



NDP Leader Tom Mulcair after losing the leadership review vote in Edmonton on April 10. “Don’t let this very divisive vote divide us,” he pleaded in his concession speech. Flickr photo

NDP Crossroads: Leadership and the Leap

Robin Sears

The late Jack Layton ran on the principle that the New Democratic Party didn’t have to sell its soul for power...it could have both. Tom Mulcair lost sight of that principle during the 2015 campaign, running a risk-averse strategy aimed at pleasing everyone that, predictably, cost him the election and the party leadership. Veteran political strategist Robin Sears looks at where the party—Mulcair, Notley, the Leapers, the ghost of Jack Layton and all—goes from here.

Canadians have never seen so public an execution of a national party political leader before. It was polite, respectful but in the end astonishingly resolute. No one—including Tom Mulcair—predicted that 52 per cent of New Democrats would say it was time for a change.

The result was one more example of the importance of expectations management in political life. Jack Layton was the first NDP leader to make a public claim on becoming prime minister, but it was Tom Mulcair whose candidacy to succeed Layton was framed by a prom-

ise of government. Tom Mulcair was the first NDP leader to insist the party could plausibly set governing the country as the bar of victory. Failing to meet the bar he set, he was the victim of the party's judgment about that failed dream.

The decisive vote in Edmonton was about more than squabbles about pipelines and the Leap Manifesto. Without the Leapers nipping at hometown Alberta premier Rachel Notley's ankles, Mulcair probably would have ended in the painful shadow zone of 60 per cent approval. In that respect, the tired old Socialist Caucus zealots did him and the party a favour: they helped make the vote decisive.

Viewed through another lens, his rejection was painfully unfair. Tom Mulcair had led the party to its second highest level of popular support, had made it a genuine contender for national power for the first time in its history. He had built, nursed to adulthood, and then protected the party's first-time base in Quebec. All this was acknowledged, and the reaction to his main convention address was warm and positive—interrupted by several standing ovations.

Very few party leaders and even fewer caucus members openly—or even privately—agitated for his defeat. The few foolhardy outliers were quickly smacked for their apostasy. The mood in the hotel corridors on the night before the vote was mixed: little Mulcair enthusiasm, but far from the antagonism that was palpable when Joe Clark was a target, or the angrier rhetoric of the young Turks attempting to unseat Pierre Trudeau toward his end. The mood was more in sorrow than in anger among the most determined change advocates.

So what caused New Dems for the first time in their history to oust a sitting leader?

The scent of power.

Those pundits and liberal placemen in the national media already pronouncing Canadian social democracy's demise might re-

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flect on this: nearly 1,800 party members, almost double the norm for an NDP convention, do not spend thousands of dollars to merely to oust a leader, let alone prepare their party's funeral. The zeal and determination of the assembled activists was as much about building the next chapter, as it was about delivering judgment on the painful election defeat just passed—despite the foolishness of some peddling aging leftist political fairy tales as the path to success.

No other NDP leader had faced this judgment in convention: sainted Tommy Douglas lost four times—including losing his own seat, not once, but twice. Beloved Ed Broadbent also got four times at bat. And in each case they stepped aside without the humiliation of a convention vote. One difference between them and Mulcair, beyond acceptable thresholds of political success, was their relationship with the faithful. But Tommy and Ed were loved, Mulcair was respected.

Ironies in political life are common: raising the prospect of victory seriously for the first time, Tom Mulcair set a threshold for leadership success that ended his career. The powerful grace in his exit speech was such that one can almost believe that he will now comfortably slide into the role of party elder, as the machinery of a leadership fight gears up.

How did the party get to this unheard-of place, killing the king as a path to power? It began with Jack Layton's astonishing—and widely derided—decision to launch his 2008 campaign with the announcement that he was running to be prime minister. From a position of less than 20 per cent in the polls, and a caucus that was a sliver of

its current strength, it did seem a bizarre, almost delusional claim.

Even among his devoted professional campaign team there was a little skittishness about the bravado of launching an NDP campaign at a \$200,000 orchestrated event, framed by the House of Commons, with rock-star quality staging—and making such an astonishing claim. They were greeted with derision by aging pundits and political opponents grown comfortable with a more modest NDP presentation and aspiration.

But Jack Layton was a brilliant political strategist, one who continued to grow in depth and skill almost until the end—when fate, with stunning brutality, pushed him off the stage just weeks after his greatest political triumph. Even three years earlier, he had begun to put the pieces in place to be able to make his claim less fantastic. Among them was the careful wooing of Tom Mulcair.

Layton forced the party to set a higher bar, and then set about building the party machinery required to meet it. He almost got there. Though it is not clear that Mulcair would have been his chosen successor, it was almost inevitable that he should be. Mulcair understood better than any other leadership contender how hungry New Democrats were to win. They had smelled blood in Liberal waters and they had a Tory opponent openly hated by progressive Canadians.

The party's mistake in 2015 had little to do with being more or less progressive, though Liberals were very clever in successfully making that improbable claim about themselves. Mulcair's strategic error, and one that Layton had sometimes flirted with, was trying

too hard to be comforting to nervous Canadians. The risk aversion of the 2015 campaign was not dramatically greater than Jack Layton's—but the world had changed in the interval.

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Instead of a pretentious amateur leading Canada's natural governing party to oblivion, the NDP were challenged by a powerful force of political nature, an undersold, under-appreciated political superstar, one with an inimitable pedigree.

Cicero urged his political juniors never to forget that political life is a pendulum, the position of power is never at rest. Two millennia later, the New Zealand All-Blacks, the world's most successful professional sports team, added the wisdom that your opponents watch and learn from your previous strategies, so you must always update them. Never bring last year's winning game to this year's contest, as James Kerr declared in *Legacy*, his powerful book on the team.

The Tories and NDP forgot the lessons of both the Roman Senate and international championship rugby. They each failed to notice how far the partisan pendulum had swung between elections, and they each brought their old game to the new season. And they each got deservedly clobbered by a new Liberal team, who did almost everything new and well.

The Mulroney-era Tories famously went from an unheard of 211 seats to two. The Liberals went from a Chré-



Alberta NDP Premier Rachel Notley reminds delegates that “pipelines are built by Canadians, using Canadian steel.” Flickr photo

tien high of 171 MPs in 2000 to an Ignatieff low of 34. New Democrats have gone from crushing defeat, to recovery, to defeat over and over. Like the Liberals in the United Kingdom, or the third party in any first-past-the-post-system, they get over-punished when a political high tide rolls in. But parties rarely die, or even fade. They adapt, prepare and wait for the rollercoaster to climb again. In addition to stomach churning rides up and then crashing down, there is another verity unique to Canadian politics:

Liberal governments always break progressive hearts.

And when they do, the NDP is usually the beneficiary. From the progressive promises of Trudeau *père* in 1974, progressives got tough wage controls and sham price controls. In 1980, Canadians got the National Energy Program and then dramatically rising deficits and bitter strikes over wages. In the 1990s the Liberals tried to roll back the debt chasm they had created over most of the previous three decades by downloading the burden onto provinces, cities, and ultimately the poorest Canadians.

There is no mystery about when the NDP rollercoaster will climb out of its latest plunge. It is almost always after the broken dreams of a ‘progressive Liberal government’ meet their electoral reckoning. From 1972 to 1979-80, to 1988, to Layton's effective re-launch of the party in the last decade, each

upswing came after disappointment with Liberal performance. Political communication masters they indisputably are. Political natural Justin Trudeau demonstrably is, but is there any reason to think the Liberal rollercoaster has come to a stop at this peak?

Unlikely.

The Conservative leadership race may avoid a return to the party's natural state of perennial fratricide, but history is not on their side. Only twice since Sir John A Macdonald have Canadian Conservatives managed to avoid constant low-level civil war, undermining their leader and their reputation as a potential party of government. The first time, under Brian Mulroney, it was the product of the charm and political skill of the most successful kind of Canadian politician, a bicultural Quebecer able to be seen as a native son on both sides of the Ottawa River.

The second time, under Stephen Harper, it was a product of the type of repression and coercion that often make authoritarian regimes appear surprisingly effective and trouble-free, until the cracks appear. It is not obvious who will be the next Tory Brian Mulroney, but there are several boomer veterans of the last regime who may try the same tricks with whips and chains. Canadians are unlikely to be impressed.

The Justin honeymoon is unlikely to fade until after, at a minimum, an-

other bad winter. But 2019 is already looking a lot like those election years when overreaching partisanship and sub-par governmental performance—and/or a growth-limited Conservative offer—means a strong NDP campaign has lots of running room.

Whether NDP activists' surprising level of agreement on the need for change in Edmonton means the party is ready to make the changes—beyond leadership—that will make it a genuine contender remains to be seen. The party's national campaign was bedevilled by a paper-thin campaign apparatus beyond Ottawa. New Democrats have never wanted to invest in the shift of power and resources that creating strong regional campaign centres—separate from the oversight of their provincial cousins—that were one of the keys to Liberal success. Jack Layton and senior campaign strategist Brad Lavigne started the process, but it had stalled after 2011.

Running 338 riding campaigns, with occasional direction by Ottawa, and a campaign centre limited in its research, intelligence gathering, and operational boots on the ground is not a winning national campaign apparatus. The days of stumbling on the niqab were proof of the organiza-

tion's inability to pivot quickly. Big changes will be required.

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The temptation of depressed progressive parties to flirt with the self-indulgent side of their tribe's own mythologies was clearly on display in Edmonton, as well. Social democratic parties in defeat frequently flirt with ban-the-bomb, vegan, solidarity-with-the-national-liberation-movement-of-the-month fringe. Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn are merely this generation's nutty successors to Ralph Nader and Michael Foot. Left unchallenged, the Leapers may do much harm before they are firmly returned to their booths stacked with

smudged leaflets on the outside of the convention hall.

The party is unlikely to make a leap into the political wilderness to its left. The strongest inoculation against a new Waffle is, ironically, the evanescent scent of victory. This flirtation with views certain only to make Liberals happy, does, however, risk hurting the one truly progressive government in office in Canada—Alberta's.

Rachel Notley's eloquent defence of a progressive economy built on resources' jobs and revenue and governed by environmental principle, did not get great attention in the leadership frenzy. She did lay out the only winning strategy for a national progressive government very elegantly, nonetheless. It will be a key indicator of the likely outcome of the 2019 contest if the federal party understands that it needs to take her lead, as it enters this leadership contest.

If they fail to do so, the Layton/Mulcair dream of national power will fade for another generation. **P**

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