

INTRODUCTION

“There are people who think that if you win seats, you must’ve done something wrong. You must have betrayed some principle. The most principled person wouldn’t win any seats. Well, I’m not that kind of leader...The complaint about us focusing on winning seats, I thought that was the purpose. Tommy rejected that dichotomy totally and explicitly. Because he talked about pragmatic principles. He said, what’s the point of advocating health care for everybody if you can never make it happen? In fact, that was his magic touch.”¹

These are the words of Jack Layton, reported in the summer of 2008, the year that marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Regina Manifesto, the founding statement of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the party that eventually went on to become the New Democratic Party of Canada. Layton’s words were prompted by a mocked-up mug shot of him that appeared in Toronto’s *This Magazine*, a favourite publication of those who consider themselves a part of Canada’s progressive left. This particular issue was devoted to an in-depth analysis of the future prospects of democratic socialism and its weaker cousin—social democracy—in Canada. Layton was portrayed on the cover as

a traitor to the cause. The feature story was contributed by Jim Laxer—a critic of the party who has been a perennial burr under the saddle. He was instrumental in attempting to push the party further leftward in the late sixties and early seventies with the Waffle movement.² Laxer’s lament would be familiar to anyone versed in the age-old principles-versus-power debate that had started in the dust-bowl capital of Saskatchewan in July 1933 with the signing of the Regina Manifesto.

“Sadly,” wrote Laxer, who was one of Jack Layton’s professors while Layton was doing post-graduate studies at York University, “the NDP has evolved into a party much like the others. There is little political ferment. Riding association meetings, party conferences and provincial and federal conventions are not occasions for basic debate and education about the state of society and what needs to be done, but rather focus on fundraising, holding raffles, and showcasing the leader for the media.” Laxer was looking back fondly to the days when the CCF-NDP was founded, the days, he believes, when there was “a creative tension between movement and party” and the party “cared about the long-term struggle to win people to socialism as well as the short-term effort to elect members to the House of Commons and provincial legislatures.”

In his own essay on the anniversary of the Regina Manifesto, author and long-time NDP strategist Gerald Caplan also bemoaned the sorry state of the NDP and the lack of principles, harking back to the ghosts of socialism past. Caplan lamented, “Instead of playing arcane parliamentary games and manoeuvring to replace the Liberals, the NDP needs to restore the ‘new’ in its name and its ideas. We need to prove that being a perennial minority party is not a wasted exercise.” In an online chat session moderated by the *Globe and Mail* in response to this essay, one reader callously dismissed Caplan’s arguments, admitting that “there is a value to having a few starry-eyed ideologues on

the left of the party to keep us mindful of our roots” but stressing that this “group” should not be allowed to “hijack” the party and “drag it out of the mainstream and into the backwaters of radical socialism.” Caplan’s response was also a familiar refrain, often heard at party conventions and constituency meetings, especially when strategy for federal campaigns is being discussed. “I maintain that we can never win government in Canada. We need to figure out how best to influence those who do govern. I fear that we no longer have the influence we used to be able to boast about. How do we get that influence? By having ideas and policies we can make so popular that the governing parties have no choice but to steal some of them from us. That’s our job,” proclaimed Caplan. “To be robbed by Liberals and maybe even Conservatives of policies that will make this a somewhat better world.”³

The federal election of May 11, 2011, blew many of Caplan’s and Laxer’s arguments about the NDP into the ocean. Jack Layton’s stunning achievement in becoming leader of the Opposition, with his historic breakthrough in Quebec, gave New Democrats across the country a reason to stand together. The long-standing goal of obliterating the Liberals and replacing them as the only *real* alternative to the Conservatives seemed a *fait accompli*. There was reason to celebrate and rejoice. Jack Layton and his political team had accomplished what few people, even some of those closest to them, had dreamed was possible. They had brought the NDP out from the sidelines, away from the fringes, and closer than they had ever been to the centre of political power—a goal that had always seemed so elusive. When tragedy struck, just a few short months after this new pinnacle, hearts stopped, a nation mourned. Could it really be true? Jack Layton, who had breathed new life into the NDP and had helped them reach new heights, was gone?

Almost immediately after Layton stepped down as leader to

battle an unnamed cancer, said to be unrelated to the prostate cancer he had first publicly announced late in 2009, the headlines predicted the demise of the NDP. “Layton’s Absence Leaves his Party Adrift.”⁴ “NDP Without Layton Could Fall Apart; No Clear Direction.”⁵ At the time, many questioned Layton’s appointment of newly elected Quebec Member of Parliament and former Public Service Alliance of Canada president Nycole Turmel as interim leader. But Layton was steadfast in his endorsement of her. “Ms. Turmel enjoys unanimous support as the national chair of our parliamentary caucus,” he said. “She is an experienced national leader in both official languages and she will do an excellent job as our national interim leader.”⁶ Virtually unmentioned by anyone at the time (lest it be seen as not tasteful, or as jinxing Layton’s chances of beating the dreadful disease that was leaving his voice raspy and his body emancipated), was that any of the other obvious choices would likely be main contenders to replace him permanently if the worst should happen.

No one could have predicted the outpouring of emotion that Canadians would express when they learned of Layton’s death, at only sixty-one, on August 22, 2011. Perhaps it was the brave face he had shown throughout his very public battle. The cane he used throughout the 2011 election campaign after he underwent hip surgery following an unexplained fracture only served to make him more human—a *real* guy, someone the average person could relate to. He was fighting for what he believed in, even at enormous personal cost. Whatever it was, Layton connected with people in a way few politicians are ever able to do—in life or in death.

Tragically, as one political commentator wrote shortly after Layton’s death, “Now we will see how the party fares with its heart and soul so cruelly removed.”⁷ This is the message, of course, that the NDP’s political foes, especially those in the beleaguered Liberal Party of Canada, want to cement into Canadians’

minds going into the next election. If Layton is given credit for everything the NDP achieved, then it is easier to paint the 2011 election as a fluke, the NDP in Opposition as a house of cards ready to fall apart without the all-mighty messiah's guidance. Certainly, all *anyone* can do is speculate how Jack Layton would have done, had he been given the chance to lead the NDP into the 2015 federal election.

One thing is undeniable in the race to replace Layton that has eight candidates vying for the job. The undercurrents of the age-old debate within the party about what it means to be a social democrat, about how far from its roots as a political movement the NDP should go in pursuit of power, will never be far from the surface. Leadership contests, through the sale of new memberships and the media attention, can strengthen a party, but they can also test the limits of its cohesion. Whoever succeeds Jack Layton on March 24, 2012, will have the same job all previous leaders of the CCF and the NDP have had—trying to figure out the right balance between taking principled stands that conform directly to long-standing party ideals, and political manoeuvring aimed at appealing to a broader audience.

The NDP members that gather to elect the leader to replace Jack Layton will represent a wide variety of political perspectives, just as did those who joined J. S. Woodsworth in Regina in 1933 to debate the finer points of the Regina Manifesto and launch the CCF. In the pages that follow, we will see that the biggest challenge facing Woodsworth and the small group of determined individuals who came together to form the CCF during the Great Depression was not *just* the job of getting a cynical media and an establishment biased against them to see that they offered a viable and beneficial alternative to the Conservatives and the Liberals, but to put aside their own perceived differences and to fight together with a unity of message and singularity of purpose. Indeed, that has been one of the most challenging tasks facing

every subsequent leader of the NDP and the CCF.

This book is about the idealistic men and women who built the CCF and, later, the NDP, the main battles they fought over the years, their disappointments and setbacks—and the high points that convinced them to carry on even when their fortunes looked bleakest. It does not profess to be a definitive history of the party. Rather, it is intended as a primer for those who wish to know more about the origins of the federal party that Jack Layton brought to the brink of power in the summer of 2011.