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Election authority calls Liberal "polling" advertising

By Bill Tieleman

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You can fool some of the people all of the time, and those are the people you need to concentrate on.

— Robert Strauss, U.S. Democratic party chair, 1973–76

Elections B.C. has determined that a controversial telephone opinion survey being conducted on behalf of the B.C. Liberal party will be defined as "push polling" and "advertising" for election-expense purposes.

The Georgia Straight revealed last week that an undetermined number of constituents in Premier Gordon Campbell's riding of Vancouver–Point Grey were called in February by a Winnipeg-based research firm called Western Opinion Research, which has been the party's pollster of record.

However, the "polling" included reading a series of seven statements that were all positive messages about B.C. Liberal government actions and asking if respondents were "aware of or unaware" of them, leading Elections B.C. to classify the calls as advertising for the party rather than opinion research.

"It is advertising, definitely; the definition of push polling is advertising," Elections B.C. communications manager Jennifer Miller said in an interview after the Straight forwarded her a copy of the questionnaire and asked if it constituted advertising under the B.C. Election Act.

Miller said that if the Liberal party or a supporter were to conduct the same "polling" during the election period of April 19 to May 17, it would have to be declared as an election expense and be subject to Election Act rules.

"If the [Liberal] party was doing it, they would have to, of course, say it was sponsored by the official agent and identify themselves and give contact information," Miller said. "Any expenses would have to be disclosed and fall under the expense limits.

"If it's a business group, they would have to register [as sponsors under the Election Act]," she added.

The Elections B.C. determination means the province joins the ranks of several U.S. states—including Wisconsin, New Hampshire, and Ohio—that regulate and



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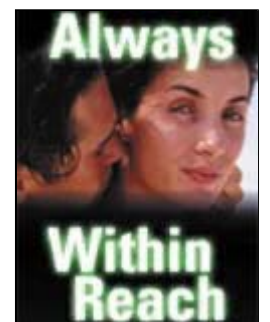
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force disclosure on push polling.

It still remains unclear whether the B.C. Liberals or a group supporting the party is the client of Western Opinion Research, as both the party and polling firm refuse to speak to the Straight, despite phone and e-mail requests.

The controversial questionnaire became public after the polling firm called my Kitsilano home on February 17 and said they were from "Warshall Research". My phone's caller-identification readout showed the call was, in fact, coming from Western Opinion Research. No company called Warshall Research could be found in Canada.

And now questions are being raised about the potential involvement of Martyn Brown, chief of staff to Campbell.

U.S. political consultant Cathy Allen said in an interview with the Straight that the controversial Liberal push polling may also be part of a sophisticated new electoral strategy called "micro targeting", where a variety of techniques are used to focus on specific voters in a riding.

Allen said that when attending the American Association of Political Consultants conference in Washington, D.C., on January 22, she ran into Brown at a session on micro targeting.

Andy Orr, the Liberals' executive director of communications in the public-affairs bureau, returned a call from the Straight to say that the B.C. Liberal party paid for Brown's attendance at the conference, but he declined to comment on Brown's possible involvement in the Liberal push polling. Orr added that Brown would be taking a leave of absence to work on the upcoming election campaign.

"The big thing in the U.S. right now is micro targeting," Allen said from Seattle. "Micro targeting was used effectively by the Republicans in the last election. You find messages that resonate within target groups. You try to refine a message for that subset and really go after the subset."

According to a December 30, 2004, Washington Post report, the Republican party used micro targeting to win votes for George W. Bush in traditionally hostile areas. The party's "motivation and mobilization strategy needed expensive, high-tech micro targeting to cherry-pick prospective Republicans who lived in majority Democratic neighborhoods."

Is push polling a regular occurrence in Canada? Nik Nanos, president-elect of the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association, representing major Canadian polling firms, doesn't think so but doesn't rule out political parties doing such polling.

"I'm not aware of any companies that have been engaged in push polling, but it does fall into the category of campaign black operations," Nanos said in an interview.

There is other evidence that similar "polling" is taking place in several other B.C. ridings. Victoria Times-Colonist columnist Jody Paterson wrote on January 21 that she received a suspicious polling call that seemed biased toward the Liberals, and Straight readers in Burnaby, Surrey, and Delta contacted Political Connections to report similar calls.

So, who is Western Opinion Research? The company has not responded to inquiries as to whether or not it is working for the B.C. Liberals, but it does conduct research for the B.C. government. It is listed in Public Accounts for 2003-04 as being paid \$63,978 for its services.

Greg Lyle, who managed the B.C. Liberal election campaign in 1996 and recently left the 2005 Liberal campaign team, again declined to comment on the polling



or the reason for his departure, though he has been publicly critical of push polling. (Last week, Political Connections mistakenly identified Lyle as chief of staff to Premier Gordon Campbell in 1996; that position was, in fact, held by Judy Kirk. Lyle was B.C. Liberal party election campaign planning director.)

Push polling, micro targeting, the Liberal party dodging questions, its pollster using a different, untraceable name, a senior party adviser leaving the campaign weeks before it starts, a top B.C. government aide attending a political seminar in Washington, D.C.—it should all make for a fascinating American-style election.

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