



FROM INFLATED EXPECTATIONS TO REALITY-BASED POLITICS: A CAMPAIGN TEST FOR LAYTON'S NDP

Robin V. Sears

When it comes to election expectations, the NDP has a long history of getting ahead of themselves, and the outcome of federal campaigns. The June 28 election, however, promises to be the party's most competitive since its high-water mark of 43 seats and 20 percent of the popular vote under Ed Broadbent in 1988. After a decade and three elections in the wilderness, the NDP is back with a telegenic and bilingual leader, a full campaign war chest, a motivated party base, and a Liberal legacy of scandal. The danger is that, as in 1988's free trade election, another opposition party, the Conservatives, will monopolize the conversation on the sponsorship scandal. "Tories do endlessly pounding attack campaigns well," writes longtime NDP war room strategist Robin Sears. "New Democrats tend to get squeamish after a few days and introduce a new day care policy." Under Layton, he suggests, this time could be different, provided the NDP leader avoids traps such as laying out his terms for co-operating with a minority Liberal government.

Historiquement, le NPD a souvent anticipé en campagne électorale des résultats jamais confirmés lors du scrutin. Mais la consultation du 28 juin promet une campagne comme il n'en a pas connue depuis 1988, lorsqu'il a raflé sous Ed Broadbent un record de 43 sièges avec 20 p. 100 du vote populaire. Après une traversée du désert d'une dizaine d'années ponctuée de trois scrutins fédéraux, le NPD est revenu en force grâce à un leader bilingue et médiatique, une caisse électorale regarnie, des militants gonflés à bloc et les scandales des libéraux. Mais un danger le guette, le même qu'au scrutin de 1988 sur le libre-échange : un autre parti d'opposition, les conservateurs, risque de monopoliser le débat sur le scandale des commandites. « Ce parti excelle dans les campagnes offensives, rappelle l'ancien stratège néo-démocrate Robin Sears, alors que le NPD tend à faiblir au bout de quelques jours puis à brandir pour faire bonne mesure une nouvelle politique de garderie. » Mais avec Jack Layton, les choses pourraient se passer différemment, croit l'auteur, s'il évite certains pièges comme celui de révéler prématurément les conditions de sa collaboration avec un gouvernement libéral minoritaire.

New Democrats revel in black humour. It's their armour against the endless electoral blows they endure. Doubling the vote in a campaign wins an ironic toast as a moral victory even when the growth is from 3 to 6 percent. The "Big Mo" has arrived, after a 1 percent gain in poll numbers, claim the wits in campaign headquarters.

No humour is grimmer than the election night toasts to snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. A spring surge in the polls most often becomes a cold wind in autumn. Like lottery wins, the numbers actually pay off once in a

blue moon, and election night becomes a bonanza that few had foreseen.

The most famous NDP lottery jackpot was undoubtedly Bob Rae's astonishing victory in Ontario in 1990. Never was a party less prepared for its good fortune, which proved as fleeting as a late summer breeze. A more normal, or predictable, outcome was Ed Broadbent's at the federal level in 1988.

To be sure, Broadbent won more votes (20 percent of the popular vote) and more seats (43 in a 295 seat House) than ever before or since, but six months earlier the polls

were twice as generous. But then the Liberals pre-empted the NDP on free trade, making it their issue, and the rest is history. The crushed expectations of that election, and the subsequent recriminations, were crazy given the record number of NDP MPs elected. But set against expectations — the real coin of politics — the pain was understandable.

As Tommy Douglas did in 1965, David Lewis in 1972, and Broadbent almost did in 1988, Jack Layton must be seen as the ordinary people's chosen champion — demanding punishment and change. Slagging Martin liberalism for its slippery Adscam ethics, its paper-thin social policy credentials, its Bay Street pinstripes and its shell game fiscal policy should be the daily menu. This is a campaign about opposition, not proposition.

After all, a mere six months before the November 1998 election, the NDP had vaulted to first place in the polls. They had visions of government, or at least Official Opposition, dancing in their heads. But Brian Mulroney proved too right when he predicted then that the NDP lead would “melt like a snowbank in May.” It was also ill-advised of Broadbent to write off the Liberals as a spent force in Canadian politics, as he did at the outset of the campaign. Natural governing parties have a way of being in government with annoying frequency.

For New Democrats it feels like the 1988 campaign again, hopefully with a different outcome: The leader's approval rating is soaring, the poll numbers are moving in the right direction, an unpopular government is waiting to be punished, and the media are working themselves into a frenzy.

Old NDP hands wonder, though, whether this will be another “normal election.” with few seats snatched from the inflated expectations of spring polls.

For Jack Layton and company to move into the 30 to 40 seat range would be a triumph, given the appalling party history of the past decade. Sadly, for expectation management, the party is targeting more than 60 ridings, in addi-

tion to their incumbents! (Strangely, seat projections maximums quickly become minimums despite everyone's promise not to fall into such traps again.)

How far fetched are such ambitions? Well, a 50-seat NDP caucus would have to be made up of roughly ten from Atlantic Canada, and twenty each from Ontario and the West, if recent history is any guide. Maybe a fluke victory in Quebec or

Alberta, or a boom in BC (where, incredibly, the NDP's no-history, no-seat, no-name provincial leader is as popular as Premier Gordon Campbell, whose Liberals swept the province only three years ago) will shift the totals slightly. Sixty to 70 seats would mean a meltdown of the Liberal vote in Ontario that we have not seen since 1984. While this is not an impossible outcome, it is hardly likely.

How can Layton deliver a caucus of slightly less fantastic proportions? — by modesty and minimizing expectations. These have not been known as his strongest leadership traits, up to now.

This is one of our “throw the bums out” elections. We have them about once a decade or so: 1958, 1979, 1984, 1993. (Trudeau allowed the Liberals to skip the sixties housecleaning they were due, but to paraphrase Lloyd Bentsen, “I knew Pierre Trudeau, and Paul Martin is no Pierre Trudeau.”)

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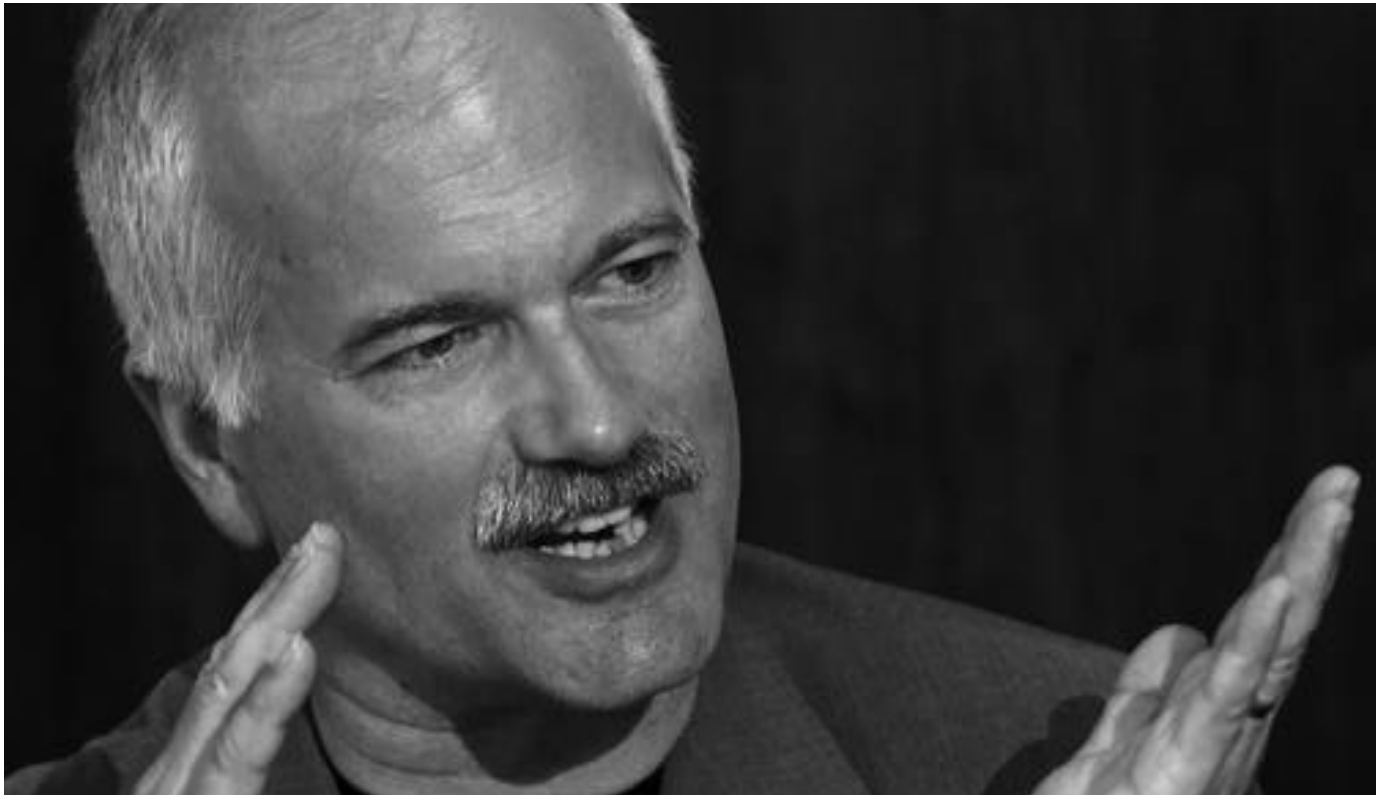
a campaign about opposition, not proposition, despite Layton's expressed preference for the latter.

Proposition for a new NDP leader in any campaign above the municipal level is dodgy. The media don't read, or report, one's suggested improvements to the country's health, security or environment if you are a third-party leader. Potential NDP voters are not choosing the Layton prescription for reforming health care over the Harper or Martin flavours in their ballot decisions. In most ridings they are choosing the candidate and his or her leader who can best whip Liberals, and in a few cases, the one who will block the hellhounds of the newly united right.

The daily diet of what used to be called “the Gainesburgers” of the campaign — feeding the pack with a pre-digested policy snack — is still essential. The leader and candidates need their “little red book” of policy nostrums. But each one needs to be tied to an attack — NDP and Tory voters in this campaign want the red meat of Liberal carcasses, not opposition promises.

New Democrats, as advocates of serious change in public policy, often become deluded about how many others share their lonely fascination with the arcanæ of public policy. Party activists really do revel in the four days of policy debate at their conventions. New leaders are especially victims of this disease as they attempt to prove their so-called seriousness to a cynical press corps.

Seasoned and tough party operatives like Terry Grier, Murray Weppler and Cliff Scotton kept Layton's predecessors from sliding too far into these policy swamps in a campaign. Sadly, the veterans of the best NDP campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s are dead, disaffected or disappeared. Those surrounding this leader are almost entirely federal election rookies who have never played at this level. In a curious similarity to both the Harper and the Martin crews, they are a young, smart, mostly



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Jack Layton is a gifted campaigner, savvy in the ways of the media. Longtime NDP strategist Robin Sears advises him to manage expectations, stay on an attack-message track, and resist the impulse to announce a new day care policy. Like Stephen Harper and Paul Martin, Layton is also surrounded by advisers who have never played the game at the national leadership level before now. "They don't know what they don't know," Sears writes.

male and mostly untested team, with few older mentors at their elbows.

Indeed, each of the three leaders has cut himself off from, or been shunned by, his party's wise elders. New leaders, inexperienced staffers, a volatile electorate and a media pack with blood in its eye will prove disastrous in this campaign for at least one of the parties.

To be fair, Layton's team do not treat their elders with the Mafiosi swagger and incredible effrontery of the Paul Martin gang. But they don't know what they don't know, and no one with hard-won campaign scar tissue is there to tell them. This bodes ill for the inevitable midnight crisis management of a tough campaign. Apart from Ed Broadbent — who will be tied down in a riding campaign in his bid for a comeback in Ottawa Centre — Jack Layton does not have the Allan Blakeney, David Lewis, Tommy Douglas team of available retired

leader-mentors to help him navigate the minefield of a federal campaign.

Jack Layton is an incredible politician. He survived the tough political kitchen of Toronto New Democratic and municipal politics. He danced the minuet between being a left darling and a politician who could deliver deals with exquisite skill. He comes from an old political family, and has roots in the Canadian establishment that no other NDP leader has ever had. This gives him an ease, a comfort and a believability in a leadership role similar to a John Kerry or a Tony Blair. He has one of Canada's toughest and shrewdest ethnic organizers and electoral tacticians, Olivia Chow, as a spouse and political partner. He has an almost magical sense of how to feed the media snake.

But as Stockwell Day, Joe Clark, Bob Stanfield and John Turner dis-

covered, nothing in Canadian politics prepares you for the meat grinder of a national election as a new national leader. Imagine dancing this tango:

- on the Prairies, Layton needs to woo ex-Alliance voters keen to hurt Grits;
- in Atlantic Canada, he needs to secure voters whose allegiance is to his predecessor, who have shallow histories of NDP partisanship;
- in Quebec, to seduce an acceptable number of voters into sacrificing their votes to be able to claim a moral victory, in a culture where you usually back the winner;
- in Ontario, to fight Grits and Tories at the same time almost everywhere.
- and in BC, to tap into Lotusland's perennial angst at being underappreciated by the East — as a new leader from Toronto!

At the same time he also needs to win a tough personal riding contest against Dennis Mills, a four-term MP and one of the wiliest local Liberals in the country.

One's back begins to throb at the prospect of such contortions. Clearly, "throwing the bums out" commends itself as a safe message for all these conflicting audiences. Except, if you are too successful and the media begin the minority government drumbeat, as they surely will.

Then, most painfully, as all NDP leaders before him have had to learn, he will need to say, with a straight face and a serious mien, "We are running in every riding in the country and we hope that the people of Canada will send more New Democrats to Ottawa than ever before." Next question please. Unfortunately, Layton has mused about minority government terms and conditions in public so often and so recently, success at staying mum will be a challenge.

Two traps face the party, reminiscent of the 1988 campaign. The first is, of course, the sponsorship scandal. It could become the free trade of this campaign. If the Conservatives manage to make it their issue, because Layton gets lost in a fog of policy proposals, the campaign outcome will be a depressingly familiar one for New Democrats. Tories do endlessly pounding attack campaigns well, NDPers tend to get squeamish after a few days and introduce a new daycare policy.

The second trap is the prospect of the defining moment of the campaign — probably in a debate — becoming a showdown between Harper and Martin. This happened to Broadbent in 1984 and 1988: Mulroney to Turner on patronage in 1984: "You had a choice, sir, you could have done better." Turner to Mulroney on free trade in 1988: "I believe you have sold us out." On both occasions, Broadbent was shut out.

Layton has a greater ability to ensure that this doesn't happen than any of his predecessors — he understands the media in his bones and is a far more powerful TV persona than either of his competitors. He is fast on his feet and spots an opponent's weakness keenly. Still, he will need to be tough — even nasty — to prevent the media choosing Stephen Harper as the meanest junk yard dog.

If Harper runs as competent a campaign as his recent performance leads one to suspect — neither pandering to the radical right, nor moving

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too cynically to the middle, and delivering an adroit tax message — the favourable reaction to it is a good omen. If Paul Martin continues to fret and twist his handkerchief in public, and convey a plodding, sloppy, nice guy out of his depth, then a solid attack campaign by the New Democrats could pay off well. A huge triumph would be 50 to 60 seats, a good payoff, half that. If NDP electoral modesty is lost in a blather of new tax regimes for oil and gas, and "Svendista" policy pronouncements on the Middle East and terrorism, it will be an election night of familiar black humour again.

Of course, the kicker is that if Layton wins 50 or even 30 seats, it may well be in a very unstable minority Parliament with a runoff election in a year or so. And we know what happens to third parties in runoff elections.

Still, for New Democrats this could be the most important campaign since the party's founding. A bilingual leader, for the first time; a competitive campaign budget, for the first time; and two untested rival leaders; again for the first time.

The bottom line:

- if Layton avoids the "long bomb" tactics he used municipally when his back was against the wall, and sticks to a more disciplined ground game,
- if he can avoid being tempted onto battleground he knows nothing about, or "freelancing" answers under pressure,
- if he sees this campaign as the first of probably three that he will fight, sticking to a strategy of party-building based on that long term goal,

- if he can deliver a tough attack on Liberal arrogance without becoming either Howard Dean or a whiner, and
- if he is able to keep his pitch modest and to resist the temptation, in the white heat of a campaign, to either inflate predictions or political rhetoric.
- then, he could be the NDP leader who does for the federal party what Tommy Douglas did for Saskatchewan — make it a credible party of government.

There are a lot of ifs in this optimal scenario, but great political leaps are made of ifs. After all, if Brian Mulroney had not shown the fierce discipline of a reformed roué in his first election in 1984, Prime Minister Turner might well have enjoyed a long and comfortable reign.

Public affairs consultant Robin Sears, a recovering political addict, worked in or managed half a dozen NDP national campaigns, and has won many moral victories. He is now a senior resident at Massey College, which takes in many poor souls such as himself.
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