

News

## Too sexy to run for political office?

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Trish Kelly's thwarted electoral run in a cautious party system

The night of February 26, 1985, British Columbia's minister of small business development, lying

dead drunk in his hotel room, wanted a callgirl. He picked up the phone, called Top Hat escort service and asked “if a girl could be made available.” One was made available, and he paid \$130 on a credit card in his own name: Bob McClelland.

When the RCMP discovered McClelland’s name on a bill sheet during a prostitution investigation, he kept his job. Premier Bill Bennett would not fire him, and stayed mostly silent on the issue. His colleagues rallied around him, saying he was a “darn good cabinet minister” and that it was not right to “poke around in other people’s business, particularly gossipy, junky stuff.” Even the attorney-general critic for the opposition NDP told the *Vancouver Sun*, “I don’t think it’s appropriate to make a judgment about people’s private lives unless it interferes with his public life.” McClelland stayed on in office until the end of his term, and quietly resigned after his party was reelected.

Twenty-four years later, during the 2009 provincial election campaign, two photographs surfaced online of NDP Vancouver-False Creek candidate Ray Lam. One of the photos showed Lam posing with his hand on a woman’s clothed breast; the other showed two friends tugging at his underwear, his pants around his knees. Lam’s Liberal opponent Mary McNeil called the photos, which were taken at a Pride celebration, “very offensive,” and demanded a public apology. NDP leader Carole James offered little more support, saying Lam showed a “lack of judgment.” Lam, who declined to be interviewed for this story, said he did not regret the photos but still quit the race, later becoming the general manager of the Vancouver Pride Society.

Five years later, in July 2014, a Vancouver political blog posted an eight-year-old video of Vision Vancouver candidate Trish Kelly performing a dramatic monologue in praise of masturbation. The video came as no surprise to Kelly — it was part of her body of work as a sex-positive artist and activist — but her party reacted differently. Three days later, she stepped out of the parks board race.

Kelly has been tight-lipped about exactly how much pressure Vision put on her to resign, saying she doesn’t want to distract from the larger debate. What she will say is that party leadership told her that her history would lead to a long, destructive and taxing smear campaign against her and Vision, and how it would hurt the party’s chances in the upcoming election.

“They are the experts in this,” she says. “I had to believe that they were the experts and they knew what they were talking about.”

There are two obvious differences between McClelland’s story and those of Lam and Kelly. First, McClelland received the support of his party, while Lam and Kelly were unceremoniously dropped. This may be partly because McClelland was a seasoned incumbent politician, but even his political opponents stood by him.

Second, Lam and Kelly never really did anything wrong. From the string of pejoratives heaped on Lam’s pictures by journalists — “racy,” “incriminating,” “skanky,” “risqué,” “ugly” — a reader might think Lam had committed something horrifyingly illegal and immoral. But looking at the photos, it is hard to imagine what offence Lam was accused of committing. Sexual assault? Not only is Lam prolifically gay, but the pictures were clearly, enthusiastically consensual. Sexual licentiousness? Lam had already been a key planner for the Pride Society for years. Had his accusers never joined the hundreds of thousands of people attending Vancouver’s annual celebration of uninhibited sexual expression?

Kelly, likewise, talked in her video about sexual behaviour that even most doctors now recognize as ubiquitous, normal and healthy. Even if her other work, like the anthology of lesbian erotica she co-edited in 2005, had come to light, what reader of *Fifty Shades of Grey* could really throw the first stone?

McClelland, on the other hand, was not only caught clienting an illegal business but showed himself to be an outrageous hypocrite: he had been a dedicated, straight-laced social conservative who “expressed serious reservation about teaching sex education in public schools.”

What, then, was so different that Lam and Kelly were booted for offenses so much lighter than McClelland’s?

For one, times have changed since 1985. The internet spreads rumours much more quickly, and those rumours often come in the form of photos and videos, which seem to have a more visceral effect. It is easy to imagine things might have turned out differently if the BC public had grappled with a Bob McClelland sex tape.

These days, it has become very difficult to keep anything hidden from the public eye. As Lam’s opponent McNeil said, apparently without irony, “In this digital age . . . If you want to represent your community, if you want to create positive change, if you want to make a difference for your children and grandchildren, you better damn well have been planning since junior high.”

In other words, nobody under the age of 30 and even marginally interesting who wants to get into politics can allow their life to leak onto the internet.

Unfortunately, says BC political media consultant Michael Geoghegan, this has a particularly insidious effect on the quality of political candidates. When political parties filter their representatives too cautiously, he says, the ones who get through tend to be either boring enough to avoid trouble, or ambitious enough to control their media presence from grade school.

“Essentially what we end up with is insipid minions led by sociopaths,” he says.

Geoghegan says in today’s highly vetted political world, eccentric candidates like Pierre Trudeau or Bill Bennett would struggle to get into the race. “We’ve gotten rid of the candidates that infuriate,” he says. “We’ve also gotten rid of the candidates who inspire. Whenever we do something that greatly restricts our pool of available talent, we end up with more mediocre results.”

And this touches on McClelland’s second advantage: unlike Lam and Kelly, he was a straight, white man. Lam and Kelly are both members of the queer community, which tends to express sex and sexuality more freely. “I believe that the spirit of queer culture is one that resists shame, and therefore has to be sexually positive and celebratory,” Kelly says.

Outside the queer world, however, open discussion of sexuality is still dangerous politics.

“Sex is the thing that most captures people’s attention, and seems to be the one thing people take umbrage to regardless of what they do in their own lives,” Geoghegan says. “It’s this strange combination of wanting to be a voyeur, and wanting to condemn the fact that you got to see something.”

Also unlike McClelland, Lam and Kelly are both under 40 years old and come from non-white lineage (Kelly's mother is Métis), and Kelly is female. None of these qualities is generally considered an advantage in the eyes of the gatekeepers who decide which candidates will represent political parties.

Jeanette Ashe, a professor of political science at Douglas College who studies how political parties pick their candidates, says parties tend to favour what they see as an ideally electable politician: male, white, straight, middle-aged, successful, able-bodied and educated. Ashe studied candidates selected in BC's 2005 provincial election, and found parties tend to pick from inside a range of "acceptable difference." Non-white candidates did well as long as they were sufficiently "normal" in other ways, as did gay candidates and women. Too many deviations from the ideal, however, made a candidate unlikely to be chosen.

But at the same time, Ashe also discovered something that offers hope for the future: political parties' assessments of what the voters want were wrong. In the 2005 election, she found, voters did not discriminate against non-white, gay or female candidates. In fact, all things being equal, they voted slightly more for women than men.

"The gatekeepers of the political parties are basing their decisions on this myth that they'll lose votes because the electorate won't accept a person who is queer or a woman or is sex-positive," Ashe says. "But there's no evidence for that . . .

It's not the electorate that has the biases; it's political parties."

Ashe believes that dropping Kelly was a bad move, not just ethically, but politically. "I can't draw anything that would suggest that the electorate would have punished her," she says.

That means it isn't voters who need to be convinced, but political parties themselves. That's why, says Mischa Oak, a gay Green Party candidate for the Vancouver school board, LGBT candidates need to stick together and support each other — even across party lines.

"I think it's very important that we have people from all different marginalized groups represented in public office, and that's why I was really saddened when Trish Kelly quit the race," he says. "The more we stand up for people who are out there and clearly aren't doing anything harmful or incriminating, the better we are as a group."

As much support as she has received, Kelly says she is done with elections for the moment. "I'm still pretty bruised about party politics," she says. Instead, she wants to convince political parties to see the advantages of diverse candidates.

Geoghegan agrees that a bit more diversity, especially when it comes to sexual expression, would be good for everyone. "I would like it if political parties in general showed more courage when standing behind candidates," he says. "And instead of going to the lowest common denominator, said, 'Yeah, they're real human beings. They have sex lives.'"

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