

## THE NDP IS COMING BACK IN '97

BY PETER WARRIAN

### HOW THE PARTY WILL POSITION ITSELF

The New Democratic Party (NDP) is coming back in 1997. The question is what will its voice be? First, the NDP will attempt to re-establish itself with official political party status. Traditional supporters and voters in general have now seen the impact of the lack of an official opposition in the country. The Liberal government has tilted without reservation or consequence to the Right. Labour voters, who have traditionally split between NDP and Liberal support, paid the price in the past

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four years of a unilateral dependence on liberal governments. Not only has the NDP suffered, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) has become a largely invisible and marginalized force. Without a voice in parliament and lacking an electoral threat to the Liberals, the labour movement has become a paper tiger.

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activist alliances will make up for the lack of a real political presence in the House of Commons. The Ontario labour leadership in 1995 made a monumental strategic error in believing that they could not do worse than have a Liberal government. The results have been disastrous. They will not be repeated. Labour leaders now see the connection and will work hard at a local riding level in the next election.

Second, the NDP will position itself as the voice of traditional community values of full employment and the social safety net. It will have no difficulty distinguishing itself in the face of the wholesale abandonment of medicare, social assistance, and labour standards by a downward spiral of Conservative and Liberal governments.

The NDP can be expected to campaign on a "Where Are the Jobs?" theme. The Liberal government, having campaigned on a "Jobs, Jobs, Jobs" platform in 1993, is vulnerable on the jobs issue. The promised employment dividend still has not been delivered.

The NDP can relatively easily reconnect with its traditional constituencies and supporters by mounting the appropriate soap box. Uncluttered by the complexities of governing, for instance, it can

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re-establish the links to Ontario-based unions whose fi-

nancial and, even more importantly, human resources,

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are crucial to effective NDP campaign efforts. Union members, industrial communities, civil servants, and social activists have been sufficiently pounded by Conservative provincial and Liberal federal governments that there will not be any trouble mobilizing candidates, campaign managers, and campaign workers.

There is currently fundamental agreement on the Left and Right in intellectual circles on two propositions: (1) the limited impact of demand-management policies in open economies; and (2) that productivity growth lies at the heart of long-run growth in income and employment. They both have plausible claims. The Right solution turns on deregulation of labour markets, reducing government, and relying on international markets. The Left version looks to investment in human capital, social and physical infrastructure, and

new capital pools. The Right has better sound clips. The Left has a better story.

The ferocity of the Harris government's attack on welfare, medicare, and schools has created a paradoxical outcome. Instead of a fundamental rethinking of approaches to the Harris government's policies, there is incredible peer pressure within labour and NDP ranks in Ontario, and across the country, not to challenge party and labour movement orthodoxy. Any public disagreement with the party line is seen as treason and aiding and abetting the enemy.

Sadly, there is no real policy debate in the House of Commons and across the country at the very time that we most need it. A vibrant NDP has traditionally played this role, particularly in relation to an intellectually vacuous Liberal administration. As a result, the largely unfounded policy prescriptions of the Liberal and Conservative governments go effectively unchallenged and are relentlessly implemented. This remains the case, notwithstanding that their policy assumptions of chronic welfare dependency and prescriptions of regenerative small business job creation are simply false.

Whoever said that political success turned significantly one way or the other on the presence or absence of well-founded analysis? The NDP should not be held to a standard that is not applied to the Liberals and Conservatives.

### HOW THE PARTY WILL DO

The NDP will regain official party status in 1997, probably with 18-20 seats. The country came through an abnormal federal election in 1993. In-

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IN PRAISE OF A CANADIAN BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS  
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possible for a person that is devoted to the sovereignty of Quebec to play a role in the House of Commons, it can only be for two reasons:

1. As long as Quebec is not sovereign, it must be considered as an integral part of Canada. If sovereigntists pay taxes, they have the right to a voice in Parliament;

2. Even after the contemplated sovereignty, the intense and sincere desire of a vast majority of Quebecers is to keep on sharing with other Canadians, to maintain some form of union or association. It behooves a party like the Bloc to demonstrate, by all means available, how feasible and how profitable such a union would be for all Canadians. Were it only for this latter reason, an openness to English-speaking Canada is highly desirable on the part of Bloc members.

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But there is more. As the Loyal Opposition, the Bloc must offer an alternative to

governmental policies, not only for Quebecers but for all Canadians. Needless to say, this is far from being easy for sovereigntists. It should be nonetheless possible to show the way for what could be an ideal Canadian union and even, why not, the ideal Canadian federation that failed to be. After all, the Bloc owes its existence to this failure. Why not remind all Canadians of that "impossible dream"?

Finally, the Bloc may have another service to fulfil for all Canadians as well as for Quebecers. As the major Opposition party, it must offer a social alternative to the government's orientation. Given the right-wing bent of the Chrétien government and the further-right alternative of Reform, it would make sense for the Bloc to follow a program that would be socially slightly left of center. This would come close to satisfying a majority of Quebecers and could attract badly needed support from the New Democratic Party. This has happened a few times in the past. It could become a successful trend in the future.

If all of the above is possible, then the Bloc Québécois could and should play a pertinent role in the House of Commons, receive the support of a majority in Quebec, and even gain a certain degree of sympathy among other Canadians. 

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ternal divisions within NDP constituencies and with labour affiliates resulted in large numbers of activists boycotting local campaigns. They have always been at the core of NDP success. The anti-Mulroney factor also meant that labour and traditional NDP supporters swung to the Liberals. And, Reform and the Bloc disrupted traditional regional patterns.


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Slippage by the Liberals in Ontario, accompanying a Reform decline, will result in the opportunity for recovery of 3-4 traditional NDP seats. The Prairies may see several additions. And in British Columbia, where the Liberal vote will rise and Reform decline, the benefit will flow to the NDP resulting in 8-10 seats. 

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