



Column / Don Newman

Back to the Future

The federal New Democratic Party is going back to the future. The pair of decisions taken at its April convention in Edmonton mean the party is going back to where it was 45 years ago; entering a leadership race with policy schism splitting the party down the middle.

Perhaps it is all inevitable. After suffering what was a devastating defeat in the election last October, it was entirely predictable that the party would be plunged into a leadership race that will centre around both who should lead the party and what the party should be.

The fact that Tom Mulcair was unceremoniously dumped as leader should have come as no surprise. The Edmonton convention only did what Mulcair should have done himself before going to bed on election night last October.

Any party leader who loses 50 seats in an election while his party goes from second to third place in the House of Commons, should have had his resignation written even before formally conceding defeat in the electoral disaster he had just presided over. Why Mulcair thought he could continue to lead the NDP and take it into the next election is beyond understanding.

Now the party is facing a leadership race that could take up to two years before Mulcair's successor is selected. And throughout the leadership race the party will at the same time be considering whether it should adopt the Leap Manifesto, the policy proposition that contains the con-

troversial proposal to stop building energy pipelines.

All of this harkens back to the NDP Leadership race in 1971. Way back then, the New Democrats were facing a situation not dissimilar to the one confronting the party now.

A decade after its founding and three elections which produced minority governments in Parliaments where the NDP held the balance of power, the Liberals in 1968 chose a man named Trudeau as their leader and rode that choice to a majority government later that same year.

Tommy Douglas, the former Saskatchewan premier and the Father of Medicare, was faced with the reality that the party was going backward under his leadership. He stepped down as leader and most people expected that the equally talented deputy leader David Lewis would be crowned the new chief at a leadership convention.

But the NDP's disappointing showing in the previous election had triggered the same kind of argument we heard in Edmonton about the future of the party and the policies it should adopt.

A radical group known as the Waffle, advocated strident left wing policies and in April of 1971 its candidate for the party leadership, James Laxer, pushed Lewis to four convention ballots before he finally won the leadership.

Now 45 years later, after the Liberals again picked a man named Trudeau and dashed the NDP's hopes of elec-

toral breakthrough, the party is embarked on another soul-searching leadership review.

Ironically in the 1970s it was the Lewis family, David and his son Stephen, who purged the party of the left wing Wafflers.

This time the left wing Leap Manifesto group is being lead by another Lewis, Avi, David's grandson and Stephen's son.

As this scenario develops Avi may well become a candidate for the party leadership. With no one of major stature federally on the horizon to represent the other side, it may come down to Alberta Premier Rachel Notley to fire away from the provincial capital in Edmonton if the Leap campaign gathers momentum.

Whatever happens, the outlook for the NDP isn't pretty. A fractious leadership campaign that produces a split party, all of this happening in the public eye and the glare of publicity.

At the recent convention, outgoing party president Rebecca Blaikie tried to assure and inspire the delegates that despite the third place election results of 2015, "the NDP," she declared. "isn't going anywhere!"

It is not the way she meant it, but based on the party's recent decisions in Edmonton, her remarks may prove prophetic. **P**

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