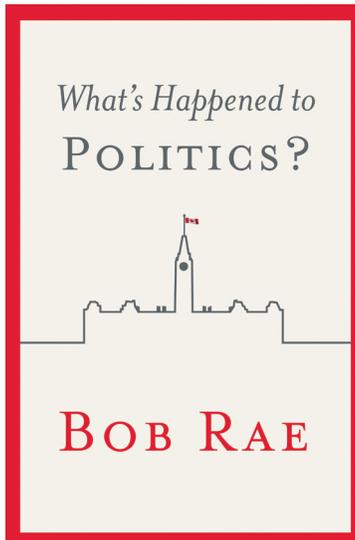


# Book Reviews



## An Optimistic Realist

Bob Rae

*What's Happened to Politics?*  
Toronto: Simon and Schuster  
Canada, 2015

Review by Geoff Norquay

When I first picked up this book, I had some initial apprehensions. Given its title, I was afraid it would be yet another polemic against modern Canadian politics, filled with laments against the manipulation of big data, the slicing and dicing of electorates, the permanent campaign, the undue influence of lobbyists and megaphone uber-partisanship.

My fears were soon allayed, because while all of that is there, Bob Rae has written a literate and thoughtful *analysis*, not only of the current political scene, but also the last 40 years of governing, policy and politics in this country.

Of course, Rae's credentials are impeccable. His life in politics has scaled heights and plumbed depths, seen significant accomplishments and notable defeats, and spanned two different political parties, but has always been

accompanied by an ability to digest, absorb, learn and grow.

“The chapter on leadership is excellent, starting with his view of its three critical components—vision, persuasion and implementation.”

The structure of the book flows nicely. A wide-ranging analysis of politics and leadership is followed by several prescriptive chapters that address, among other issues, energy sustainability, healthcare, mental health, aboriginal issues, the current state of democracy and foreign policy.

The chapter on leadership is excellent, starting with his view of its three critical components—vision, persuasion and implementation—all of which must be present and in balance for leadership success to be achieved. In the Canadian context, he looks at the leadership accomplishments of Sir John A Macdonald, Pierre Trudeau, Jean Chrétien and Brian Mulroney. Of Mulroney's unsuccessful attempt to bring Quebec into the Constitution, he concludes, “...sometimes, the issues with leadership have nothing to do with the leader themselves....the truth is that any leader can only control her own actions, and not the actions of others, let alone the host of external factors in which she must operate.”

As for the prescriptive chapters of the book, not everyone will agree with every solution Rae advances.

On the positive side, there is a forthright attack on the Harper government's decision to end the long-form census, a cure for which there was no known disease, and which has equally disadvantaged government, the private sector, and the academic community.

On the negative side, Rae's analysis of the energy and environmental sustainability issue is particularly rose-

coloured. He treats us to the usual bromides: “A sustainable national energy policy can also be a source of well-paying jobs across the full breadth of the economy. From infrastructure and construction to advanced manufacturing, the job potential is huge.”

Well, not so much in Ontario, where the Fraser Institute told us in 2013 that provincial subsidies add \$6 billion to household energy costs and \$12 billion to business and industrial costs or, as Gwyn Morgan wrote in the *Globe and Mail* in 2013, “transforming Ontario's previous low cost electricity economic advantage into a crushing millstone.”

And then there's the 2014 study by Tom Adams suggesting that wind and solar projects be halted in Ontario because they together provide less than four per cent of the province's power, but account for 20 per cent of what Ontarians pay for electricity. It's hard to see the advantages of such sustainable energy policies here.

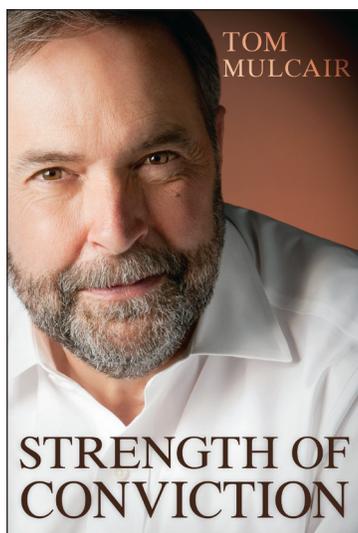
Rae's chapter on aboriginal issues is equally mixed. He provides an impassioned and exhaustive description of the long, sad history of white-aboriginal relations and treaty making, as well as the jurisprudence created by the court system over several decades. But when he looks to possible solutions, there is little acknowledgement of the thousands of First Nations Canadians who have long since given up on the reserve system and moved on with their lives. There is little acknowledgement of the difficult choices facing aboriginal leaders, pulled one way by those communities who seek to bolster dependency through the colonial provisions of the Indian Act and those others who are already well down the road to social and economic self-sufficiency. And one searches in vain for any sense that the splits in national aboriginal leadership have become a huge barrier to progress on First Nations issues.

In his concluding chapter, Rae writes, “This book has not been written as an exercise in partisan propaganda. My intention has been to show the resonance and resilience of a way of looking at politics that is based on as-

assessments of values, idea, programs, character, and leaders, not on spin, money, image, impressions, branding, and appeals to fear or even hate.”

My personal quibbles and policy preferences aside, this is an entertaining and eminently readable book. Despite the many twists and turns in his 40-year political journey, Bob Rae remains both a realist and an optimist. **P**

*Geoff Norquay, a principal of Earnscliffe Strategy Group, was senior adviser on social policy to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. [geoff@earnsccliffe.ca](mailto:geoff@earnsccliffe.ca)*



## Personal Touchstones On a Political Journey

Tom Mulcair

*Strength of Conviction.*  
Toronto: Dundurn, 2015

Review by James Baxter

Understanding the potential of an old house under renovation, one needs to look at the strength of its foundation, the quality of the materials and the loving upkeep it has received from its owners. In evaluating Tom Mulcair, understanding what dwells unseen by most gives us a better indication of the

kind of prime minister he could be.

Mulcair struggles with a public persona that is seen as pious and uncompromising, an image he hopes to change—or at least explain—in his pre-election autobiography *Strength of Conviction*. The picture on the cover is a chapter unto itself—the greying beard and wrinkles around the eyes suggest experience and wisdom, while the twinkle in those eyes show vigor and focus.

From the foreword, Mulcair acknowledges that the book—and much of his political life—has been a team effort. It took a phalanx of friends, family and a dogged publisher to extract and organize the many memories and deeply held values that have brought him to the point of aspiring to lead the country.

Unlike many of today’s politicians, who have never imagined any other career path for themselves, Mulcair paints a picture of a happy childhood, though one that was far from luxurious. He came from tough Irish stock, watched his father, a man with 10 children, suffer through a career setback when the company he worked for was bought out by a US-based rival. He lost his job and seniority, but with dignity and humour, built himself back up. It was one of the many lessons Mulcair has carried with him since.

What is made clear through the first third of the 184-page book is how strongly Mulcair values family. In many political biographies, families are mostly used as props, but the depth of characters Mulcair reveals to the readers offers tremendous insights into his most basic beliefs.

Beyond his immediate family—and Rocket Richard, of course—among his greatest childhood influences is Father Alan Cox, a Montreal priest who ran afoul of the Montreal archdiocese for his avant-garde approach and was sent to minister in suburban Chomedey, where Mulcair was a high school student. What made Cox cool was that he sought social justice and taught Mulcair and his classmates to seek more from each other and to strive for a better, fairer world.

He also takes us through his love affair with Catherine Pinhas. The two have been together since 1974, when Mulcair was a 19-year-old law student. It’s clear that theirs is a unique and powerful bond, one that is a key theme throughout the book.

Mulcair describes his passion for the law as a quest for fairness in the world. His

time working with the minority English-rights group Alliance Quebec and at the helm of the Office des professions du Québec is well written, but doesn’t provide a lot of insight into Mulcair’s leadership style or his vision for Canada. What is clear is that he revels in results, championing nuance and reaching acceptable compromises.

Not surprisingly, the book moves from character foundation to historical thriller as the disenchanted Mulcair, having served as Quebec environment minister under Jean Charest, prepares to exit Quebec politics in 2006 and is wooed to run by Jack Layton’s NDP in the 2007 Outremont byelection. Mulcair’s admiration for Layton is clear and inspiring, but also complicated. Layton’s world was one of large personalities and reaching across aisles, whereas Mulcair’s was much quieter and transactional. Together, however, it’s clear they made a strong team.

But where Layton could be publicly engaging of his rivals, in the book, Mulcair makes no effort to hide his disdain for the political antics of Stephen Harper and his staff. He also offers a particularly merciless assessment of Michael Ignatieff and the hapless Liberals. His words are short, sharp and leave little doubt that he believes Ignatieff was his own (and his party’s) worst enemy.

With all that background in place, the final chapter, a treatise of sorts titled *A Country of Shared Values*, offers a listing of his beliefs and desires for the country. Among them: “It’s time to remember how strong we are when we work together; I believe that every young family just starting out should have every opportunity to succeed; I believe access to affordable child care is an economic as well as a social priority; I believe every Canadian should be able to retire in dignity with financial security; I believe that a family with two children working full-time at minimum wage should not be living in poverty....”

One need only read these last eight pages to learn what Tom Mulcair might do as prime minister. But by looking back at the road he has travelled, one sees that Mulcair’s convictions are built on a solid foundation of people who showed him how one person can do make all the difference in the lives of many. **P**

*James Baxter is Editor and Executive Chairman of iPolitics. [jamesbaxter@ipolitics.ca](mailto:jamesbaxter@ipolitics.ca)*