

## The NDP and the balance of power

NDP leader Jack Layton now has the balance of power in the minority House. How comfortable is his coalition of convenience with the Conservatives? What is he looking for, on climate change and in the March 19 budget, as the price for his support? In his Parliament Hill office last month, Layton discussed these and other issues with *Policy Options* Editor L. Ian MacDonald.

Le chef du NPD détient désormais la balance du pouvoir au sein d'une Chambre minoritaire. Est-il heureux de la coalition utilitaire qu'il a formée avec les conservateurs ? À quel prix fixe-t-il ce soutien par rapport aux changements climatiques et au budget du 19 mars ? Dans son bureau du Parlement, Jack Layton s'est entretenu de ces enjeux et de quelques autres avec le rédacteur en chef d'*Options politiques* L. Ian MacDonald.

**POLICY OPTIONS:** Mr. Layton, thank you for doing this. One day in January you woke up and you had the balance of power. How do you feel about that?

**JACK LAYTON:** Well, of course other parties have had the balance up until now and in fact we probably had it earlier. The thing about the balance of power is that the government has to be willing to enter into some kind of a collaborative effort. I was optimistic at first, as I said in my book. I had a couple of chapters about the last few years up here, and two governments, and some of our ideas made it into the Speech from the Throne, verbatim. However, the meetings stopped about a week before the Speech from the Throne, and they didn't happen again.

**PO:** On the special committee on the clean air bill, it looked like you were cutting a deal right on the floor of the House of Commons.

**JACK LAYTON:** There were meetings requested but not granted for many months. And so now has it really changed? I think it is too early to say. There were a couple of meetings but whether that is going to result in a significant shift...I would say that there is a possibility with the mere acceptance of the tool we proposed, which was the special legislative committee with no vote

on second reading. [It] could turn out to be a very interesting tool in a minority Parliament that might — if this one works, and that is a big "if" — serve to create a bit of a precedent, a little bit more like you would find in European parliaments from time to time. You know, an actual recognition that when you have minority parliaments, different constellations of parties are going to work together producing some results.

**PO:** So how do you play this card without overplaying it, be perceived as being responsible without sort of putting the government's back to the wall, or putting their feet to the fire without putting a knife to their throat?

**JACK LAYTON:** Well, I think it is a question of sticking to concrete proposals that are actually reasonable, workable.

**PO:** The minority Houses of 1963 to 1968, and 1972 to 1974, were in different times, but is there something from the Tommy Douglas and David Lewis periods that informs this debate in terms of the NDP's agenda and getting results out of a minority House?

**JACK LAYTON:** I am quite well versed in that. I'm an old political scientist and we studied it very carefully, and I have also looked at how the accord in Ontario functioned.

**PO:** In 1985-87, the pact between David Peterson and Bob Rae?

**JACK LAYTON:** I have spoken to the people who were directly involved in that...And so now we have looked at how the NDP in those contexts used its seats to try to influence affairs, and pick examples.

**PO:** If you look at the Pearson/Douglas period, for example, you have the NDP proposing a Canadian flag, the Canada Pension Plan and the Quebec Pension Plan, all the things that came out of what has been regarded as the most productive period in Parliament since the end of the Second World War.

**JACK LAYTON:** The 1972-74 period wasn't too bad, either: the National Housing Program, and a whole series of other things. Now that was a real working relationship, with weekly discussions. It was a recognition of the reality of a minority House. Both with Paul Martin and with Stephen Harper it is very different.

**PO:** How do you find Mr. Harper as a listener compared to Mr. Martin?

**JACK LAYTON:** I haven't had enough conversations with Mr. Harper yet to know. I have found that Mr. Harper gets right to the point, he says what is on his mind, he recognizes that we have very, very different perspectives,

and that sometimes the possibility of some action could produce some results. His Senate reform agenda, we don't agree with that. We wanted proportional representation to be advanced.

**PO:** Speaking of the special committee on climate change, although it is early days here, can you see the cutting edge of the deal somewhere? For example, moving the goal posts back from Kyoto a few years, with short-term targets in exchange for the government accepting your long-term target for 80 percent emission reductions by 2050?

**JACK LAYTON:** Well, no. Kyoto is a complex document that provides many tools, also provides penalties, and honouring the obligations to Kyoto would mean that you are going to do as much as you can in your own country, you are going to avail yourself of the tools that exist within Kyoto to work in the global community to accomplish the equivalent of reductions, and that you would accept that there would be a penalty, and the penalty has to do with equal reductions. But given that the government has said that we are going to honour the Kyoto agreement, we are going to proceed within the Kyoto process, I am taking that as a hopeful signal, that there may be able to be an approach constructed that recognizes the obligations, accepts the consequences and gets on with it. Let's hope so.

**PO:** Right, but there is no doubt that there is a margin of manoeuvre and the math of the committee is that the Conservatives and the NDP make a majority. Is there a possibility of creating common ground and trade-offs?

**JACK LAYTON:** My hope is that the other parties as well — my ideal scenario, and some people say I am dreaming in Technicolour, but that we could have full party agreement. That would be quite exciting. I am not going to hold my breath, mind you, but that would be the ideal scenario. I think Canadians would be positively thrilled if that could happen; like I say, I am

not holding my breath. Otherwise there are other scenarios, an opposition party bill could emerge, or a bill where the government is a part of the support for it, with some combination; we really don't know how it is going to play out, because there are too many possibilities. They will probably come to the House and there would be real discussions at the report stage and further adjustments to see how far we can go with it. That would be very exciting.

**PO:** Now on the budget, what are you looking for here? I mean the deal makers for you would probably include fairness to families — a fairness to families package as opposed to, say, corporate income tax cuts.

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**JACK LAYTON:** Yes, that kind of thing, and we have laid out some of the parameters, much as we have in the past.

**PO:** So that on the 19th March it is going to be clear that there are going to be deal makers and deal breakers for you in the budget, outside the environment, the clean air discussion?

**JACK LAYTON:** Well, we have said that we want to see those oil and gas subsidies removed, and we want to see some significant investment in environmental programs that should be put forward, and we will push them all hard and we will see what the government comes up with.

**PO:** Is it fair to say that this arrangement, to the extent that it is a successful working coalition, or whatever you

want to call it, clearly annoys the Liberals big time? To the extent that it succeeds, it gives you time to marginalize Elizabeth May and the Greens on the left, to be able to say, Well, you don't need her around here, because look, we are delivering results for you.

**JACK LAYTON:** I would say the same about the Liberals. In municipal politics you have every kind of combination and it is all about trying to manoeuvre things into position to get some positive results.

**PO:** People who know you well say, Jack comes from a background, a culture, Toronto City Hall, where you started as one guy with a piece of paper and an idea, and you end up creating a consensus all across the city. So is that what you bring to this town, what you learned about deal making in Toronto?

**JACK LAYTON:** Well, I try to, and we have a lot of municipal politicians in our caucus who have that experience. I shouldn't be credited with this, because of course I never was one guy, there was always Olivia there, too, always on the same council, and she is far better at that kind of work than I ever was. She was the master at putting together vote combinations, and people predicted that things would never happen, and then they would. I

keep reminding people that when it comes to votes in the House, the NDP is the least co-operative with the Conservatives. The Liberals made sure that the Afghanistan mission extension passed. The Prime Minister said in the debate just before the vote, If this is not approved we will have an election in 12 months on this issue. It was a confidence motion, and it was the Liberals, Ignatieff and his group, that provided sufficient votes, and 11 of them stayed away, which I thought was a shocking moment actually for all Liberals.

**PO:** And it was Mr. Martin who put those people in harm's way in Kandahar, who didn't bother to show up for the vote.



Karl Belanger

**NDP leader Jack Layton in his office on Parliament Hill. He now holds the balance of power in Parliament. How does he play the card without overplaying it?**

**JACK LAYTON:** I will let you say that. But I have never been able to explain how that could be considered responsible behaviour by a parliamentarian.

You might consider what would have happened if the Bloc had not supported the budget last year. Constitutional convention would suggest that we wouldn't be sitting where we are right now.

**PO:** There would have been an election.

**JACK LAYTON:** No, there could have been a coalition.

**PO:** Of course.

**JACK LAYTON:** The constitutional history is pretty clear on that, had there been an offer. The Bloc made that choice, and then the softwood lumber deal was declared to be a confidence matter as well, which we didn't support. I always look at these things on a case by case basis, and that is what we are going to do here on climate change — let's see if we can't produce some legislation.

**PO:** If you can get a deal on the *Clean Air Act* in the committee and bring it back to the House, and if you can support the government on the budget, though obviously you don't know that yet, do you think that this House can work through 2007? Because then basically you are through the spring session, and into the fall.

**JACK LAYTON:** Impossible to say.

**PO:** Got a gut feeling about it?

**JACK LAYTON:** To everybody who asks me, I say it is 50-50, because you never know. I mean, first of all, on the budget, we really have no idea whether Mr. Harper is going to present the kind of budget that we can support, even with the stretch to the point of pain. He has really not given any indication; in fact, if anything the indication so far is not very positive. A tax cut approach to public policy is the one sort of signal that he has been sending out so far, and we just think it is bad economics for the country right now.

**PO:** You have often said the people of Canada sent us here to make this Parliament work, and that is your responsibility.

**JACK LAYTON:** Yes.

**PO:** Is it hard to explain that sometimes to the NDP rank and file, that you are working with the Conservative government to a certain extent to make this Parliament work?

**JACK LAYTON:** We are going to try to get results from whichever parties we can rally together to make something happen. Our most significant achievement in this Parliament is getting our national child care act passed through second reading. Such a bill has never been before Parliament and it didn't get much media attention. But what was interesting was that the Bloc and the Liberals decided to support our bill. The Bloc has never supported a major new social program in Canada. So we have taken a piece of legislation and moved it to a very important new stage.

**PO:** And you are probably supportive of Mr. Flaherty's initiative of parents of disabled children setting up child education trust funds, and other trusts for them?

**JACK LAYTON:** We have been advocating that sort of thing. We think that in the disabilities act, the problem with the trusts is that a family with a low income with a disabled child has more difficulty getting it going. It wouldn't have been our preferred approach, but it is a good approach for those who have the means.

**PO:** Back to climate change here, in terms of our domestic emissions. Preston Manning, quite thoughtfully I thought, explained it as that we have two different problems. A production issue in the West with Alberta's oil patch, and a consumption issue in Ontario primarily, although the auto industry is based in Ontario. And I wonder how you bring those two together, especially in your party, because cars are made by guys who belong to the CAW and vote for you.

**JACK LAYTON:** I set out a goal when I became leader, which was to try and get Buzz Hargrove, and Greenpeace, and me on the same platform with the same policy. That happened. Our green car strategy was launched by the three of us two and a half years ago. And then we got together again and talked about fuel efficiency,

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this if it is going to work in the North American market, and that is what we have advocated. We are pushing very hard on it and we have heard the beginnings of language like that coming from Mr. Harper. I don't think for a minute that that would have happened last fall; I think that our party has played a role in pushing him there.

**PO:** He now says climate change is the most compelling issue of our time.

**JACK LAYTON:** The first meeting we had, I went in and said, We have an opportunity...It is kind of interesting to go back to the first things I said to him, actually. Come to think of it, I remember exactly what I said: it was, "You are a minority Parliament and we have an extraordinary opportunity to do something very significant here, and I am asking you to keep a very open mind." I gave him a copy of a book, *The Weather Makers*, and I said, "I believe this book is the most important book that a policy maker could read and let's see if we can't do something." And now we find ourselves in a position where that might actually happen...

**PO:** And you are kind of in the driver's seat, or at least the first passenger seat.

**JACK LAYTON:** I'm in one of the seats, I don't know if it is in the bumper car, I am not sure. I do use the metaphor of a bus, and for too long we

have felt like we are on the bus, we are looking out the front window, we can see the cliff. We can see how fast we are going and that we are accelerating, and we are debating whether or not if we took our foot off the gas and put it on the brake, would that actually stop us from going over the cliff. And therefore

we are not giving the driver instructions until we sort that out. The longer the debate, the more predictable the result. Now I believe that we should be telling the driver now to get his foot off the gas and onto the brake.

**PO:** On Afghanistan, you said at your convention last September, "I will support the troops by bringing them home," and you took a lot of heat for that from people saying that it was a cut and run policy. Some cartoonists portrayed you as Taliban Jack, and that sort of thing. Can you, not in sound bite terms, but if you were to recall the mission, how would you explain that to our troops? If you were to go out to Petawawa and speak to their families, what would you say?

**JACK LAYTON:** I say this quite often when I am talking at the Legion and other places. The reason that Canadians support their troops as much as they do is because these are people who will do whatever we ask them to do. They give their best. The same reason we support fire-fighters and police officers. There is an understanding that these individuals will take action and do what is necessary and what we are asked to do without thought for our own well-being. So that is the start. But there is the other side of that equation, which is to make the right decisions about what they do, and I would say to our service personnel, We

have come to the conclusion, having evaluated what is going on in the mission, that it doesn't have the prospect of success down the road. That we are on a path that doesn't seem to have an end to it, and we, like you, want it to come to an end at some point. A successful end, with an Afghanistan that isn't in chaos, with an Afghanistan

which has been able to be put back together. But after five years we don't see the end in sight. So we are going to initiate a withdrawal and simultaneously we are going to engage with those many countries that are in Afghanistan that have refused our repeated requests to come to join us in the south.

**PO:** You mean some of our NATO partners?

**JACK LAYTON:** Many, the vast majority, and say, All right, we are ready to come and sit down with you folks now because we are about to make a change, and we are going to sit with you, and we want to develop a new approach. And we believe that approach will have to be more along the lines of what you are doing, but probably with some adjustments, because the south is a different kind of place with a different kind of conflict happening. So let's work together to come up with a strategy, and it would have to involve diplomacy, and President Karzai and I agreed on this — he said, there must in the end be diplomacy, and there must be engagement of all parties. There has got to be, of course, rebuilding and aid, but then there has to be a security dimension as a part of this process. But [it would be] to end the counter-insurgency war fighting and replace it with that combination of strategies, and that as the withdrawal was happening the new approach would be engaging. That is how I explain it. And that is what we said all along was our approach.

**PO:** Finally, tuition fees were raised in the House in February. This initiative kind of plays a little differently in Quebec than in the rest of the country, as you know, because my daughter can go to McGill for \$1668, which is the lowest tuition fee by far of any province or state in North America, and it is about half of what it costs you to go to U of T, and about a third of what it would cost you to go to Dalhousie. With the highest tuition rates, they have the highest enrolment rates in the country in Nova Scotia, and Quebec with the lowest tuition rates also has the lowest enrolment rates. So is there a very different issue in Quebec than the rest of Canada, or does the whole issue play the same way through for you, and what about the constitutional issue on section 92 and 93?

**JACK LAYTON:** You work through that the same way we always have in Canada, when it comes to using the federal spending power. We have always believed in an asymmetrical approach, which is that you should try to work out

**We have always believed in an asymmetrical approach, which is that you should try to work out a deal. And I found, just from direct experience, when I was president of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and tried to broker the housing deal, that not only could you broker a deal, but that Quebec would take it up and use the money faster than any other province, even though it was clearly in an area of their responsibility. That's how the Canada and Quebec Pension Plans came to be in the 1960s, which Tommy Douglas supported. He was a social democrat who believed in a strong Canadian state and supported the concept of the asymmetry of the Canada Pension Plan.**

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**PO:** The universities in Quebec are starving for funding, and even the young Liberals — you probably saw the headline in *La Presse* — support an increase in Quebec, lifting the freeze at least so that tuition fees in Quebec can rise to national levels.

**JACK LAYTON:** We don't support that; we support funding post-secondary education, but not the tuition fee increases. They make no sense. I spent 13 years in university, I know that they need funding. Right across the country the infrastructure is appalling compared to when I went.

**PO:** If there is increased funding for PSE in the budget — and we all know, parenthetically, this has been a

hobby horse for Kevin Lynch, the Clerk of the Privy Council, going back to when he was a deputy in Industry — you would be supportive of that.

**JACK LAYTON:** We are calling for it, and it has been on our list from day one.

**PO:** How do you feel about the challenge of modernizing this party and taking it to where, for example, Tony Blair took Labour and made it a mainstream party as well as a party of the left?

**JACK LAYTON:** I don't think you can import the comparison.

**PO:** I was going to exclude Iraq from that equation.

**JACK LAYTON:** Well, more than that, though. In the UK it has always been the Labour and the Conservatives; the dynamics are totally different. Since becoming leader I have worked to grow our party in a much different way that respects the Canadian context. We have tripled our vote, doubled our caucus, elected the highest percentage of women in history and have re-written a federal budget for the first time since Confederation. We have been successful in helping to set the agenda of one minority Parliament and now we are working hard to get progressive legislation through this Parliament. One challenge that I want to continue to focus on is making a breakthrough in Quebec. I think the breakthrough in Quebec is going to happen when people don't expect it, and we are going to be ready for it. We have a very young and dynamic team there now, and we didn't have a team when I came.