

# Hanging by a Thread: British Columbia's NDP Minority Government

David Mitchell

*Among the other effects of British Columbia's recent improbably close election is that the province is living through the rare experience of minority government. Because of the precariousness of the NDP's control of the legislature, the possible scenarios for the province's politics have been multiplied exponentially. Former MLA David Mitchell games out the future.*

**H**ere's a skill-testing question: How many NDP premiers has British Columbia had? Can you name them?

This is a surprisingly difficult quiz, even for most British Columbians. Ever since 1933, when the NDP's predecessor, the CCF, became British Columbia's official opposition, the left-leaning option has been the province's would-be alternative. But it's a tribute to the political effectiveness of a variety of anti-socialist coalitions that the NDP has served as the governing party for only 13 years.

Now that they've secured one of their rare chances to govern this divided and polarized province, questions remain: how long will they last? And can they find a way to convert their minority government into a majority at the next provincial election?

With such a tenuous grip on power—41 seats to the Liberals' 42 and dependent on the support of the three elected Green party MLAs—it

will be fascinating to see what they do with the opportunity.

Given that it's been 16 years since the NDP last governed in Victoria, you'd be forgiven for puzzling over the questions posed above. The truth is John Horgan has now become the sixth NDP premier of the province, preceded by: Dave Barrett, Mike Harcourt, Glen Clark, Dan Miller, and Ujjal Dosanjh.

Today, the only Canadian NDP governments are located in the two westernmost provinces. And at present, the governments of B.C. and Alberta seem to have as many policy differences as similarities. However, there are numerous examples of previous NDP governments in our country that can serve as useful reference points for Premier Horgan. While the party has never been victorious in a federal election, the NDP has actually governed in a majority of Canadian provinces. In addition to B.C. and Alberta, they include Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia and the Yukon.



Premier John Horgan's minority NDP government will have a bit more breathing room in the legislature now that Christy Clark has stepped down as Liberal leader and also resigned her seat. *BC NDP Flickr photo*

So, the new B.C. government could model itself on the stable approaches of Allan Blakeney or Roy Romanow in Saskatchewan or Gary Doer in Manitoba. Or it could burn itself out like the one-term administrations of Bob Rae in Ontario or Darrell Dexter in Nova Scotia.

Closer to home, will Premier Horgan position himself as a moderate leader, like former B.C. Premier Mike Harcourt? Or will he let the pent-up ambitions of his long-serving opposition party get the better of him, like the province's first NDP Premier, Dave Barrett?

**I**n the B.C. context, what is truly remarkable is how John Horgan fits into a noteworthy pattern

that crosses party lines and which has consistently seen dramatic personality differences in successive elected leaders. The province has long been known for electing flamboyant, confident, larger-than-life premiers, whose personalities have often overshadowed their party's policies or ideology. Less commonly noted is that in order to recover from the excesses of the politics of personality, British Columbians have unfailingly found respite in rather bland and colourless personalities in their subsequent choice of premier.

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In this sense, the rather understated Horgan is a perfect antidote to the garrulous and outgoing Christy Clark, just as she served as a counterpoint to the technocratic Gordon Campbell who, in turn, followed the fire-breathing partisanship of Glen Clark. Indeed, one could pursue this historical trail of elected B.C. premiers back in time with surprising consistency. If the pattern holds in the future, Horgan will almost certainly be followed by a more colourful populist premier who fits this well-established B.C. tradition. But it's worth noting that the big-personality B.C. premiers, such as Bill Vander Zalm, have generally not served for as long in office as those who were less colourful, like Bill Bennett.

In the meantime, the fledgling NDP minority government faces numer-

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ous policy and governance issues. Following the indecisive election results, the formation of the government actually provided a good civics lesson for British Columbians: it's not necessarily the party that wins the largest number of seats or most votes that forms a government; rather, it's the party that can command the confidence of the legislature. For as long as the NDP maintains that confidence, it will need to demonstrate an ability to provide a steady approach and sound public policy.

How the government is able to manage a minefield of issues, including the proposed expansion of the Kinder Morgan pipeline, the future of the Site C dam project on the Peace River and the commitment to the Greens of pursuing the seemingly cursed goal of electoral reform, will provide key tests for the NDP.

**W**e know that minority governments can be productive; there's of plenty of evidence of this in other parts of Canada, including at the federal level. But B.C. doesn't have much experience with minority administrations and of critical importance is the role of the Greens in holding the balance of power.

Some observers have suggested that the electoral breakthrough for the Greens has heralded a transformation of the party system in B.C. Based upon parliamentary experience elsewhere, however, junior partners in governing coalitions or alliances often suffer political misfortune. It's just as possible, therefore, that the Greens will end up as either a passing fancy or as political roadkill in the next general election if B.C. returns to its traditional polarized model.

Christy Clark's resignation as leader of the Liberal party and as an MLA has given the NDP a bit of breathing room, for a few months at least. In the short term, the government won't need to count on the Speaker to cast a deciding vote on all matters that come before the legislature. But a by-election to fill Clark's vacant seat can't be long deferred and a new leader of the Liberal party may be keen to try to defeat the NDP government at an early opportunity.

The average duration of minority governments in Canada is approximately 18 months. With that in mind, Premier Horgan almost certainly has his eye out for an exit ramp leading to the next provincial election. And he would be well-advised to study the fortune of the only other minority government in B.C. history.

Following the indecisive 1952 provincial election, W.A.C. Bennett became premier of B.C.'s first Social Credit government. Lacking a majority of seats in the legislature, the wily Bennett knew that his inexperienced administration couldn't last for long. He therefore worked hard on a strategy to engineer his government's defeat on an issue he could successfully take to the people in an election campaign. The issue was a complex education financing measure that favoured rural school districts. Bennett's strategy paid off; his government was defeated in the House and he went on to win his coveted majority government in the 1953 election, less than a year after he had become premier. He would remain in office as premier for two decades. **P**

*David Mitchell is a political historian, former B.C. MLA and currently serves as President & CEO of the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations. dmitchell@calgarycvo.org*