

Less than Green: What Does the Green Party Stand For?

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The Tyee - Murray Dobbin - Many people vote Green because they assume it is more grassroots, more democratic, than the others. They would be shocked to know that the party is the most top-down of any of the federal parties, and that Harris seems to simply ignore decisions that he doesn't agree with.

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[Green Party:](#)
[Short on Policies and Democracy](#)

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A diligent search of their website reveals no platform at all.

Voting Green? Not so much.

If the polls are accurate about four per cent of Canadians, possibly more, will vote for the Green Party in this election. (Last time around it was 4.3 per cent, a historic high). Exactly who votes Green and for what reasons is still unclear as no one has done a publicly available survey to answer the question.

But the motivation is not monolithic. There are protest voters, disgruntled NDP voters, Red Tories appalled at Stephen Harper, and Liberals angry at Paul Martin's policies but not willing to go to the NDP. And then there are those who vote Green positively, because they assume that the Green Party of Canada is more or less like the Greens of Europe: democratic, socially and economically progressive and strong defenders of the environment.

In fact, all these categories make the assumption that the Green Party is at least, well, Green. They should take the time to be sure. In the last election I wrote, based on the policy platform on its website, the party was right wing on social and fiscal policy and also pointed out that both

[the Sierra Club](#)

and

[Greenpeace](#)

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rated them below the NDP (and in most categories, below the Bloc) on environmental policies. Unfortunately, little has changed. Some things are actually worse.

Green Party leader Jim Harris, a former Tory and a motivational speaker for large corporations, is again preoccupied with running as many candidates as possible (he ran candidates in all 308 ridings in 2004). This is to ensure that there is a Green Party franchise in every riding in the country so the party's government funding remains intact.

He knows that a certain percentage of voters will vote Green no matter what ? and each vote brings the party \$1.75. The party received over a million dollars under election financing rules implemented for the first time in 2004. Yet, Harris has been almost invisible since the last election, has done little organizing, no membership drive, has managed to raise just over \$200,000 and has paid virtually no attention to policy development.

But most disturbing to many inside the party, is Harris's authoritarian style. Many people vote Green because they assume it is more grassroots, more democratic, than the others. They would be shocked to know that the party is the most top-down of any of the federal parties, and that Harris seems to simply ignore decisions that he doesn't agree with.

The situation is so bad that [four of the party's 11 officers](#) , including the treasurer, have resigned from the governing council in protest or been suspended in the past year. Two positions remained unfilled for eight months and two are still vacant. According to dissidents, Harris delayed filling the positions because he was happy with the remaining officers who tend to support him and he did not want to risk having more people turn into troublesome dissidents.

But in any case, leaving the positions of fundraising chair and communications chair empty for most of the year leading up to an election raises troubling questions.

At the 2004 AGM, members passed several constitutional amendments which ? constitutionally ? were supposed to be ratified by a party-wide vote within six months. Fifteen months later, it hasn't happened and there are no plans to hold a vote. The 2004 AGM also voted to have a policy convention this fall in anticipation of a federal election. Harris simply declined to hold one, then rescheduled it for February, 2006. Now that convention has been postponed.

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Recently, a party-wide binding vote was taken on the sensitive issue of revenue sharing. Members voted overwhelmingly for an option that would divide up party revenue equally among local riding associations, the national party and its provincial branches. It took a year for the party's council to respond to an 83 per cent vote in favour of this option at the 2004 AGM.

Harris was strongly opposed to this formula, and after the vote, the national office announced that it considered it to be just a guideline. Members of the revenue sharing committee were furious ? and one started a petition demanding the party comply. The party headquarters eventually bowed to the pressure. None of this kind of behaviour would be tolerated for a minute in any of the other federal parties. And none would simply allow nearly half the critical officer positions on the governing council to go unfilled for months.

The policy situation is scarcely any better. In fact, the party seems to have no written policies. A [diligent search of their website](#) reveals no platform at all. Last spring, there was a policy document entitled Platform 2005, but it has been removed. Click on ?Policies? on their website and you get a statement saying they will release policies as the election unfolds. There are also some broad policy principles. But what happened to the policies the party had last year? Have they been dumped and if so, on whose authority?

On the website, you can connect to [Living Platform](#) , an innovative approach to engaging members in policy debate and development. The problem is that the man in charge of that process was fired by the executive last winter. He claims Harris helped push him out while Harris denies it. In any event, his position was never filled again. Critics say that's because Harris and his advisors (one of them an operative formerly with the Alliance Party) thought the whole exercise a waste of time.

As a result, the 300 or so people engaged in the process were left with no moderator. The page highlights ?Planks in the works? and lists 12 policy areas. But for ten of these policy areas, the last updates were made as far back as January and no later than June of this year. The page has no actual policies, just rudimentary brainstorming.

There is a strong suspicion from some of those who resigned from the council, that Harris simply removed reference to party policies from the website because they caused him so much grief in the last election. You can see why. Enhanced food banks to solve poverty, more volunteerism instead of more money for social programs, reduced taxes on corporate income

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and investment, rejection of strong environmental laws and strong enforcement in favour of so-called 'voluntary compliance' by corporate polluters. These 2004 policies were ridiculed as badly thought out, not costed and clearly contradictory of the Charter of the Global Greens which the party has adopted as its guiding principles.

The party is now issuing a news release with a new policy almost everyday. Some actually have a progressive tilt, but they are almost universally vague, hastily formulated, and have no roots in any party deliberations. And to make matters even more confusing, some Green Party candidates in Saskatchewan are not even running on the national party's policies but on their own locally developed platform.

I expect that many people in BC intend to vote Green for the same reason they did last time: the Green Party brand implies a lot of very positive sentiment and progressive history. Many others will make little distinction between the Harris Green Party and the provincial Greens who had a progressive platform in the last provincial election. Green voters often think of themselves as amongst the most principled voters in any election. If they are serious about this claim, they should be wary of voting for Jim Harris ? and what remains of the Green Party.

Murray Dobbin is a Vancouver journalist. His latest book is Paul Martin: CEO for Canada? This piece has appeared in The Tyee.