

British Columbia's premier felled by casino-licensing scandal

Keith Jones
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Dan Miller, a former millwright and trade union official, is to be sworn in today as Premier of British Columbia. But he will head the government of Canada's third most populous province only until the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) can organize a leadership convention to choose a new party leader.

Glen Clark, the BC NDP leader and premier since early 1996, resigned last Saturday, less than 24 hours after the provincial attorney-general revealed that Clark is under criminal investigation over the granting of a provincial government casino-gambling license to a company that is co-owned by his neighbor and friend, Dimitrios Pilarinos.

Earlier last week, a BC Supreme Court judge rejected an application from Clark's lawyers to quash the injunction under which the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RMCP) raided Clark's Vancouver home last March 2. Instead, Justice Patrick Dohm ceded to press requests for at least partial disclosure of the warrant's contents.

The warrant application, large parts of which were released Friday, indicate the RCMP is investigating Clark for bribery, corruption, fraud and breach of trust. It alleges the now ex-premier may have helped secure approval for the casino-license application of Pilarinos and strip club owner Steve Ng in return for Pilarinos, who is a building contractor, making unpaid renovations to Clark's home and cottage and/or promising to funnel donations to the NDP from future casino profits. The warrant reports that Pilarinos is said to have told an associate that Clark rejected offers of a share of the casino profits for either himself or his children. It adds Clark may have been "duped" into accepting favors from Pilarinos.

The warrant shows that prior to the raid on Clark's home, the police had made the premier and Pilarinos

the target of intensive electronic and physical surveillance.

At his press conference Saturday, Clark vehemently denied all allegations of wrongdoing: "I'm completely confident I will be exonerated and cleared. No premier should be driven from office by the existence of an investigation that remains incomplete and much of which has already been disproven."

Clark is not the first top BC social-democrat to be felled by a scandal involving gambling. Exposure of system of kickbacks under which profits from provincially-chartered charity bingos were siphoned into the coffers of the NDP and the pockets of at least one prominent New Democrat, led to the resignation of Clark's predecessor as NDP leader and BC premier, although there was never any suggestion Mike Harcourt personally benefited from or even knew of the scheme.

That said, there is no question Clark has been the target of a campaign of rumor and innuendo orchestrated by the big business media. In office since 1991, BC's social democrats have headed a right-wing regime that has closed hospitals, cut welfare benefits, imposed austerity on public sector workers, stripped the working poor of the right to legal aid, and echoed the Reform Party's law and order rhetoric. In its last budget, the BC NDP slashed taxes on all but BC's largest corporations. But big business is seething over the NDP regime's failure to cede to its demands that income taxes be dramatically cut, union rights further curtailed and environmental regulations gutted.

Whatever the truth of the allegations against Clark, they have been colored from the beginning by the big business campaign to destabilize the NDP regime if not drive it from power. The police case against Clark was initiated on the basis of a complaint lodged by an associate of Pilarinos, who first approached the Liberal

Party, the NDP's main electoral rival, and the *Vancouver Sun*. The March 2 raid on Clark's home was televised live by BCTV, the province's largest television station and a notorious voice of right-wing opinion. To this day, the RCMP has not explained how word of the raid leaked to the press. And the raid itself was led by a police officer who had previously been approached by the Liberals as a possible candidate.

The real attitude of the big business media to the type of corruption in which Clark is alleged to have engaged was exemplified by an editorial in Monday's *National Post*: "Political mismanagement," it declared, "is forgettable if the province's economy is in good order."

The NDP will try to use the impending leadership campaign to appease its right-wing critics. The three reputed favourites are Gordon Wilson, a former provincial Liberal Party leader and avowed "anti-socialist," whom Clark convinced to cross the floor of the legislature only last January; Attorney-General Ujal Dosanjh, who has won accolades from the media for his anti-crime rhetoric; and Joy MacPhail, who quit as Finance Minister last month at least in part because she wanted the government to take a more "business-friendly" approach.



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