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March 30, 2009

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Cover Stories
Policy Briefings
Letters
Classifieds
Careers
Vacation
Links
Home Page

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Login
Weekly PDFs
Archives
Surveys
Lists
FAQ

NEWS

News Stories
Heard on the Hill
Legislative Column
Hill Climbers
Civil Circles

OPINIONS

Editorial
Op-eds
Letters

COLUMNISTS

Andrew Cardozo
Richard Cl roux
Jenefer Curtis
Aaron Freeman
Philippe Gagnon
Chantal H bert
David Jones
Joe Jordan
Warren Kinsella
Tom Korski
Brad Lavigne
Don Lenihan
Denis Massicotte
Arthur Milnes
Angelo Persichilli
Tim Powers
Ken Rubin
Mike Storeshaw
Leslie Swartman
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FEATURES

Policy Briefings
Spin Doctors
Parliamentary
Calendar

Search

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The Hill Times, March 30, 2009

NDP loses ground, Hargrove questions why party doesn't look for a new leader

Pollster Nik Nanos calls it a steady decline in support for the NDP with voters moving to Liberals.

By Harris MacLeod and Abbas Rana

Former NDP activist and president of the Canadian Auto Workers union Buzz Hargrove says the New Democrats are losing ground to the Liberals because the party has lost touch with its roots, and instead focused too heavily on building leader Jack Layton's profile.

"Jack as a leader has developed a hell of a profile for himself, but I don't believe he's developed a profile for the party on the issues that are critical to Canadian families. He's assumed that if he built Jack, the party support would follow and, politics just doesn't work that way. People will vote for the people who are out front on the issues that are important to them and their families," said Mr. Hargrove, who was kicked out of the provincial Ontario and federal NDP parties after he called for tactical voting in the 2006 federal election, which included voting for Liberal candidates in ridings where they had the best chance of defeating the Conservative candidate. He also publicly criticized Mr. Layton in 2005 for voting with then opposition leader Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.), and Bloc Qu b cois Leader Gilles Duceppe (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, Que.) to bring down the Liberal minority government of prime minister Paul Martin.

A Nanos poll conducted between March 13 and March 18 had the NDP at 13 per cent support nationally, compared to 33 per cent for the governing Conservatives, and 36 per cent for the Official Opposition Liberals. The NDP were down three points from 16 per cent support in February, and from 18 per cent support on election day last October. And *Toronto Star* syndicated columnist Chantal H bert recently wrote a column, published in this week's issue of *The Hill Times*, arguing that Mr. Layton (Toronto-Danforth, Ont.) was the big loser after the Liberal-NDP coalition agreement that the NDP leader had inked with former Liberal leader St phane Dion (Saint Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) fell apart earlier this year.

"The key is the steady decline in support for the NDP with those former NDP voters moving to the Liberals," said pollster Nik Nanos.

Five-term NDP MP Peter Stoffer (Sackville-Eastern Shore, N.S.) brushed off predictions of doom for his party's prospects in the next election.

"Polls go up and down all the time....The accurate measure is go talk to Canadian people. Go talk to them in Halifax, in St. John's, in Timmins, Ont., go talk to them in the Yukon," said Mr. Stoffer.

He disagreed that Mr. Layton has been focusing too much on building his own profile rather than the profile of the party.

"The reality is you can argue [the same] about Stephen Harper, Michael Ignatieff, and Gilles Duceppe. The reality is Mr. Layton's been our leader since 2003, everybody knows that, but he always says that it's his team, it's his efforts, he's always with other constituents and other candidates. Jack never says the word 'I', it's always the term 'we,' so I would disagree with that," said Mr. Stoffer.

Commenting on Ms. H bert's column, Mr. Stoffer said that it would be a mistake to conclude that voters would abandon the NDP for the Liberals in the next election.

"What she's doing is reading the polls. There's no question that Iggy has some wind in his sails right now, that's understandable. Don't forget that when St phane Dion was the leader of the Liberal Party, he was at 42 per cent at one time and everyone said, 'Oh, he was a left leaning Liberal, he's going to steal votes from the NDP,' and look what happened. Stockwell Day became the leader of the Alliance Party, 'Oh, they're going to steal votes,' look what happened. So, only time will tell. The only poll that really counts is

ON THE HILL



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the one when the polls close on election day," Mr. Stoffer said.

Mr. Stoffer also denied that the NDP is looking for a new leader.

"To say that we're looking for a new leader is simply false, I haven't heard that on the ground, I haven't heard that in our caucus, I haven't heard that even privately from people who speak to me on a regular basis. I haven't heard that at all. So it's simply not on."

The NDP are holding a party convention in August in Halifax, N.S., where party delegates will vote on whether or not to have a leadership review. At the party's last convention, in 2006, Mr. Layton received a glowing 92 per cent support.

A top NDP source told *The Hill Times* that Mr. Layton will lead the party into the next election and his leadership will be questioned only if the party performs poorly in the next election.

"I don't think it's possible to draw that conclusion. You'd have to wait for the outcome of the campaign...I suppose, if it was a disastrous campaign and we lost a lot of seats, you can't rule that out as a possibility but he's a very good strategist, he has good people around who run our campaigns, who run the office, I'm not expecting any kind of a disastrous result."

The NDP has recently made breakthroughs in Newfoundland, Quebec, and Alberta, where they were previously shut out. The party's most significant victory came in a 2007 byelection when NDP MP Thomas Mulcair, a former Quebec provincial Liberal cabinet minister, defeated the Liberal candidate in the former Liberal Montreal stronghold of Outremont to become the only NDP MP from Quebec.

Mr. Mulcair, who is fluently bilingual and an adept performer in Question Period and in the media, was immediately made deputy leader of the party and many saw him as Mr. Layton's heir apparent. His brisk manner has put off some in the party, however, and the Liberals, who are surging in support in Quebec under new leader Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.) have trained their sights on retaking Outremont.

The Liberals do not yet have a candidate in Outremont, but Liberal sources last week told *The Hill Times* that former Chrétien-era cabinet minister Martin Cauchon, who left federal politics in 2004, could be looking to make a comeback by taking on Mr. Mulcair.

"I hear that they're courting a few big names and that it could be a big surprise," said the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, of the search for a star candidate. "It's important to remember that Outremont is a pretty strongly Liberal area and I think the fact that Mulcair was a Liberal minister combined with the fact that our candidate there was announced at the last minute and was not high-profile, along with our low party fortunes at the time allowed the NDP to snag it."

Mr. Hargrove said that Mr. Layton erred in focusing his attacks on the Liberals both in the last election, and in 2006, and that attacking Prime Minister Stephen Harper would have better reflected the thinking of NDP supporters. He added that he doesn't think the party did enough to differentiate themselves from the Liberals.

"I think going after the Liberals was a major mistake...They felt more comfortable attacking the Liberals when the people I talked to were concerned about Harper. He would have got more mileage and more support in the country if he had went after Harper. I also didn't think he differentiated himself and his party much from the Liberal platform either, there wasn't very much to attack, it was more about personalities than major issues."

Mr. Hargrove said he was surprised that after the last election, which was the third the NDP fought under Mr. Layton who replaced former NDP MP Alexa McDonough as leader in 2003, that people in the party were not calling for a change in leadership because though the NDP gained some seats, their results were seen to be disappointing.

"I would have thought after the election when they didn't improve their lot to any degree that someone might have surfaced saying, 'We've got to do something different with somebody else,' but that didn't happen, so it's not clear that people are pushing," he said.

NDP National Director Brad Lavigne, who Mr. Layton has charged with "modernizing" the party, noted that former leader Ed Broadbent reached the height of his public support fully 12 years after becoming leader. He said the NDP has consistently made gains in each election, and that the party's convention in August will be largely devoted to analyzing where they could do better in the next election.

"Jack Layton has been the leader for six years, and if you were to look at Ed Broadbent, for example, Ed Broadbent became leader in 1975 and he became the most popular leader in 1987, a full 12 years after he became leader. So we're only half way there. Our party has gone from 13 seats to 37, from 900,000 votes to 2.5 million votes, we've made breakthroughs in Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Alberta. Those are very exceptional results, we're very proud of those, but we know that that's not all we can do."



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