

The ups and downs of Bill Vander Zalm and Gordon Campbell

The former B.C. premiers' have an uncanny history

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For much of their respective political careers, former premiers Bill Vander Zalm and Gordon Campbell—two lions of B.C.’s political scene—have been like two kids on a see-saw: just as one’s star rises, the other’s crashes and burns. “It’s more than ironic,” says David Mitchell, a B.C. historian and president of the Public Policy Forum. “It verges on the bizarre.”

Campbell, Canada’s high commissioner to Britain, got a raucous welcome last week in B.C., where he made his first public appearance since being hounded from office in the face of record-low public approval ratings. Coincidentally, just one day before Campbell’s cheery re-emergence, Vander Zalm’s star suddenly dive-bombed.

For two years, Vander Zalm had been riding high in B.C. His “Fight HST” campaign managed both to bring Campbell’s decade in the premier’s chair to an abrupt end, and kill the harmonized sales tax.

But as Campbell spoke to a sellout crowd of Howe Street insiders at a luncheon, Vander Zalm hit a humbling new low when he was found guilty of libelling former conflict-of-interest commissioner Ted Hughes, and slapped with \$60,000 in damages.

Their entwined history has deep roots. Campbell managed to rise to power by uniting the B.C. Liberals with Vander Zalm’s Social Credit party; it had collapsed after Vander Zalm resigned in

scandal. Campbell, in wielding the Sacred vote, won an overwhelming majority in 2001, taking 77 of B.C.'s 79 seats.

With these two, it will always be one up, one down, it seems. B.C. is notoriously tough on politicians, says Mitchell. "We build up our leaders, and we tear them down just as quickly." On Canada's wild West Coast, there just doesn't seem to be room enough for them both.