



Fighting the Good Fight

The ideological blooming of the neo-conservative revolution occurred during the 1980s. Not until the 1990s, however, did Canadians feel the lash of the radical downsizing in the role and support of government services in their daily lives. Buoyed by the dominant political currents of the day, the full implementation of the neo-liberal agenda washed up on Canada's shores with Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin.

Throughout the mean nineties, the NDP found itself swimming against that stream. Though our voice was not silenced, our numbers were dramatically reduced. The direct challenge to the social democratic legacy of public health care, public pensions and accessible education, advanced by the NDP and the CCF, was what propelled me into the federal arena. After 15 years as Leader of Nova Scotia's New Democrats, it had not been my intention to move to the federal scene. That was until 1995 when, in the absence of the NDP having official party status in the House of Commons, the Chrétien-Martin tag team attacked the fundamentals of the social democratic state that had been half a century in the making.

Even I would not have predicted that, by the time of the Chrétien-Martin divorce, government spending, as a percentage of GDP, would be at its lowest level in 54 years. The results were felt across the board. According to Statistics Canada, child poverty rates rose from 11.8 percent in 1989 to 13.7 percent in 1999. The use of food banks has increased 12 percent since 1997. Between 1984 and 1999, the average net wealth of the bottom 20 percent of families plummeted by more than 50 percent. At the other end of the income scale, families in the top 20 percent increased their net wealth by 43 per-

cent. To top it all off, we now have the wealthiest 10 percent of Canadian families owning 53 percent of the net worth of the country. With numbers like those, it is not surprising that 50,000 people live on the streets in today's Canada, that each year 250,000 people find themselves temporarily homeless, and another 2.2 million people live in poor or substandard housing.

In the earliest days of the federal slash and burn approach, it became clear that everything New Democrats had fought for and won at the provincial level was going to be destroyed by a federal government in the clutches of Reform-Alliance ideology. Abandoning the longer view of how to build a country and its people, budgets were being judged solely on how fast taxes could be cut and the debt lowered. In the absence of a national debate on people priorities, Canadians were bullied with bogus budget numbers. For nine consecutive years, Paul Martin overstated the deficit and underestimated the surplus to the tune of close to \$80 billion.

The Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care is another stark reminder of how much damage has been done. Once the proudest achievement not just of social democrats, but of Canadians generally, our not-for-profit public health-care system has withered under the Liberal watch.

Signs of hope are on the horizon. The Canadian soul has been stirred. We are debating once again how best to manage our relationship with our American neighbours. Our restored confidence in ourselves is rekindling the belief that we can forge our own path, that there are uniquely Canadian approaches to national and international challenges. The debate that focused almost exclusively on debt, deficit and

the business agenda has been blunted. Canadians are demanding progress in restoring health care, cleaning up our environment, and rebuilding our physical and human infrastructure.

This renaissance in Canadian values parallels the increasing momentum behind the New Democratic Party. We are currently enjoying our highest level of public support in more than a decade. Our recent by-election victories in breaking a 40-year stronghold in Windsor West and gaining 20 percent of the popular vote against the Alliance leader in Calgary South West are signs that even in once hostile territory, our message of putting the interests of Canadian working families first is resonating.

The new tide offers an opportunity to reach new ground. Carrying the message forward into the fast-moving waters of Canadian politics will be a new federal NDP leader. While Paul Martin desperately tries to reconstruct his image, we have every intention of making sure that he is left high and dry on the electoral beach. His experiment in budgetary priorities should be left behind as so much flotsam from an experiment that benefited the few at the expense of the many.

I intend to remain active in this fight for the soul of Canadian political values, but in a supporting role to whomever my Party chooses as its next leader. If my constituents will allow me, I will repay them for their support while I was dealing with national and international issues, by serving them, once again, as their MP for Halifax, but this time, full-time without the added responsibilities of national leadership.

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