Principle or Power? The NDP's Eternal Struggle

Robin V. Sears

The NDP has been Canada's perpetual bridesmaid party, formulating socially progressive policy for the Liberals to repurpose for implementation in government. Veteran strategist Robin Sears, who spent decades advising NDP leaders on both policy and strategy, examines the party's eternal existential question of balancing principle and the quest for power.

When it comes to opining about New Democrats or the Liberal Party, the Globe and Mail can usually be relied on to be snarky to one or the other. Their lead editorial on May 31, 2017 managed to offend both.

"Kathleen Wynne is a Great NDP Premier" was their sneering response to the Liberal government's donning an orange political disguise, stealing NDP policies on labour rights, the minimum wage and housing. It did, however, neatly sum up the love/hate relationship between Canada's two centre-left political parties.

From the day Mackenzie King agreed to create Canada's first national pension plan—after years of campaigning by the CCF's legendary leader, J.S. Woodsworth—until today, the CCF and the NDP have acted, to their frequent chagrin, as the Liberals' best think tank from which to steal progressive ideas.

Wynne's Hail Mary conversion—as she struggles to regain a possibility of re-election—to the wisdom of a decent minimum wage, came after years of dismissing Andrea Horwath and her caucus' harangues that it was an obscenity in a province as rich as Ontario to claim that a family could be supported on an annual wage of less than $23,000 a year. But it is a policy theft in a long and honourable political tradition.

Indeed, it is hard to think of a significant piece of progressive legislation that the Liberals did not first attack and then snatch in the past century. After pensions came women's right to vote, then the first Labour Code, then Medicare, then OAS/GIS, then Petro-Canada, election finance reform and the list could run for literally pages. It has been frustrating for Canada's social democrats on two levels. First, obviously, is the use of their policy vision to elect another political party. Less self-interestedly, it is because the Liberals rarely do the implementation well.

It took from 1962 to 1980 and the passage of the Canada Health Act for successive Liberal governments to even partially implement Tommy Douglas's vision for a universal health care plan from coast to coast. Labour laws went through half a dozen revisions before they achieved anything like real protections for Canadian workers. And as Ontario New Democrats and pundits have observed about Wynne's attempt at a survival strategy, it's less than half a loaf as well.

The Ontario Liberals ducked on making it easier for workers in small businesses and the service economy to join a union, again. They failed to tackle the fiction of 'self-employment' being used increasingly by employers to escape obligations to an employee,

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Nor did they offer any meaningful protection for workers whose bosses can move, add to or cancel their shifts with less than a week's notice. But the reaction of many voters, especially working class voters, may well be that it is still something to have a more liveable minimum wage; it's better than anything the Tories might offer. And—here is the painful rub for New Democrats—because the Liberals are as seen more likely to be in power, it might actually happen.

This hits the most painful internal struggle faced by any party of principle of left or right: Is power and its necessary compromises more impor-

CCF Leader J.S. Woodsworth at the time of his election to Parliament from Winnipeg North Centre in 1921. *Library and Archives Canada photo*

David Lewis and Tommy Douglas at the founding convention of the NDP in 1961. *Library and Archives Canada photo*

tant than principle? Does being right always take precedence, even if the price is certain defeat? I am revealing my bias: If it's virtue and irrelevance you seek, take a vow of poverty in your favourite convent or monastery.

Politics is about power: not merely the ability to constrain or influence someone else's power, but achieving the ability to deliver on your vision. Being the "conscience of Canadian politics"—a phrase that to many Jack Layton-era New Democrats grinds like nails on a political blackboard—cannot be enough. It is too early to tell whether the power-over-principle choice made by B.C. Greens will allow them and the B.C. NDP to deliver a real political renewal in B.C. But they each surely made the right decision to try.

A strong, centrist Liberal party is an anomaly in western democracies. That the Canadian Liberals have been able to campaign from the left and govern from the centre-right for most of the past century is a unique achievement. Being excluded from governing alone is no anomaly for social democrats in those same countries, however.

Yes, for much of the post-war era in Northern Europe, social democrats shared power. More recently in Mediterranean Europe, social democracy has flourished following the collapse of fascism, then communism. But receiving enough votes to govern alone? Rare.

The mighty German SPD have held the chancellorship alone for merely 13 of the past 68 years. Yet, even Otto von Bismarck's universal pension plan—the world's first—came as a result of pressure from the left. So, this fate of being trusted by voters to give birth to the best ideas but not being granted the sole responsibility for implementing them has a long and broad history.

For some on the left, that is enough. Knowing that you have blocked irredentist, reactionary, racist regression should be an object of pride. Knowing that you have generated the ideas and the momentum to drive progressive change even more so.

But politicians on the left would not be human if they did not bridle at the successive generations of bourgeois parties—as the French would call them—so successfully playing cuckoo bird, perennially stealing from the their 'idea nest.'

The future may be shaping up differently in Canada and internationally. The other major centrist political family—traditional conservatism or Christian Democracy—is being badly squeezed from the populist right. Social democrats' greatest challenges no longer come from the centre but the hard left, and insurgent Green and "nativist" parties.

Donald Trump is no more a conservative than Hillary Clinton. But he is a nationalist, nativist, ethnic purist, right-wing populist. He defeated the Democratic party, yes, but he may destroy the conservative tradition in the GOP as well. Independent Emmanuel Macron crushed socialist and conservative parties alike in winning the Élysée Palace. These are strange times in western democracies. Centuries old verities are being challenged on all sides.

How quickly and how well the traditional Canadian political families adapt to these new challengers will determine not only who governs but what type of Canada we bequeath to new generations. If Andrew Scheer lives up to the Liberal attack line of being merely a "Stephen Harper with a more believable smile," the Conservative party will be out of power for as much of this century as it was in the last one.

If, however, he is able to play "Nixon in China" with his social conservatives—a more likely prospect, in my view—massaging them without being manipulated into bad choices by them, he could recreate the Mulroney

Conservative coalition. With Maxime Bernier as a strong Quebec lieutenant, and a strong provincial conservative party in every province from Ontario to Alberta, he could build a 21st century Conservative coalition, one based on effective and hands-on economic management, aggressive immigrant recruitment and integration, and free of either a parochial or a *Poujadiste tinge*.

The Liberals need to continue to struggle against their twin vices—arrogance and complacency—to remain successful. Their recidivism is, however, legendary. It will remain the main task of every leader to fight their slow slide into entitledness about their entitlement. But they can always be assured of a progressive left from which to snatch and re-package their policy agenda indefinitely.

For the NDP—or at least those who do not see their party as a secular monastery and want to win power—the challenge is perhaps the hardest of all. On the one hand, they must resist the eternal temptation to "movementitis." A political party is not a movement, it's a coalition of many clans, with shared values knitted carefully into a sustainable political quilt, one with sufficient and broad appeal to win.

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On the other hand, the 21st century risks ripping asunder the class alliance among farmers, industrial, commercial and public sector workers. There is not an obvious solidarity between a BC Hydro engineer with an indexed pension, a commitment to building large power plants and a six-figure salary and the woman who serves him coffee each morning at Tim's.

Jack Layton and Ed Broadbent at a 2008 campaign rally in Toronto. *Wikipedia photo*

The clash of values between what American social commentator Joan Williams dubs starkly "The White Working Class" and the start-up green tech millennial, even if today their standards of living are not that far apart, is deepening. Building bridges between the two has always been a challenge for social democrats. It is an even tougher challenge today.

Finally, New Democrats need to elect a new Jack Layton. Parties that are coalitions for power only can thrive without iconic leaders. Parties of both principle and power must be led by political masters. They must mediate tough internal divisions. They have to lean against the 'movement' builders without pushing them out of the tent, and they need to appeal to enough outside the tribe of true believers to build a winning coalition. Not easy.

J. S. Woodsworth built the bridge between farm and labour brilliantly, his successor not so much. Tommy Douglas did it as premier, at the national level less well. David Lewis did it during the party's hardest years, the height of the Cold War, as what we would call the party's national director, battling Liberal-allied Communists, and Trostskyites. He served with greater frustration later as leader. Ed Broadbent was the party's first modern leader, with the ideal pedigree for a successful social democratic leader—an irreverent intellectual with working-class roots. His successors each stumbled.

It was Jack Layton who demonstrated that a new future was possible, rebuilding a shattered party, then a "best in class" campaign team, then romping painfully close to victory out of Quebec. Then the cycle repeated itself with his successor stumbling badly.

So, if you believe that history does foretell, the party will choose its next iconic leader in October. That figure will fashion the 21st century version of the farmer-labour coalition. Their new coalition will win the trust and credibility to not only conceive, but to win the mandate to execute, a vision for a progressive new Canada.

Or, if not, maybe they'll just help the Liberals finally implement the national daycare plan they stole from Jack Layton. P

Contributing writer Robin V. Sears, a principal of Earnscliffe Strategy Group, is a former national director of the NDP in the Broadbent years. robin@earnscliffe.ca