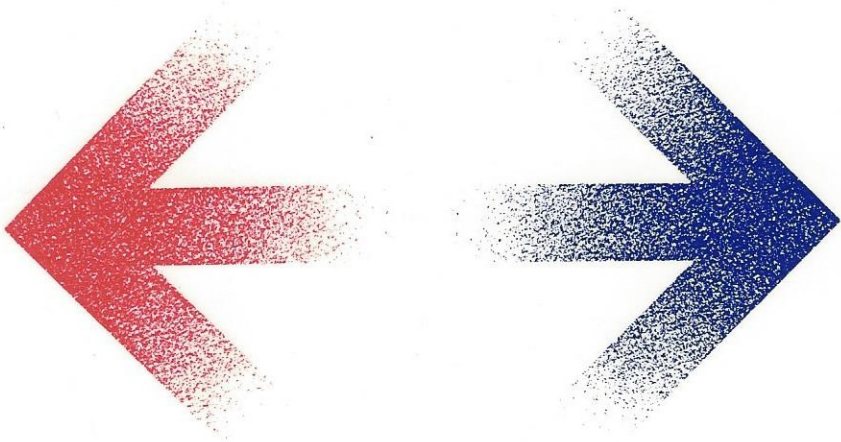


Grassroots Politicians

Party Activists in British Columbia



Donald E. **Blake** R.K. **Carty** Lynda **Erickson**

Resisting Polarization: The Survival of the Liberals

ROBYN A. SO WITH THE AUTHORS

Casual observers of BC politics are often surprised to learn that an active provincial Liberal party organization still exists. Fifty years ago, it dominated provincial politics, today it struggles to be noticed and taken seriously. Since the 1952 electoral debacle, when the decade old Liberal-Conservative coalition lost office to the Social Credit party, the Liberal's popularity has steadily declined: its vote collapsed in the 1975 election and then virtually disappeared in 1979. In the past three elections it has not managed to elect a single member to the legislature. Although its share of the popular vote rose in the 1986 election to just above 6 per cent, prospects for any substantial revival in the fortunes of the party remain bleak. Local political pundits readily dismiss the party as moribund. Its lack of recognizable candidates, the comparatively short tenure of its leaders, its lack of financial resources, and its thin organizational base merely reinforce the portrait of an unviable party.

Yet despite this sorry state the party has not disappeared from the provincial political stage as have the Progressive Conservatives. Indeed almost half (43%) its current activists joined the party since 1979. On the other hand, 40 per cent of active party members joined over fifteen years ago when they might plausibly have perceived the Liberal party as a viable electoral force. These individuals have stayed with the party through its darkest days. In the face of continuing provincial defeats, what underlies the motivations of these Liberals' continuing enthusiasm and longstanding partisan activity? As for the former, those who have joined more recently, what motivates them to join a party whose experience of governing is beyond the memory and experience of most British Columbians?

Conventional wisdom and a good deal of academic literature sug-