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# Jack Layton goes from kingmaker to bystander

**Bubble has burst for NDP leader since coalition, and party has lost its momentum from 2008 vote**

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**RICHARD J. BRENNAN**  
 OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA – Jack Layton looked like a kingmaker when the Liberal-NDP coalition threatened to topple the Conservative government last fall, but eight months later he is struggling for attention.

By throwing in his lot with the Liberals, led then by Stéphane Dion, the NDP leader saw a chance for real power. However, his ambitions came crashing down when Governor General Michaëlle Jean agreed to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's request to prorogue Parliament, sending MPs home.

Since his power play, Layton's party has lost the momentum it had during the 2008 election and his personal popularity has nosedived.

While part of the NDP's decline can be traced back to Layton's role in the failed coalition, it is the growing strength of the Liberals led by Michael Ignatieff that is really pushing the party to the margins.

When he was compared to the hapless Dion, Layton looked good but the changing Liberal dynamic has voters wondering what he stands for, other than opposing everything the Conservative government proposes.

It used to be that Harper treated Layton with obvious deference – considering him an ally in the fight to keep the Liberals on the ropes – but now Harper routinely attacks Layton, accusing the NDP of being irrelevant.

"The problem for the NDP is that the lowest-level game being played in this Parliament is by the NDP," Harper told the Commons last week. "The NDP does not seem to accept that the people of Canada re-elected this government, and this government wants to work with other parties. As long as the NDP decides it will oppose everything before it even knows what the proposals are, it will remain completely irrelevant to Canadians."

Pollster Nik Nanos said when the Liberals get wind in their sails, the New Democrats' numbers decline.

"The slow climb of the Liberals has in large part been at the expense of the New Democrats," he said. "When the focus is on Michael Ignatieff and Stephen Harper, Jack Layton basically gets pushed off the agenda and it is much more difficult for him to have profile."

During the 2008 election, Layton consistently placed second to Harper as the person who would make the best prime minister. NDP support at the time spiked at 22 per cent, compared with 15 per cent now.

"The election is a bit of a false indicator for Jack Layton, because a lot of that had to do with the weakness of Stéphane Dion," Nanos said.

A serious recession should be a time for the New Democrats to make political hay, but rather than picking one specific thing to go after the government for, they have chosen more of a shotgun approach, accusing the government in general terms of taking the country in the wrong direction.

While the shine may be off Layton's public image, he is not expected to be subjected to a leadership review at the party's national convention in Halifax, Aug. 14-16. With the possibility of an election this fall, he's likely to be given one more kick at the can in light of the party's numbers in the 2008 election.

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