

FEATURE

AUDREY McLaughlin

interview by Jerry West
and Dawn Mitchell

What is the New Democratic Party's proposed social charter?

We proposed the social charter last year as a part of our constitutional process, plus we, in our convention in Halifax last June, reinforced that policy.

As well as individual rights I think there have to be some collective rights. That can be an expectation, in other words, what does a nation owe its citizens. The social charter is really the contract that a nation has, with its people. Unlike the *Globe and Mail's* account, it is not vague, with no one really knowing what they're talking about. It includes the right to public education, the right to a clean environment, to health care and so on. It is interesting that the Economic Community, in their recent trade negotiations have also included a charter of rights and freedoms which are very similar to the ones that we are advocating.

How would that be enforced, would it be in the constitution?

It has to be enforceable in a way that means something. Otherwise, what does it mean. Because we have, I believe, a population that wants to see a balance in the interests of community this is going to be a very important part of our constitutional talks.

The B.C. Supreme Court said that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms should be interpreted as including sexual orientation in section 15, one of the equality clauses. What is your position on that?

That is a very interesting decision. The Yukon NDP government, and the Manitoba government, when it was NDP, put sexual orientation in their Human Rights Codes and I haven't seen the whole world falling apart because of it. In fact, I think it was a very important thing to do. It didn't come about without some controversy, but, it's now a part of what people expect.

What do you think about the charge that the Mulroney Government is following in Ronald Reagan's footsteps, trying to 'union bust' in the present PSAC strike?

I think it is a clear part of the right wing agenda. That agenda includes doing whatever they can to undercut the unions in the public sector and the private sector. I think that the Public Service strike is not about economics, it's about politics. Brian Mulroney looked to what Margaret Thatcher did with the miners, what Ronald Reagan did with the air-traffic controllers, and saw that they both went up in the polls after taking on the unions.

We have 88 per cent of the population unhappy with the present government. If they really want to show how unhappy they are, that 88 per cent should get out there and stand with the public service workers for the right to collective bargaining and for the right to fair and just

treatment. That would send a big message to Brian Mulroney.

How could I, or any M.P., say that the PSAC should accept this when we all accepted more than three per cent on January first. Managers got 4.2 per cent on February 25, the day before the budget came down. Those in a more privileged position, and I would include myself, have not taken the kind of medicine that the Tories are asking the Public Service workers to take.

In Rosemary Brown's book Being Brown she talks about the NDP being a social movement versus a political movement. What do you think about that?

I think we're both. I think that the New Democratic part of the CCF did start out as a social movement, but we also try to get people elected. To me it's a somewhat specious argument if you simply accept that you want to be the conscience of the nation but you never want to be in the position to implement all of the principles that you put forward.

I believe that you don't get into power by giving up all of your principles, but by keeping your principles, and presenting them to the Canadian public. And it's not just power for power's sake, it's what you do when you get there.

So Audrey McLaughlin is not going to run in the next election simply to be a symbol, but to be Prime Minister.

As you know the Social Credit Party in B.C. and the Progressive Conservatives in Saskatchewan are using the NDP's record in Ontario against the NDP candidates in their own provinces. How do you feel about that?

First of all I think that it is very interesting that the only platform the premiers can find is the record of another government, that says something to the electorate. But, having said that, I think they should examine the record of the Ontario Government.

How about the record that half of the cabinet is women? How about the record that they have invested in education? How about the record that they have increased social assistance by seven per cent? How about the record that they put in 5,000 childcare spaces? I think they're using part of the record.

I suppose it's natural that in politics anything goes, but I think that the voters aren't stupid. I think that the voters will decide, and they'll see it the way they see it.

Could you tell us about your policy for recruiting more women?

We passed at our convention affirmative action guidelines, not just for women, but for visible minorities and aboriginal people as well. If we say that we're for equality, we have to do something about it.

How exactly would you accomplish that?

The executive is working on the exact implementation, but we would group ridings together, and tell those riding associations that we want to aim for 50 per cent of their candidates to be women, which is what they did in Ontario.

In the end the decision is left to each individual riding association. It works pretty well. We may only get 45 per cent, and we may get 65 per cent.

Some people say that this means that qualified men don't get jobs. I say no, this means that qualified women do get jobs. Why is it always looked at as qualified men not getting jobs? The meta-message there is that unqualified women will get nominations above qualified men.

When I ran for nomination in my own seat I ran against three other people, and that will [continue to] be the case.

We're not going to hand anything to people. This is to encourage

people to run. A lot of people need that encouragement.

First of all they're alienated by the system and don't want to get into it. Secondly they have bought the message that they are too inexperienced and don't have anything to offer.

Do people want a parliament where every person there has only been in politics and nothing else? Certainly experience in parliamentary procedure is important, but you can learn that. You can't learn what it's like to be a black person and never feel you can go anywhere. We want to see this opened up to a broader spectrum of people. Surely that is the essence of democracy.

So what do you think of the effectiveness of a national party, most of whose candidates have never held office before?

Well, you know, when I ran for leader a lot of articles asked "what have you done?" So I thought, what have I done?

I'm fifty years old. I'm a mother and a grandmother. I've run two small businesses. I've lived and worked in Africa and the Caribbean. I've worked in my party for twenty years. I've worked in the women's movement, the environmental movement and the peace movement. I was elected twice at that point - in a by-election and an election.

Well, it was clear that I hadn't done anything compared to Brian Mulroney who, when elected leader, had never served a day of his life in the House of Commons. His major contribution was to close down a town, before he was elected leader.

I guess I have a different idea of what experience is. People bring life experiences with them. If politics is the only real experience in life, there are a heck of a lot of Canadians who don't have much experience, that don't have much of a life.

If you look at the experience of the traditional Liberal Party and the traditional Conservative Party, it's the experience of trying to get all of the power. I'm not adverse to getting power, but I'm very interested in how you share it.

I come out of the community development movement, and I have a lot of faith in the Canadian people.

That's why I think we should have a constituent assembly on the Constitution. You didn't ask me that, but I thought I'd get it in anyway.

What do you think of the effectiveness and the role of the United Nations?

I have to tell you that I was struck last week, when I was touring farms in southern Ontario, talking to farmers my age and older who were crying, because they were losing their farms, and there is no place for their children who want to farm.

How ironic that on one side of the ocean we have people crying because they don't have a market for the food that they can produce, and on the other side of the ocean we have people crying because they have no food. That has to change. And the United Nations has to have a greater role in that.

I am an advocate of the United Nations, but it has to be a United Nations that provides equal weight to all countries, and not be dominated by one or two countries.

What do you think of the North American free trade deal?

Well the last Stats Can report that came out, as I'm sure you know said that 435 000 jobs were lost in the manufacturing sector in 21 months. We need a real international trade policy.

Our party is working with Mr. Cardinaz and the PRD party in Mexico,



Audrey McLaughlin, the leader of the federal New Democratic Party, dropped by the Gazette office last week to answer a few questions.

and with progressive forces in the States to see what would be a good trade deal.

What we have here is the Tory government, which is supposed to be the government that knows all about business, cutting the worst business deal that most of us have seen in a long time. What is going to happen?

We've seen the government, in many ways withdraw from unemployment insurance. We now hear questions about medicare: can we afford it, are we going to have it?

The character of our society is very much affected. The longer this goes on, the more a sense of powerlessness develops in the public mind. And that's very scary. Once you're convinced that you're powerless, you are.

And what about all the promises. What about the jobs the free trade deal was supposed to create? It's been two years. If I were them [the Tory government] I'd have the report telling everyone how terrific it is out by now. I haven't seen it.

What do you think about the direction that education is taking?

Our government says that we have to be competitive and move into the 21st century, and at the same time they cut 7.3 per cent from education, according to the last statistics.

Do you have a policy on nationalising education standards, or education funding?

The present focus is on competitiveness, productivity and trade. It's not on what kind of a country we want, and how those things fit into it. It's "we have this, how does the country fit into it?" Seems backwards to me.

When you talk about national goals and national standards it has to be defined in the context of who we want to be. I think a country is as well defined by its culture, and therefore education has to reflect that. What is now happening is that research is increasingly being directed by corporations.

To be frank with you, we don't have a written policy on that, we're going to have to do a lot more thinking about it. I think it's very important.

The Tories have said that they would stop short of giving Native peoples a separate justice system. What do you think about that?

So much of politics is focused on keeping what you've got, and not on what works.

I know myself that there are many models that will work, because I've worked on them myself, but they have to have the full involvement of Aboriginal people.

Sure it has to be within the framework of a broader society, but if we say that we support aboriginal self-government, justice is a part of that.

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