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LEFT TURN IN CANADA?

The NDP Breakthrough and the Future of Canadian Politics

By Murray Cooke and Dennis Pilon

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Canada's NDP: A left force to be reckoned with?

In the last Canadian federal election, the New Democratic Party (NDP) won more than 30 per cent of the popular vote. For the first time in the party's fifty-year existence, it now forms the Official Opposition in the national Parliament in Ottawa. Because of this remarkable showing, the question of whether this election represents a historic national breakthrough for the Canadian left has been put on the agenda.

Conventionally, the NDP is considered a social democratic party in the Anglo-American mold, rather than the European socialist tradition. The party emerged much later than comparable labour parties in Europe, the UK and Australia. And unlike other comparable socialist and labour parties, it did not displace the traditional reformist Liberal Party. Arguably the key barrier to the Canadian left has been the continued viability of the Canadian Liberal Party, long after comparable liberal parties have waned in Europe and Australia. Therefore, the sudden increase in seats and shift into second place in the national party system, largely due to a breakthrough in the French-speaking province of Québec, was both unprecedented and unexpected.

The NDP's success particularly surprised those pundits who had argued that Canadians have simply not been interested in its mild social democratic policy mix, or that American influences have tempered Canadian political collectivism. However, these "explanations" have failed to take into account that the party has gained office in five of the country's ten provinces, demonstrating its broad popularity, while a great many of its national policies have been introduced by other parties.

So what were the factors contributing to the NDP's success? And what kind of politics does the NDP stand for? Is it a party of the left or rather a mildly center-left force favouring the implementation of neo-liberal austerity policies, just as the other Canadian parties do?

Murray Cooke and Dennis Pilon from the Department of Political Science at York University, Toronto, both of whom have published extensively on issues relating to Canadian party politics, analyse the NDP's outlook. They explore what kind of party the NDP is and has been, its historic position in the national party system, and the role of regional, linguistic and class factors in shaping its federal presence. Cooke and Pilon also discuss the more recent changes taking place since Jack Layton became the NDP's leader in 2004, and the impact of his untimely death only months after his greatest political victory.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg
Co-Directors of New York Office, October 2012*

Left Turn in Canada?

The NDP Breakthrough and the Future of Canadian Politics

By Murray Cooke and Dennis Pilon

On May 2, 2011, the New Democratic Party (NDP) won 103 seats in the Canadian federal election and formed the Official Opposition in the national Parliament for the first time in the party's fifty-year existence. Media described the event as an 'orange crush' sweeping the nation, a riff on the popular soft drink and the party's historic use of the colour. Though the party made strides across the country, capturing the second largest popular vote in eight of the country's ten provinces, its breakthrough rested primarily on a stunning result in the largely French-speaking province of Quebec. Coming first in both the provincial seat total and popular vote, the NDP won 59 of the 75 Quebec seats.

The party had gone from having one MP from Quebec in the previous Parliament to a majority of its MPs hailing from *La Belle Province*. In the days that followed, media pundits and political activists speculated about whether the result was a one-off rejection of the political status quo in Quebec, a populist embrace of charismatic NDP leader Jack Layton, or an indication of a new alignment of political forces in French Canada and across the country. Whether the 2011 federal election represents an historic national breakthrough for the Canadian left or simply a contin-

uation of a national trend of party and partisan instability is not obvious or immediately clear.

To explore this question we must go beyond the superficial media spin to assess just what kind of party the NDP is and has been, its historic position in the national party system, and the role of regional, linguistic and class factors in shaping its federal presence. Such background cannot reliably predict whether the party will remain one of the top two parties in the country, perhaps a potential governing alternative to the present Conservatives, or slip back to minor party status in subsequent elections. Nor can it tell us how the party may alter its policy preferences to retain or advance from its present position. But exploring where the NDP has come from and how it has remained the country's pre-eminent electoral competitor from the left can give us some insight into the many factors that might influence the party in the days to come. This context will be explored in two ways: by examining the party's distinctive historic trajectory as it emerged from multiple influences on the Canadian left throughout the twentieth century, and through an analysis of the more recent changes effected since Jack Layton became leader in 2004, culminating in a more detailed assessment of the 2011 election itself.

The Distinctive Trajectory of the Canadian Left

Scholars, activists and pundits have long debated what kind of party the NDP is (Young 1969; White-

horn 1992). Media regularly dub the party 'socialist', usually in a pejorative sense. On the other

Figure 1. Map of Canada's Provinces



Source: Natural Resources Canada.

hand, Canadian scholars have been reluctant to cast the NDP as a European-style socialist or mass party, often seeming to concur with the view that they are merely 'Liberals in a hurry' (Carty, Cross and Young 2000). Within the party itself and amongst its supporters, a range of self-description has emerged, from socialist, to social democratic, to simply progressive. There has been little doubt about where to place the party on a left-right continuum: it has always been to the left of the two traditionally domi-

nant national parties: the Conservatives and Liberals (Avakumovic 1977; Archer and Whitehorn 1997). But the sense of its specific ideology has always been fluid, reflecting its mixed membership and influences, and the shifting historical circumstances and political fashions. In assessing the historic character of the left across western industrialized countries, comparative scholars often distinguish between continental European socialist parties on the one hand and the British Commonwealth labour

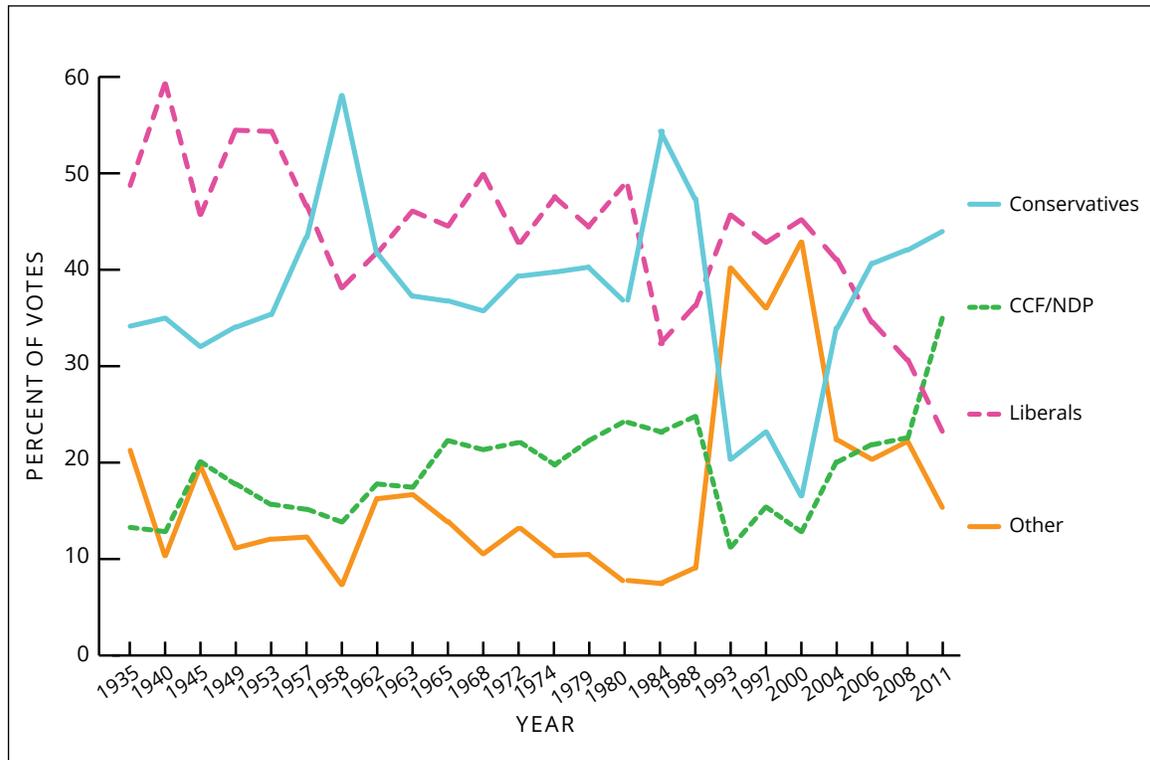
parties on the other (Cronin et al 2011; Schmidtke 2002). The former were conventional mass parties, with both institutional and individual memberships, subscribing to a clear socialist ideology, even if specific programs may have differed or changed. The latter, by contrast, tended to grow out of organized labour and their sponsorship, with delegated memberships of union members typically exercising influence via their leaders, subscribing to a *mélange* of reformist and socialist ideas (Moschonas 2002). Canadian historic experience is closer to the British Commonwealth model in terms of ideological fluidity but departs from it in terms of timing and organization. For instance, whereas the British and Australian labour parties took shape at the turn of the twentieth century, a stable electoral party representing the Canadian left would not emerge until the early 1930s. Prior efforts to launch a national labour or socialist party fundered for a host of reasons: competition from reforming Liberals, easy migration for workers between regions and the US, and splits within the Canadian labour movement. A few labour members were elected prior to the 1930s, particularly after World War I, but their repeated efforts to form a stable party failed (Young 1976; Heron 1984).

This changed in the 1930s as the Great Depression created mass unemployment and tightened border controls, limiting emigration to the US. The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) was formed in 1932, competing in its first federal election in 1935. Originally, the party's full name included 'farmer, labour, socialist' tacked onto the end, reflecting its broad coalition dynamic. Ideologically, the CCF's theoretical commitment "to replace the present capitalist system" co-existed somewhat uneasily with the practical politics of parliamentary reformism. Organizationally, different groups and unions could join, as well as individual members, but nothing like a British-style block vote for unions existed (Whitehorn 1992). Though some in labour circles saw the CCF as the 'political arm

of labour' the links were not formalized and labour itself was not united about which party to endorse politically (Morton 1977). CCF support rose quickly in some provinces, allowing them to become the official opposition in BC in 1933 and Saskatchewan in 1934. But results in its federal debut were disappointing: just nine percent of the popular vote and seven of 245 seats. This result was basically repeated in the 1940 federal election as well. But as the 1940s progressed the party's support appeared to be on the rise. A national Gallup poll in 1944 placed the CCF first, ahead of the Conservatives and the governing Liberals, and in the same year the party won its first provincial election in agrarian Saskatchewan (Lipset 1950). Yet in the federal election held in 1945 CCF support topped out at 16%, the best result the party would ever achieve. Over the next four elections its support fell, bottoming out in 1958 at 9.5% (Whitehorn 1992).

There were many reasons for the failure of the CCF to make gains in the 1950s: lack of support in Quebec, rural over-representation across the country, the ability of the Liberal party to position itself as a progressive party, the general improvement in economic conditions in the postwar period, as well as a business-sponsored media campaign against the party and the rising anti-left hysteria of the Cold War (Whitehorn 1992). The 1950s were a period of social democratic revisionism in Western Europe, from the battle over Clause Four of the British Labour Party's constitution to the German Social Democrat's *Bad Godesberg* program of 1959. Like social democrats elsewhere, the CCF attempted to reposition itself closer to the political centre with the Winnipeg Declaration in 1956, but to no avail. Arguably more important than this were negotiations with organized labour, which led to the formation of a new party that would have stronger links to unions. The New Democratic Party (NDP) replaced the CCF as Canada's party of the left in 1961. Unions did have more influence in the new party but the structure still privileged individual members

Figure 2. Canada Elections Results (1935-2011)



in local constituency associations (Archer and Whitehorn 1997). Ironically, at the same time as the NDP solidified its relationship with the labour movement, it sought to reach out to “liberally minded individuals.” This was an attempt to broaden the base of the party by reaching out to the middle-class, but it also signified a renewed attempt to surpass and replace the floundering Liberal Party, which was uncommonly weak and out of office from 1957–63. Rather than becoming a labour-based party, the NDP was born as a “catch-all party” (Kirchheimer 1966).

The transition from the CCF to the NDP did appear to revive the fortunes of the Canadian electoral left, though it is hard to discern whether changes in the party or the electorate were ultimately responsible. NDP support tipped upward to 13% in the 1962 and 1965 federal elections, shifting to a new plateau of

17 to 18% in 1968 and 1972, only to dip slightly in 1974 to 15.5%. These increases coincided with the massive influx of youth voters in the 1960s resulting from the coming-of-age of the postwar baby boom. Though the creation of the NDP was supposed to strengthen the party’s links to organized labour, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the party attracting both new social movement actors like the women’s movement as well as more middle class support from the professions and the now-expanding white-collar government workforce. The party made advances on the provincial front, winning government in Manitoba in 1969 and British Columbia in 1972, while returning to power in Saskatchewan in 1971. But federally the party could not seem to displace the federal Liberals as the potential governing alternative to the Conservatives. In the crucial decade of the 1960s, the Liberals shifted left under Prime Minister Les-

ter Pearson and introduced public health care, the Canada Pension Plan and other social reforms—undercutting the newly formed NDP. From the doldrums of the 1950s, NDP support grew each decade through the 60s and 70s, reaching a new plateau in the 1980s at 19–20% (Whitehorn 1992). The early 1990s saw the NDP win provincial elections in Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan. However, the best of times quickly became the worst of times for the party. The difficulties faced by these govern-

ments, especially the first NDP government in Ontario (the largest province and the manufacturing and financial centre of the country) left the federal NDP divided, confused and unpopular (Evans 2012). From its best result in 1988 the federal NDP staggered to its worst result ever in 1993. It continued to stumble along through the remainder of the 1990s. It was only after 2000 that the NDP gradually began its climb back to its historic levels of strength and then beyond in 2011.

Interpreting the Electoral Weakness of the National Canadian Left

Commentators have frequently blamed the federal party's perennial third or fourth party status on the various CCF or NDP proposed policy mixes over the years, implying that they have been too radical to appeal to the allegedly intrinsic moderation of Canadian voters (Richards et al 1991). But as many CCF and NDP policies have gone on to become federal policy, this hardly seems a convincing explanation for the party's failure to make a breakthrough at the federal level (Laxer 1997). Indeed, voters in a number of provinces have sometimes voted the CCF or NDP into provincial power but failed to give them a similar level of support in a prior or subsequent federal contest, suggesting that factors other than policy are influencing the decision.

Attempts to link the party's failure to its ideas often refuse to analyze how they have changed with the times. Just analyzing how leaders have characterized the party at different times demonstrates the influence of the historic events and changing public views. Thus in 1945, amidst burgeoning public support in western countries for traditional left policies, CCF leader M.J. Coldwell campaigned as a 'socialist' (Coldwell 1945). But in the transition to

the New Democratic Party in 1961, amid rising superpower tensions accompanying the Cold War, CCF MP Stanley Knowles barely mentioned socialism at all in his book promoting a 'new party' (Knowles 1961). Then, by the early 1970s, no doubt buoyed by the youth activism both within and outside the party, NDP leader David Lewis would write about his commitment to 'democratic socialism' in his best selling book *Corporate Welfare Bums* (Lewis 1972). By the 1980s most NDP MPs and leaders referred to the party as 'social democratic' (McDonald 1987). And by the time Jack Layton became leader, the party was simply 'the left' or 'progressive', reflecting the public's widespread disengagement and/or ignorance of the traditional vocabulary of twentieth century politics (Layton 2006).

Despite the changing labels, academic research does support the view that the public can distinguish between the different federal parties and that they are fairly successful in linking the policies they want to what the different parties represent (Clarke et al 1980; Nevitte et al 2000; Blais et al 2002). The resiliency of the federal CCF/NDP and its success at the provincial level appears to suggest that

there has long been and remains a constituency in Canada for a broadly social democratic party. But how large is such a constituency? The failure of the CCF/NDP to capture power at the federal level could mean that such a constituency is too small (Young 1969). But the recent breakthrough of the party in 2011 might suggest otherwise. Instead, the party's historic failure has been rooted in three different factors: the regionalism of the Canadian party system, key divisions within the Canadian union movement, and the success of the federal Liberal party in straddling the centre of Canadian federal politics.

Most Canadian political scientists would claim that Canadian party politics is defined by regionalism, specifically western alienation from central Canada (e.g. Ontario) and the 'French fact' embodied in the voting power of Quebec, rather than, say, class (Bickerton 2007). But this is a misreading of the events. First, the western alienation of Canada's farmers was defined by a class dynamic fueled by the federal government's defence of tariffs, which benefited Ontario manufacturing at the expense of western farmers (Brodie and Jenson 1988). Second, the systematic eradication of French linguistic rights everywhere but Quebec powerfully shaped the political culture of that province and its political elites, focusing them inward, both politically and economically (McRoberts 1988). Various political initiatives on the left and right would benefit from western alienation but in Quebec the federal Liberal party, the historic defender of provincial rights, became the default party for a population that largely absented themselves from national politics (except to veto attempted incursions into provincial jurisdiction) (Whitaker 1977). Successive Liberal prime ministers carefully managed or "brokered" French-English tensions. This reliable block of Quebec seats allowed the Canadian Liberal party to survive where so many western liberal parties had succumbed to what were seen as more reliable reform parties on

the left. Quebec's inward focus also limited its pre-World War II economic development, denying Canada's national left the kind of local economy that would foster union growth and thus a reliable labour partner in the province (McRoberts 1988).

The CCF's inability to make inroads into Quebec both before and after WWII was fueled by a number of factors. The province's small, primarily English business community was adamantly opposed to the party's economic policies, while the Catholic Church, a dominant force in the province's life and primarily responsible for operating hospitals and schools before 1960, opposed its secularism and plans for public social services. The weakness of the province's labour movement denied them an independent platform from which to oppose these two powerful forces in civil society (McRoberts 1988). But beyond these challenges, the CCF's advocacy of increased federal powers over the economy and social services ran counter to Quebec's deeply ingrained defence of provincial rights. The inability of CCF and later NDP leaders to fully understand the nature of Quebec's concerns meant that the party failed to benefit from the historic shift in Quebec society that got underway in the early 1960s. With increasing postwar economic development and the rising cultural impact of television and mass culture, a 'quiet revolution' occurred in Quebec that gave rise to social democratic values, particularly support for an increased role of the state to protect and further the province's French culture and language. Initially these changes appeared to be fueling a slight increase in NDP support in the province in the 1960s, but this had stalled by the 1970s (Whitehorn 1992). Increasingly, to be on the left in Quebec (among the majority of francophones) was to be a Quebec nationalist.

From then on, the NDP attempted to come up with various ways to appeal to French Canada,

but they repeatedly failed. Indeed, the strong centralist tendencies in NDP appeared to create a unique Canadian 'dilemma of electoral socialism' where as the party tried to reach out to Quebec, it alienated its western base, and vice versa. These contradictions finally came to head with the party's support for the Meech Lake Accord in 1987 and the Charlottetown Accord in 1992, where the leadership thought they were acting to appease Quebec demands for constitutional reform. But in the end, no one was happy. In the 1993 federal election, western supporters deserted the party while Quebec remained indifferent, contributing (along with the intense unpopularity of the Ontario NDP government) to the NDP's worst showing ever—just 7% (McLeod 1994). For the next decade, the party's electoral future remained in doubt.

Over the course of three elections—1997, 2000 and 2004—the NDP slowly restored its electoral fortunes, aided in part by the desertion of the traditional postwar centre of Canadian politics by both the Conservatives and Liberals. At the same time, the Liberal party's hold on Quebec was weakened by the rise of the nationalist Bloc Québécois, a party theoretically committed to the separation of Quebec from Canada but one that primarily acted as an advocate for Quebec interests in the national parliament. Though it emerged initially as a collection of former Conservative and Liberal federal MPs amidst the constitutional wrangling of the early 1990s, the Bloc came to be seen primarily as a social democratic-style party, defending social programs (Gagnon and Hérvault 2007: 113). This came as a mixed blessing for the NDP, as it both demonstrated strong electoral support for the left in Quebec and its capture by a rival party. On the other hand, as the Bloc took up the centre-left policy space, this pushed the remaining federal Liberals to the

right, as they became the only viable federalist choice for centre-right voters in the province. As the Liberals migrated further from the centre nationally (Jeffrey 2011), this opened space for the New Democrats to capture some of their old centrist support, particularly in the Maritimes and Ontario.

Traditionally the Canadian left found itself on the sidelines of federal politics for reasons mostly to do with the particular nature of the Canadian party system. The historic 'French fact' in Canada collided with the CCF/NDP's traditional left focus on centralizing power to control the economic levers and create universal policies, allowing the federal Liberal to survive as a mildly reformist party that could nearly always rely on a bloc of Quebec votes. As the new millennium got under way, this historic stasis in the Canadian party system appeared to be unraveling. One of the two main governing parties, the Progressive Conservatives, had fractured in the 1993 election and remained divided, unable to mount a credible bid for government. Still, the rise of the new populist Reform party would tilt Canadian federal politics further to the right. To solidify its competitive position, the Liberals moved decisively to embrace neoliberal economics and social policy, seeming to abandon even the veneer of social reformism, if not the rhetoric. Historically, the Liberals had periodically shifted left to undercut the CCF-NDP, but in the 1990s they shifted right to undercut the rising support for right-wing populism. Ironically, a large number of centre-left supporters who were worried about the far right politics of the Reform party decided to vote strategically for the Liberals as a response. Amid declining voter turnout amongst its traditional supporters, the poor and working classes, the NDP too was rethinking who it was and what it might have to do to improve its electoral fortunes. But no consensus about the way forward emerged (Berlin and Aster 2001).

The Canadian Left in the 21st Century: Social Democratic Modernization

The choices facing the NDP in the early 21st century were not unfamiliar. Many of the party's elite figures called for a tempering of its traditional leftism in favour of wooing the political centre, especially now as the Liberals appeared to have abandoned that ground. But a significant group of party activists, noting the ongoing decline in voter turnout and youth disengagement from politics, argued that the party needed to reconnect with its grassroots and make links with the emerging anti-globalization protest movements that were capturing headlines. In a way, this same debate within the party had fuelled disagreements over the revisionist 1950s Winnipeg Declaration, the expulsion of the nationalist Waffle movement of the 1970s, and suggestions circulating in the early 2000s that the NDP should morph into a new party. The latter thinking gave rise to the New Politics Initiative (NPI), founded in 2001, which gained the support of a number of high profile MPs and public intellectuals. Though the NPI proposal to reinvent the party failed, the group did prove influential in choosing its new leader in 2003, helping Jack Layton, a progressive Toronto city councillor, defeat a number of candidates perceived to be more on the party's right.

Layton won the leadership with the support of a very broad coalition of leftists and moderates, trade unionists and social movement activists. At the time, Layton's victory was perceived by many as a shift to the left, but it was highly ambiguous. As Cooke wrote at the time, "Layton's appeal was that he could be a better messenger" (2003: 8). Layton offered the NDP a charismatic, bilingual, media-savvy leadership. Furthermore, "many defenders of the Third Way supported Layton...The hope among NDP modernizers is that Layton represents a chance for the party to modernize its campaign tactics and fully embrace advanced electioneering strategies" (Cooke 2003: 19-20).

The signs that were visible at the beginning became clear over time. Under Layton's leadership, the NDP became more pragmatic ideologically and more professionalized electorally (Erikson and Laycock 2009). Just as "only Nixon could go to China," only someone with Layton's credibility on the left of the party could shift the NDP so solidly toward the centre of the political spectrum without a murmur of discontent. The provincial sections of the NDP in Saskatchewan and Manitoba became the model for the federal NDP under Layton. These sections had proven to be electorally successful and moderately centre-left parties. In particular, the Manitoba NDP had demonstrated the viability of focusing on a small number of practical policies at election time. This became a hallmark of the federal NDP under Layton as well.

The NDP's 2011 platform, *Giving Your Family a Break: Practical First Steps*, was almost certainly their most moderate ever. As journalist Thomas Walkom (2011) pointed out, "the central economic theory behind that platform was a very conservative one: The best way to create jobs is through tax cuts for business. The only difference between this position and that of Stephen Harper's Conservatives was that Layton focused on small rather than large business." Even on corporate taxes, the NDP now claimed it was committed to "ensuring" that the Canadian corporate tax rate "is always below the United States' federal corporate tax rate" (NDP 2011: 9). Thus the NDP's rhetoric on taxes appeared to fall in line with the hegemonic positions established by their more right-wing opponents. The section of the NDP's platform that dealt with business taxes and tax credits was entitled "Practical First Steps to Reward the Job Creators" (NDP 2011: 8-9).

There were promises to strengthen the public pension system, hire more doctors and nurses,

invest in infrastructure and transportation and address climate change, but it would be misleading to argue that this represents a social democratic platform rather than a social liberal agenda. And the moderation of New Democrat policies was not only restricted to domestic policy. John Ibbitson (2011) pointed out that "Layton has steadily moderated party policy in his seven years as leader, to the point where it is getting hard to distinguish the NDP's foreign and defence policy from the Conservatives."

Under Layton's leadership, the NDP became a modernized and professional electoral machine. As McGrane describes, "Layton and his team embarked on the professionalization of the party's campaigns and a centralization of party structures over the three elections in 2004, 2006, and 2008" (2011: 79). The professionalization of the NDP reached its fruition with the 2011 campaign. According to one account, "The real story in the last week of the federal election campaign may not be Jack Layton so much as it is the professionalization of his New Democratic Party...his team is excellent at staging, advertising and using new technology to reach voters" (*Maclean's*, 2011).

A notable aspect of the modernization of the NDP was the centralization of power within the federal party around the leader and a small number of key advisers. This involved a transformation of the federal party's relationship to the provincial sections of the party and to the trade union movement (McGrane 2011: 79). These changes were conscious decisions coming from the top but they were also pushed by changing party finance regulations.

The centralization of power within the NDP was facilitated by the changing party finance regulations (of 2004 and 2006) which banned union and corporate donations to federal political parties and also required the financial separation of federal and provincial parties (Pilon et al 2011: 29). The new party finance regulations

weakened the leverage of the provincial sections and the labour leadership, allowing for a more streamlined federal party leadership around Layton.

The federal NDP had long been institutionally weak relative to the major provincial sections of the party. Under Layton's leadership, there was an effort to develop the institutional capacity of the federal party. "When [Brad] Lavigne became the party's national director in 2009, the first thing he did was to blow up a quaint old system by which the national party would contract out its election organization to provincial parties...This dramatically improved the coherence of the NDP's national organization" (Wells 2011). While preparing for an election, the federal party would still consult with provincial NDP governments, but the centralization of power at the federal level was notable (McGrane 2011: 94).

The labour leadership (itself divided) had been another power bloc within the federal NDP. The elimination of union donations to political parties has altered, but did not sever, the NDP's relationship to the labour movement (Jansen and Young 2009; Pilon et al 2011). These changes have allowed power to be centralized around Layton and his small team of advisers "with less ideological and strategic control from the labour movement" (McGrane 2011: 98). At the same time, it is important to note that trade unions are still institutionally represented within the NDP and the 2011 election saw a number of new MPs elected that emerged from the labour movement.

The leadership was also strengthened by another internally-driven change. With the movement to a form of one-member-one-vote leadership selection, Layton had a mandate from the broad party membership, with a relative marginalization of the federal caucus, the powerful provincial wings, the labour movement and local party activists.

The other side of the new party finance regulations was the introduction of new public subsidies for the political parties based on their electoral support. While the NDP did not gain as much money as the Liberals or Conservatives, the funds strengthened the party's financial health and the NDP was able to run increasingly sophisticated electoral campaigns with the advertising, polling, message-testing and vote-tracking to compete with the other parties. The three major parties all spent close to the spending limits, but it is notable that the NDP (as the federal party and not taking into

account riding associations) spent more than the Liberals in the 2008 election and more than either the Liberals and Conservatives in 2011. Considering the historic poverty of the CCF-NDP relative to the two major parties, this is almost as unfathomable as winning 59 seats in Quebec.

Overall, the modernization of the NDP under Layton's leadership provides further evidence that the party has evolved from a mass party structure to an "electoral-professional party" (Panebianco 1988; Cooke 2006).

Behind the Scenes: The Back-story of the 2011 Federal Election Result

The Canadian federal election of 2011 was an electoral earthquake. After three successive minority parliaments, the Conservative Party won an unexpected majority government. The NDP soared to a second place finish and Official Opposition status with 103 seats. The Liberal party stumbled to their worst result ever. The Bloc Québécois was nearly wiped out. For good measure, the Green Party leader obtained that party's first seat in the House of Commons.

The NDP finally succeeded in becoming a pan-Canadian party with significant support in all regions of the country. In the 2011 election, the NDP received its strongest results (by popular vote) in Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador. Previously, this would have been unthinkable. Overall, the NDP finished first in Quebec, second in eight provinces and third in the smallest province, Prince Edward Island.

The most fundamental and unprecedented aspect of the NDP's electoral success was the massive breakthrough in Quebec. With essentially no history of electoral success in Quebec,

the NDP stormed to 59 (out of 75) seats with 42.9% of the vote. This breakthrough in Quebec was obviously related to the unexpected weakness of the nationalist Bloc Québécois and the continuing weakness of the two other federalist options, the Liberals and Conservatives, in the province.

It was also the culmination of 50 years of off-and-on-again courting of Quebec by the NDP. The transformation of the CCF into the NDP was, in part, an attempt to reach out to Quebec. There had been serious attempts by the NDP to court Quebec voters and accommodate Quebec nationalism in the 1960s and 1980s. These efforts, particularly as they involved recognizing Quebec as a nation or distinct society, were often controversial within the NDP. Furthermore, as these efforts repeatedly failed to bear fruit, some within the NDP saw the outreach to Quebec as pointless, a distraction or even counter-productive (Cooke 2004; Leebosh 2011). Still, there were occasional glimmers of hope. NDP support peaked in the 1965 and 1988 federal elections at 12% and 14% respectively.

The NDP even won a by-election in 1989, electing consumer advocate Phil Edmonston.

Layton's ascension to leadership renewed the Quebec strategy (Hébert 2003). Born and raised in Hudson, Quebec, Layton was bilingual and dedicated to raising the NDP's profile in Quebec. Pierre Ducasse, another challenger for the party leadership in 2003 and associate president of the party became Layton's Quebec lieutenant. Ducasse was one of the key players behind the so-called Sherbrooke Declaration, passed by the Quebec section of the NDP in 2005, which laid out a vision of accommodating Quebec's national character through asymmetrical federalism and reiterated the NDP's recognition of Quebec's right to self-determination (NDP 2005). Striving to raise its profile in Quebec, the NDP also made the strategic decision to hold their 2006 federal convention in Quebec City.

Under Layton, the NDP began a modest but steady climb in Quebec, rising from 1.8% of the vote in 2000 to 12.2% in 2008. The NDP won an extremely important beachhead in Quebec when Thomas Mulcair won a by-election in 2007, taking a formerly safe Liberal seat in Montreal. Raymond Guardia, who had managed Edmonston's election in 1989, was also behind Mulcair's victory in 2007. Mulcair successfully retained his seat in the 2008 election. This breakthrough and the visibility of Mulcair increased the credibility of the NDP in Quebec. It also revealed the extent of Liberal disarray in Quebec. A former provincial cabinet minister (in a Liberal government), Mulcair became a primary spokesperson for the NDP in Quebec. For example, he was featured in many of the NDP's French language commercials during the 2011 election. Meanwhile, Raymond Guardia oversaw the NDP's entire Quebec campaign, demonstrating some of the continuity between the NDP's Quebec strategy in the 1980s and in the past decade (Topp 2011).

The minority governments that existed at the federal level from 2004 to 2011 were skilfully

exploited by Layton to raise the NDP's profile. Layton repeatedly sought to cooperate with other parties to obtain political results. In 2005, the NDP was able to amend the Liberal budget in exchange for propping up the government. In late 2008, the NDP agreed to form a coalition with the Liberals that would be supported by the Bloc in order to defeat the Conservatives (Topp 2010). The Conservatives managed to avoid a non-confidence vote by proroguing parliament, but Layton certainly made his party relevant. The proposed coalition was particularly popular in Quebec. Not only did Harper attack the coalition and the Bloc's role in it as illegitimate, but new Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff also distanced himself from the coalition. This combination helped make Layton and the NDP a visible and viable option for Quebec voters.

During the 2011 campaign Layton presented himself and his party as in touch with moderate Quebec nationalism, in synch with Quebec's liberal social values and positioned as strong alternative to an unpopular Conservative government and a discredited Liberal Party. Even though Layton had moderated NDP policies, Michael Ignatieff's previous stances on the Iraq War and torture helped the NDP stand out as the progressive federalist party. The NDP became the leading federalist option in Quebec, but it also significantly ate into Bloc support among Quebec nationalists (Bélanger and Nadeau 2011). Layton spoke in favour of expanding French language rights within the federal jurisdiction and made vague promises of creating a climate that would allow constitutional discussions to address Quebec's place in confederation. During the campaign it became clear that Layton had personally struck a chord with Quebec voters during the leaders' debate but particularly through an informal interview with a popular French-language television show.

The "orange wave" in Quebec was obviously the most notable aspect of the NDP's success in 2011, but it wasn't the only story. Under

Layton's leadership, the NDP rebounded from the lean years of 1993-2000 throughout the rest of Canada. The 2011 election continued this trend. From the 2008 election to 2011, the NDP experienced a net gain of 8 seats outside of Quebec (gaining 2 in Atlantic Canada, 5 in Ontario and 3 in BC, while dropping 2 in Manitoba). The 44 seats won by the NDP outside of Quebec would still have been the pinnacle of NDP electoral success, just surpassing the 43 seats from 1988.

The NDP had actually experienced a breakthrough in Atlantic Canada in the 1990s. Led by Alexa McDonough in 1997, the NDP won 8 seats in the region. Provincially, the NDP rose to Official Opposition status in Nova Scotia in 1998 and finally formed the government after the 2009 provincial election. NDP success in Newfoundland and Labrador is more recent and can be traced back to the 2008 election, in which they elected their first MP since a 1987 by-election. Another MP was elected in 2011. In a Newfoundland provincial election later that year, they finished second in votes (but third in seats).

In Ontario, Canada's largest province, the NDP received its best federal result ever in 2011, winning 22 seats with over 25% of the vote. While

a highpoint for Ontario, it should be noted that this level of support was surpassed in 7 other provinces. Only in Alberta and PEI did the NDP receive lower levels of support. The continuing growth of the NDP will likely hinge on the ability of party to expand further and squeeze the Liberals in Ontario, while hanging onto its new and tenuous Quebec base. Ontario remains a challenge for the NDP as the travails of the provincial NDP government in that province have still not been forgotten, even though the former NDP premier, Bob Rae, is now the interim leader of the federal Liberal Party.

In western Canada, the NDP is a significant player in British Columbia but currently struggles to win seats elsewhere. The NDP's results in western Canada in 2011 were strong, but not historic, judging by votes or seats. In all four provinces, the NDP's 2011 results were below the highpoints of the 1980s. Most notably, the NDP has not won a seat in the old CCF-NDP heartland of Saskatchewan in the last four elections. Certainly, this is partially a product of the electoral system. The NDP received close to a third of the vote in Saskatchewan during the 2011 federal election, but no seats. Considering the growing population of western Canada, this presents another challenge to the NDP.

An Electoral Realignment or Just More Party Instability?

The CCF-NDP has long sought to realign the Canadian party system and supplant the Liberals as one of the two major parties. Provincially this happened in BC, Saskatchewan and Manitoba (and may be occurring presently in Nova Scotia). Now, the NDP hopes that they have achieved this at the federal level.

The future of the Liberal Party is an open question. The Liberals have lost elections before,

but the extent of the losses in the last two elections has been historic in scope. Furthermore, the Liberal Party, which dominated Canadian politics for most of the 20th century, has experienced a longer term decline. This is most obvious in regional terms. Once upon a time, under William Lyon Mackenzie King (c. 1919-1948), the Liberals were truly a national party. The Liberals have generally been weak in western Canada for the last 50 years (longer in Al-

berta) coinciding with the rise of populist Progressive Conservative leader John Diefenbaker in the late 1950s. Pierre Trudeau further alienated the west with his controversial energy and constitutional policies in the 1970s and 80s.

More recently, the Liberals lost their crucial base in Quebec. From 1896 to 1980, the Liberals won a majority of Quebec seats 24 times out of 26 elections. But, in the last 9 elections, the Liberals have not won a majority of Quebec seats even once. This coincides with Trudeau's patriation of the constitution without the consent of the Quebec government in 1982, but it also reflects a wide variety of political factors. Most notable was the rise of the Bloc Québécois, which was able to take a majority of Quebec seats for 6 straight elections, from 1993 to 2008.

As their dominance of Quebec slipped from their grasp, the Liberals under Jean Chrétien were able to form majority governments by virtually sweeping Ontario in the elections of 1993, 1997 and 2000. However, this was facilitated by divisions on the right of the political spectrum and the weakness of the NDP. With the creation of the Conservative Party of Canada and the revitalization of the NDP, the Liberals can no longer count on Ontario carrying them to an election victory.

The Liberals have been plagued by internal divisions since Trudeau's retirement in 1984. These divisions have largely been based around personalities and the rush for spoils, but they also relate to cross-cutting divisions within the party over ideology and federalism. The Liberals have been divided between so-called business Liberals on the right and social (or welfare) Liberals on the left. At the same time, Liberals squabble over the Trudeau vision of a strong central government with the equality of the provinces versus the recognition of Quebec as a distinctive society or nation to be accommodated through asymmetrical federalism and/or a more general decentralization of powers to

the provinces (Jeffrey, 2010). Provincially, federal Liberal supporters work closely with federal Conservatives in the BC and Quebec Liberal governments, appear to support the provincial NDP in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and operate more independently in Ontario and the Maritimes (though this may be changing in the latter). The bottom line is that the Liberals have been struggling to define themselves and have repeatedly stabbed their leaders in the back. The Liberals seem unable to renew themselves and have been hamstrung by weak leadership (Newman 2011).

The Liberals have rebounded from historic defeats before, notably in 1958 and 1984 when they dropped to 48 and 40 seats respectively (in a smaller House of Commons). Their proven ability to rebuild themselves should not be overlooked. Even in their disastrous 2011 campaign, the Liberals remained competitive in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces. These regions, and to some extent the very fluid situation in Quebec, provide some limited but significant room for Liberal growth. However, the Liberals have never been reduced to third place before and the 2011 results were their worst ever in terms of seats and share of the popular vote. A key part of Canadian liberalism's historic electoral survival was pragmatic—an ability to win national elections or appear to be the only viable alternative to the Conservatives. Now reduced to third place, they may have lost this advantage.

The future of the Bloc Québécois is also uncertain. The collapse of the Bloc does not signal the death of the sovereignty movement in Quebec, but it does seem to represent public weariness with the issue and with the Bloc itself. The erosion of Bloc support was in evidence before the most recent election. In 2004, shortly after the sponsorship scandal became public, the Bloc won 49% of the vote in Quebec. Two elections later, in 2008, the Bloc was down to 38% in Quebec. During the 2011 campaign, Gilles

Duceppe's attempt to re-ignite the sovereignty question seems to have backfired against him and his party (Bélanger and Nadeau 2011). The Bloc is now faced with the challenge of rebounding under new leadership. Daniel Paillé was selected to replace Duceppe who had led the Bloc since 1997.

On the other hand, the Bloc's emergence was neither as unprecedented nor original as some have perceived. Quebec has regularly surprised the Ottawa-centric political elites by foxing the traditional parties. In some cases, it has done so alongside Liberal party dominance (e.g. Bloc Populaire c. 1942–47, Ralliement des créditistes c. 1962–79), sometimes as a challenge to it (e.g. Progressive Conservatives c. 1984–93, Bloc Québécois c. 1993–2011, NDP c. 2011–present). Historic experience would seem to suggest that Quebecers appear willing to take up different federal strategies as times and circumstances change. The Bloc had straddled Quebec nationalism with a kind of social democracy. As the nationalist cause appears to have abated somewhat (though hardly disappeared), it is not entirely clear what Quebecers expect of their present NDP representatives.

The merger of the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives to create the Conservative Party of Canada also altered the recent federal political landscape. As a result, the Liberals could no longer rely on vote splits on the right. The Conservatives have been targeting (with apparently some success) immigrant communities, previously a key constituency of Liberal support. Led by a committed right-wing ideologue, Stephen Harper, the rise of the Conservatives has polarized Canadian politics. This may have helped the NDP across Canada, but especially in Quebec. The NDP could argue that they, unlike the Bloc, could defeat Harper and the Conservatives. Plus, Layton had demonstrated to Quebecers his willingness to build alliances in order to cooperate to defeat Harper. The future of the NDP will largely depend on

whether they can maintain their position as the most viable alternative to the Conservatives.

One thing that the NDP does not have to worry about is a significant challenge from its left. Unlike many Western European social democratic parties, the NDP does not face a meaningful electoral challenge from a party to their left. To some extent this is a result of the federal NDP never truly becoming part of the political establishment, but even in the provinces in which the NDP regularly forms government, left-wing alternatives have not emerged. This is one way in which the NDP benefits from Canada's continued use of the unrepresentative electoral system, single member plurality or 'first-past-the-post' (also in use in the USA and UK). The Communist Party was never a major electoral factor in Canada; after winning one seat federally in 1943, it quickly faded away. Newer socialist parties have not emerged to challenge the NDP and would have minimal chances in Canada. The Green Party of Canada was formed in 1983 but has only become a significant, yet minor player, in the last 10 years. The rising profile of environmental issues and the development of public subsidies helped increase the Greens' profile. The Greens did elect their first ever MP in 2011, but their overall support declined to under 4%.

Another factor that complicates the Canadian political landscape is the ever changing party finance regulations. The parties have experienced a whirlwind of changes in the past eight years. In 2004, the Liberal government limited personal, corporate and union donations to political parties and introduced new public subsidies for the parties based on their electoral strength. In 2006, the Conservative government further reduced the personal donation amount and completely eliminated corporate and union donations (Jansen and Young 2009; Pilon et al 2011). These reforms certainly influenced the electoral landscape over the last few Canadian elections. However, having won a majority government in 2011, the Conservatives are now

phasing out public subsidies to the parties, while retaining the contribution restrictions. Sorting out the winners and losers of each stage of these changes can be a complicated task.

Two things are clear, the Liberals have been significant losers in this process and the Conservatives have an immense financial advantage. Historically reliant upon corporate donations, the Liberals suffered the impact of their own reforms. The introduction of public subsidies was not sufficient to compensate for their loss of corporate funds. Now, with those subsidies being removed, the Liberals face a difficult situation and must quickly manage to find more grassroots forms of financial support. On the other hand, the Conservatives have a sophisticated and effective fundraising machinery that far outstrips the opposition parties. This, of course, inspired their phasing out of public subsidies.

Two parties that benefited greatly from the introduction of the subsidies were the Bloc Québécois and the Greens. Now, the removal of the subsidies will hinder the renewal of the Bloc and the future growth of the Greens. In relative terms, the NDP was not hit as hard as the Liberals by the restrictions on donations. As noted above, the NDP was able to essentially reach the spending limit for parties in 2008 and 2011. Following the 2011 election, the NDP received a significant boost in its public subsidy, so the phasing out of the subsidy will be keenly felt. Still, the NDP should easily have a healthy bank account to fund its 2015 election campaign.

Conclusion

The stunning electoral breakthrough of the federal NDP in Canada's 2011 election was capped by a shocking coda just a few months later with the death of its popular leader, Jack

Finally, the question might reasonably be asked, just what do the current Canadian parties represent to the Canadian electorate, and how varied are the choices they offer? Terms like left and right might assume differences that are more apparent than real. With the biggest electoral change over the past three decades involving the abandonment of the electoral arena by nearly half of the potential voters, some complain that despite the seeming instability in the Canadian party system, the underlying problem is really too little choice amongst the options. Many voters may be simply staying home to protest what they perceive as a lack of relevance in the current political discourse. For instance, all parties, the NDP included, subscribe to a neo-liberal view of the economy, with its concomitant reduction in governing ambition in favour of market solutions. Though clearly a centre-left party in conventional political discourse, today's NDP, like Labour in the UK or Labor in Australia or New Zealand, seems far distant from the 20th century democratic socialism that influenced its origins and development.

In terms of the choices presently on offer, perhaps voters are just cycling through them in search of a substantive alternative. If that is the case, the NDP federal alternative is mild and may prove unsatisfying. On the other hand, it may represent an opportunity for the party to reconnect with these missing voters and a considerable portion of its base support, which still reports an interest in something like 'social democracy'.

Layton. As the media narrative held that Layton's charisma had largely won over Quebec, his passing was interpreted as bad news for his party. Since then media commentary has

regularly reported waning interest in the party from Quebecers and predicted an almost inevitable slide back to minor party status. But, as has been recounted here, the story is more complex. The NDP's rise to the second party in Canada's national parliament has resulted from a complex interaction of factors operating in the federal party system, including regionalism, language politics, reformism, and a shift in the profiles of parties not on the left. In March 2012 the NDP chose Thomas Mulcair, the former provincial Liberal cabinet minister and their most high profile MP from Quebec, to replace Jack Layton, a choice many saw as a continuation of his modernizing initiatives and

a pragmatic nod to the party's new strength in Quebec. The choice was immediately hailed as crucial to the party's future electoral success. Certainly, leadership matters, but no matter who had won, the ideological direction of the party was unlikely to dramatically change because forces beyond this or that personality have helped shape where the party is. Nor is it likely that the party's main competitors, the Liberals and Bloc, will alter their basic approaches. Thus the next federal election will be the real test of the recent changes, whether they represent just noise caused by voter volatility, particularly in Quebec, or a fundamental realignment of Canadian national politics.

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