

# Organizing political support for the natural city

## Preston Manning

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## Introduction

My background is in Canadian federal politics. My experience has been in taking the tools which democracy gives to us all – freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom to vote, freedom to influence the votes of others – and using those tools to attempt to change the national agenda, including the agendas of traditional parties, the media, the public, and the federal government.

In the 1990s, my colleagues and I had some success in organizing a new political party based in Western Canada, becoming the Official Opposition in the Canadian Parliament within ten years, changing the national agenda in some important respects, and forcing a realignment of conservative forces on the national stage.

## Question to be answered

Suppose that this Natural City conference comes up with an "Agenda for Change" – a list of five concrete policy proposals which, if pursued by senior levels of government, would move us much closer to the natural city of the future.

These proposals could include:

- instituting full-cost pricing of land and services;
- conscientiously greening schoolyards and other public places;
- reclaiming the waterfronts and river fronts of communities built around water;
- establishing watershed/air-shed based regulatory systems;
- redefining the service responsibilities and financial resources of civic administrations in relation to building and maintaining the Natural City, and much more.

How might one generate the level of public support – political support – required to secure adoption of those policies?

## Suggestions for action

Because my time is short, I am only going to make two or three suggestions which I hope will be helpful, or will at least provoke discussion.

### Suggestion One: Organize an issue campaign

At the federal and provincial levels in this country, the political parties no longer conduct serious issue campaigns, the parties having become strictly marketing machines for fighting election campaigns. But there is still a place for issue campaigns, and if political parties will not conduct them, then somebody else should.

An issue campaign is organized like an election campaign with:

- A beginning and an end (so that you are not asking people to sign up for life, only for a specified amount of time);
- A Campaign Team that includes a Campaign Manager, a Fund Raising Team, a Communications Team, and a strong grassroots component; and,
- Simple but carefully researched messages and mobilization of the means to communicate them (including competent spokespersons, special events, brochures, print and electronic advertisements, door-to-door canvassing, and a good website).

While an issue campaign may be organized like an election campaign, its object is not to get someone elected (although that may follow) but to get some issue – the need to establish environmentally sustainable cities – or some policies that would facilitate that, higher on the political agenda of the country and the politicians, than that issue and those solutions would otherwise be.

In other words, you run your issue campaign so that when the government or the political parties send out their pollsters, they begin to find that two out of three or three out of four people surveyed are responding to questions about their top-of-mind issue by saying:

- Why don't you do something about improving the urban environment? Or,
- Why don't you implement that Natural City Agenda?

It can be done! And if you want a few stories about federal issue campaigns, I wrote them up in a book called *Think Big* (McClelland & Stewart, 2002) – including the Charlottetown Referendum Campaign, the Balance the Federal Budget Campaign, and an Axe Your Tax Bill Campaign – all of which

are instructive. These may not be your favorite issues, but it is the issue campaign techniques that I commend to you as applicable to raising Natural City issues and policies higher on the national agenda in Canada than they are at present.

### **Suggestion Two: Build principled coalitions to get things done**

The author is personally convinced that the most effective way to get things done politically in the 21st century will be to build principled coalitions to pursue particular policy objectives.

The days are gone (if they ever existed) when any one party or interest group can assemble all the right people with all the best ideas all at the right time all under one roof with all the necessary public support to advance a major public policy objective like eco-friendly, sustainable cities.

The alternative is to put together a coalition of individuals and organizations who may not agree on everything or even 50 percent of everything but who can agree on five or six very important positions – the Natural City Agenda for Change, for example – and are willing to work together politically at least for a time to get those five or six things done. Note that I use the term “principled coalitions” as distinct from coalitions of expediency or coalitions built solely on opposition to something or coalitions that rest solely on some temporary coincidence of interests. I believe that the most credible and effective coalitions are those in which the various players share a core set of principles or values from which their policy commitments and collective actions flow. This makes securing agreement in principle one of the first key steps in assembling such coalitions.

The building and management of principled coalitions, of course, is an art and a science. And, sadly, in Canada, our political system at the federal and provincial levels, with its division of legislators into watertight partisan compartments reinforced by rigid party discipline, fails to teach or facilitate – indeed obstructs and discourages – coalition-building activity. There is far more coalition building incentive, capacity, and experience, for example, in the US Congress and the British

House of Commons, than there is in the Canadian House of Commons.

In Canada, there is currently much more potential for principled coalition building at the municipal level or among NGOs and interest groups in the civil society sector – particularly if one’s purpose is to build a coalition for running an issue campaign to advance a Natural City Agenda for Change.

### **Suggestion Three: Frame key policy positions in their communicable form**

This may seem self-evident but its importance is frequently underestimated, particularly by academics and idealistic interest groups endeavoring to get politicians to adopt new or different policy positions.

More specifically, if the caucuses of federal Members of Parliament, regardless of party, cannot see within about 30 seconds how to effectively communicate the position you are trying to get them to adopt, that position is in deep trouble, regardless of any of its other merits.

It is regrettable, but in this age when politics is increasingly dominated by communications, especially electronic communications, the communicability of a policy position is now more persuasive with most caucuses than its rationality, constitutionality, economic costs and benefits, ethicality, or administrative feasibility.

When we are presenting the highlights of our Natural City Agenda for Change to that political decision maker at Queen’s Park or Ottawa, that legislator is most likely sitting there asking, “But if I adopt this position, how will I explain it at the town hall meeting in my riding next Saturday? How will I articulate it effectively to the TV reporter lurking outside this caucus room when she sticks her mike and camera in my face? How will I respond to their questions if I champion this position?”

If our presentation of the Natural City Agenda for Change to politicians fully addresses these questions – by presenting our key policy recommendations in their most communicable form – then our chances for getting a thoughtful hearing and a good reception are immeasurably enhanced.