

# The Battle for the Future of Progressive Politics in Canada

Brad Lavigne

**S**o what does all that happened at the NDP convention in Edmonton mean for the future of the party and progressive politics in Canada?

To answer that question, we need to recognize two important factors at play in Edmonton.

The first is the sheer number and motivation of the delegations.

With 1,887 delegates registered for Edmonton 2016, it had to have been apparent to the party leadership and leader's office in the days leading up to Edmonton that change was coming. Very few people take two days off from work and spend a couple thousand of their own dollars to fly to Alberta to vote to maintain the status quo—six months after a heartbreaking election.

A week prior to the Edmonton convention, over 1,000 people attended the Broadbent Institute's third annual Progress Summit in Ottawa. While there was some overlap, there were a lot of new faces at both. Despite electoral disappointment, progressives are highly engaged in policy work, movement politics and partisan politics.

The cancer for any political party is indifference. Clearly, New Democrats and progressives are far from indifferent.

The second factor is that the culture of winning, so carefully cultivated under Jack Layton's leadership, defined the outlook of activists within the party in Edmonton.

The leadership vote was not just a verdict on the October campaign, but a look ahead to 2019. For the overwhelming majority of delegates, the issue wasn't whether to replace Tom Mulcair before 2019, but *when* before 2019.

The pragmatists did not think he could improve the party's seat count

in 2019, while others felt that he was not equipped to attract new votes without a more solid articulation of the social democratic values of the party. Either way, it was the 2019 election campaign that was the lens through which delegates rendered their judgment.

In other words, this was not a left-right issue or about the NDP settling back into becoming the conscience of the nation instead of vying for power, as some pundits wrongly argued. This faulty conclusion rests on bundling a misreading of the leadership vote with a misrepresentation of the vote on the Leap Manifesto.

The grassroots of the party didn't embrace the Leap Manifesto. Had the party voted on the content of the Leap Manifesto, such a motion would have failed. The authors of the document knew it couldn't win a straight up vote on its content, so they brokered a process motion to have local discussions. "Even though there are problems with the document, who could vote against more discussion?" many said on the convention floor. But even under such circumstances, the motion to debate this document at the local level barely passed.

**S**o what's next?

If the leadership race is to be organized with maximum opportunity in mind, it should not be within the next 16 months. There is no need to rush into a leadership vote. The next election is not for three and-a-half years. Getting the leadership timing right in 2017 is one of the most important aspects to winning in 2019. The party needs to give time for a strong slate of credible candidates to emerge who offer a smart, vigorous exchange of ideas that attracts progressives and puts our issues at the forefront.

During this time of interim leadership, Rachel Notley will become for the progressive forces in Canada what Brad Wall has become for the conservative forces—a provincial leader providing national leadership.

Notley's speech at the Edmonton convention gave voice to the widely held premise that there is no contradiction in the pursuit of and the exercising of power while maintaining the very values that define us. To claim that the debate is between "the movement" and "governing" is to suggest that our values are somehow out of step with Canadians. In fact, the opposite is true.

In the short term, the greatest threat to social democracy at the national level isn't the self-admitted naivety of the "leave it in the ground" crowd. Rather, it's the threat of the Liberals to use their false majority in Parliament to introduce ranked balloting as its electoral reform measure for the 2019 election.

Make no mistake: ranked balloting layered onto Canada's winner-take-all voting system of first-past-the-post will further rig Canada's voting system, ensuring that the Liberals govern in perpetuity and progressives are forever denied an equal shot at 24 Sussex. Ranked balloting is so-called strategic voting on steroids. That's why the fight for proportional representation, where every Canadian's vote will count, must be the unifying focus of progressives in the near term.

Over the next two years, the battle on the left won't be whether to pursue power, rather how to attain it. **P**

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