

# NDP — Better Days For Us

## ~~NDP Victory Brightens Outlook For Mental Patients~~

Hail! Hail! The long black night of Social Credit is over! The dawn of a new era has arrived!

No longer will the Socreds block the efforts of downtrodden people to improve their lives. For the first time in B.C. history, we have reason to be hopeful. Local, progressive groups can now imagine moving forward to build the communities we so desperately need.

Where we had received indifference and opposition, we can now expect help. Where we had been made to feel impotent, we can now begin to participate.

The NDP is a people's party. It is the only party that can make legitimate claim to representing ordinary working and poor people. ~~It's~~ Its first commitments are not to big business and foreign investors, but to the aged, the handicapped, welfare mothers, children and the workers of this province.

We in MPA have good reason to be optimistic. The Social Credit government treated mental patients like garbage, using Riverview as the dump. Premier Barrett, a social worker who has worked at Riverview, knows what a sham it is as a "therapeutic" institution. He has pledged to abolish it and to decentralize mental health services.

Certainly, mental patients can expect changes for the better. The questions for us at this point are: What relationship can MPA have with the new government, and what can we do to contribute to the changes?

Previous NDP involvement with MPA

Before answering these questions, let us review the relationship which has already developed between MPA and the NDP. Until very recently MPA has followed a more-or-less official policy of not engaging in partisan politics. Beside the alienation from such politics most of us have felt under 20 years of the Bennett regime, the decision to be "apolitical" was



also based on the realistic appraisal that supporting a particular party would jeopardise our grants. (This in itself is a comment on the politically restrictive climate under Social Credit.)

While we had agreed not to go to bat publicly for any party, we had ~~not~~ no objection to receiving party support. It is significant that only the NDP took enough interest in MPA to find out what we were doing and to give us their official backing. At their Provincial Convention in May of 1971, resolutions were passed in the Health Workshops explicitly supporting MPA.

The resolutions read:

"That the NDP support:

- a) Self-help groups (e.g., Mental Patients Association) in the mental health field.
- b) These groups to provide 24 hour, user-controlled centers (emergency, drop-in, social etc.) that would extend but not encroach on existing services.
- c) Funding from government for these services."

And at an unofficial level, it is surprising to note how much contact we have had with NDP individuals--MLA's and other prominent party members. This contact, we believe, is indicative of the sort of people who lead the party, i.e., elections or no election, they do take an interest in grass roots people's groups like ours.

When MPA was just being founded, Dave Barrett suggested we get in touch with Ray Parkinson. Parkinson, who is a psychiatrist, NDP ex-MLA and long-standing critic of the backward mental health policies of the Socreds, supported MPA from the outset. He wrote us several letters of recommendation which enabled us to obtain funding. In March of 1971 he put a successful motion before the Section of Psychiatry to endorse MPA's policies and goals. This endorsement greatly helped us in establishing our credibility in our early stages.

Norm Levi, social worker with the John Howard Society and now Burrard MLA, has referred several of his clients to us and has always cooperated with us in securing housing, welfare, jobs etc. for people leaving hospitals



or prisons.

Phyllis Young, MLA for Vancouver Little Mountain, sat on a committee to whom we had applied for a grant through the Rehabilitation Department. She argued on our behalf strongly and against considerable opposition. Thanks largely to her efforts we did receive the grant, a salary for the coordinator of the crafts program.

Rosemary Brown, Barrard MLA along with Norm Levi, not long ago received an (anonymous) phone call from a "neighbour" of ours who said that while she thought ex-patients should live in the community, she didn't want us living in her community. Rosemary told her it was our community too.

Mike Musclow, MPA farm coordinator, has had contact with Peter Rolston, MLA for Dewdney, the riding where our new farm is located.

Hilda Thomas, who was unfortunately defeated in the Point Grey riding, spent an evening at the drop-in center with her husband, Phil, playing and singing B.C. folksongs which they have been collecting for almost 20 years.

It is not politically irrelevant that NDP candidates and MLA's are people with whom we can spend a comfortable evening talking and singing. One blinks with amazement to think that they and others like them are in power representing us. Such a situation was unthinkable under Social Credit. Imagine Gagliardi in our living room playing the banjo and singing "Hallelujah

I'm a Bum"!

### The Decision to Support NDP

In July of this year, MPA began ~~moving~~ inching toward taking a more political stand. We started Politics Night meetings once a week. Naturally, once the election was announced, we began discussing it. We discovered that almost all of us who attended the meetings were planning to vote NDP. Further, we agreed to work as a caucus within MPA to canvass for the NDP,



We drew up a list of policy demands (see page of the newsletter) for changes in the mental health field and invited Rosemary Brown (MLA for Burrard where the drop-in center and west end residence are located) and Phyllis Young and Roy Cummings (MLA's for Little Mountain where the east end residence is located) to attend the Politics Night meeting on August 17th.  
with the candidates

We spent the evening actively discussing our demands and the NDP position on mental health in general. We reached a strong consensus on the need for change and on some of the directions it ought to take.

Because the Little Mountain candidates, who were running against ex-Attorney General Peterson and therefore had a more uphill battle than did Rosemary Brown and Norm Levi, we agreed to help canvass in the Little Mountain riding. We distributed more than 1,000 NDP leaflets and are happy to have had a hand in defeating Peterson and in making Little Mountain an NDP riding.

*How to The Future: What will MPA's role be?*

We began with the question of how MPA can work with the government to contribute to improving the dismal mental health system in B.C. Obviously the ~~answers~~ answers to this question will have to be worked out in the months and years ahead. At this point we can only sketch out the more general approaches we might take.

No one really expected the NDP to form such a strong majority government, so most of our previous plans were designed with the thought of having an unsympathetic government to contend with. Now we have to begin re-thinking all of our strategies.

The research committee, for example, which has just completed an 85 page brief recommending changes in the Mental Health Act, was about to initiate a campaign of public education on the issues raised in the brief.



We felt this course would be more fruitful than approaching a deaf legislature to change the Act. Now, however, there is a real chance that the brief can have an impact on legislative change and the feeling is that ~~this~~ this is where we should apply our energies.

And not just on legal issues, ;but in the whole mental health area, we must begin formulating policies and making recommendations which are feasible. Beforehand, it was easy to voice demands when we knew they had ~~some~~ almost no chance of being implemented. Now our demands must take into account the change in government and thus conform to a level of reality such that they ~~xxxxx~~ can be ~~acted~~ acted upon.

It's important to bear in mind that the government will be looking to groups like MPA to participate in re-shaping and humanizing the programs botched up by the Socreds. We must take the initiative to make concrete proposals rather than simply react to government actions. Of course, this should not mean that we work in isolation; we must develop relationships with government officials so that once we have made our initial proposals we can collaborate with the Mental Health Branch and other departments in jointly formulating a course of action.

Because the government will be busy for several months clearing out the ghosts and cobwebs left behind by Bennett, we should begin as soon as possible among ourselves to put together program proposals. I suggest we set up a 4 or 5 day conference at our new farm in early October to make a start in this direction.

I also suggest that, at the outset, we indulge the grandiose fantasy that it is up to us to structure the entire mental health system for B.C. Once we have pooled these delusions, we can descend as a group to more realistic levels. of planning.



~~Text~~

This brings up an obvious note of caution, namely, that MPA could fall into the trap of biting off more than we can chew. Government funding will not enable us to accomplish more than we are organizationally prepared to undertake. Funding is a necessary but not ~~3~~ sufficient condition for moving ahead. It is up to us to ensure that we set our goals rather than let them be set by enticing offers of government support. In a word, we must counterbalance our delusions of grandeur with equally valid delusions of mediocrity.

A few ~~Some Specific Suggestions~~

But just because there are obvious limits to what proposals MPA can implement does not mean that we cannot make recommendations for other groups and agencies to undertake. MPA, as a group, ought to press for creation of and representation on <sup>Government</sup> committees geared ~~toward~~ toward reviewing and establishing policies in the entire sphere of mental health.

In the area of daycare, for example, it is well known that ~~many~~ many, ~~many~~ many women suffer emotional breakdowns largely because they have no help with their kids. While MPA may not be organizationally ~~prepared~~ ready to set up daycare centers, we ought to be involved in ensuring that child care provisions are made an essential facet of provincial mental health programs.

As we know from our own experience, the area of crisis services is another one that desperately needs strengthening. Crisis work is <sup>messy</sup> inefficient and costly--two of the reasons no effective programs are in operation. Yet if such programs did exist, if genuine help (not in a hospital emergency ward or on a telephone) were available in the early stages of crisis, how many people would be saved from the downward spiral which eventually results in even costlier hospitalization? Again, MPA cannot begin to meet the crisis needs of the province, but we can participate in establishing policies which will.



Child care and ~~xx~~ crisis services are only two of many issues which require urgent and thoughtful consideration. Others are: aftercare, employment discrimination, public education, community integration, patient-participation, de-professionalization, legal aid programs, etc. etc. We should be discussing all of these topics and others with the goal of devising feasible and effective programs for people who are being driven crazy by the inhuman conditions of life in B.C.

Now the Work Begins

The point I most want to make is that we in MPA must begin to think not only of improving the lives of our 200 more or less active members, but also of proposing ideas which will help the thousands of in-patients and the tens of thousands of out-patients, ~~ex~~-patients and others being driven quietly mad in this province.

The NDP victory makes these goals infinitely more possible than they were under Social Credit. Now that the jubilation over the ~~six~~ election is dying down, it is time for us to get down to the hard work of participating with government in designing programs which will meaningfully attack the sources and symptoms of human misery.