

# NDP at the crossroads

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Election post-mortems can be significant for a political party, particularly for a losing one. For example, out of the electoral sweep of all time, Dief's in 1958, grew two movements: The one regenerated the Liberal Party through the work of the Kingston Conference, the other transformed the old CCF into first the New Party, and then the New Democratic Party.

It's clear by now that the Tory post-mortem for last February 19th is incomplete and at this stage seems to consist of a general admission that the Liberals have a staggering edge in what one might call "natural" party voters. What about the other opposition party, the New Democrats?

A few weeks ago the NDP federal council met to discuss the election in the first gathering for the hundred odd councillors since Feb. 19th. I've heard from several of those attending that the main substance of the discussions neither reflected a deep, critical concern nor pointed to any means of massive regeneration or expansion for the party. Perhaps this is to be expected from the NDP council, a ratifying, rather than a policy-making group. Its members still seem too homogeneous in outlook to be boat-rockers. However, there is a critique, a strong one, that can be made of the way the NDP fought the last campaign and seems certain to fight the next one.

The party leadership cadre claims that much of their election success stemmed from Ed Broadbent's popularity. They say he is the most popular leader in the country, not least because of the money the party spent on radio and TV to keep the leader before people. It's notable that some of those who make these claims work for Broadbent in one way or another.

The air at the council meeting was thick with self-congratulations. Election planning chairman Terry Grier and federal secretary Robin Spears told the council how their smooth leadership strategy and media dealings paid off with the highest popular vote and the most seats the party has ever attained. No one pointed out that Broadbent was running against two of the most unpopular party leaders in modern times, that the "big battalion" vote of organized labor was once again undelivered, and that the party beachheads in three regions, Northern Ontario, the Maritimes, and Newfoundland were wiped out.

But more to the point of votes and seats, the media campaign of the NDP did not work where it was most focussed — in Southern Ontario. The party made gains only in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and B.C., provinces where it has been in power provincially and where organization is strong.

If a strategist like Terry Grier is proud that only 7% of the campaign budget went on "organization" what will be the plans for the next election? The party's strength (26 of 32 seats) is in the West and next time some 13 seats there to be retained were won by margins of less than 3,000 votes.

Let's put aside post-mortems which imagine Ed Broadbent as Canada's most beloved leader. The idea that the party came out of February with any momentum which would threaten either the Tories or Grits has already been lost in the referendum din and the clever strategem of Tru-

deau's key advisor, Jim Coutts, that the NDP is really the Western Canadian branch of the Liberals.

The NDP caucus is solid and energetic but it lacks the 1972-74 minority situation to bring it attention. So far the caucus has not been able to gain real public attention and backing for issues in the economic area.

The NDP, like the CCF before it, always gave prime place to being "the" party of policy, yet it has outdated or no policies for such fields as communications, air and water transportation, culture, recreation and sport, or on the constitution. At the NDP council meeting an omnibus committee was appointed to catch up on the constitutional issue; everyone of academic credibility in the party seems to be on the committee except F.R. Scott, the granddad of constitutional authorities.

To catch up on another embarrassment, a foreign affairs review committee under MP Pauline Jewett and UAW president Bob White was struck. It will rescue Ed Broadbent belatedly from his bloopers in the campaign on the Soviet threat.

Despite these two initiatives the NDP policy effort seems rather stunted. It has only one working committee on policy, this under the direction of an earnest, hard-working young lecturer at Carleton University, Steven Langdon. Compare this to the effort in the NDP's favorite model, the British Labor Party, which has up to 50 committees sitting at any given time to produce discussion papers for the party and new policy pamphlets.

The party has decided to do further study on developing a national newspaper, after having given it five years of consideration. The glacial pace of this idea reminds one that the institutional power of the federal party is weak. The NDP is a confederation of 10 provincial parties, plus the North. Really, the federal party organization comes into existence largely as a co-ordinator of separate provincial ones. Such a structure explains why the cadre at the centre has spent so much money and energy on building up the image of the party leader and on focussing so much on economic issues.

It seems certain the NDP has four years to ready for the next election. The caucus and the party can diversify and deepen its policies. One assumes Mr. Broadbent will continue to get his slice and perhaps more of media time and space. But organizationally... especially in Ontario ridings? A more massive membership, especially in Ontario? Such questions should challenge the federal NDP. Its leaders must remember that M.J. Coldwell and T.C. Douglas were always much more popular with the public than they brought home in seats and votes from elections.