

# Has the NDP jumped right off the edge?

At first glance, you have to wonder if the New Democratic Party (NDP) be simply given up on its desire to be a force in Canadian politics in the next century. This past weekend in Ottawa, it had a historic opportunity, both to strongly reiterate its commitment to social justice and reform and to reassert itself as a presence in federal politics.

Instead, the 1995 NDP leadership race, in which the first-place candidate threw his support to the second-place candidate after a single ballot, has rewarded the party faithful with an individual who has no real profile west of New Brunswick, who will spend the next two to three years sitting in the House of Commons' Public Gallery and who may not even be able to deliver her own region to the NDP in the next federal election.

**Problem #1:** Nobody in central or western Canada has heard of Alexa McDonough. By con-

trast, every who watches, reads or listens to the news has heard of Svend Robinson. Sure, nobody had heard of Audrey McLaughlin when she ran for the NDP leadership, either; but, who's heard of her since 1993?

Svend Robinson is a sitting MP with a national profile. It's true, he's regarded even by colleagues as a 'maverick,' but the NDP, of all parties, should have respect and admiration for someone who has stood up for human rights in China and for environmentalism in British Columbia. Those who argued that Robinson's activism would doom the NDP to the fringes of Canadian politics ignored an important fact — they're already there.

Party faithfuls have been telling themselves that they should return to their principles — they should not let mutant concerns such as electability cloud their choice of a new leader — and they must re-establish the party

as the social conscience of Canadian politics, speaking out on behalf of the poor and oppressed. I'm sorry, I thought that Svend Robinson was *already doing that*. Way to slap him down, that'll learn 'im!

**Problem #2:** Alexa McDonough has no seat in the House of Commons. This, in itself, is not a bad thing; Brian Mulroney's first day as Tory leader saw him sitting in the Public Gallery with the spectators. But Mulroney had deep political roots in both Quebec and Nova Scotia, and a by-election in the latter soon gave him a seat in the House.

McDonough has announced that she will not run for a seat in the House until the next federal election. This is a shrewd move, since it would look pretty bad for a newly elected party leader to be defeated in her first federal fight.

To get into the house, McDonough would have to run for a seat in western Canada, since all but two seats in Ontario and Atlantic Canada are held by Liberals, none of whom seem inclined to resign from office to allow McDonough to run in the resulting by-election.

Thus, McDonough does not want to run for a seat in the House at this time, because she would not be able to win one. The western Canadian ridings, even those which went to the NDP in 1993, would be understandably reluctant to elect an individual from the other end of the country of whom they've never heard. Would a Nova Scotia constituency leap at the opportunity to elect Ray Martin as its representative if he were the federal NDP leader?

(Ray Martin was the NDP leader in Alberta during the 1980s. Like McDonough, he had no national profile and little electoral success despite personal popularity; thus, he fits the analogy.)

Finally, when the riding of Central Nova elected Brian Mulroney in 1983, they were electing the leader of the official opposition party in the House of Commons. Even if a western Canadian seat were to open up, would the constituents elect someone who doesn't even lead an *official* party in the House?

**Problem #3:** The political geography of Canada suggests that an NDP party led by Alexa McDonough has little chance at success in either the West or the Atlantic region.

The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and NDP originated and blossomed in western Canada. On a provincial level, three of the four western provinces have oscillated between the NDP and the Tories (or Socreds) throughout the last three or four decades. Thus, the party's greatest strength and largest audience, arguably, is in the West.

The further east we move, the less presence or support the NDP has. Ontario has completed its one-time experiment with an NDP government. Quebec's distinct political landscape has no room for the NDP.

With the possible exceptions of Alberta and Ontario, the Atlantic provinces have been the most traditional in their voting patterns; the only parties which seriously challenge for power in this region, federally or provincially, are the Grits and the Tories.

Could a national leader from Nova Scotia give the NDP a beachhead in Atlantic Canada? I'd like to think so, but if McDonough, in 14 years, could only muster 3 seats out of 50-plus in the Nova Scotia legislature, her chances in the rest of the region seem slim.

Add to this the possible loss of support to the West, the defeat of leadership candidates from B.C. and Saskatchewan, homes of the only two provincial NDP governments in Canada. What we have is a party whose revival may depend more on public reaction to the federal government's sustained sidle to the right than on its own soul-searching.

The history of the future is not yet written, but it seems quite likely that McDonough will meet the same fate as another federal NDP leader, Ed Broadbent — respected for sincerity, personally popular, and recognized as a hard worker. But like the sidekick in a cop movie, nobody really wants McDonough to drive the car.

Worse, as a leader from a region which seldom if ever elects an NDP candidate, federally or provincially, as a virtual unknown in the western birthplace of the NDP and as a leader who will spend the next three years standing outside the House because she is unable to sit inside, Alexa McDonough could also meet the fate of Audrey McLaughlin — unable to increase the NDP's presence nationally, unable to maintain historical NDP strongholds, and, ultimately contributing to the party's slide off the edge into irrelevance and obscurity.

RICHARD LIM

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