

THE UNBEARABLE RIGHTNESS OF VOTERS

Robin V. Sears

Once again the NDP's hopes for a breakthrough were dashed, and its expectation of holding the balance of power denied, in the June 28 election which gave them only 19 seats to show for their 16 percent of the vote. While Jack Layton campaigned well, he became the latest in a line of NDP leaders to fall into the trap of appeasing Quebec, with his promise to repeal the *Clarity Act*. And the party, like social democratic movements in other countries, remains "trapped in a time warp," writes its former campaign chair Robin Sears. In a scathing appraisal of what went wrong and a brutally frank assessment of what must be done if the NDP is to become a competitive force in Canadian politics, first, he says, it must lose the wish lists of fiscal irresponsibility. Then it must adopt a pragmatic foreign policy that reflects the realities of the post-Cold War world and Canada's place in it. Finally, it must modernize and rejuvenate the party and its structures, which have become as ossified as Tammany Hall.

Les attentes du NDP, qui espérait faire une percée dans les élections du 28 juin et détenir la balance du pouvoir, ont de nouveau été déçues alors qu'il n'a élu que 19 députés et n'a obtenu que 16 p. 100 des voix. Jack Layton a fait une bonne campagne, mais il n'est que le dernier de toute une série de leaders néo-démocrates qui se sont laissé prendre au piège en faisant des concessions au Québec, dans ce cas-ci en promettant de révoquer la *Loi de clarification*. Et tout comme les mouvements sociaux-démocrates dans d'autres pays, le parti reste pris dans un « autre temps », dit l'ancien président de la campagne du parti, Robin Sears, qui nous offre une analyse dévastatrice de ce qui n'a pas marché et une évaluation franche de ce que le NPD doit faire s'il veut devenir un élément compétitif sur la scène politique canadienne : tout d'abord cesser de faire des promesses qui respirent l'irresponsabilité financière, puis adopter une politique étrangère pragmatique qui tienne compte des réalités de l'après-guerre froide et qui reflète la place du Canada dans ce nouvel environnement; enfin moderniser et rajeunir ses structures, qui sont devenues aussi sclérosées que Tammany Hall.

Canadian voters knew what they wanted. They had been telling pollsters for months. They wanted to deliver a sharp slap to the Canadian political establishment, to elect a weak and chastened government, and to ensure that federal politicians knew that they were on probation. And they did.

In his marvellous new book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki examines the phenomenon of collective decision making. Big amateur groups make better decisions, one by one, than the smartest smaller group of experts in weeks of conflagration. The pundit class and political hacks always intone with pious solemnity in advance of an election, "Canadians need to understand that they can't vote for a minority government." Yes, they can. And they did.

The election outcome was the product of just the right sprinkling of votes in the right places to deliver exactly what a majority of Canadians wanted. The NDP and the Tories got some small victories and the Liberals had a near-death experience. The Bloc were given so many seats that Quebecers underlying message was clearly, "Okay, you're our vehicle to pound the Ottawa *grosses têtes*, but you'd better use the mandate well."

Sadly, for the NDP, the message could not have clearer, either: "You're our insurance policy, but we're only buying the cheapest coverage possible. You haven't earned a "central role" in government yet."

And the harshest note on the NDP report card from this demanding "left-lib" voter is: You got only this limited role

as the chaperone or the vice squad in Parliament because you didn't offer anything believable, or uniquely appealing, that we couldn't get some of, later, in a cheaper version from the Liberals.

Jack Layton fought a serviceable campaign, and a relatively gaffe-free one for a beginner. The party made a stab at

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fiscal prudence, but then undermined it by listing 250 "urgent priorities," and estimating revenues "generously." But they were neither fish nor fowl in the end: not a party of government, nor a thundering populist opposition. A classic nightmare for an NDP leader ("NDP" and "leader" here and below refers only to the federal party, not the 13 provincial and territorial parties) is too many chefs, too many interests, and therefore too many "one day policy hits." The effort to feed all the demanding mouths showed in this campaign and the lack of focus and cohesion allowed the media to freelance on that day's message. Layton's inability not to address any microphone stuck under his nose got him into trouble on Quebec and on homelessness.

But the party did well, given that it has yet to face its deeper problems of relevance. To double the vote back to historic levels was an achievement. Achieving this threshold of 15-20 percent of popular vote again is not bankable, especially in a runoff election following an argumentative minority-government. The Liberals will really turn up the heat on "strategic voting" in that round. If history is any guide, voters will respond, and the NDP will sag back to 10 to 12 percent again.

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world in misunderstanding who the 1989 earthquake's victims would be.

To its great misfortune, the NDP has usually followed the lead of the British Labour party. This is a party that, until recently, was a dinosaur and the most consistent failure of the big left parties. As well, the NDP has rarely had the kind of tough, visionary leadership that allowed the leading parties of the democratic left to escape irrelevance. Tommy Douglas, David Lewis and Ed Broadbent make up the entire list over three generations. They alone had the power, the guts and the vision to drag the party from its comfort zone of opposition sloganeering — a task they only occasionally took on.

The experience of the most important parties of the Left is interesting to compare:

- 1959 — under the prodding of the future global statesman, Willy Brandt, the German SPD met and fought bitterly. They dropped the last vestiges of Marxist command and control rhetoric and the Bad Godesberg program eventually propelled them into power.
- 1966 — Swedish Social Democrats, the world's most successful party of the Left, survived a similar struggle, dropping nationalization

almost entirely, with future Prime Minister Olaf Palme among the young turks demanding change. They've governed for most of the past century.

- 1974 — Felipe Gonzalez, the brilliant courageous strategist who consolidated Spanish democracy, began dragging his militants kicking and screaming into NATO, and a looser, federal Spain into the European Community. In power for a decade and now back.
- 1982-85 — Paul Keating and David Lange prescribed tough taxation medicine and ensured Australian and New Zealand Labour status as parties of government.
- 1995 — the most impressive turnaround of them all, as the rot was the most deep there, Tony Blair and British Labour.

On issues as varied as security policy, the role of state corporations, the market, the global economy, health care, education, and party structure, no honest New Dem could claim that the party had tackled the challenges of the post-war era aggressively. For that matter, its efforts since the end of the Second World War to give up the comforting 19th century rhetoric of the Regina Manifesto have been sporadic.

No, the NDP ducked most of these debates. After all, a biggish slice — maybe even a third — of Canadian voters are soothed by fanciful, sanctimoniously anti-American social and economic policy nostrums. The problem for the NDP in appealing to this "credulous voter" segment is that most of them are more comfortable voting Liberal. The failure to hail the role of the social market, to fight Quebec separatism, to challenge utopian fiscal policy nonsense, to adopt a believable defence policy or to resist the temptation to indulge in childish anti-Americanism was relatively harmless if one wanted to elect a federal caucus of a couple of dozen regularly recycled MPs.

Embarrassing though, even Red Tories began to understand the chal-

lenges of the modern public sector better than many New Democrats. Ontario Tory Bill Davis' famous dry wit slashed the arrogance of the largest Crown corporation in the world: he would say with a shrug, in private, "Ontario Hydro's been a fabulous contributor to our success. I just wish, sometimes, that they didn't see the province as one of their assets."

Liberals understood that pandering to Quebec separatism was not a strategy for Canadian survival, as early as Frank Scott in the 1960s. Social democrats who were serious about government — Alan Blakeney, most famously, in Canada — understood that to govern successfully you had to tell the truth about economic and social policy choices.

Intellectual laziness and political cowardice were the root causes of these failures. The defenders of the "social movement theory" of the party from Carlyle King in the 1930s to Gerry Caplan and Buzz Hargove in the 1980s didn't believe in seeking power. Power was corrupting, the gadfly role ennobling. The activists and the leadership also knew there was never a prospect of federal power without Quebec, so what's the point. And some provincial New Democratic leaders consistently sabotaged the federal party, claiming with hardly a blush that the route to national power was through the provinces.

The party had launched and survived a few tough fights: over pacifism in the 1930s, with the communists and their "useful idiots" in the forties and fifties — though it was always a bit like shooting fish in a barrel given the Canadian communists' surreal ineptitude. There was struggle that the Lewis family bravely led against the anarchist children's crusade called "the Waffle" in the seventies. It was the party's "most un-Canadian," bloody and ultimately successful conflict, until the war over "Trudeau's Charter"

arrived. No one wanted to go through *that* kind of unpleasantness again.

The delicious irresponsibility of permanent opposition — the Svend Robinson School, as it were — was a far more congenial political space than the harsh tradeoffs of preparing for power. The Ontario and BC New Democrats in government were painful examples of why long-term opposition parties usually fail in power. A despairing BC government and party leader asked to explain why most of the attacks on the Harcourt government seemed to be coming from the rear, observed sourly, "The BC NDP has fought governments for most of the past century, just because it's our own government is no reason to stop now."

Ed Broadbent forced the party to accept the appeal and social democratic logic of the Charter. He successfully prodded the Liberals into key changes on individual, women's, and First Nations' rights, and on limitations to the power of capital. In 1988, he dragged the party to a less pacifist defence policy with a credible new global strategic doctrine based on "common security." (Full disclosure:

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the author was among those who expended hundreds of hours crafting the new security doctrine.)

But Broadbent left, frustrated in part by the reaction to these struggles and the churlish reaction to his 1988 campaign success — 20 percent of the vote, and 43 seats, the highwater mark in NDP history. The Berlin Wall fell and the party snapped back to 1960s anti-Americanism. Instead of a clear-eyed view of how the world had changed and how the NDP would need to

respond, it substituted old slogans for hard choices about Canada's role in the world, and the NDP's role in Canada. By the middle of the decade, the party had drifted into describing Arab suicide bombers as the moral equivalents of the Israeli military, to the horror and quiet shame of many party loyalists. It had a perfect track record of opposing international intervention in: Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti, Somalia, and the Gulf War. Tommy Douglas, the first anti-fascist Canadian federal politician was, no doubt, spinning in his grave.

When the Soviet Union disappeared, and with it overnight the competence of Marxists to govern, many New Dems heaved a huge sigh of relief. No longer would social democrats be tagged with the horrors of state capitalism as practiced by knuckle-dragging Soviet thugs. No longer would the Trotskyites and their bizarre Maoist enemies be a source of treachery and disruption inside the NDP. Canadian social democracy would be seen as European and civil, electorally pragmatic and modern. Wrong.

The collapse of communism highlighted the triumph of social market

capitalism. It painted in stark relief the irrelevance of traditional social democratic and conservative postures. In Canada, it legitimated a two-party system. For after all, in MacKenzie King's immortal phrase, what were social democrats but "Liberals in a hurry"? That we ended up briefly with a half-dozen parties was a product of our regional peculiarities. Ideologically, there were two menus on offer: a mild state interventionism combined with a modest international agenda from the

Liberals, and a market-driven, mild social conservatism from the PCs. Pundits were hard pressed to describe what the NDP even claimed to represent in this period. Its demands were usually framed in terms of “more, sooner, faster, better,” as responses to government initiatives.

The whiff of intellectual decay had been rising on the democratic left since the 1960s. Although Marxists were the biggest victims of the “glorious delusion of ‘68” in Paris, and Berlin and Berkeley, social democratic leaders were marginalized as well. Awkward at integrating the challenges of women and gays and new immigrants, they tried to square the circle of growth and jobs, with the constraints of environmental sanity and the prejudices of organized labour. They struggled with the demands for flatter, more open party hierarchies, extra-parliamentary activism and a less ritualized and more transparent style of politics.

Even in the 1980s, the NDP failed to understand that the triumph of “liberation theologies” in the third world, and “new social movements” in the developed world, were not necessarily a boon to the democratic Left. With most of the Left, they failed to develop a coherent response to the nostalgic and nationalistic appeals of the Reagan/Thatcher neocons.

The earthquakes launched by the fall of communism were but the Wagnerian final act of this long-running political opera. Though few predicted the timing of the final curtain, the terminal incompetence of Marxism was obvious to most. For liberals around the world the thunderclap of the falling Berlin Wall was a huge gift: they claimed immediately that it was an endorsement of their approach to government, a middle way.

Neoconservatives in Canada and elsewhere judged the impact as partisanly and foolishly as New Democrats: for them it was a triumph of the hard-line Cold Warriors. Liberals, and Canadian Liberals especially, were much more clever at adapting to this



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Jack Layton ran a strong campaign at the retail level, but stumbled on his promise to repeal the *Clarity Act* as a gesture to Quebec. Moreover, he was stuck in a time warp from another era of spending promises beholden to left wing constituency groups and a foreign policy of anti-Americanism and non-engagement that would shame many of the NDP's founders.

new world. They co-opted the rhetoric, some of the leaders, and much of the energy of this new political environment. They swept into their embrace all manner of social movement activists and former hard-liners. They successfully occupied a huge swathe of the middle class, the moderate swing voters in many democracies. Bill Clinton's tri-

umphant “triangulation” became the ideal for liberals everywhere.

Throughout the following fifteen years the NDP slowly declined; pushed to the sidelines, it grasped harsher and more unbelievable policy positions internationally, and clung to increasingly dubious economic postures. The massive public deficits of the period

were “not a problem, they were an investment in our children.” It looked, by the turn of the millennium, at the national level, as if social democracy in Canada would simply continue to quietly fade away.

Then, along came a new century, a new leader and some newish ideas. Together, in this election, they would deliver a new electoral triumph for Canadian social democracy. Wrong.

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A plurality of Canadian voters chose Paul Martin’s smooth assurance that they could get most of the rewards of an NDP-backed government, with him and without them. They were spooked very effectively by Liberal attack ads at the prospect of the Albertan Talibanis seizing power, lynching gays, jailing loose women, and making gun ownership compulsory. In the absence of any strong NDP countervailing message — except begging to be given a chance — English Canadian voters decided, not unreasonably, to vote Liberal.

As a Prairie sage of NDP campaigns put it: “The Liberal Party is the Coca-Cola of Canadian politics: boring, predictable, no thrilling new taste sensations; but reliable, a comfort food, and risk-free.” So when the NDP offers a “a green new day with no one left behind,” and the new Tories are promoting, “tough love and truth telling,” Coke looks pretty good. What is to be done?

Lenin disparaged those “social democrats” who would claim common cause with other social movements in his famous 1902 pamphlet. He rallied his revolutionary allies by attacking Mensheviks (today’s liberals) as the greater enemy, not the defenders of Czarism. Lloyd George and MacKenzie King believed in gentle and continu-

ous tacking against the wind. Karl Kautsky, the great German social democrat leader believed that Lenin was the key enemy of the democratic left, not liberals. FDR understood his job was to save America “from his own class,” if it was to avoid the twin perils of left or right totalitarianism.

It may seem previous or peculiar to refer to these leaders of another century in reflecting on tomorrow’s choices for

Canadian lefties. But our political cleavages differ more in texture than in substance with those of the 1900s. Liberals, then and now, endorse a more optimistic hands-off approach to the inevitable acceleration of inequality in a market economy. A “light hand” of regulation will temper the accumulation of wealth and power, and the challenge to democracy that that presents, is a core liberal conviction. Isaiah Berlin’s “negative liberty” — the freedom to be left alone by society — remains at the centre of modern liberalism.

Similarly, now that Canada has given up its peculiar home-grown “progressive conservatism” and adopted the more plain vanilla social and economic conservatism of most of the right-wing parties in the Western democracies, we see the thread running back to Palmerston, Hoover and R.B. Bennett. Low-tax, trickle-down economics, married to militarism and Protestant family values, after all, have a century or more of great currency, if somewhat less credibility.

A more Malthusian pessimism informs traditional social democrats. They insist on sterner mechanisms of redistribution and intervention in a defence of democratic fairness. The state must be the instrument of this balancing act, and the market is to be tolerated but regularly trimmed. Sadly, of the

three surviving “tribes” of democratic politics, the banner of social democracy looks the most tattered today.

Libertarians, fascists, Leninists and suicide bombers are no longer welcome in the democracies. But conservatives have, in some cases, managed to reconfigure themselves as nationalists, supermanagers and, most ironically, modernizers. Liberals continue to successfully ooze across the spectrum, spilling left or right dependent on political fashion. Social democrats, in countries like Canada, Austria, and Japan — essentially conservative cultures — remain trapped in a time warp.

There is neither time nor space here to enumerate the new approaches that a “modern social democrat” might deploy on a philosophic or ideological plane. The much missed American progressive Michael Harrington outlined some in his final book, *Socialism Past and Future*. Joseph Stiglitz and Robert Reich have explored the international challenges with courage. The Progressive Policy Institute in the US and the several Blairite think tanks in the UK have all plowed the domestic policy ground well. Suffice it to say that,

- a defence of the poor and the weak,
- an activist promotion of equal opportunity,
- tough social, environmental and productivity performance requirements of governments and corporations, and
- more genuine democratic decision-making, in all institutions and communities, are central to each of these “revisionist” social democrats.

Some policy tools and campaign elements, which embody some of these principles, that a “New NDP” could employ to move itself to competition for a role in government are:

- *Cities*: Neither begging nor hope are strategies. Cities need political power as well as new revenue. The

Liberals can't push their provincial cousins to grant it — the NDP can. Re-examine burden-sharing and consider "uploading" some tasks: immigrant integration, safety and security, regional transport. Layton brings unique credibility to this file — use it to wedge the Liberals.

- *Democratic reform:* Forget PR. Anything requiring a constitutional amendment died with the *Charlottetown Accord* for a generation. And you can't reform the Commons without tackling the Senate. Set up a credible commission of "wise men" to look at the issue of "democratic decay." The choices are too many and the complexities too great to simply prescribe solutions today. Try mandatory voting and fixed terms as ways of leveling the playing field in the short term — they only need a Commons majority.
- *Health:* Forget playing on the margins of the medicare funding wars. No solution acceptable to the provinces can be imposed from Ottawa. The provinces are not ready to face the truth of their incompetent management of Canadians' health. Outline detailed deliverables like a national drug plan and formulary, mandatory patient data-sharing between providers, support for family-centred home care, etc.
- *Education:* Our failures in ESL secondary education and university funding are well known. Forget federal/provincial sensitivities and set literacy and academic performance improvement standards in return for funding. Australia, a federal state with more hostile governmental relations did it. We need to.
- *Pensions:* The next social policy crisis for boomers. Stanley

Knowles created pensions, Layton might be able to save them. Force Liberals and employers to acknowledge our system is broken and fix it to protect the most vulnerable — privately employed baby boomers.

- *Environment:* Bury Kyoto, it's dead. Deliver better air and water quality to Canadians. Campaign on asthma, and diabetes and brain damaged kids. Low-head hydro, access to the power grid for small

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producers, and gas-for-coal power substitution all connect to the cities' agenda. Giant wind farms are too easy to make fun of.

- *The party:* Party barons are seen as Tammany buffoons, internal democracy as the plaything of union and corporate and ethnic bosses. The NDP is not immune. Reform party governance and the sources of power. Guarantee places for First Nations, women and under 25s in the councils of power and on candidate lists. Cutback union prerogatives in light of pub-

lic funding changes. Force turnover through "internal term limits" for party leaders. Set independent oversight rules for nominations and conventions. Cut MPs' ability to build cash mountains and private political fiefdoms.

- *The World:* Outline a sensible defence strategy: emphasize coastal and air defence, cut land forces; pump up special forces and air mobile capability, cut bases. Steal Martin's idea of a G20 and give it some teeth. Admit previous errors on Kosovo, *et al.* and outline a progressive case for armed intervention. Return to sanity on the Middle East.

None of these messages is radical given the revolutionary changes taking place within social democracy internationally. Compared to the SPD's "*volte face*" on global security policy, the international changes are notional. Nor are they risk-free: Gerhard Schroder is almost certain to be defeated by his own party, and then the German electorate, for pushing a more modest reform agenda. Compared to Blair's efforts to force choice in both health and education on the public sector, these ideas are timid. "Canadian" issues such as Quebec, our aboriginal shame, direct vs. income taxes, and North American integration will still need to be addressed.

But even incremental changes such as these should move the NDP's "competence to govern" marks from F to C+. These changes need to be delivered as part of a competent economic and fiscal management agenda, believable revenue and cost projections, and a commitment to throw out the bottom 327 items on previous campaign wish lists.

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