the Liberals before the votes in B.C. had been counted.

We can be like that in B.C., a chip on our shoulders; an easy willingness to take offence. And over the past four years, we have taken a great deal of offence to Stephen Harper.

The basic story of the BC election is actually quite similar to that of Canada as a whole.

Much of the anger against the federal government in BC was driven by style. Voters were alienated by a top-down command and control process that gagged most federal government officials as well as, it appeared, local Conservative MPs. Voters from the party's Reform Party wing who were mobilized by concerns over a similar approach from the Mulroney and Chrétien governments were particularly offended.

There were growing concerns over ethical scandals: the Robocall issue from 2011 and perceptions that the Conservatives would stoop to anything to win, the conviction and imprisonment of Dean Del Mastro for breaking election spending rules and the Duffy trial.

But B.C. has usually been more kind than the rest of Canada to Stephen Harper. In 2004, 2008 and 2011, the Harper Conservatives did considerably better in B.C. than on average in Canada. In 2011, B.C. treated Stephen Harper and the Conservatives particularly well, delivering just over 45 per cent of its votes and 21 of 36 seats. If the only problems in B.C. had been the same as elsewhere, BC should have delivered more votes and more seats than it just did. There had to be something more than the issues that were bedeviling the government everywhere else in the country. And there was. But to find the explanation we have to look back beyond this election, all the way back to the cabinet that was appointed right after the 2011 campaign.

In May 2011, newly elected Toronto MP Joe Oliver was sworn in as Canada's Minister of Natural Resources. He came from an illustrious career in the investment sector but with no previous elected experience. At the top of his priority list was the Northern Gateway pipeline running from Edmonton through Northern BC to Kitimat on the North Coast.

British Columbians have obvious concerns about pipelines. They understand B.C.'s role as Canada's gateway to the Pacific Rim, but they want to ensure that any dangerous cargo shipped through their province is handled with the utmost care. They

**“ By July 2012, the damage was done. The government had failed a character test. BC had backed Stephen Harper in election after election only to feel he had turned his back on them when they needed him to listen. ”**

want to see high standards to minimize the impacts of construction and operation and they want to know there are plans and resources in place to deal with accidents and natural disasters. They look to their governments to protect these interests so that if a pipeline is approved, it meets the highest possible standards and that governments remain vigilant in monitoring their ongoing operations. They want a government that acts as an honest broker.

New to politics and keen to impress, Oliver was far from balanced in his early comments. “Gateway, in our opinion, is in the national interest”, he said within weeks of being sworn in. And with that statement the government pulled off its referee's jersey and jumped on the field. The rhetoric escalated as 2012 began. This was not Oliver freelancing. The Prime Minister himself called environmentalists “radicals” who wanted to “hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda”. British Columbians who simply had reasonable questions and fears felt the government had stopped listening and was determined to have its way, regardless of the consequences to B.C.

These fears quickly came to a head in Vancouver when the Conservatives closed the Kitsilano Coast Guard base. The 2012 budget was a key moment in the government's efforts to eliminate the deficit. Already in power for six years, the Conservatives had no easy cuts available to meet their target of \$14 billion in spending reductions by 2015. As every branch of government looked for ways to make do with less, the Coast Guard developed a plan to manage its search and rescue function without the Kitsilano base.

Federal government unions searching for ways to oppose the cuts quickly

identified the base closure as a soft spot for government and mounted a public campaign to oppose the closure. They quickly tied the base closure to the larger issue of marine safety raised by Northern Gateway, questioning the government's motives. Their call was quickly picked up by politicians such as Mayor Gregor Robertson and Premier Christy Clark. Even talk radio jumped on the issue, particularly CKNW morning host and BC media icon Bill Good. The government felt it could not afford to back down, that if they gave in on this decision the unions would roll them back one cut at a time, putting in jeopardy the plan to balance the budget. But the federal communications response was weak at best and the government bled on the issue for months.

**B**y July 2012, the damage was done. The government had failed a character test. BC had backed Stephen Harper in election after election only to feel he had turned his back on them when they needed him to listen. With few exceptions, month after month, the polls showed the Conservatives had lost their B.C. electoral advantage and the new normal for the Conservative vote in B.C. was the national average.

So it was no surprise at the start of the election that the Conservatives were in trouble in BC. Redistribution had been helpful to the Tories. The province gained six new seats and analysts expected the Tories to win five of them, based on the last elections results. But the loss of the B.C. Conservative advantage and the general negative trend meant the Conservatives would struggle to hold on to what they had.

The NDP started the election as the best bet to gain from Conservative weakness. B.C. has not always been

kind to New Democrats. During the 90s, weighed down by an unpopular NDP provincial government and fighting against a populist Reform party, the NDP won only two or three seats per election. But as the Reform transformed into the Conservative party and memories of the provincial government faded, the NDP under Jack Layton were able to build up a core of eight to 10 seats based on Vancouver Island and East Vancouver. They also started to see some success in the Interior and in Vancouver suburbs such as North Surrey and the Tri-City area. Thomas Mulcair added to these advantages as the campaign began. B.C. voters saw him as Harper's equal on competence while leading on compassion and positive change.

Liberal prospects in B.C. seemed dim. The Liberals had won just two seats in 2011. Their best election in the past 20 years was in 2006, when they won nine seats. More typical were the six seats they won in 2008. Bullish Liberals eyed a new open seat in Vancouver and one or two relatively close suburban Vancouver seats as possible wins.

The Liberal managers delayed their initial response to the dropping of the writs in order to give Justin Trudeau time to fly to Vancouver for his campaign launch. He also made a dedicated B.C. campaign ad during his third campaign visit on September 10 and 11. However, if you judge an area's priority by the amount of time the leader spends there, it was clear the Liberal war room was not betting heavily on B.C. as Trudeau visited a total of just five times in the 11-week campaign.

Once the campaign began, the developments in B.C. mirrored those of the rest of the country. For much of August, the Liberals shored up their leadership weaknesses. Once they dropped their deficit bomb late in August, they began to pull in centre-left voters who were uninspired with the NDP promise of "some change, some day" and rallied to the Liberal message of "real change now". As it became clear that the Liberals were moving ahead of the NDP, bandwagon and strategic voters joined their more ideologically driven neighbours in leaving the

NDP and moving to the Liberals.

Despite the final Liberal surge, the Greens and the NDP held their own on election night. Green leader Elizabeth May retained her seat on Vancouver Island, although she was unable to expand her beach head. This despite several promising Island races including Victoria, where the Liberals dropped out of the race leaving the Greens in a head-to-head race with NDP star Murray Rankin.

**“ For much of August, the Liberals shored up their leadership weaknesses. Once they dropped their deficit bomb late in August, they began to pull in centre-left voters who were uninspired with the NDP promise of “some change, some day” and rallied to the Liberal message of “real change now”. ”**

The NDP lost votes but gained seats. They dropped six points in their vote share but ended up with three more seats. The NDP benefited from their relatively high initial starting point from the last election and the fact that, while they may not have gained votes compared to 2011, they didn't lose any either. Not only did they sweep all the Island seats with the exception of Green Leader Elizabeth May's, as well as holding on to their East Vancouver redoubts, they won several Tri-City and Southern Interior seats. The NDP gained from the Tories on the Island and in Interior swing seats as the Conservatives did lose votes on an absolute basis.

**T**he big drama in B.C. came from the showdown between the Liberals and the Conservatives. Tories experienced the largest drop in their share of vote in the country—down a third from 46 per cent to 30 per cent. In our first-past-the-post system, that resulted in the

loss of two thirds of their seats, a drop from 29 seats using the 2011 votes on 2015 boundaries down to 10. Some losses were shocking. The Tories lost all three seats in the prosperous North Shore suburbs of Vancouver. In Cloverdale-Langley, a 17,000 vote advantage over the Liberals in 2011 votes turned into a 5,000-vote loss to the Liberals in 2015. In Kelowna-Lake Country, a 23,000 win over the Liberals in 2011 turned into a 4,000 vote defeat in this election.

The Liberals ended up winning all but two seats in the City of Vancouver and a strong majority of seats in the rest of Greater Vancouver's suburbs. Even more shocking is how close they came to winning even more seats. They were about 500 votes away from winning Burnaby South from the NDP and Richmond Centre from the Conservatives. They were 1,500 votes away from winning the Central Okanagan seat and from defeating a Conservative star, former Surrey mayor Dianne Watts, in South Surrey-White Rock, both bedrock Conservative seats.

With a few notable exceptions, the Tories did not lose because their vote went down dramatically. On average, the Conservative vote only dropped by 2,500 votes a seat in the Lower Mainland and the Interior. The Liberals won by mobilizing new voters. B.C.'s turnout surged from an average of 60 per cent in 2011 to 70 per cent this year. These new voters gave the Liberals an average increase of 14,000 votes in those regions.

At the end of the day, the Liberals won 17 B.C. seats, up from only two in 2011. The NDP actually increased its seats from 12 to 14, while the Conservatives were reduced from 21 to only 10.

So long as the Liberals can keep those new voters voting, the Liberals have a strong base to work with. The challenge for the Liberals will be to maintain that enthusiasm through four years of the day-to-day reality of government. **P**

*Greg Lyle is the President of Innovative Research, a Vancouver-based public opinion research firm.*  
[glyle@innovativeresearch.ca](mailto:glyle@innovativeresearch.ca)