

A Brief History of Dogwood's Love Affair With the Initiative and Recall Act



By Laura Benson
Director of Organizing, Dogwood
laura@dogwoodbc.ca

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In May 2017, Dogwood was on the brink of launching a province-wide campaign to mandate a *Community Health and Safety Review Act* for inadequately reviewed projects like Kinder Morgan using British Columbia's unique citizens' initiative process.

Time was of the essence: Christy Clark's Liberals had narrowly secured a plurality of seats (43) in the legislature after a nail-biting election recount. Kinder Morgan, with federal and provincial approvals in hand, was threatening to start construction on its reckless and unwanted pipeline and tanker project.

Given the fatal inadequacies of the National Energy Board assessment, we knew British Columbians would mobilize to force a rigorous review of the project's health and safety impacts. We partnered with First Nations allies, public health professionals, and expert lawyers to draft legislation, and filed that legislation with Elections BC.

While First Nations continued to fight Kinder Morgan in the courts, it seemed the only peaceful and democratic avenue left for settlers was to force our own government's hand through the Citizens' Initiative process. The bar is set high in B.C.--the *Initiative and Recall Act* requires volunteer canvassers to collect signatures on an official paper petition from 10 per cent of registered voters in each of the province's 87 ridings over a 90-day period.¹ It is difficult and only to be used as an insurance policy when all else fails. Only the Fight HST campaign has successfully won through the initiative process.

¹ For comparison, in U.S. states like Washington and California, which also allow for citizens' to put initiatives on the ballot, canvassers can be paid, have six months to gather signatures, and the petition requires only 5-8% of voters state-wide (so, collected anywhere).

But Dogwood's Executive Team called off our *Community Health and Safety Review Act* initiative after the leaders of the BC Green and BC New Democratic parties, with a mandate to stop Kinder Morgan using "every tool available", agreed to work together to defeat the BC Liberal minority government, and Clark agreed to recall the legislature quickly. This created a clear path to work with our new government to end the threat of Kinder Morgan's pipeline and tanker project--it was no longer up to British Columbians to do it on their own *in spite of* their government.

This was the closest Dogwood has ever come to pulling the trigger on an initiative campaign, but it has been at the root of our work for more than five years now. As we watched political accountability in British Columbia erode year after year, Dogwood staff began exploring the option to use people power to force our provincial representatives to respect the will of the people and stop the unwanted expansion of oil tankers if all other legal and democratic options failed.

It all started with Enbridge.

Dogwood's No Tankers campaign began as a strategy to build political support for First Nations and community groups in Northern B.C. fighting Enbridge's proposal to build a bitumen pipeline to Kitimat and send super-tankers out to sea on B.C.'s wild North Coast.

Groups fighting Enbridge hoped to use the federal government review processes to beat the project. But we were up against Stephen Harper's Conservatives — hellbent on using their control of the federal government to help their Big Oil buddies. When Harper won a majority in the 2011 federal election, we knew we had a steep uphill battle to stop Enbridge.

The 2011 election set Dogwood on its path towards community organizing. Our staff and leaders at the time realized that without real people on the ground, organized as a political force in local communities, even the scrappiest campaigners could not build the power needed to counter corporate influence and hold governments accountable to every day British Columbians.

As Dogwood and progressive Canadians in general were reeling from Harper's victory, political organizers in the U.S. began incorporating the tools and models used in Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. Dogwood staff started researching and seeking training in Marshall Ganz's engagement organizing model — an adaptation of long-standing theories and methods from decades of community and labor organizing that Ganz applied to the electoral process.

Engagement organizing is a method to build a distributed network of volunteers by training people to use one-on-one conversations, storytelling and intentional relationships to recruit like-minded people, organize themselves into teams under volunteer leadership and work together on a rigorous common strategy. Dogwood decided to give it a try as part of our No Tankers campaign, starting in our historical stronghold, Victoria.

Meanwhile, Harper's government proceeded to systematically gut federal environmental laws. In 2013, the industry-captured National Energy Board approved the Enbridge project despite the unprecedented wave of public participation that Dogwood mobilized during the federal hearing process. Harper ignored the pleas from British Columbia of all political stripes and a B.C. government that remained opposed to Enbridge's risky proposal.

Dogwood's leadership was convinced Harper's cabinet would rubberstamp the approval and that B.C.'s Liberal government would eventually abandon its famous five conditions for pipeline projects. By early 2014, we saw a Citizens' Initiative as our best democratic strategy to stop Enbridge, and felt confident our new organizing model would allow for rapid, distributed mobilization to collect signatures across the province.

We announced our plan to our supporters and started talking to allied groups. As the clock ticked towards the Cabinet approval deadline in June 2014, we scaled up our organizing with new staff, rapid team-building and a province-wide training tour.

The approval went ahead, as suspected, but the B.C. government held firm to its conditions and several First Nations filed lawsuits challenging the approval. This caused delay and uncertainty, allowing for other avenues to stop the project. It was not time for the strategy of last resort, so we suspended plans to run an initiative campaign and channelled organizing efforts into mobilizing voters in two crucial elections: the 2014 municipal campaign and the 2015 federal election.

It worked because organizing is organizing. The teams and volunteer capacity Dogwood had built for an Enbridge initiative -- and continuing with the long-term goal of building a base of support equivalent to 15 per cent of voters in every riding -- allowed us to make a significant impact in both elections.

We had thousands of voters on our supporter list in dozens of important municipalities and swing ridings. We had a trained, organized and experienced network of volunteers ready to knock on doors and make phone calls. We had established and tested tools like our online organizing hub and rapid-dialing system, Callfire. And we had access to the research and lessons

learned from thousands of North American political campaigns about the most effective way to get voters committed to our campaign issues to the polls.

With Enbridge delayed indefinitely, and a successful municipal Get Out the Vote effort under our belts, in 2015 Dogwood embarked on a three-month campaign to add new anti-Enbridge supporters to our list, ask supporters to pledge to vote and make sure they got to the polls in October. If we could elect a new government that would cancel pipeline projects -- or at least revisit the utterly broken NEB review -- there would be no need for an initiative campaign.

It almost worked. Pro-tanker candidates lost more than 24 per cent of their voters in the 19 riding Dogwood teams worked in, compared to 11 per cent in the rest of B.C. and 1.7 per cent in the rest of the country. But it turns out British Columbians can't count on the promises of Ottawa politicians.

By early 2015, on the heels of federal election victory against Harper and his pipeline agenda, the potential need for British Columbians to mount their own legislation to stop oil tankers seemed blissfully remote. While Dogwood worked on developing a new strategic plan for the next five years, our organizing program continued to use initiative-style benchmarks -- building local teams and partnerships with other grassroots organizations to cover as many ridings as possible and build Dogwood's support to approximately 15 per cent of registered voters -- to usher in wins on No Tankers, Beyond Coal and make a new push for the B.C. government to Ban Big Money in politics.

But then the oil lobby set to work, and elite Liberal insiders started their cynical game-playing on climate and energy politics.

Enbridge died a slow death as the company failed to meet its NEB conditions and the federal Liberals gave in to British Columbians' relentless calls for a North Coast Tanker Ban. But candidate Trudeau's promise to Dogwood that a Liberal government would scrap the 'broken' National Energy Board and 're-do' the Kinder Morgan review process turned into a couple of toothless, hand-picked review panels.

In November 2016, despite the fact that even the slapdash panel had raised serious unaddressed questions about the project,² Trudeau's government approved the Kinder Morgan project.

In January of 2017, the next battlement fell. Christy Clark flip flopped,

² For instance, how could a federal approval of Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain expansion be consistent with Trudeau's promises on climate change, or on the right to free, prior and informed consent for First Nations? [Full report here.](#)

abandoned the famous five conditions and granted approval to Kinder Morgan in exchange for some behind closed door promises on Site C and Petronas LNG -- and hundreds of thousands of dollars in political donations from pipeline backers. Now both the federal and provincial governments had approved Kinder Morgan and the BC Liberals -- with a huge war chest of corporate and out-of-province campaign donations -- seemed poised to win a fifth consecutive mandate. Without a small miracle in the May election campaign, Dogwood saw no peaceful, democratic way for non-Indigenous British Columbians to stop Kinder Morgan's bulldozers except a successful Citizens' Initiative campaign.

Dogwood quietly prepared to launch an initiative campaign as the provincial election drew nearer. Our teams held information sessions in their communities to start the conversation about our plan and began signing up volunteers to be official Elections BC canvassers. Dogwood's organizers, applying the experience of four years of engagement organizing and the wisdom and advice of Fight HST organizers, made plans to re-organize teams, volunteers and partner groups into regimented initiative roles, routines and structures to channel every resource we had into collecting an average of 6,000 signatures in every riding in August through October.

Dogwood staff started conversations with potential allies and endorsers — winning the essential early support of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs — and worked with the province's best environmental lawyers to craft a ground-breaking bill that would require Kinder Morgan to undergo a health and safety review overseen by public health officials, and community and First Nations representatives.

With attentions and energies intentionally divided, Dogwood mobilized a more limited effort than 2015 to get out the vote in May's provincial election. Once again, the skills and leadership our volunteer teams had developed over four years of laying groundwork for initiative capacity deployed easily into phoning and canvassing efforts. Teams signed up dozens of new voters and 281 volunteers took to the phones and had personal conversations with 13,579 No Tankers, Ban Big Money and Beyond Coal voters in ridings across the province. We called as many people in two weeks with a slower system than we did in three months during the federal election campaign, and for the first time joined forces with 22 other conservation and democracy groups to broaden Get Out the Vote efforts through Organizing for Change.

It turns out, with a lot of hard work, some luck and a province full of disgruntled voters, small miracles are possible -- but sometimes they come with a twist. The BC Liberals did not reclaim a majority government, but narrowly held onto a plurality of seats in the legislature. And now you're back to where this story began.

Although Dogwood has called off its second plan to mount a B.C.-wide Citizens' Initiative, it still remains a cornerstone of our long-term organizing work. Not only do we still need an insurance policy to win on our campaigns, we also know preparing for an initiative helps build grassroots power for everything, from elections to major infrastructure decisions to important policy campaigns. That's why it remains a framework for Dogwood's five year strategic plan to keep expanding our network of like-minded British Columbians, conversation by conversation, community by community, until decision-making is back in the hands of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who call this place home.

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