

# Reprint **Island Tides**

Visit [www.islandtides.com](http://www.islandtides.com) for more interesting articles on other BC, national & international topics

Reprint from Volume 11 Number 9

May 6, 1999

## *Dealing with Government VI*

### *Divining the Purpose - Patrick Brown*

It's sometimes all too easy to get the impression that the process of government, far from being the carefully planned management of a series of actions leading inevitably to the progress of civilization, is in fact a day-to-day series of random improvisations. Whether or not this is true, our understanding of the process would undoubtedly be assisted if we could divine the purpose of either the carefully crafted long-term strategy or the daily improvisations.

Surely, one feels, there must be a purpose. Government actions (or, as we mentioned last time, inactions) would be much better understood if the purposes were properly explained, the strategies set out, and it was made clear who was in charge. Wouldn't it? Those who call for 'increased transparency', or 'more accountability' or even 'demystifying government' are in fact implying that if only we understood the purposes of government, we could do it ourselves.

#### **Many Objectives**

In fact, the process is driven by a multiplicity of objectives. A skeptic might say that some of these objectives conflict, so they cause confusion. Sometimes this confusion is a mere public illusion, but remarkably often the confusion is in the government itself. Government is, in fact, a hotbed of argument, and that doesn't count the Official Opposition.

Whether elected or appointed, people in government are sincerely trying to make it work (the aforementioned progress of civilization). But other objectives keep getting in the way.

#### **Power**

The apparatus of government is structured to give the public the impression that government has power to accomplish things. Many of the people we elect are taken in by this, and attempt to exercise their authority for many years before the awful truth comes home. History is littered with kings, presidents, prime ministers, generals, and economists who spent years learning (and sometimes not understanding) that power is not inherent in government, but is, at best, a temporary gift from the public for use in a limited situation.

It should be noted that nearly all of these people are dead. Some of them have been dead a very long time.

Some, and their names are legion (a very small legion), learned this in time to contribute to the aforementioned progress. In today's world, where power lasts only till the next newscast, the chances of that happening are substantially reduced.

Nevertheless, the trappings and illusions of power confer a warm, fuzzy feeling and occasional bouts of material comfort. So it's not surprising that staying in power is an important objective of people in government. Alternative occupations are hard to find.

Note that this objective applies to both elected and appointed people. Elected people have to maintain their position in a sort of continuous popularity contest, inconveniently punctuated from time to time with real elections. Appointed officials have the choice of playing this same game vicariously, with the elected people as intermediaries, or maintaining total invisibility, which carries the risk that they may be found dispensable.

#### **Opposition**

There's the Official Opposition, and then there's the Rest of Us. It has been said that 'The duty of the Opposition is to oppose'; a more fatuous statement about government would be hard to imagine; it reduces the function of the O.O. to a largely ceremonial one. But many members of the O.O. take this statement as a credo, leading to behaviour which makes it hard to visualize them as a 'government in waiting'.

The Rest of Us are also frequently viewed by Those in Power as potential, if not real, opposition. Power's evil twin is, after all, Paranoia.

This may explain why government often adopts the same approach to both 'oppositions'. This is colloquially known as the 'mushroom treatment', or 'keep them in the dark and cover them with manure.' A little thought will make it clear how this somewhat agricultural approach makes disclosure of objectives difficult. The government, after all, is trying to keep the noise level down to a dull, and hopefully distant, roar.

#### **The Mandate**

This is the term used to describe what the people who got

---

© Island Tides Publishing Ltd. This article may be reproduced with the following attribution, in its entirety, and notification to Island Tides Publishing Ltd.

*'This article was published (May 6, 1999) in 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing across the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria to Nanaimo.'*

Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada.  
Email: [islandtides@islandtides.com](mailto:islandtides@islandtides.com).

Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.  
Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

---

elected think the voters elected them for. Logically, it should be related to the aforementioned etc., but this interpretation is often transitory. While recycling has always been the main source of raw material for the construction of a mandate, current practice rescues from the electoral wreckage significant planks from the platform of those who were not elected. This gives them less to stand on (or cling to) and confuses the voters.

However, it is still difficult to get elected without making promises. These are traditionally vague and recorded only by the press, who are subsequently accused of misquoting candidates. In recent years, attempts have been made to record promises in a published book, usually distinguished by its colour. The result was that the party involved had to accuse itself of misquoting itself.

Thus the mandate doesn't have the same influence on government action as it used to, and, because it is continuously evolving, can't be easily explained. If we only knew what a government thought its mandate was at any given time, we might be able to see how objectives in the mandate influence

government action. Influence it, that is, along with the objectives of continuing in power and mushrooming the oppositions.

### **An Exception**

In these articles, I have tried to avoid references to any particular governments, and I have been delighted to see that readers seem to be able to draw their own examples from all over. It should be noted, however, that the Islands Trust is undeserving of some of these comments because it is not elected, nor does it operate, along party lines. This at least saves it from having an Official Opposition, though it has lots of unofficial ones. Discussion in Trust Council is intelligent and often persuasive, and votes are free and unconstrained by party lines. This is not to say that trustees don't have their differences; they do, in every way. But they resolve them, or at least agree not to.

But possibly the most important feature of the Islands Trust is the existence of the permanent 'Preserve and Protect' mandate. The constitutions of more senior governments, unfortunately, do not provide this level of guidance. ✍

