

INTERNET HAS MOBILIZED NEW WAVE OF ACTIVISM¹

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British Columbia has earned a reputation for its tumultuous politics and recent events are doing nothing to temper that view. Well, it turns out that one in four of us in B.C. actually considers him or herself an "activist." And activists can cause a lot of distress for politicians — and anyone else who tries to tell them what to do.

But politicians and business leaders are starting to learn that it's all about consultation. If they want to put up a 50-storey building, or just five street lamps, they have to talk to the public first. What's precipitated this change? The Internet, of course.

There was a time when the sphere of influence for the average person's opinion was limited to the water cooler, dinner table, coffee shop or bar and, from time to time, a letter to the editor. But now, with the proliferation of blogs, website polls and social networking sites, people can literally broadcast their opinions any time — and do it freely. And they're having a huge influence on the shape of our communities and our province.

It was a recent survey conducted by the Mustel Group that found that a quarter of British Columbians see themselves as activists of some sort. One in four translates to almost one million B.C. residents (aged 15 and over), a group that can make a significant amount of noise.

While protests against large residential projects or big-box retailers have become commonplace, communities are mounting high-profile campaigns against such micro issues as community gardens and installation of sidewalks in city parks. Municipal politics used to be quite sleepy, but now federal MPs are leaving the "big show" and flocking back to their issue-and controversy-rich communities.

The desire to be more involved in decision making, along with the means to do it, is putting increased pressure on political leaders to decide when to show leadership by making decisions they believe are for the best in the long term, and when to involve the community in decisions and perhaps bow to their wishes. "Telling you" is no longer an option, according to Judy Kirk, president of Kirk and Co., a communications veteran who specializes in consultation with the public.

The HST issue is a current example. The provincial government will claim it was showing good leadership in implementing the tax. But now anger regarding lack of consultation threatens its demise, perhaps more so than opposition to the tax itself.

Another example is the Hornby Street bike lane dispute. Confident from the success of the Burrard Bridge reconfiguration, which involved much communication and consultation, the city felt it could confidently go ahead with further expansion of the network, without the cost and time involved in a full-blown public-consultation process.

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But business groups and some members of the public have recoiled from this green initiative, due at least in part to lack of consultation. The cost of consultation can be enormous. Effective consultation often requires significant financial and human resources. Politicians, governments, private companies and advocacy groups can spend countless hours in public hearings and meetings, and spend significant dollars on communication professionals and information dissemination. However, the costs of inadequate consultation can be even higher. The potential cost to repeal the HST is a case in point. And many government agencies, developers and businesses can share stories of the millions spent on development plans that have later been quashed by public opinion.

Such concerns about the costs of public consultation has led some to ask: "What happened to the idea of electing leaders to make informed decisions on our behalf?" Others will argue such consultation keeps public officials in check more than they've ever been, and so is worth paying for. Kirk correlates increased involvement with higher education rates. "People believe they have a right to be involved in decision making and expect that government will listen," she says. Kirk also warns that any consultation must not be misused, for example as an organizing tool, but be a sincere attempt to listen to public views. "The public always knows when they are being manipulated," she explains.

So it doesn't matter if it is a macro issue, such as HST, or a micro one. If people feel they are being jammed, they will draw on the many resources at their disposal and let the policy-makers know. They may not be turning up on election day, but they are making their voices heard in other ways. "People have always had a desire to voice their opinions, but they are now more literate about the ways to be involved," Kirk says.

More than ever, it's clear, politicians have to listen — or face losing their jobs.