

# **Seat Distribution in the BC Legislature: An Election Results Scenario**

## Introduction

In BC there is a regular parade of polls stating the relative popularity of the political parties. What is missing from the raw popularity numbers is the way these numbers would play out in the number of seats for each party in the case of an election. The single member plurality electoral process that is employed in BC (also referred to as ‘First Past the Post’) rarely translates popular vote into an equal number of seats. Who will be in and who will be out is the question never answered by the polls. This analysis will attempt to answer this question.

What will the legislature look like after the election? With the redistribution, there will be 79 instead of 75 MLAs elected in the next election. Further changes from the 1996 election has one political party officially dissolved and another that started with two MLAs in 1996 now has none. Based on the varied polls of the last few months, this analysis will try and quantify what the outcome will be. Description of the methodology is found in appendix D.

## Scenario

The assumption of the scenario in this analysis is that the popular vote will be:

Liberal 50%

NDP 28%

Reform 17%

Green 5%

This scenario assumes that Clark has stepped down and that the NDP is assumed to have a new leader. This new leader (Wilson, MacPhail or Dosanjh) will have caused some upward mobility in the polls. The scenario assumes further that the Liberals will not be able to maintain more than 50% as it has been very rare for any party anywhere in Canada to ever score much more than 50% of the popular vote.

On this basis of this scenario, the result will look something like:

Liberal 69(65-69) NDP 4(4-8) Reform 6(5-7) Green 0(0-1)

The huge Liberal majority should not be a surprise given such results as New Brunswick under McKenna in 1986 and Chretien in 1993 federally.

The huge drop in the number of seats by the NDP (aggregate loss of 36 seats) is definite as the NDP hold very seats by a majority. North Coast (Dan Miller), Powell River-Sunshine Coast (Gordon Wilson), Vancouver-Mount Pleasant (Jenny Kwan), and Esquimalt-Metchosin (Moe Sihota) are the only safe NDP ridings, but according to the latest Angus Reid poll, even these ridings are no longer safe. This analysis however assumes a recovery by the NDP of some of the popular vote.

The surprise is the rise of Reform BC. Frequently declared dead, they are so far still alive. The support for the party is strongest in the Interior, especially in the rural Interior and concentrated enough to win seats.

The Greens are included because they are within the range of being able to elect someone (note that the Liberals prior to 1991 and the PDA in the 1994-98 range were both marginal parties in the 5% range). Green support is strong enough in one Kootenany riding to have a chance to win there.

## **Liberal**

The single biggest problem for Gordon Campbell in this analysis is that he will be sitting with 69 MLAs and only a limited number of jobs. Close to 45 of his back benchers are not going to have any concrete role in the government, since cabinet, committee chairs and the speaker's role require a total of approximately 25 MLAs. The government will not even need all those backbenchers to ensure passage of bills as the cabinet alone will be twice the size of the opposition.

This analysis will not dwell further on the Liberal, since everything that the other parties can not win is by default Liberal. Not a single sitting MLA for the Liberals is in danger of losing their seat. Probably the closest a sitting Liberal MLA comes to a defeat is Judith Reid; her

Parksville Qualicum riding is being dismembered and her home will be in the Alberni Qualicum riding currently held by Gerrard Jansen of the NDP.

## **New Democratic Party**

An election at any time in the near future is a suicidal move for the NDP. Put quite crudely, the margin between the NDP and the Liberals is a quick measure of the relative safety of each seat. In this analysis the assumption is that the NDP, when compared to the 1996 election, loses 11 percentage points and the Liberals gain 9 for an aggregate shift of 20 points between the two main parties. This leaves only four ridings safely NDP, North Coast, Powell River Sunshine Coast, Vancouver Mount Pleasant and Esquimalt Metchosin. A further six to eleven ridings are in the marginal range and could theoretically go either way, but that calls for an even higher concentration of the NDP vote within winnable ridings. In order of decreasing NDP support, the next ridings are: Victoria-Hillside, Surrey-Newton, Vancouver-Hastings, Surrey-Whalley, Nanaimo, Victoria-Beacon Hill, Surrey-Green Timbers, Vancouver-Kingsway, Cowichan-Ladysmith, West Kootenay-Boundary and Malahat-Juan de Fuca .

The error in viewing the possible outcome in this manner is that it ignores the fact that the NDP vote has already bottomed out in many ridings and will not go much lower - instead it is the 39 ridings the NDP won in 1996 that would be the source of the popularity drop and likely a larger drop than in ridings held by the Liberals now.

Of the eleven “marginal” ridings mentioned that are NDP, there is not a single one in which the third party vote is significant. The people opposing the NDP have only one place to go and that is to Gordon Campbell’s Liberals. Furthermore, some of these ridings are held by NDP back benchers with little or no presence even in their home riding (Rick Kaspar in Malahat Juan de Fuca or Steve Orcherton in Victoria Hillside) or by cancer survivors that will likely retire (Ed Conroy and Penny Priddy), or by the likes of Sue Hammell, a weak cabinet minister, or Gretchen Brewin, a weak speaker. All these factors work against situations in which the sitting MLA would be able to hold the seat.

Of more interest is what happens once the leadership changes. No obvious and strong candidates exist to take on Glen Clark's seat. Furthermore, if Joy MacPhail prevails over Gordon Wilson, then she will likely hold her seat but Wilson will not run and open Powell River Sunshine Coast for the Liberals to win. In either scenario (or even a Dosjanh NDP) the NDP still remains at four safe seats.

Dale Lovick and Jan Pullinger sit atop strong local election machines but are not personally very popular. Both will sink or swim with the prevailing tide of the party but be unable to pull off personal miracles.

The only New Democrat that might buck the trend is Ujjal Dosanjh. He might be able to hold his own seat in the face of a Liberal landslide, but it would not be advisable to bet on it.

The NDP is therefore looking at four safe seats and five to six seats in which they will make a race of it but will not likely win. The full details of the redistributed results of the 1996 election for the safest NDP seats is found in appendix A.

## **Reform BC**

As surprising as it sounds, the envisaged scenario of Liberals at 50%, NDP at 28% and Reform at 18% opens the chance for the Reform party to win a number of seats. Reform could end up with more seats than the NDP and form the Official Opposition.

Reform BC is still polling in the range of close to twice the 1996 election results and points to an ongoing unhappiness with the Liberal Party in the interior of BC. The latest Angus Reid results show a Reform result of around 25% in the interior of BC versus 41% for the Liberals. Further, Reform BC seems to have fallen behind the Greens in the urban areas of BC (Vancouver and Victoria). Both these findings in the polls point to a strong concentration of Reform BC vote in the more rural and northern ridings - concentrated enough to win a number of ridings. Furthermore it points to a core of people that are not going to join the Liberal camp no matter how conservative the party gets.

The redistricting has left the north with the same number of ridings and would allow a number of seats to be won with less vote than it takes to win one suburban seat in the GVRD. Only one of the five top seats for Reform is not in northern BC - that being East Kootenany.

Reform BC has the best chance in ridings that were tight three way races in 1996 and ended up with an NDP MLA. In order, the

**Ridings most likely to be won by Reform:**

Peace River South, Bulkley Valley Stikine, East Kootenay, Skeena and Prince George North

**Marginal Reform ridings**

Yale Similkameen, Prince George Omineca, Shuswap and Cariboo South

**Unlikely Reform wins without outstanding local issues or strong candidates**

Cariboo North, Okanagan Vernon, Prince George Mount Robson and Columbia River Revelstoke

Peace River North would seemingly go with the current MLA - elected as Reform but crossed the floor to the Liberals. In the case of the Abbotsford ridings where Reform was present in 1996, the Liberal lead over Reform is too large to overcome. The only northern ridings that seem secure from Reform are North Coast (Dan Miller) and Peace River North (Richard Neufeld).

The final question for Reform is where does Bill Vander Zalm run and can he win the seat? Currently he lives in Delta South, held by Fred Gingell who could be retiring. Can Reform win Delta South with the leader there? Very unlikely. His best bet is as a parachute candidate in the north somewhere. For a full breakdown of 1996 voting patterns in Reform BC vulnerable ridings, please see appendix B.

## **Conclusion**

Unless something miraculous happens between now and the next provincial election, the only likely result will be a Liberal landslide. Even though this analysis does not contemplate it, a complete shut out of all of the opposition parties is not an impossibility.

For the NDP the issue in the next election is first of all being able to win enough seats to be a recognized party in the legislature and secondly to try and strive for a strong enough result that the party has the ability to offer a creditable opposition the Gordon Campbell government. The first is achievable while the second seems impossible in the current political climate.

Reform BC does have the chance to become the voice for rural and northern BC, a voice that seems to be missing from the legislature at the moment. It could also usher in an era of BC politics being a debate between the centre right and the far right with the voice of the left being silenced.

Finally, one outcome of a result as envisaged in this analysis is that there will be a grand total of two MLAs with more than ten years experience as provincially elected politicians and the majority of the MLAs will be first time in the house. The long term corporate knowledge of the functioning of politics in BC around the legislature will be at an all time low in BC history, even lower than in 1991.