

BOOK EXCERPT

Jack Layton's Final Days: An Optimist to the End

Brad Lavigne

*Jack Layton's story is unrivalled in the history of Canadian politics for its juxtaposition of triumph and tragedy. The minutes, hours and days lived by the people closest to him during those final weeks of his life in 2011 tell the very human story behind the Shakespearean pageant witnessed by the rest of Canada. Here, in an exclusive excerpt from *Building the Orange Wave*, Layton's former campaign director and principal secretary shares the poignant experience of those final weeks of a very public life.*

It had been a whirlwind spring for Jack, and immediately after the election on May 2, he switched gears and turned his mind to building the office of the Leader of the Opposition. He was supported by an eleven-member transition team: MPs Tom Mulcair, Libby Davies, Malcolm Allen, Jean Crowder and David Christopherson; advisers Brian Topp, Matt Hebb and Bob Dewar; and staffers Ray Guardia, appointed Jack's special Quebec adviser; chief of staff Anne McGrath; and me, newly appointed as Jack's principal secretary.

With senior staff and the transition team in place, we next had to put together a strong Shadow Cabinet. New Democrat MPs would be sitting directly across from the government side for the first time in our history. Jack agreed that we should match up Harper's Cabinet picks with people who would make for a strong contrast and shine as NDP counterpoints to Tory cabinet ministers during Question Period.

The Shadow Cabinet took many days to build, since we had to balance region, gender and experience. It wasn't easy, especially with so many new MPs, the majority of whom we did not know much about. Jack also insisted that everyone—all 103 New Democrat MPs—be given a job to do. He had been close to his late father and had learned lessons about caucus management from him. Not long after the May vote, Jack reached out to his dad's old boss, Brian Mulroney, who had appointed Robert Layton to his Cabinet in 1984 and later as his long-time national caucus chair. "He and I worked very closely on areas of caucus relations," Mulroney said of Jack's father, "and he had spoken to Jack about the way I'd handled caucus."

Jack called Mulroney and the two spoke for about an hour and a half. "I have gone from A to B here, and B is the Official Opposition with a large delegation of Quebecers who have never been in Parliament before," Mulroney remembers Jack saying. "They don't know a great deal about the rest of Canada and vice versa, and so caucus management is going to be the



Riding the Orange Wave—Jack Layton, *le bon jack*, radiates confidence at a campaign meeting in Montreal in April 2011. The wave carried the NDP from fourth place in the House to Official Opposition. But in the afterglow of his triumph, tragedy struck and within four months of the election, he died of cancer. *Montreal Gazette* photo

highest priority for me, as it is for any leader in the British parliamentary system who understands the true nature of political success." Mulroney continued: "Without the caucus, you can't get across the street. Without caucus loyalty, you can't get anywhere, and so Jack said to me, 'Look, everybody knows about your success with caucus, starting with my own father. I'd like to talk to you about it.' All I could tell him is how it had worked for me, and he took it all in."

The party's general convention in Vancouver, set to run from June 17 to 19, 2011, meant Jack couldn't stop to take a break after the election. We were marking the fiftieth anniversary of the party on the heels of our historical breakthrough, and we needed to put on a strong show, with Jack at the centre of it.

Jack was in good form at the convention in Vancouver, where he received an approval vote of 97.9 per cent in his leadership review. He was feeling fatigued when he flew back to Ottawa on the Sunday, but he took solace in the fact that the parliamentary session was almost done. He just had a few more sitting days in the House and one evening event that week at Stornoway, the official residence of the Leader of the Official Opposition. After that, he'd be able to head back home to Toronto for the summer to recharge. Labour Minister Lisa Raitt had thrown a wrinkle into Jack's plan on Monday, June 20, when she tabled provocative legislation to order postal workers back to work; they had been locked out for a week after a few weeks of rotating job action. The NDP weren't going to be doormats, so we opted to filibuster the legislation. This meant the session would drag on past Thursday, but Jack thought it was important to draw attention to the government's attack on collective bargaining and buy time for the two sides to reach a settlement.

Jack felt unwell all week. He was supposed to make a quick detour to Montreal on Friday, June 24, to celebrate Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day, but even before it became apparent Jack would be stuck in Ottawa because of the filibuster, he'd told Bélanger he didn't think he would be able to walk the parade route. He was also showing some signs of discomfort on Wednesday evening, just before the filibuster was set to begin. Jack hosted a barbecue dinner that night for NDP caucus and staff and their families at Stornoway. He arrived a bit late because of his duties in the House and mingled before delivering a short speech. He was upbeat, but he seemed to be favouring one hip while relying heavily on his cane. I just figured he was exhausted.

By late Saturday, June 25, the 58-hour filibuster in the House of Commons was coming to an end. Jack had kicked off the debate on Thursday evening with an hour-long speech. He pressed forward despite the pain he was feeling and the "Union Jack" jeers from the government side. Over the next two days, he was in and out of the House to support the NDP MPs, including 70 newly elected rookies, who were rotated through Parliament for the around-the-clock debate. The filibuster had the effect of gelling the new team of inexperienced MPs, and Jack had insisted on being in the chamber for the final vote. As the vote neared, he turned to Mulcair, his new House Leader. "Tom, will you be able to give the wrap-up speech? I'm feeling a little discomfort," Jack said.

"Yeah, Jack," Mulcair replied.

"And can you scrum after it's all done?" asked Jack.

Mulcair stood up and gently patted Jack on the back. "Of course," said Mulcair. He was concerned, though, he recalls, because Jack's suit jacket was soaking with sweat.

In the days after the end of the parliamentary session, Jack was back in Toronto, doing a series of medical tests. He either cabbled to the hospital with Olivia or got a lift from his son or son-in-law. Either way, Olivia was usually with Jack. Other patients and personnel recognized Jack, but they didn't snap pictures of him. "People were respectful. I just think that people are not that intrusive in Canada. I think they respect someone's privacy," recalls Jack's son, Mike.

On July 9, their wedding anniversary, Jack and Olivia hosted an engagement party at their home for Mike and his fiancée. "He was in good spirits," recalls Mike.

Mike and Sarah, Jack's daughter, had gone in on a video recorder and a good microphone as a gift for Jack and Olivia's anniversary. The idea was to continue a family tradition that Jack had started with his own parents. Jack would sit down with his old video recorder and ask his mother and father about their parents and grandParents, and about what life had been like for them growing up.

When Mike and Sarah purchased the gift, they didn't know how serious their father's illness was. "I don't think I ever realized that, and neither did my sister," Mike says when asked whether he believed his father could die.

The new video recorder was put to work right away. "Like he had done with his dad and mom, he sat down and we did

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these interviews, just me asking questions like, ‘What was it like then?’ We did it for a little bit, not as much as I would have liked, but we did do it for many hours, where it was just him and me shooting the shit... Sometimes other people would be there and they would chime in,” Mike remembers. “So we got that time. Us doing the interviews wasn’t an acknowledgement of an end coming near, just that we may as well try and document some of this, because people do die... He liked to tell stories.”

Jack was an optimist at his core, and this perspective had become even more pronounced after his diagnosis with prostate cancer in December 2009. “I often say getting a cancer diagnosis, in terms of your view of the world, it’s a little like switching from watching black-and-white TV to watching colour,” Jack explained in the NDP video shot in January 2011. “I’m old enough to remember what that was like. It’s just such a difference. You look at every moment in your life as a gift, and that’s a wonderful experience. Ironically, you’d think with a bad news diagnosis, if anything, you’d be looking at the greys, you’d be looking at the dark side. But at least for me, and I know for many people who are surviving cancer, it’s the opposite.”

Anne McGrath visited Jack at his home weekly, and she had already begun discussions with Jack and Topp about different options in the event that Jack needed to step aside for health reasons. When Jack received his major test results on Wednesday, July 20, he called McGrath. Olivia was by his side. It was evening, but McGrath was still at the office in Ottawa, she recalls. “The news isn’t good. They found a new cancer. I’m going to fight it, but things aren’t great,” Jack, sounding apologetic, told McGrath. “I need you to present me with some scenarios,” Jack said.

Earlier in July, Jack had asked Brian Topp, newly elected party president at the Vancouver convention, to review the NDP’s constitution concerning the process for interim leadership. “Jack, you asked me about the rules on this matter,” Topp wrote and then cited the relevant section of the constitution: “Should the position of Leader become vacant at any point, the Council may, in consultation with the parliamentary Caucus, appoint a Leader for the interim period until a new Leader has been elected.” The trigger here is the office ‘becoming vacant.’”

During their discussions, McGrath and Topp had decided that if Jack needed to step aside temporarily, they would recommend Nycole Turmel, who had been elected in the Quebec riding of Hull–Aylmer in May and who was caucus chair, to serve as interim leader.

Now McGrath—and Jack—knew the moment had arrived. “He was quite aware that he was going to step aside,” McGrath remembers about their conversation on July 20.

“Walk me through your arguments,” Jack told McGrath about the Turmel recommendation. The interim leader had to be someone bilingual, and it should be someone from Quebec but not someone who might go for the leadership at a later date, McGrath explained. Turmel was a new MP, but her long tenure as president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada meant she had significant experience running a national organization.

“He was in agreement with it. He was worried about it. He was worried about every possibility,” recalls McGrath. Jack, Olivia and Anne agreed on the phone that Jack would make the announcement in Toronto on Monday, July 25.

Jack had received the results five days earlier than expected, and McGrath couldn’t immediately reach Topp, who was on a canoe trip with his family. She enlisted Sue Milling, who contacted a park warden to find Topp. On Thursday, Topp called and got the news. McGrath also called the senior staff, one by one, into her office in Ottawa to inform us of the development.

“Things aren’t good. Jack’s not well. He’s going to step down as leader. He’s fighting a new battle, and he needs to take some time,” McGrath told each of us. “Funny how you can be in shock when you can also expect something,” says McGrath today.

Bélanger had just begun his holidays, so McGrath called him back to the office to speak with him in person, hinting there was an issue with Jack’s health. When Karl arrived, Anne explained that Jack would be taking a leave of absence to focus on a treatment plan. “I let the news sink in, but I was not totally shocked,” he recalled. He had spent a lot of time with Jack in June, and he knew about some new growing pain and discomfort.

While Karl was there, McGrath was able to get Jack on the phone. “That’s when I was actually shocked for the first time, when I heard the voice. Anne had told me that he had lost a lot of weight and was pale, but she hadn’t mentioned how raspy he sounded,” Karl would later recount. “I quickly composed myself, and Jack started apologizing for interrupting my vacation. He apologized for what was happening.”

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"There is no need to apologize, sir. Anne informed me that this was why I make the big bucks," Bélanger joked.

At the end of their conversation, Jack's voice began to crack just as he started to apologize again for putting them through this. He couldn't complete his sentence. "It is our honour to serve you, sir," Karl said, "and we will see you Monday."

Kathleen Monk and Bélanger were put in charge of the press conference in Toronto, and their job was to organize it while making sure word didn't leak out in advance. They enlisted Rick Devereux from the party office and the production company Project X to produce the event. I was assigned, along with Topp, McGrath and Anderson, to help Jack and Olivia with the statement. It would fall to me to brief the staff on Parliament Hill, which we would do just before Jack's press conference.

McGrath flew to Toronto on Saturday morning. She had arranged with Nycole Turmel's assistant for Turmel to call her at 6:30 that evening, but Turmel did not yet know what the phone meeting with Jack's chief of staff was about.

Turmel called McGrath's cellphone at the designated time. McGrath spoke to her for a few minutes to prepare her a bit. "Jack isn't well, and he has something to ask you," she told Turmel, before passing the phone to Jack. "I felt really horrible for her," recalls McGrath. His voice was starting to get quite weak at that point, and he was emotional."

The call was brief. "Will you step in as interim leader while I work on my health?" Jack asked her. Turmel immediately said yes.

The next day, Jack emailed me a copy of the draft speech he and Olivia had prepared with Topp and McGrath. The statement began like Jack's announcement about his prostate cancer had: it was direct and succinct about his diagnosis. The statement then transitioned to his recommendation for Turmel to serve as interim leader while he underwent treatment. He had also insisted on setting a return date, and the opening of Parliament on September 19 made the most sense.

For Jack, the statement was also deeply personal, and he wanted to weave a political call for building a green, caring Canada into his message of love, hope and optimism. I amended the love stuff, since it seemed a little un-prime ministerial to me, but Jack put it back in. This was who he was, and he was going to lay it all out in his own words.

When Jack woke up on that hot Toronto day, his weakened, raspy voice matched how ill he felt. But he pressed ahead, labouring to put on the suit he would wear to make the most important announcement of his life. At 2 pm, he would go before the cameras to reveal he was stepping aside as leader of the NDP to fight a new cancer. He had insisted from the start on making the announcement himself. "I want to do it. This is something I need to do," he had told Kathleen Monk.

Just before the press event, McGrath alerted the chiefs of staff to the prime minister and interim Liberal leader Bob Rae about Jack's announcement. In Ottawa, fifteen minutes before the news conference was scheduled to begin, I brought together all caucus, MP and party staff as well as any MPs in town to brief them. Jack wanted everybody in the same room to watch the announcement, he had instructed me, to remind us that we were family and that we were going to get through this together. As the staff streamed in, they were relieved of their BlackBerries to make sure word didn't leak out.

The room went silent as Jack appeared on the giant television screen. His physical transformation in just a few weeks had been radical, and the silence was broken by gasps as people reacted to his dramatic weight loss, flushed face and shaky voice. Many of the staffers were looking at me for clues as to how bad his condition really was. I kept a brave face.

Good afternoon. On February 5, 2010, I shared with Canadians that I, like 25,000 thousand other Canadian men every year, had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. I have received overwhelming support from my loving family, my friends, my caucus and party, and thousands of everyday Canadians. Their stories and support have touched me. And I have drawn strength and inspiration from them.

In the closing days of the most recent session of the House of Commons, I suffered from some stiffness and pain. After the House rose, I undertook a series of tests at Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto. My battle against prostate cancer is going very well. My psa levels remain virtually undetectable. However, these tests, whose results I received last week, also indicate that I have a new, non-prostate cancer that will require further treatment. So, on the advice of my doctors, I am going to focus on treatment and recovery.

I will therefore be taking a temporary leave of absence as Leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada. I'm going to fight this cancer now, so I can be back to fight for families when Parliament resumes....

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I am as hopeful and optimistic about all of this as I was the day I began my political work, many years ago. I am hopeful and optimistic about the personal battle that lies before me in the weeks to come. And I am very hopeful and optimistic that our party will continue to move forward.

We will replace the Conservative government a few short years from now. And we will work with Canadians to build the country of our hopes

Of our dreams

Of our optimism

Of our determination

Of our values...

Of our love.

Thank you.

Jack stood up slowly after his announcement. With the help of his cane and with Olivia by his side, he walked back to the holding room behind the black curtain. McGrath hugged him; so did his children. Jack thanked everyone for helping him get through it. He was also very proud of himself. “My doctors weren’t sure I’d be able to do it,” he told the others. The group chatted until all the reporters had left the hotel, allowing Jack to avoid flashing cameras.

As Jack got into the car to head home with Olivia, Nigel Wright called McGrath. Harper’s chief of staff had emailed her immediately after the press conference, saying the prime minister would like to speak with Jack, and the two had arranged this time. McGrath handed Jack her phone and the two men chatted briefly.

Not long after he got home, Jack posted a tweet, his last. “Your support and well wishes are so appreciated. Thank you. I will fight this—and beat it.”

Jack’s mother, Doris, sent her son an email that night just after 10 pm. “Am sure you’re tired after your ordeal today—you deserve a good rest. Am going to bed now—hope to talk in the morning. Sleep well my sweet son—you are loved by so many more people than you can imagine.”

Jack tried like hell to push off death. A day after his press conference, he brought together his medical team and informed them he wanted to try whatever he could. “I’m going to challenge them,” he told McGrath. He had always done the same thing with his political team in Ottawa. “He’d say, ‘Assemble the team. Okay, we’re at 20 per cent. How are we going to get to 25 per cent?’” McGrath remembers.

Ultimately, the aggressive new cancer cells took over, and Jack, a details guy and planner to the end, asked McGrath and Topp to work with him on crafting a final message to Canadians. Over the next few weeks, they spoke to Jack about what he wanted to say and worked on various drafts with him. It was important to Jack to keep the party’s work going after his death, but he also wanted to strike an optimistic tone that would motivate people and give them hope.

On Saturday, August 20, Topp and McGrath went to Jack’s house to do more work on the message with Jack and Olivia. By then, Jack found the stairs difficult to manage, so the family had transformed the living room into his bedroom with a hospital bed set up next to the front window. The four of them went through it word by word, using an iPad to take notes. Section by section, they read out loud what they had, and Jack interrupted. “Okay, walk me through our thinking,” he’d say. Or, he’d stop to ask Olivia, “Is that okay with you, love? What about this?”

Periodically, Topp and Olivia would head up to the study on the second floor to input the edits on the desktop computer. McGrath would stay with Jack. He’d rest, and then the two would go through it again. After five hours, the letter was done. The plan was to release it after his death.

“To other Canadians who are on journeys to defeat cancer



On the campaign trail in Montreal. Layton swept 59 seats in Quebec. Managing his caucus was his top priority, and he had a long conversation with Brian Mulroney about just that. His father, Bob Layton, had served as Mulroney’s caucus chair. *Montreal Gazette* photo

and to live their lives, I say this: please don't be discouraged that my own journey hasn't gone as well as I had hoped. You must not lose your own hope... You have every reason to be optimistic, determined, and focused on the future. My only other advice is to cherish every moment with those you love at every stage of your journey, as I have done this summer," Jack wrote.

To the members of the NDP, he wrote in part, "Let's continue to move forward. Let's demonstrate in everything we do in the four years before us that we are ready to serve our beloved Canada as its next government."

"Our caucus meetings were always the highlight of my week," Jack wrote to his caucus colleagues. "It has been my role to ask a great deal from you. And now I am going to do so again."

To his "fellow Quebecers," Jack wrote, "On May 2nd, you made an historic decision... You made the right decision then; it is still the right decision today; and it will be the right decision right through to the next election, when we will succeed, together."

"Many of you have placed your trust in our party," he wrote to young Canadians. "As my time in political life draws to a close I want to share with you my belief in your power to change this country and this world... I believe in you. Your energy, your vision, your passion for justice are exactly what this country needs today."

And "finally, to all Canadians," Jack wrote, "Canada is a great country, one of the hopes of the world. We can be a better one—a country of greater equality, justice, and opportunity... We can do all of these things because we finally have a party system at the national level where there are real choices; where your vote matters; where working for change can actually bring about change. My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we'll change the world."

"Jack was relieved," recalls McGrath. "He really wanted to make sure we were happy with it. He was always checking to make sure it was okay. Everything he did was as a team. He always said his two key words were 'team' and 'respect.'"

I had travelled to Toronto with McGrath a week earlier to visit Jack. We sat in the living room, next to his bed. He was in his usual chair with his bathrobe on. We all thought we had a few more weeks with Jack, so this wasn't goodbye but a check-in.

Throughout this period, Jack received dozens of emails from people expressing their love and concern. On August 8, he received a touching note from Lauren Harper. Under the subject line "A big juicy steak..." she wrote: "Good afternoon Jack and Olivia, I am sorry I didn't email you earlier to offer our best wishes (I know you talked to my husband). I was away hiking in the Yukon and lived days without any media. Just wanted to offer up a nice steak when you get back to Ottawa cooked by me. You are in our hearts and prayers (my heart, Stephen's prayers)."

The day after Jack completed his letter to Canadians, Kathleen Monk spent the day at the house. She was there to begin the conversation with Olivia about Jack's funeral, something he and Olivia had talked about in the preceding weeks. He had emailed some of his ideas for Olivia, which would later be incorporated into the service. It was the last email Jack ever sent.

When Monk left to catch her flight back to Ottawa on August 21, she knew she wasn't going to see Jack again. "You could just tell," Monk remembers. She called McGrath when she landed to tell her. "We do not have three weeks."

Shortly after 11 pm, Jack's mother, Doris, called her son to say goodbye one last time. "Hi mom," Jack said softly. "You've had a great life, Jack. It's time to close your eyes and sleep now, son."

Just after midnight, Monk and McGrath received a quick note from Olivia, saying that this was it.

By then, family members and close friends had assembled at the house. Jack, the consummate planner, had made sure that his personal affairs were taken care of, party affairs were in order and his letter to Canadians was complete. He had checked off all of the boxes on his task list. He could let go.

Just before sunrise at 4:45 am on Monday, August 22, 113 days after being elected leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, John Gilbert Layton—husband, grampa and sixth leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada—died. **P**

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