

Of Nice and Men

Civic affairs in Greater Vancouver have become a study in contrasts between the high-testosterone battles of Vancouver and the you-go-girl style of Surrey

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It's a study in contrasts that no one could have predicted. Surrey once had city council meetings that bore a closer resemblance to monster-truck competitions than politics.

Now, after a couple of years of Mayor Dianne Watts' you-go-girl leadership style, five of the council's six women and one male councillor have banded together to form the apolitical Surrey First party.

Long-time independent and moderate-left councillor Judy Villeneuve was the latest addition last week. That cemented Watts' reputation as someone who can turn local politics from hand-to-hand combat into something so consensual that the only thing missing is tickle-fights during council meetings.

Meanwhile in Vancouver, ostensibly the home of the yoga, latte and getting-in-touch-with-your-inner-child class, civic politics has turned into a blood sport with at least seven combative -- and male -- politicians jousting for the mayor's job, a major rift in the ruling party, and a general atmosphere at council reminiscent of the 100 Years' War.

How did this happen? Is it a gender



CREDIT: Stuart Davis, Vancouver Sun files

Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts has a reputation as a politician who can turn local politics from hand-to-hand combat into a more consensual exercise.



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun

thing? Or is there some deeper force at work affecting the nature and structure of municipal political parties in Vancouver?

Peter Ladner (left) and Sam Sullivan have battled on Vancouver city council and will now compete for the NPA's nomination as the mayoralty candidate.

Watts attributes the current Surrey climate mostly to personal style.

"It is incumbent on the mayor to set the stage and create the environment," she said. "And if you get to the core of what people want to do, they want to affect change.

"So if you can empower people, you've got an effective member of your team. It comes from that place of really valuing people's contribution because everybody's got value."

She does seem to be willing and able to conciliate, and not only lately. Firefighters' union president Larry Thomas says it was Watts' leadership in the late 1990s that helped defuse a standoff between city hall and the union.

With some prodding, Watts says it has partly to do with the different ways women and men approach politics.

"There's a sort of natural ability women have in any structure, whether it's a household or government, to bring people together to focus on the problems."

That "women are just more collaborative" theory is one that many politicians and political analysts will echo, but with some wariness. As they all say, it's not automatic. There are male politicians who are great collaborative leaders, and political women who make Attila the Hun look like Phil Donohue.

But in general, women don't like the mudslinging and combativeness in politics and they'll avoid it if they can, says former NPA councillor Jennifer Clarke, who helps run B.C.'s Women's Campaign School, which trains women for politics.

Vision Vancouver Coun. Heather Deal says she's not enamoured of the women-are-kinder-and-gentler philosophy, but she does admit she had a different experience when she sat on the park board, where six of the seven commissioners were women, than what she sees on Vancouver council.

Simon Fraser University political-science professor Patrick Smith said it seems clear to him that gender does play some kind of role.

"If you talk to women in politics, they'll tell you that there's more potential for talking across the divide among women," Smith said.

There's a parliamentary women's caucus in Ottawa that brings together women from different political parties to talk about issues in a way that just doesn't exist anywhere else.

Surrey has the highest proportion of women of any council in Metro

Vancouver. Two-thirds of the nine councillors are women in a region where the average proportion is one-third women, two-thirds men. So, says Smith, it's not inconceivable that having a high number of women has affected the way business is done.

But there are others who put much more emphasis on structural differences between Vancouver and Surrey politics than the gender split.

As former COPE councillor Anne Roberts points out, there are more women on Vancouver council now -- five -- than the previous term.

"You could hardly say that [NPA councillors] Suzanne Anton or Kim Capri are willing to be less combative than any of the men. They're right in there swinging."

So while Roberts believes that women may have the capacity to approach politics differently, they also need the right environment to do it in. If that environment is dominated by a combative leader or an entrenched party system, not much is going to change.

So Roberts and others say the difference seems to be more about the party system -- or lack of it -- in each municipality.

SFU political scientist Kennedy Stewart says Vancouver has a mature party system, which inevitably involves nomination battles, while Surrey doesn't.

"Surrey is like the Vancouver of the 1950s or 1960s or maybe even TEAM [a short-lived political coalition of the '70s], where you have one party that's not a party and the left doesn't have it together as a credible party," Stewart said. He predicts that as Surrey grows and has to develop a more stable and entrenched party system, the collegiality will inevitably give way.

And that's not a bad thing.

"I'd rather be in Vancouver than Surrey at this point," he said. "Here, there's lots of choice and a very active political scene. In Surrey, it's not going to be that interesting. You'll have Watts talking about her record and [Coun. Bob] Bose saying 'We shouldn't develop.'"

Clarke agrees that the party system in Vancouver makes conflict more inevitable.

"When a political organization has a track record of being able to win seats, then there's a struggle over who leads that organization. Nominations become highly prized."

Roberts concurs that it's the party system more than a gender or style difference that is creating the Tale of Two Cities.

But more than the party system is at the root of it, Roberts says. There has to be another reason for the unusual level of divisiveness in Vancouver, which

has now seen three councils in a row split into warring camps during their three-year terms.

"Why does it seem so inevitable that these parties split apart? The one thing I've thought might be a factor is that the parties at the federal and provincial level have ways to ensure some discipline. They have some plums to throw around and that tends to keep people in line."

At the civic level, there's very little to keep councillors from the same party together except for the fear of appearing to be split during the next election.

That's been exacerbated by efforts in the past two terms by mayors Larry Campbell and Sam Sullivan, whose staffs have worked to create a provincial premier-style office, but without the powers a premier and party leader has, making friction even more inevitable.

But some say that's more about personal style. Certainly, as Watts pointed out, a leader's individual style can make the difference.

Anyone who looks around Metro Vancouver can see that many councils, with and without parties, have gone through periods of strife. Surrey did for years, first as then-mayor Bob Bose tried to preside over a divided council and then under former mayor Doug McCallum's rule. Langley Township was another hot spot in the 1990s.

But there, Mayor Kurt Alberts also ushered in a new period of relative tranquility and collaboration after several years of high-profile conflict.

So calm exists now in Langley, as it does in Surrey, because voters clearly were sick of high-testosterone politics and voted in a new group on the premise that they were different.

But that won't last forever.

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