

THE NDP LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE—RE-CONNECTING THE LEFT TO THE MIDDLE

In the run-up to the NDP leadership vote on January 25, party activists faced a difficult choice between two apparent front runners, the well known face of NDP House Leader Bill Blaikie of Manitoba, and Toronto city councillor Jack Layton, an interesting new face with national credentials as president of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. While Blaikie represents the party's deep roots in the West and the co-operative movement, Layton represents the possibility of taking the NDP back into the cities and union towns of southern Ontario, where it was strong during the era of Ed Broadbent from 1975-1988, a highwater mark in NDP history. Toronto Star columnist Graham Fraser, widely acclaimed for his books on Canadian politics, offers this situational update on a party confronting an agonizing choice.

Graham Fraser

En prévision du scrutin à la direction du Nouveau Parti Démocratique du 25 janvier, les militants font face à un choix difficile entre les deux candidats les plus en vue : le Manitobain Bill Blaikie, leader du NPD à la Chambre des communes, et Jack Layton, conseiller municipal de la ville de Toronto et un temps président de la Fédération canadienne des municipalités. Un premier visage très connu, donc, et un second qui gagne à l'être. Si Blaikie représente le profond enracinement du parti dans l'Ouest du pays et le mouvement coopératif, Layton incarne pour sa part l'espoir de lui rendre la popularité dont il jouissait dans les grands centres et les villes ouvrières du sud de l'Ontario, où le NPD a connu une période historiquement fastueuse sous le règne d'Ed Broadbent, de 1975 à 1988. Le réputé chroniqueur du Toronto Star Graham Fraser, dont les livres sur la politique canadienne créent toujours l'événement, fait le point sur l'état d'un parti aux prises avec un choix déchirant.

Walking home from a meeting in Ottawa in late November, Ed Broadbent was reflecting on the New Democratic Party leadership. Since summer, the former NDP leader had been thinking of whether to endorse a candidate in the NDP leadership race.

"My particular dilemma, to be quite candid, at this moment in history, and as a member of the New Democratic Party, has been to decide between Jack Layton and Bill Blaikie," he told a news conference on November 27.

It was an anguishing decision; Blaikie had been a solid and loyal member of Broadbent's caucus for years, and Broadbent barely knew Layton. But after meeting with Layton several times, he concluded that Layton had a better chance to reach out and connect—or reconnect—with voters that Broadbent described as "literally thousands of Canadians with social democratic values, of every age in every region of the country."

It had been an emotionally difficult decision; Blaikie had been loyal, and a friend.

"But in deciding who should be leader of the party, you set aside loyalty, you set aside friendship, and that's difficult

to do, frankly," he said. "Because Jack was not a friend. I did not know Jack well before. Bill Blaikie was a friend, was a colleague. But you sit down and say who is the best person for the party at this time? And that's exactly what I did."

A few minutes later, the difficulty of the decision showed through.

"Being quite candid, it is my affection..." and Broadbent paused for words, seized with emotion, as if realizing the wound he was inflicting on a loyal friend. "Anyway, I had other personal considerations, but the political result was very clear in my mind. Jack, in my view, is the best candidate."

The difficulty and the obvious emotional cost involved was both revealing and reflective of the process that New Democrats will be making as they choose a leader in late January to replace Alexa McDonough, who is stepping down.

Unlike the Liberal leadership, self-interest is not a factor; it requires an enormous degree of self-hypnotic optimism for an NDP member to believe that in casting a ballot he or she will be choosing the next prime minister, or even the next leader of the Opposition.

Rather, the challenge for the voter in the one-member-one-vote leadership selection process will be to decide who can revive the faltering social democratic party which has never fully recovered from the effect of the 1993 election, when it fell from 43 seats in 1988 (and polls earlier in the year which had suggested that Broadbent had a shot at forming a government) to nine seats and the loss of party status.

In the decade since, the party has recovered under McDonough's leadership, winning 21 seats in 1997 and breaking through in Atlantic Canada for the first time in decades—but sliding back to 13 seats in 2000, just ahead of the Tories. (Since winning the by-election last spring in Windsor West, they have 14 MPs.)

Paradoxically, the NDP has been a victim of the rise of the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance. They have sucked away rural and working-class support from the NDP that was attracted to the populist anger of the right—an anger which used to be expressed by the left when the right was contained in and by the blue-blazered Anglican good manners of the Tories—on issues like crime and guns.

At the same time, a significant part of the progressive support for the NDP was scared into voting Liberal in order to block the rise of Preston Manning and Stockwell Day: an important factor in the Liberals' virtual monopoly in Ontario over the last three elections.

But some of the NDP's wounds have been self-inflicted.

McDonough's attempt to lead the party to the economic centre (which she later satirized herself by calling "the Tony Blair Witch Project") did not prove successful. Despite various MPs showing up in Seattle and Quebec City, the party has not been effective drawing the anti-globalization movement into parliamentary politics.

The NDP's link to organized labour has been a mixed blessing, and the internecine battles between centrist pragmatists and the doctrinaire left at the provincial level, particularly in Ontario and British Columbia, have left scars on the federal party. And the NDP's sometimes contradictory and usually awkward handling of the thorny issues involved in the Middle East has driven away some longstanding supporters.

McDonough's decency, empathy and hard work were not enough to overcome some of the fundamental strategic problems the party faces if it is going to regain the momentum it had in the late 1980s.

On the face of it, this ought to be possible. The Romanow Report fits more comfortably with the NDP with the Liberal Party, and public support for the Kyoto Protocol, disenchantment with the deregulation that resulted in the water catastrophe in Walkerton, Ontario, and the Liberal clumsiness in managing an interventionist state should all provide an opportunity for the NDP to win back lost ground.

Certainly, that has been one of the many points of agreement shared by the leadership candidates, MPs Bill Blaikie, Lorne Nystrom and Joe Comartin, Toronto city councillor Jack Layton, Quebec community worker Pierre Ducasse, and British Columbia feminist Bev Meslo.

But Canadian public opinion has become more fiscally prudent; balanced budgets are now a reflection of national values.

The NDP leader will be chosen in a one-member one-vote election during a convention in Toronto being held January 24-26.

Because of the selection process, it is virtually impossible to know how the candidates are doing. Blaikie is a widely respected MP; Nystrom has a solid base among the 16,000 members in Saskatchewan as Blaikie does among the 6,500 members in Manitoba; and a substantial chunk of the 18,000 members in Ontario may be leaning to Windsor MP Joe Comartin, a former Canadian Auto Workers lawyer.

However, early in the campaign, an Environics Poll question of 221 NDP voters (a subset of the 2,001 Canadians surveyed between September 20 and October 11) found that Layton was the preferred choice of 21 percent, while Nystrom was favoured by 14 percent, Blaikie 10 percent, while the others trailed: Comartin with 5 percent, Melso with 4 percent and Ducasse with 2 percent. Over 40 percent were undecided.

Later, a poll of 867 NDP members conducted by Strategic Communications Inc. for the Layton campaign concluded that Layton and Blaikie were running neck and neck, with a tiny edge to Layton—suggesting that New Democrat voters are going through a similar process of elimination as Broadbent did before settling on a choice.

Comartin is a recently-elected Windsor MP, and a long-time labour lawyer. The leadership debates have shown him to be thoughtful, intelligent and surprisingly fluent in French—but he remains relatively unknown outside Windsor labour circles.

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Pierre Ducasse has revived the hopes in the NDP that the party could find a place for itself with progressive voters in Quebec as the polarization between sovereignists and federalists wanes. Eloquent in both languages, the native of Sept-Iles who works in a community development project in Drummondville reminds New Democrats of the deeply-held dream—rebuffed so often that it is almost repressed—that the party could some day win support in Quebec from voters who now vote for the Parti Québécois provincially and the Bloc Québécois federally.

That dream is as old as the party itself, when the New Democratic Party first recognized Quebec as a nation at its founding convention in 1961 (thereby driving the late Eugene Forsey to the Liberals). Then, in 1968, Robert Cliche led the party's Quebec wing under Tommy Douglas. The Liberals recognized the threat Cliche posed, even in that spring of Trudeauania, and threw everything into defeating him in the suburban Montreal riding of Duvernay—running Eric Kierans against him. Cliche, who once famously referred to Pierre Trudeau as Quebec's revenge on Canada, retired to the Quebec bench where he presided over a 1974 royal commission into the construction industry, in which future political notables Brian Mulroney and Lucien Bouchard made their marks as a commissioner and chief counsel.

Two decades after Cliche's candidacy, the prospect of a breakthrough in Quebec was briefly dangled before the NDP in the spring of 1988, when Broadbent led all leaders, and all parties, in the polls, a lead that melted like a snowbank in May. Had Rémy Trudel, the star NDP candidate in Quebec in that election—and now a PQ cabinet minister—won his seat, Broadbent might have stayed on as leader. (However, it is difficult to imagine Trudel, or any of the other leading NDP candidates, staying in Ottawa after the death of Meech Lake in 1990.)

The results of the December 9 by-elections in Lac-Saint-Jean-Saguenay and Berthier-Montcalm, where the NDP got 1.4 and 3.5 per cent of the vote respectively suggest that the Quebec breakthrough is not about to occur anytime soon.

Bev Meslo has been running as a symbolic candidate for the left-wing of the party, but has been unable to participate in all the debates for lack of funds.

Lorne Nystrom's campaign is more difficult to characterize. This is the third time that the Saskatchewan MP has run for the leadership. He

is articulate and effective in both French and English—the most bilingual of the MPs who are running, and more comfortable in French than Layton, who grew up in Quebec but whose French is rusty.

He is the most centrist of the candidates, arguing that the NDP has to come to terms with economic realities, and has thrown his energies behind a number of interesting reform proposals: proportional representation and abolition of the Senate.

With his years of experience (he was first elected in 1968), his bilingualism, centrist message, a preferential ballot and strong membership in the party in Saskatchewan, his candidacy should not be written off. But there seems to be a quiet consensus that Nystrom's time has come and gone.

The choice that the party is wrestling with seems to be the one that Broadbent took a long time to make: between loyalty and hope for growth, between Parliamentary experience and media-friendly charm, between French-lesson French and Quebec colloquialisms, between a known quantity and the gamble that change will work—between Blaikie and Layton.

Blaikie is fighting for politics. Federal politics. Parliamentary politics. And in a world of slick, camera-ready politicians, he is an anomaly.

He is a bear of a man: tall, bulky and bearded. He rejects the politics of image-making, and is running for the leadership of the New Democratic Party on the basis of his years in the House of Commons as a representative of the underprivileged, and the underrepresented: a defiant voice of moral indignation and moral values.

Blaikie, in the phrase of political scientist Alan Whitehorn, is “another minister in the social-gospel tradition”—as were many of the great figures of the NDP and its predecessor the CCF: J.S. Woodsworth, M.J. Coldwell, and Tommy Douglas.

He was born in Transcona, Manitoba, a CNR suburb of Winnipeg—and a photograph of the town, nestled beside the rail yards, hangs in his office. Three generations of Blaikies worked for the railway; beside the photograph, there is his grandfather's certificate as a railway carman, and his father's certificate as a machinist. As a student, Bill worked for the CNR himself.

In 1971, Bill Blaikie—then 20—was in Halifax, on his way to Europe and several months of backpacking, when he watched a New Democratic leadership convention.

While in high school, he had been an active member of the Young Progressive Conservatives,



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THE CONTENDERS (Left to right): Jack Layton, Bill Blaikie and Lorne Nystrom share the stage at an NDP leadership debate

but he was transfixed. “I was watching David Lewis, M.J. Coldwell, Tommy Douglas,” he said, referring to the newly-elected leader and his two predecessors, all powerful orators. “I thought ‘Wow! This is my political home’.”

Until then, Blaikie had intended to study political science and then go to law school; instead, when he returned to Winnipeg after his months in Europe, he decided to study philosophy and religion—and join the NDP.

Blaikie’s political and religious commitments were, as he put it, “not unrelated”; after the University of Manitoba, he won a fellowship to study for the United Church ministry in Toronto, and, after he was ordained, returned to Winnipeg where he worked in an inner city ministry at the Stella Mission, one of the missions where the first leader of the CCF, J.S. Woodsworth, had also worked.

In 1979, at the age of 27, he was elected as a Member of Parliament—and became deeply involved in the fight to preserve and strengthen the public health-care system. Blaikie quotes from memory Monique Bégin’s reference to his campaign on behalf of medicare at the time that the Liberals were considering what became the Canada Health Act.

“ ‘Parliament re-opened October 27, and Bill Blaikie, my NDP counterpart, immediately launched a guerrilla attack to force me to act’.” he recites from her memoir “Medicare—Canada’s Right to Health. “ ‘I stalled him to gain a little time, but I was backed into a corner’.”

This is the discourse of parliamentary politics, reflecting his deep belief that, like his former Winnipeg colleague and mentor Stanley Knowles, he can best fight for social change on the floor of the House.

And, as a Parliamentarian, he reacted defensively to one of Jack Layton’s rhetorical riffs during one of the debates. Layton had been using as a mantra the phrase that “politics happens” outside the parliamentary arena: politics happens when a mother takes her child to emergency and can’t get the care she needs.

“Politics also happens on the floor of the House of Commons!” Blaikie snapped.

The challenge—and the hope—that Layton offers is to bring the politics that is happening on the streets and in the neighbourhoods into the New Democratic Party.

One of his mentors, former Toronto mayor John Sewell, argues that Layton has been extremely innovative, and very successful in bringing diverse groups together, and in mobilizing the previously inert and ineffective Federation of Canadian Municipalities into a potent force that got the federal government to invest \$250 million into a green infrastructure program. Those who are less admiring see Layton as, in the scornful words of one veteran of the battles of Canadian labour and the NDP, as “a rich man’s son playing at radical politics.”

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Layton makes no secret of his background. Indeed, he talks more about his formative experiences growing up in Hudson Quebec, an affluent suburb outside of Montreal, than he does about his 20 years on Toronto City Council.

His father, Robert Layton, was an engineer, first a Liberal and then later a member of the Mulroney cabinet, and his grandfather had been briefly a member of the Duplessis cabinet.

As a teenager in the 1960s, Layton became aware simultaneously of the discrimination against French-Canadians (he recalls quitting the Hudson Yacht Club in protest when the club complained that he had invited Francophones to a club dance) and the political ferment of the Quiet Revolution.

The first election he was involved in was in 1962, when he helped put up signs for Paul Gérin-Lajoie, the Liberal who went on to create Quebec's Department of Education, and his first demonstration was in 1969, when he marched at the McGill Français rally. His first intellectual mentor was McGill philosopher Charles Taylor, who had run for the NDP against Pierre Trudeau.

And his first leadership convention was the 1970 Quebec Liberal convention that elected Robert Bourassa—"my Dad was active and I was curious"—where Layton met one of the leadership candidates, Pierre Laporte, and spent an hour chatting with him. Ten months later, Laporte, who had become Bourassa's Minister of Labour, was murdered during the October Crisis—and Layton decided to join the NDP.

Pierre Trudeau had introduced the War Measures Act, and NDP leader Tommy Douglas opposed it. Impressed at the political courage that Douglas had shown, Layton joined the NDP when he moved to Toronto to do his doctorate at York.

When he finished, he began teaching—first at Ryerson, and now at the University of Toronto—and fell in love with Toronto's communities. The result was a 20-year career in city politics.

In his campaign, Layton is careful to say that he does not see an ideological distinction between the candidates, whom he praises as parliamentarians. His liability—being from outside the caucus, without experience in Parliament—he spins as an asset, arguing that the grassroots of the NDP are leaving the party to join social movements, no longer seeing the party as relevant.

He argues that with his experience as a city politician, and in creating movements like the

White Ribbon Campaign—men against violence against women—he will be able to reach outside the traditional base of the party and, at the same time, get some media attention for a party that has been largely ignored.

Layton's emphasis on the need to get the party covered by the media resulted in one of the rare personal criticisms in the leadership campaign, when Nystrom warned against the NDP selecting another Stockwell Day: all photo ops, no content.

Already, he has quietly brought together some of the disparate, previously antagonistic elements as part of his campaign: from Svend Robinson to Ed Broadbent. Indeed, veterans of the NDP civil wars noted that at Layton's campaign launch on Parliament Hill in July, the last two supporters who spoke on his behalf were Janet Solberg, a former president of the Ontario NDP, and Mel Watkins, a former candidate for the party in Beaches-Woodbine.

It was an unmistakable signal of unity. For Solberg is the daughter of former leader David Lewis, and the sister of former Ontario NDP leader Stephen Lewis, while Watkins is a former leader of the Waffle, the group of left-wing nationalists who launched an assault on the traditional leadership of the party in the early 1970s. For a party that is often torn between the idealism of its radicals and the pragmatism of its leaders, it was a reassuring message.

The leading candidates face challenges. In an interview on her last day in the House as leader, Alexa McDonough reviewed some of her own shortcomings when she won the leadership: her French was inadequate, she didn't have a seat, and she had no experience in the House of Commons.

The only candidate who does not have any of those weaknesses is Nystrom. If Blaikie wins, he will have to overcome the perception that he is a throwback to an earlier era, and prepare for the prospect of a national TV debate in French—an ordeal that seriously hobbled Ed Broadbent. And if he becomes leader, Layton will have to win a seat—something he has tried and failed to do for the NDP twice before.

Choosing a leader will be only a first step to solving the problems the NDP is wrestling with, and reviving federal social democratic politics.

Graham Fraser is a national affairs writer and weekly columnist for the Toronto Star, and the author of Playing for Keeps: The Making of the Prime Minister (1988).