

NDP at the crossroads

New leader must address direction the party wants to take

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Being earnest, hard-working, dedicated and principled can get you a lot of places in life.

Politics -- at least for Ontario's New Democrats -- has not been one of them.

Now, as the province's perennial third-party prepares for a gruelling, eight-month contest to replace outgoing leader Howard Hampton, some insiders are asking if a fundamental break with the party's past might be necessary to stave off perpetual irrelevance.

"The party needs a complete rethink, a complete re-evaluation of who we are and what we stand for," a senior party official said last week. "We're at a crossroads."

Stuck in the polls (19% in a recent Environics survey, 13% in the latest from Nanos Research) and with the upstart Green Party closing in from behind, the official said New Democrats are left with a choice of moving to the centre-left, largely vacated by the governing Liberals, or heading even further left, which put the party in the dustbin of history," the official said.

At least five of the party's 10-person caucus have expressed some interest in replacing Hampton, the combative MPP from Kenora-Rainy River who has been in charge for 12 hard years. Toronto MPPs Rosario Marchese, Micheal Prue and Peter Tabuns have all expressed their interest. Deputy leader Andrea Horwath from Hamilton and Timmins-James Bay's Gilles Bisson could also throw their hats into the ring. There's also been some interest from outside the caucus, including union leader Sid Ryan and Parkdale-High Park MP Peggy Nash.

MAGIC WORDS

Regardless of who runs, there's only one thing the party official wants to hear from them.

"What I want to hear is a candidate stand up and say: 'I'm running for the leadership of the New Democratic Party but I'm also running to be premier of the province of Ontario,' " the official said.

"We can't have more of the same."

But moving the venerable social democratic party out of the ideological wilderness towards a more centrist, Third Way direction means confronting the wrenching experience the NDP endured in its one, brief moment of electoral success under former premier Bob Rae, an experience which so traumatized the party, it has for the most part vowed never to sacrifice principle for power again.

"It's a lot harder when you have to make decisions (in government)," one former Tory cabinet minister said. "It's

not a lot of fun going to meetings all day and talking about all the things you can't do."

So discovered the recession-wracked Rae government of 1990-95, which was suddenly and unexpectedly thrust into power and floundered, alienating many of its core supporters, some of whom still can't mention the now-Liberal MP's name without spitting.

"The Third Way is no way," Hampton thundered to a standing ovation as he announced his resignation as leader earlier this month.

"I was aghast," the senior party official said of the applause.

"We've had one crack at it (government) and we didn't do so well. Maybe we need a group hug. Bob Rae's moved on. It's time we did too."

That view -- to put it mildly -- does not cut much ice with Sid Ryan, the feisty president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees who is currently considering whether to run for Hampton's old job.

For Ryan, there's no question of sacrificing or softening any of the party's traditional positions, nor should that be considered a prerequisite for governing.

"I believe we can be both (principled and in government)," Ryan said, who has run for the NDP five times in both federal and provincial elections, and lost narrowly on each occasion.

LIBERAL-LITE

"We will never trade our principles. If people are given the choice between voting for a Liberal or a Liberal-lite, they'll vote for the Liberal every time."

If anything, the recent leadership has been too flexible in pursuit of votes, Ryan said, pointing to the NDP's support of the Liberal bill ordering striking TTC workers back to work in April.

"That sent a confusing message to workers," Ryan said.

Pollster Nik Nanos said even though under Hampton the party's numbers have recovered from their worst depths, they're still below their typical historical levels of about 20%.

"Right now," Nanos said, "if you were a New Democrat, you would want to have some kind of view on the economy, on jobs and on protecting jobs."

And to people who say the party does just that, Nanos says the evidence says it needs to do it better.

A classic example came in last fall's general election when the question of funding religious schools pushed every other issue aside, leaving Hampton and the NDP sputtering on the sidelines while Dalton McGuinty dismembered Progressive Conservative John Tory.

The race to replace Hampton officially begins on July 15 and wraps up with a convention in Hamilton in March

2009. Anyone who signs a membership card before the end of the year can vote.

"We are looking forward to an exciting race that will energize New Democrats across Ontario," Ontario NDP President Sandra Clifford said.

"We invite all Ontarians to find out more and join the party to become part of the ultimate exercise in grassroots democracy -- the opportunity to select someone who will be the NDP's candidate for Premier in 2011."

