

THE FREE PRESS OPINION

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"The theory of a free press is that the truth will emerge from free reporting and free discussion." Walter Lippman

THE PRINCE GEORGE FREE PRESS

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Changing the rules

While Prince George city council and the community wrestle with the smoking in public places issue it may be instructive to watch as other communities debate the same issue. The complex issue has divided our council and community with those promoting public health on one hand, and on the other, a group of entrepreneurs who have renovated their establishments to accommodate smokers and non-smokers alike.

The city's situation is not unlike one unfolding in New York. Municipal officials there have recently imposed a bylaw limiting smoking in public places while at the same time allowing smoking to continue in some select venues.

But this past week the state legislature passed a bill that will end smoking in establishments heretofore unaffected by smoking bans such as bars, pool halls, betting parlors, bowling alleys, some restaurants and even company cars. The good news for smokers in New York State is that they can still smoke at home, in their own cars, at First Nations casinos and in existing cigar bars.

It has been called some of the most strict legislation of its kind in America and its proponents claim it will improve the health of thousands of employees - but at what cost to private business owners who, like in Prince George had been building specially ventilated rooms?

The broad goal of improved health for workers and the general public is at the core of the legislation in our own city and is a good idea whose time has likely come thanks to shifting public opinion.

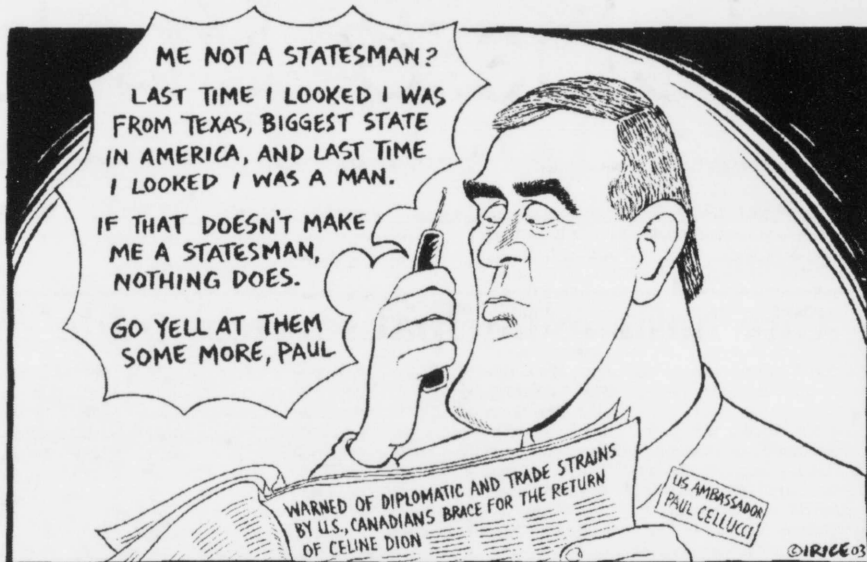
Of course the big catch here in Prince George is the many bar owners who have spent tens of thousands of dollars to try and comply with one government's set of rules which are about to be changed, as in New York, mid-game by another level of government.

If these business men feel betrayed, they're entitled.

Having built businesses based, in part, on a smoking clientele they are now in danger of having the rug swept out from underneath them. They could be the victims of a system that would prohibit adults from choosing to smoke or be subjected to second-hand smoke in a private establishment.

From what we know of efforts by owners to provide properly ventilated smoking rooms, it seems to be a reasonable approach and is certainly a welcome addition for their patrons who smoke or would share a beverage with a smoker.

What would be completely unreasonable would be to ignore these good faith gestures and shut them down without full compensation.



HIS MASTER'S VOICE

Post-Maui poll cheers Liberals, offers challenge, says Paul Willcocks.

The Liberals bounce back

VICTORIA - The Liberals - at least the ones from urban ridings - should be grinning at the latest poll results.

But MLAs from the Interior and North should be feeling a little queasy.

The polls were eagerly awaited as the first look at how Premier Gordon Campbell's drunk driving arrest and other developments had affected his party's prospects.

And the answer, as the Liberals hoped, is not much. Liberal support climbed back to the levels of December, before Campbell's vacation.

Across B.C., 44 per cent of decided voters said they would back the Liberals today, up from 41 per cent in the days after the arrest. The NDP lost four points, dropping to 30-per-cent support.

Campbell's personal approval rating climbed from 38-per-cent to 42 per cent.

It wasn't all good news, as we'll see.

But it still should give considerable cheer to the Liberals. British Columbians looked at Campbell's arrest and his apology, weighed its significance and decided that it didn't really affect their views of him as a politician.

The Liberals will also be cheered because despite lots of criticism over health care and education, their base remains solid. If an election were held today, the Liberals' current level of support

would ensure another big victory.

Voters may not approve of all the Liberals' actions. But that's not the test political parties have to face in an election. They simply have to be the best available choice, and so far the Liberals remain the first choice for enough voters to guarantee a large majority in their second term. On balance, voters prefer their policies, level of competence and leadership to any other available choice.

Now to the bad news for the Liberals, information that comes as no surprise.

The Liberals are in fine shape to form a government. But their ability to claim to be a truly provincial party is at risk. The overall approval numbers hide a big split between the Lower Mainland, and the rest of the province.

The Liberals have the support of more than half the voters in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, with the NDP a distant second at 25 per cent.

And that would give them enough seats to form a government.

But on Vancouver Island, the NDP has the support of 33 per cent of decided voters, edging the Liberals' 32 per cent and the Greens' 27 per cent. And in the Interior and North the Liberals have 37-per-cent support, the NDP has 34 per cent and Greens have 19 per cent. If an election were held today - and if anti-Liberal voters could avoid

splitting their votes - some 34 Liberal MLAs would be in big trouble.

It's not surprising. The New Era has not been kind to the rest of B.C. and the Liberals have been largely unresponsive to rural concerns.

Almost half the people who supported the Liberals in the months after the election had changed their minds.

The Liberals are trying to change that, with a "Heartland strategy" aimed at encouraging economic growth and winning back lost support.

The forest reform plan expected this week will be a significant first step.

But the Liberals have a blueprint for a bolder plan, if they care to act. The premier's Progress Board has also called for better transportation and more spending on tourism marketing. And it has proposed the government introduce a "resource dividend," taking a percentage of the \$2.9 billion in resource revenue and using it to pay for infrastructure, research and economic development in the rest of B.C.

The Liberals have a good chance of regaining the lost support, if they're prepared to act. Both the NDP and Greens are likely benefiting more from voters' disappointment with the Liberals, not wild enthusiasm for their own policies or leadership. That has to be considered soft support.

The poll offered good news for the Liberals, and a clear definition of an important challenge. Not bad for a mid-term government.

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