



# Dealing with the devil

*Alexa MacDonough prepares for battling Manning and Charest in Ottawa*

BY MARK REYNOLDS

Last summer's federal election saw Halifax elect its first New Democratic Member of Parliament. Though new to the House of Commons, Alexa MacDonough has been on the political scene in Nova Scotia since the late seventies.

MacDonough graduated from Dalhousie in 1967 with a Master's in Social Work, and later returned to Dalhousie to teach.

She ran for office as the federal NDP candidate in both the 1979 and 1980 elections, but failed both times.

In 1980 she became the leader of the provincial NDP and was the only member of her party — and the only female — in the legislature. In 1995 she became the leader of the federal NDP.

The Gazette caught up with Alexa shortly before she participated in the Terry Fox run last Sunday.

**Gazette: Your party won eight seats in the Maritimes when most polls indicated that you would be lucky to take one.**

**MacDonough:** That depends on whose polls and who was putting the spin on the polls. We were quite confident that we could win a number of seats in the Maritimes.

**What does your party have to offer a young Canadian who is heading out into a grim job market, especially since the social programs might not exist in the coming years?**

I think a couple of things. A solid demonstrated record [exists] that a progressive political voice in politics can make a difference. Young people have the greatest degree of energy and optimism to progressive politics if they can be persuaded that they can make a difference.

**Young people have the greatest degree of energy and optimism to progressive politics if they can be persuaded that they can make a difference.**

Unfortunately, young people today have experienced years of relentless right-wing propaganda pounding home the message that you can't make a difference; that life's a bitch and you just have to put up with it; that you're on your own Jack, or Jill, and don't expect society to be there for you. So we have a major challenge to try to turn that around.

**Do you have any specific policies or goals in parliament so that social programs will exist for young people in the future?**

You can't build a society on the notion that everybody is on their own. You've got to put in place the kind of infrastructure that will create some kind of cohesion in society; that ensures that people do provide for one another.

The most cost-effective way to ensure a pension in one's senior

years is a public pension plan. It's perfectly obvious that there is a huge lobby underway to tear down people's confidence in the Canada Pension Plan. But there's no objective basis for it.

There's three reasons why the Pension plan is in jeopardy now. One is that the fund has not been managed with a view to future generations. The second is that there is a population bulge that will be a strain on the funds....Thirdly, we've gone through such a prolonged state of high unemployment that there haven't been the kind of contributions to the Canada Pension Plan that are needed.

But all of those are fixable. The battle is to make young people understand what the options are.

One thing is darn sure, and that is that there are some people that would be better off going it alone on private pension schemes...equally certain is that collective security of the population in general would be severely eroded. I'm optimistic that young people can understand why their best interests are served by doing a better job at providing for collective security.

**Your party is only the fourth largest in Parliament. How effective will you be in getting your agenda across?**

Well, it remains to be seen, doesn't it? If the question is that I think we can offer the alternative

that has been so missing in recent years, then I'm extremely optimistic about that. We've got the numbers to enable us, with official party status, to participate — we actually have a

voice again.

Notwithstanding that, we're the fourth party, there is considerable evidence that there are a lot of people that are questioning where we're headed if we continue down the road of a market driven society. But it's going to depend on how effective we can be in reaching out and broadening the base of understanding the social democratic alternatives that brought us to where we are; with a whole range of benefits that are the envy of the world.

Our job is to work with the public and mobilize support around these social democratic options; because it's quite clear, in terms of

numbers, that there will be no occasion where the New Democratic Party can out-vote the parties that are there to represent the interests of the privileged and the wealthy, or the particular interests of the corporations. We're going to have to appeal to the broader range of Canadians. We're not likely to change the minds of very many parliamentarians, who are there representing the corporate elite.

**During the election campaign you said that you would be willing to "deal with the devil" in Parliament to get your agenda across, a stance that many criticized as being against NDP principles. Do you still hold this view?**

(laughs) It was a figure of speech, to make a point. I'm prepared to cooperate with whatever political party is willing to support the social democratic agenda. And if — for whatever cynical, self-serving reasons — any one of the

parliamentarians are willing to change their minds and support the strengthening of medicare for example, after contributing to its unravelling, then I'd be happy to cooperate. If Preston Manning were prepared to no longer be so adamant in advocating a two-tier education system, then we'd be happy to cooperate.

Our objective is to improve the programs and services for Canadians and whoever wants to work with us on that, well of course we'll work with them. It's not a question of abandoning principles, it's a question of using whatever resources and opportunities are available to you to try and make progress on the commitments we made to Canadians.

**Jean Charest recently floated the idea that all the leaders of the federal political parties get together and work on a strategy for the Quebec situation. Would you be willing to participate in such a forum?**

That falls into the category of dealing with the devil. I have no hesitation in saying that I would be willing to sit down with the other party leaders on any occasion where there is a possibility of strengthening a unified Canada.

...[In the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords] too many things were done behind closed doors. I for one, will refuse to participate in a strategy that imposes a so-called constitutional

solution on a nation without people having an opportunity to participate fully in it.

...I think the NDP policy has long recognized the need for constitutional recognition for the uniqueness of Quebec in respect to its culture and civil law, but there's a lot of things that have to go along with it.

When I talk to Quebecers...particularly those that voted yes in the last referendum...they say to me [that] strengthening and advancing social democracy in the rest of Canada is the most promising course for luring "soft" sovereigntists back to the Canadian family.

They don't want to be a part of a society that tears up its commitments to its young people, senior citizens and its most vulnerable segments. I've become increasingly convinced that if the only federal strategy for national unity is to get into a narrow constitutional wrangle over two words [distinct society], then we're going to lose the battle. I think we can do better.

**Nova Scotian university students pay among the highest tuition fees in the country. Does the NDP intend to work towards making university more accessible for Nova Scotians by bringing them more in line with the rest of the country?**

Absolutely. I've fought long and hard to deal with what is really a triple tragedy for Nova Scotian students in having the highest tuition, among the highest unemployment levels, and the lowest level of student aid. I mean, it really is a recipe for exclusion of an awful lot of students.

As federal leader, one of the things I have been very vocal about is that accessibility be established as a national standard for post-secondary education.

**Will the unprecedented number of Atlantic Canadians in your caucus, influence your party's policies in areas such as resource management and unemployment in this region?**

Well it's pretty evident that there was simply no real voice for Atlantic Canadians, except for the most privileged, in the last Parliament...The government made a decision to push people out on a tight-rope, and then they took away the safety net at the same time.

There was no real voice in the Canadian Parliament on behalf of either the individual or families or the communities and the whole region...[was] impacted by those policies. I think the most immediate change we'll see from having eight New Democrats from Atlantic Canada is that we'll have a real voice for Atlantic Canada on these issues.

## Alexa in 1980

The Gazette interviewed Alexa MacDonough when she was a federal candidate for the NDP in the 1980 election. The following are a few select excerpts.

On cutbacks affecting university accessibility:

"I think [cutbacks] do limit accessibility, certainly for lower income groups, when you don't do very much about ensuring jobs for people."

On university funding falling behind the rate of inflation:

"There is not really enough long-range planning involved in government decisions...I think it has more to do with a general attitude towards government spending that is created when people feel under pressure. I think the average taxpayer is feeling squeezed for all kinds of complicated reasons, and looks around for somebody to scapegoat...universities become popular targets for that."

On student employment programs:

"We need quality jobs at reasonable levels of remuneration...the work that students do is real work that advances the development of programs or services."

On the Canada health and social transfer payments:

"[Allowing provincial discretion with CHST payments] abandons the kind of leadership that is necessary to ensure certain basic standards in the country and what happens is there are more and more inequalities throughout the country."

On student loans:

"Students that come from affluent socio-economic backgrounds have access to higher education, which in turn, will guarantee their future socio-economic status...those who do not have those kind of guarantees will not have access to higher education. It is a formula perpetuating the inequalities of the system. Certainly resources and education is our most valuable instrument of investment in resources. To lose sight under conditions of financial restraint is to me, very short sighted."

**How much satisfaction has your GPA given you lately? Try focussing on something else. Write for the Gazette.**

**Meetings every Monday at 4:30pm room 312, SUB**



MacDonough visits the Gazette office before Sunday's Terry Fox Run. Photo by Mark Reynolds.