

# The NDP and the election

BY JUDY REBICK

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The New Democratic Party has never asked me for advice on electoral strategy. The common wisdom in the party is that those of us on the left are hopeless idealists without a clue about getting elected. The party leadership has almost always looked to the right for their strategies. I write in the vain hope that since they haven't been doing so well lately they might reconsider that direction.

In my view, the NDP did so badly in the last election because they didn't offer a clear alternative to Mike Harris. The problem became apparent in the leaders' debate. Howard Hampton did the best job as a debater but came across as cold and uncaring. This is a serious problem for a party that presents itself as the one that is the most caring and compassionate. Of the three, it was Hampton who should have reflected the anger of those who Mike Harris has cut out of participating in Ontario's democratic process. This was not a government like any other and it should not have been a debate like any other. Hampton needed passion. He needed a tough and sustained attack on Harris for the brutality of his government, for his exclusion of the poor, of working people and their unions, of teachers, of health workers, of anyone who doesn't agree with his government.

Hampton is quite a passionate man. I assume he dampened his natural tendencies on the advice of his handlers. In fact, the 1999 Ontario election marked the ultimate triumph of the handlers, pollsters, and spin doctors over anything resembling real politics. Maybe they thought that if Tony Blair could win with spin doctors so too could Hampton.

Voters who consistently told pollsters that health care and education were their top concerns returned a government that has done more to threaten universal health care and public education than any government before it. This election was not fought on issues, it was

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fought on leadership. Without a clear programmatic alternative, Harris won as the strongest leader.

What was the alternative presented by the NDP in the last election? As far as I could make out, the only real difference between the NDP and the Tory program was that the NDP was going to spend a little more on health care and education. So anxious were they to impress the fiscal conservatives with their promise of a balanced budget that the NDP often alienated their own potential supporters.

In the middle of the campaign, I attended an all-candidates meeting in Ottawa organized by the daycare community there. The audience was initially very supportive of the NDP. Then the NDP candidates outlined how they

couldn't spend any more on child care than the rather modest amount they had outlined in their election platform. After all, it is very important to be fiscally responsible. Individual candidates indicated that they had sympathy for the young mothers, who took to the microphone explaining their struggle to continue their schooling given the long waits for subsidized spaces. But, what could they do? The Liberals, however, responded to the issues raised by the audience and promised to have another look at their plans for daycare. After the meeting I overheard a number of young women saying that before the meeting they had planned to vote NDP but now they weren't so sure.

It is true that voters have been persuaded that fiscal responsibility is very important in a government, but that doesn't mean that the NDP has to cave in so completely to a balanced-budget approach that their election campaign talks more about dollars and cents than about caring and compassion.

Harris has created an intense polarization in Ontario, evident in the popular vote. He has also created a level of protest and discord unprecedented in Ontario's history. Huge groups in society—teachers, union members, and poor people—feel excluded by his government. Unfortunately, many of these groups also feel alienated by the NDP. The divisions go back to Bob Rae's social contract. For a while, Hampton attempted to paper over these divisions with support from groups like the auto workers and the teachers. Then came strategic voting.

Most of the same labour groups that saw Bob Rae's social contract as a betrayal supported strategic voting in the last Ontario election. The idea was that progressive groups would choose the candidate—Liberal or NDP—in each riding who had the best chance of defeating the Tories and campaign for that person.

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to respond in kind, and Ontario elections in the immediate future at least will be driven more by money and advertising than in the past, and by appeals to self-interest rather than competing concepts of the public interest.

In terms of governance, these strategies have carried over into the way in which the government conducts business between elections as well. Unlike previous Ontario governments, the current government has reduced the powers of the legislature, cut back dramatically on consultations with stakeholders

and on public hearings, and centralized control of media relations in an attempt to focus all government communications on a few simple messages. Recently, for example, Robert Fisher, host of Global Television's *Focus Ontario*, ended a broadcast by thanking Guy Giorno, a key figure in the premier's office, for "permitting" the government house leader to appear on the program.

During its first mandate, the government renamed the coordinating committee of cabinet the Policy, Priorities, and *Communications* Board and re-

quired all government policy proposals to be accompanied by a communication plan with a clear message related to the CSR, often accompanied by government-funded polls measuring support for the policy not so much in the general public as in the key geographical and demographic constituencies supportive of the Conservatives.

Given a determined and well-funded Conservative party in Ontario, it may well be that other parties will have to adopt many of these communication strategies to compete. ♦

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Needless to say, the NDP was strongly opposed to the idea, believing that it would lead to the election of more Liberals than NDPers. My own view at the time was that the only way strategic voting could work would be if the parties themselves accepted it. In other words, if the NDP would cede to the Liberals in certain ridings and the Liberals to the NDP in others. When it became clear that this would never happen, the strategic voting approach was doomed to failure. There were other problems as well. Who would decide which candidate to support? How would this information get communicated to voters? And why would most voters listen to those groups? Nevertheless, since it had little impact, it did not damage the NDP's electoral results. I have talked to a couple of people who do this sort of number crunching and they see no evidence of NDP loss because of strategic voting.

Beyond the divisions produced by Rae's social contract, most of the people struggling for social change in this province do not see their interests and concerns reflected in the NDP. No doubt, NDP back-roomers believe that the loss of core activist supporters, whom they see as out of touch with modern realities, is the price the party has to pay for increasing its popular support. But where is the evidence? Whenever the party has run on a third-way right-wing program, it has lost.

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Nevertheless, a winning strategy does not mean returning to the bad old days of social democracy. Mind you, David Lewis's corporate welfare bums campaign of 20 years ago seems pretty relevant today.

The only way a social democratic party can win electoral victories in most provinces, including Ontario, is to identify with the majority of the people who are struggling to keep their heads above water in an increasingly polarized society. Harris and others have managed to convince a lot of these people that tax cuts, attacks on the poor, and a survival-of-the-fittest society is in their interest. The NDP's job is to outline a different road, a road to social solidarity rather than social division. The best way to do this is by identifying with those fighting for social change.

Instead of a few million dollars difference here or there, the NDP should be putting forward a radical new direction, a real alternative to the autocratic, slash-and-burn politics of Mike Harris and Jean Chrétien. The elements of this alternative are being developed around the world: participatory democracy, economic democratization through taxing finance capital, and shorter working hours are among the ideas that the NDP could develop. The "Days of Action" in Ontario and, more recently, the massive demonstrations in Seattle against the World Trade Organization show there is a mass base for alternatives to neo-conservative politics. The NDP should be riding this wave of protest rather than standing on the shore with the other two parties watching it go by. ♦