

## New NDP vs. Classic NDP Is a Synthesis Possible, and Does It Matter?

Tom Langford

Volume 85, Spring 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070911ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2020.0010>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Langford, T. (2020). New NDP vs. Classic NDP: Is a Synthesis Possible, and Does It Matter? *Labour / Le Travail*, 85, 269–283. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2020.0010>

## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# New NDP vs. Classic NDP: Is a Synthesis Possible, and Does It Matter?

**Tom Langford**

David McGrane, *The New NDP: Moderation, Modernization, and Political Marketing* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019)

Roberta Lexier, Stephanie Bangarth & Jon Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience: The CCF, the NDP, and Social Democracy in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2018)

DID YOU KNOW THAT AFTER JACK LAYTON took over as its leader in 2003, the federal New Democratic Party became as committed to the generation and dissemination of opposition research, or “oppo research,” as its major rivals in the federal party system? Indeed, the NDP takes the prize for being “the first federal party to set up stand alone websites specifically to attack opponents, now a common practice.”<sup>1</sup> The NDP’s continuing embrace of “oppo research” as a means of challenging the credibility of its political rivals was on display during the final days of the 2019 federal election campaign. Facing a strong challenge from Green Party candidates in ridings in the southern part of Vancouver Island, the NDP circulated a flyer that attacked the Green Party for purportedly sharing “many Conservative values,” including being willing to “cut services [that] families need” and to fall short of “always defend[ing] the right to access a safe abortion.” Needless to say, the NDP’s claims were based on a very slanted interpretation of the evidence pulled together by its researchers

1. David McGrane, *The New NDP: Moderation, Modernization, and Political Marketing* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), 98. Long-time NDP political operative Brad Lavigne reports that “the first online campaign in Canada politics” was Flytheflag.ca; it humorously reinforced that Prime Minister Paul Martin’s Canadian Steamship Lines had registered its vessels in countries other than Canada. See Lavigne, *Building the Orange Wave* (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2013), 54.

and did not promote a considered understanding of the differences in philosophies and electoral platforms between the Green Party and NDP. The Green Party's then leader, Elizabeth May, counterattacked the flyer, calling it "deliberately misleading," "a smear campaign," and a demonstration of the NDP's "general lack of integrity."<sup>2</sup>

At the time the NDP circulated its anti-Green Party flyer on Vancouver Island, the party was rising in the election polls in the wake of leader Jagmeet Singh's effective performances in the two major leaders' debates. We can only speculate on the impact of the flyer on the election results. Perhaps it saved the riding of Victoria for the NDP (where the Green candidate ended up fewer than 2,400 votes behind). On the contrary, perhaps it contributed to the NDP's slippage in the polls over the final few days of the campaign (since May's counterattack called into question Singh's homespun campaign persona of authenticity and charm).<sup>3</sup> Aside from its potential effects on voting, the flyer attacking the Green Party raises important questions about how the federal NDP of today goes about its business: What are its goals as a party? Why is opposition research given such a pride of place? And who has the authority to generate and distribute an attack flyer in the name of the NDP?

Answers to these questions are found in David McGrane's important new book that lifts the veil on the ways the federal NDP has changed since the 2000 election, when Alexa McDonough was leader. Based on an impressive compendium of research involving multiple sources of data, *The New NDP: Moderation, Modernization, and Political Marketing* details changes in internal party organization, the operation of the parliamentary caucus, campaign strategies and platforms, and, most importantly, the locus of party power. The book, a thorough dissection of the *modus operandi* of the new NDP up to and including the 2015 election, is well worth a careful read (although the two chapters analyzing survey data on political and economic beliefs and voting behaviour are overly long at 100-plus pages and would have benefitted from condensation).<sup>4</sup>

2. Althia Raj, "NDP Flyers Comparing Greens to Conservatives Are 'Blatantly Dishonest': May," HuffPost, 12 October 2019, [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/ndp-greens-conservative-flyers\\_ca\\_5da234b5e4b06ddfc51adc0d](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/ndp-greens-conservative-flyers_ca_5da234b5e4b06ddfc51adc0d); Anne Kingston, "If Only Hugs Were Votes," *Maclean's*, 22 October 2019, <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/green-party-elizabeth-may-election-2019/>.

3. The NDP's polling average on the CBC poll tracker rose steadily from October 9 until a few days before the October 21 vote and then appeared to level off or start to decline. In British Columbia, the NDP's polling average peaked at 26.2 per cent on October 18; however, the party ended up securing only 24.4 per cent of the votes cast in the province. "Poll Tracker," CBC News, last updated 20 October 2019, <https://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/elections/poll-tracker/canada/>.

4. Two valuable studies of the new NDP that predated the 2015 federal election are James S. McLean, *Inside the NDP War Room: Competing for Credibility in a Federal Election* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012); and David Laycock & Lynda Erickson, eds., *Reviving Social Democracy: The Near Death and Surprising Rise of the Federal NDP* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015).

McGrane came to this research project as an NDP insider of some distinction; in recent years he has served on the Saskatchewan NDP Provincial Council and Executive. (In his day job he is an associate professor of political studies at St. Thomas More College and the University of Saskatchewan.) McGrane's insider status seems to have opened many doors. He was able to arrange interviews with 60 "NDP operatives, party activists, and politicians concerning their experiences from 2000 to 2015" as well as interviews with 60 per cent (N = 58) of the 2014 federal NDP caucus. *The New NDP* is overflowing with information from these two sources, as well as from an original database of all party platforms, news releases, and commercials released between 2001 and 2015; another original database, containing each of the 18,701 questions asked by NDP members of Parliament in question periods during the 37th to 41st Parliaments (2001–15); quantitative analyses of an original online survey of 2,440 NDP members in early 2015 compared to parallel analyses of a 1997 survey of party members; and quantitative analyses of an original panel survey of over 4,000 voters conducted at the time of the 2015 election compared to parallel analyses of voter surveys carried out by Canadian Election Studies teams for English Canada (the five elections between 2000 and 2011) and Ipsos-Reid for Québec (2006, 2008, and 2011 elections).<sup>5</sup> Juggling such a massive amount of data in a single project is exhausting just to think about – kudos to McGrane for pulling it off. In the end, however, it is the information from the interviews with a wide array of party insiders that is most instructive on the character of the new NDP. McGrane is very even-handed and respectful in his presentation of these empirical materials, in keeping both with social scientific norms and his own insider status. At the same time, his low-key critical appraisal of the current state of the NDP is an important part of the story.

McGrane draws upon a "political marketing" framework borrowed from Robert Ormrod to analyze the new NDP: "According to Ormrod, all parties must simultaneously orient their organization, policy offerings, and strategies towards four distinct groups: voters, other political parties, powerful stakeholders in society, and party members." McGrane asserts, "At the beginning of the 2000s, the NDP's political market orientation was excessively geared toward party members and key external stakeholders – unions – and only superficially towards voters or competitors. During the Layton years, an important part of the party's moderation and modernization was becoming more voter and competitor oriented and less stakeholder and member oriented." As a consequence, the federal NDP shifted from running campaigns that advocated for (or tried to sell) policies grounded in social-democratic principles to campaigns where the preferences of potential voters were foregrounded and policies were massaged or reframed to appeal to those preferences. Opposition research and negative campaigning fit the later sort of campaign in that they aim to turn voters against a competitor and, hopefully, toward the NDP with its

5. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 19–22.

reformulated voter-friendly policies. Other “postmodern” campaigning techniques that the NDP has adopted since 2003 include “sophisticated electoral market segmentation,” so that messages can be crafted for particular market segments; collapsing the party’s brand into the leader’s brand; the specialization and growth of the central party bureaucracy, with power shifting toward political operatives in the leader’s office; and staying in campaign mode between elections.<sup>6</sup>

As recently as the early 2000s, power in the federal NDP was dispersed across the leader, parliamentarians, and elected volunteer officials. Not anymore. “In the story of moderation and modernization that unfolds in this book,” writes McGrane, “the political operatives are like the stars of the movie, whereas the volunteers, and even to a certain extent the elected MPs, are more like the extras.”<sup>7</sup> What factors precipitated this dramatic change in the power structure of the federal NDP? Firstly, the party’s weak electoral showing in 2000 (8.5 per cent of the popular vote and just thirteen seats) precipitated a “ferment of questioning and discussion” that continued through the 2002–03 leadership race won by Layton. This period of soul searching “ended up being an opportunity for agents to propose substantial changes to the political marketing of the party.” The first group to call for the NDP to shift its political market orientation toward voters and adopt postmodern campaign techniques was NDPprogress, fronted by Nova Scotia MP Peter Stoffer. Stoffer also called for the party to learn from Tony Blair’s “Third Way” approach in Britain, a position that NDP leader McDonough had briefly championed in 1998 but disavowed the next year. Layton and the operatives behind his successful leadership campaign likewise were enthralled with “modernizing” the political market orientation and campaign techniques of the party. However, Layton combined this intent with left-leaning rhetoric and policy ideas that won over champions of the New Politics Initiative (NPI), including MPs Svend Robinson and Libby Davies, and effectively camouflaged the long-term implications of how he intended to reorganize the party.<sup>8</sup>

Second, starting in 2004 the federal NDP began to receive revenue from the per-vote subsidy system introduced by the government of Jean Chrétien (eventually phased out in 2015 by the government of Stephen Harper). This provided the party with a multimillion-dollar yearly boost in revenue that would grow over the next decade because of the party’s election successes under Layton. This new money allowed Layton’s team to hire more permanent employees in Ottawa, who took over tasks previously undertaken by volunteers operating in “member-controlled” bodies, the staff of provincial NDPs, and union representatives. As McGrane notes, “The result was a gradual increase of the

6. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 4–14. See Robert P. Ormrod, “A Conceptual Model of Political Market Orientation,” *Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing* 14 (2005): 47–64.

7. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 13.

8. McGrane, *The New NDP*, Chap. 1.

power of party headquarters as these professionals led the moderation and modernization of the party.” Furthermore, as electoral success increased the quarterly allowances stemming from the per-vote subsidy, political operatives were able “to reproduce themselves – they could hire more professionals at party headquarters dedicated to pushing forward the process of moderation and modernization of the party. In a virtuous circle, electoral success and moderation and modernization reinforced each other.” (Of course, this circle was irrevocably broken in 2015 when the per-vote subsidy ended. Matters were further complicated by the decline in the party’s vote share and seat count in the 2015 election, which hampered post-election fundraising efforts, and the tidy election-year deficit of over \$6 million that Tom Mulcair’s political operatives left the party with on their way out the door.)<sup>9</sup>

Third, “party members appeared to acquiesce to this organizational transformation spearheaded by political operatives at party headquarters.” McGrane suggests this might have been because the changes were low profile and gradual. He also thinks that the growing electoral success of the federal NDP so enthused members that they were willing to live with questionable organizational changes.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, it is noteworthy that McGrane’s online survey of NDP members in early 2015 revealed majority support for greater local control in the party, indicating that a significant latent conflict existed between locally focused members and centralizing political operatives at that time. A multivariate statistical analysis led him to conclude that “there are two types of New Democrats: left-wing marketing skeptics and right-wing marketing enthusiasts. In this sense, the division in the federal NDP is not just about right versus left but also about what members think regarding the very concept of political marketing.” In my estimation, a more sophisticated analytical strategy (such as cluster analysis or Q-factor analysis) would be necessary to ascertain exactly how many “types” of New Democrats there are in terms of combinations of ideology and political market orientation. Nevertheless, McGrane’s preliminary analysis is convincing in suggesting that future left-right conflicts in the NDP might well problematize the place of political operatives and whether the party should orient itself so heavily toward voters and competing political parties.<sup>11</sup>

McGrane’s book covers many points that are essential to understanding how the NDP operates much differently now than it did at the most recent turn of a century. For instance, the relationship between the labour movement and the party has fundamentally changed. The new party-financing rules that took

9. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 40–57; see Statement of revenue and expenses, for the year ended December 31, 2015, in “New Democratic Party: Financial Statements, December 31, 2015,” independent auditor’s report, 29 August 2016, n.p. [6], [https://www.elections.ca/fin/oth/pol/asset/2015/ndp\\_2015.pdf](https://www.elections.ca/fin/oth/pol/asset/2015/ndp_2015.pdf).

10. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 41, 87–88.

11. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 81–87.

effect in 2004 banned not only monetary contributions from unions to the NDP but also in-kind contributions, including the seconding of union staffers to campaigns. Two years later, affiliated unions became more like riding associations than stand-alone power blocs: “the representation of affiliated unions at NDP conventions and on its Federal Council became determined by how many members of the union actually signed NDP membership cards and paid their own membership dues.” These changes coincided with an end to regular dialogue between the Canadian Labour Congress leadership and the parliamentary caucus. Between 1977 and 2003, the CLC political action director actively participated in at least one caucus meeting per week while Parliament was in session, and the party’s labour critic attended each CLC executive and council meeting. After 2003, the latter practice ended and the CLC’s representative at the parliamentary caucus slotted into an observer role. This array of changes signified that “the relationship between the party and labour became more about consultation and independence and less about integration and control.” It “also meant that Layton’s political operatives were free to pursue the moderation and modernization of the party without any interference from the labour movement.”<sup>12</sup>

McGrane’s study reveals additional details. First, for instance, he writes that “although the Conservatives won a majority government, NDP operatives were ecstatic with the results of the 2011 election.” This is because the operatives’ first priority was marginalizing the Liberal Party and making the NDP the “credible, pan-Canadian, left-of-centre alternative to the governing Conservatives.”<sup>13</sup> Second, the new NDP’s operatives treated MPs like trained seals in the interests of message control. Indeed, the questions that MPs asked in question period began to be written by political operatives, not the MPs. Furthermore, the MPs selected to ask the prewritten questions were required to practise reciting them in front of the question period team of operatives prior to being turned loose in the House of Commons. “In the quest to moderate and modernize its political marketing,” McGrane argues, “the NDP chose discipline and order over freedom and discretion for MPs.”<sup>14</sup> A third detail revealed in the book is that under the leadership both of Layton and of Mulcair, the party’s question period strategy “was dominated by topics related to corruption and ineptness in government operations.” Between May 2013 and August 2015, “Mulcair and other NDP MPs devoted approximately 2,000

12. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 48–50, 92, 101.

13. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 160, 323.

14. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 94–95, 121. It would seem that not all MPs welcomed stage-managed participation in question period. Long-time NDP parliamentarian Bill Blaikie (first elected in 1968) worked alongside the Layton political operatives between 2003 and 2008 (at which time he decided against running for re-election). Brad Lavigne notes, “Bill Blaikie was an outstanding orator in Parliament and an excellent performer in Question Period, but he didn’t readily take messaging advice or embrace the pithy quotes Jamey Heath sometimes provided.” Lavigne, *Building the Orange Wave*, 49.



questions” to the expense-claim affair involving Senator Mike Duffy and Prime Minister Harper’s chief of staff Nigel Wright.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, McGrane shows that, leading up to the 2015 election, operatives working out of Mulcair’s office built relationships with organizations that would later be asked to be “third-party validators” of NDP platform policies. For example, after Mulcair announced that the NDP would extend the accelerated capital cost allowance, Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters issued a press release applauding the leader’s support of the manufacturing sector. In cultivating third-party validators, the NDP was in competition with other parties. “Obtaining these endorsements,” notes McGrane, “necessitated sending stakeholder groups embargoed copies of NDP announcements and even making last-minute changes to secure their support.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, among the mistakes that the NDP’s political operatives made in 2015 was “saving their advertising budget for the last two weeks of the campaign,” at which point the party’s polling numbers had already collapsed. To make matters worse, McGrane argues, “the party’s focus late in the campaign on strategic voting seemed to be somewhat ludicrous given the Liberals’ lead in public domain polling at the beginning of October. So, though controversies over the NDP’s position on the niqab at citizenship ceremonies and on balanced budgets were unhelpful, the NDP campaign suffered from some deeper-seated problems.”<sup>17</sup>

McGrane concludes *The New NDP* with a discussion of seven “lessons learned” from his study. The final lesson (“meeting voters where they are comes with a risk”) problematizes the logic behind the new NDP project. “The approach devised by Layton’s team and carried forward by Mulcair’s team,” he asserts, “never really sought to create solid NDP partisans dedicated to social democratic values and policies.” As a consequence, the NDP support base was quite soft and, after an effective Liberal campaign in 2015, “Layton Liberals turned into Trudeau New Democrats.”<sup>18</sup> Let me add that the new NDP’s focus on winning transient votes rather than growing the public’s commitment to social-democratic values and policies also poses a significant risk if the party ever wins an election. Having campaigned from a pragmatic, centrist position, a new NDP government could be expected to govern from the centre in an attempt to keep the equivalent of the “Layton Liberals” electorate on board. Furthermore, NDP parliamentarians and party members who pushed such a government to discuss, let alone adopt, a transformative policy or two could be expected to experience the wrath of political operatives who would see such ideas as outside the bounds of the new NDP brand. Given this dynamic, it seems hard to picture a new NDP governing from the centre much differently

15. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 113.

16. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 69–70.

17. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 173–174, 317.

18. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 328–336.



than a certain Canadian political party that has perfected the art of governing from the centre for over a century. It is not by coincidence that Trudeau's national Liberal government occupied much the same political space as Rachel Notley's Alberta NDP government between 2015 and 2019.

Those who despair at the direction of the new NDP will find some comfort in *Party of Conscience: The CCF, the NDP, and Social Democracy in Canada*. The book contains a diverse collection of academic papers, personal reflections, and political commentaries that were first presented at a conference in Calgary in May 2017 to celebrate the 85th anniversary of the first meeting of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in that city. Only a few of the contributions explicitly critique the direction of the new NDP. Nevertheless, in celebrating and critically appreciating what I call the classic NDP, *Party of Conscience* adds historical depth and perspective to McGrane's measured reservations about the new NDP initiative.

Only one of the aforementioned new NDP political operatives has a piece in *Party of Conscience*: Karl Bélanger, who was Mulcair's principal secretary and a member of Layton's inner circle. Bélanger's contribution, however, has nothing to do with his experiences as an operative; instead, he offers a very useful sketch of the somewhat convoluted history of the CCF/NDP in Québec from 1932 to 2018. After identifying the organizations that joined together to form Québec Solidaire in 2006, Bélanger quips, "Québec Solidaire is therefore a great-great-great-grandson [or should that be grandchild?] of the NDP."<sup>19</sup> One lacuna in *Party of Conscience* is that there is no assessment of whether Québec Solidaire's recent successes have any significant lessons for the NDP.

The two "big name" contributors to *Party of Conscience* come through with lively and engaging pieces. Bill Blaikie provides a compelling analysis of how a confluence of different factors, including "the Canadian constitutional saga," undermined the fortunes of the federal NDP at the end of the 20th century. I especially appreciate his pithy take on Preston Manning ("that most excellent of dog whistlers") and his willingness to criticize Ed Broadbent's shortcomings as party leader (which include his falling short of John Turner's success at "emotionalizing the nationalist political argument in the debates" during the 1988 federal election campaign and his jumping to support the Meech Lake Accord in 1987 prior to consulting with the NDP caucus). Blaikie is no fan of the Third Way, which he terms "a politics less of accommodation to reality and more as a form of supine acquiescence to corporate power." He makes the case that the NDP of the 1980s and 1990s was "the last best left" in the social-democratic world and laments that the party did not get very much credit for its principled positioning from groups like the Council of Canadians and the

19. Karl Bélanger, "The NDP in Quebec before and after the Orange Wave," in Roberta Lexier, Stephanie Bangarth & Jon Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience: The CCF, the NDP, and Social Democracy in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2018), 156.

activists behind the NPI (with Robinson, his parliamentary colleague, being singled out by name).<sup>20</sup>

Avi Lewis was the keynote speaker at the beginning of the May 2017 Calgary conference, and a version of his engaging talk concludes *Party of Conscience*. Given the importance of the Lewis family to the 20th-century history of the CCF and NDP, his memories of growing up in a house where “The Party” was “the family business” are captivating.<sup>21</sup> The first objective of the speech is to identify the major themes in his grandfather David Lewis’s writing and campaigning that resonate with his grandson today. These themes are a commitment to economic planning; “the embrace of difference, the vision of a coalition with real tensions but also unity of purpose”; the notion that step-wise incremental changes “can build momentum and ambition for a leap to system change”; and “corporate-bashing fervour.” Avi Lewis recognizes the dissonance created when his grandfather’s support for the ouster of the Waffle from the Ontario NDP in the early 1970s is counterposed with the theme of embracing difference. His attempt to square the circle, however, falls back on the NDP establishment’s stock explanation that the expulsion was justified by the personal animosity displayed by some Wafflers. On this point, Lewis would benefit from considering the thoughtful reflections of Waffle leader James Laxer. In a 2014 interview with Matt Fodor, Laxer pointed to the “huge generational gap” between the two sides of the Waffle struggle and his surprise to learn that the older generation of established NDP leaders “were very tremendously devoted to their conception of Canadian social democracy, they didn’t really want to hear from anybody else much about it, and they were determined to hang on to their control of the party.”<sup>22</sup>

The second objective of the speech is to analyze the present-day impasse in Canadian social democracy over how best to respond to the climate emergency. Lewis offers a sharp criticism of the Alberta NDP government of 2017 for failing to mandate immediate reductions in the production of greenhouse gases, arguing that its approach “is helping to preserve a deeply destructive status quo.” His alternative – “to transform our energy system in an incredibly short time, and take the opportunity, while we’re at it, to deal with inequality by putting economically and racially marginalized communities first in line for the benefits of the next economy” – is consistent with the Leap Manifesto.<sup>23</sup>

20. Bill Blaikie, “From Contender to the Margins and Back: The NDP and Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” in Lexier, Bangarth & Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience*, 123–127.

21. Avi Lewis, “Social Democracy and the Left in Canada: Past, Present, and Future,” in Lexier, Bangarth & Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience*, 197–198.

22. Lewis, “Social Democracy and the Left,” 201–207. Laxer quoted in Matt Fodor, “James Laxer on Canadian Social Democracy,” Rabble.ca, 13 March 2018, <http://rabble.ca/news/2018/03/james-laxer-canadian-social-democracy>.

23. The Leap Manifesto (subtitled “A Call for a Canada Based on Caring for the Earth and One Another”) is a nonpartisan initiative born “in the spring of 2015 at a two-day meeting

Lewis notes that the NDP's reaction to the Leap Manifesto between 2015 and 2017 was "very mixed," ranging from "virulent antipathy from party insiders" to "an energetic embrace from the grassroots." Lewis ends his contribution by reproducing the manifesto, thereby making clear that he sees it as a blueprint for the future of social democracy in Canada.<sup>24</sup>

One contribution in *Party of Conscience* overlaps directly with the content of McGrane's *The New NDP*, and it is interesting to contrast the two interpretations of similar research. In his chapter, Matt Fodor analyzes continuity and change in the nine federal NDP election platforms from 1988 to 2015. His research focuses on just four policy domains (economic priorities, taxation, policies aimed at workers and unions, and social policy) and is guided by a theoretical understanding of the features of the Third Way turn in social-democratic politics (which he terms "social democracy's accommodation to neoliberalism"). Fodor's finding that "the NDP in the late 1990s and early 2000s resisted the Third Way tide" corroborates Bill Blaikie's view of the party at that time. Under the leadership of Layton, however, a partial move away from traditional social-democratic policies can be observed in the election platforms of 2004, 2006, and 2008 while a major shift occurred in 2011: the 2011 platform called for keeping "Canada's corporate tax rate competitive" with that of the United States; "put less emphasis on labour and employment issues"; and, compared with earlier platforms, "was more modest in terms of welfare state measures." Fodor concludes that the process of policy moderation was sufficiently advanced by 2011 that "the NDP had undergone a Third Way realignment." It is noteworthy that the NDP's subsequent (2015) platform was "in several respects ... more progressive than the 2011 platform," although on issues like corporate taxation and deficit budgets it doubled down on the neoliberal approaches found in the 2011 platform.<sup>25</sup>

McGrane's research on federal NDP election platforms (from 2000 to 2015) differs from Fodor's work in two main ways: McGrane analyzes the platforms over a much wider range of issue areas (sixteen vs. four), and he compares his findings not against a theoretical conception of traditional vs. Third Way social democracy but rather against a parallel analysis of the platforms of the federal Liberal Party. McGrane's research strategy yields some unique findings, such

---

in Toronto attended by 60 representatives from Canada's Indigenous rights, social and food justice, environmental, faith-based and labour movements." See "Frequently Asked Questions about the Leap Manifesto," Leap Manifesto, n.d., accessed 10 February 2020, <https://leapmanifesto.org/en/faq/>.

24. Lewis, "Social Democracy and the Left," 208–214. The "virulent antipathy" included the Rachel Notley government's forbidding its MLAs from attending the Calgary conference. Apparently none of the MLAs defied this edict, although Lewis, in his introductory greeting, humorously welcomed to the room "members of the Alberta NDP (here in disguise)," 197.

25. Matt Fodor, "From Traditional Social Democracy to the Third Way: An Assessment of Federal NDP Platforms, 1988–2011," in Lexier, Bangarth & Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience*, 133–134, 137–146.

as that the NDP's "commitments in policy areas classified as right wing by issue ownership theory become more prominent" over time. In addition, McGrane discovers that the overlap in platform commitments between the NDP and Liberals increased markedly for the 2011 (34 per cent overlap) and 2015 (31 per cent overlap) elections compared to the elections in the 2000s (overlaps of between 10 per cent and 17 per cent). On the other hand, McGrane believes the non-overlapping policy commitments of the two parties in 2015 were sufficiently distinctive that it is accurate to classify the NDP as social democratic and the Liberal Party as more centrist. McGrane never addresses the question of whether the later Layton and the Mulcair versions of the NDP should be classified as Third Way.<sup>26</sup>

*Party of Conscience* is a delight to read because it touches on so many interesting episodes in the history of the CCF/NDP. For instance, two complementary chapters recount the life and times of party leader and parliamentarian Andrew Brewin. In discussing the importance of Brewin's Anglican faith to his political life, his son John (a former NDP MP himself) reminds us of the role of Christian socialism as an underpinning for the commitment of a number of early CCF/NDP leaders and, furthermore, raises the question of finding a "shared morality" to animate today's NDP.<sup>27</sup> (It is noteworthy that Jagmeet Singh's strong commitment to fighting injustice and inequality because of his Sikh religious commitment is entirely in line with the social gospel's effects on earlier generations of leaders.)<sup>28</sup> Stephanie Bangarth's chapter uses Andrew Brewin's accomplishments in human rights advocacy in Canada, humanitarian relief for Biafra, and diplomatic recognition of China to demonstrate that the contributions of the CCF/NDP to Canada are broader than commonly acknowledged. Andrew Brewin makes one other appearance in *Party of Conscience*: Peter Graham, in a study of the conflict between the New Left and the old guard NDP in municipal politics in Toronto between the late 1960s and early 1980s, points out that Brewin was a bigot who denounced homosexuality as a "sickness."<sup>29</sup>

Graham's chapter is my personal favourite in this collection because it is meticulously researched and offers candid assessments of the reactionary roles played by different individuals and groups in opposing New Left urban initiatives in Toronto. When John Sewell and Karl Jaffary were elected as

26. McGrane, *The New NDP*, 183–187, 190, 193, 195.

27. John Brewin, "Religion and the Rise of the CCF/NDP," in Lexier, Bangarth & Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience*, 22–29.

28. Jagmeet Singh, *Love and Courage: My Story of Family, Resilience, and Overcoming the Unexpected* (Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 17–18.

29. Stephanie Bangarth, "The Left at Home and Abroad: Broadening the Dominant Narrative of Canadian History," in Lexier, Bangarth & Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience*, 49–58; Peter Graham, "New Leftists, 'Party-Liners,' and Municipal Politics in Toronto," in Lexier, Bangarth & Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience*, 92.

alderpersons in the city's Ward 7 in 1969, they "helped pioneer a new kind of grassroots politics, which emphasized participatory democracy and clashed with the ideas of many veteran NDPers," Graham notes. "As the 1970s progressed, left-wing community organizations mobilized to elect more radical candidates. Their efforts helped redefine municipal left-wing politics by fusing it with a distinct New Left urban vision."<sup>30</sup>

Graham opines that "the NDPers who had sat on [Toronto city] council prior to the 1969 election were a rather sorry lot" and observes that the NDP's William Dennison, who was re-elected as Toronto's mayor in 1969, was "supported by all the city's major newspapers and property developers." Interestingly, some of the strongest opposition to New Left political organizing in Toronto came from far-left groups that were embedded in the NDP in the 1970s. ReforMetro, a New Left organization that emphasized decentralization, localized democracy, and community-controlled services, was founded in 1974 to bring together groups and alderpersons across the city. Members of two Trotskyist organizations active in the NDP were among the earliest vocal critics of ReforMetro. Later, when the NDP in Toronto decided to field a slate of candidates in the 1976 municipal election, in direct competition with New Left candidates, "many of the NDP association's strongest supporters of a party slate belonged to a Marxist-oriented study group."<sup>31</sup>

Graham's history also documents Layton's admirable New Left activism within the NDP in the 1970s and 1980s. (Layton had been a member of both the Waffle and ReforMetro in the 1970s before being elected as a Toronto alderperson for the first time in 1982.) The bewildering thing about the New Left/NDP conflict in Toronto in the 1970s, concludes Graham, is that "it was the reputedly disorganized New Left that helped municipal New Democrats expand their support base, renovate their ideology, and gain a renewed sense of purpose."<sup>32</sup>

There are other highlights in *Party of Conscience* that I can only briefly mention. The late Robert McDonald tells the fascinating story of a young, ambitious, and charismatic party insider with roots in the Liberal Party who set out to moderate and modernize the provincial BC NDP in the 1960s. This insider argued that there is "more, much, much more to socialism than public ownership." Readers may recognize the name of this one-election-and-done provincial leader from his subsequent work in the mid-1970s as the commissioner of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry. Christo Aivalis presents a generous view of the federal NDP's leftist credentials between 1968 and 1984; indeed, he portrays the party as solidly democratic socialist during these years. "Across this timespan, [Tommy] Douglas, [David] Lewis, and Broadbent – both inside and outside their respective leadership tenures – put forward

30. Graham, "New Leftists," 83.

31. Graham, "New Leftists," 84–85, 90, (234 n22).

32. Graham, "New Leftists," 91–95.

an anti-capitalist alternative, emphasizing wide-reaching democracy, comprehensive economic planning, and a more encompassing conception of equality.” Roberta Lexier details three examples of left-wing social movement formations that challenged the NDP party establishment of the day: the Waffle, from the early 1970s; the NPI, from the early 2000s; and the Leap Manifesto, starting in 2015. Her considered conclusion is that the NDP “faces incredible pressures; activists demand that it be bold and inspiring, presenting an alternative vision for the country, while party loyalists insist that it be electorally viable, promoting policies and practices that are digestible for ordinary Canadians.” Erika Dyck and Greg Marchildon praise Tommy Douglas, who “engaged in a process of changing the way people thought about their health and their collective responsibility to invest in our health as a society” in the years leading up to the introduction of the single-payer hospital and medical care coverage programs designed and implemented by the Saskatchewan CCF/NDP. The authors argue that leftists today need to do more than defend medicare “and instead begin imagining how a social democratically reformed health care system might look in the twenty-first century.”<sup>33</sup>

After reflecting on these two excellent books, as well as on my own experiences as a long-time NDP member and periodic volunteer in a federal electoral district association (EDA), my first impulse is to argue that the new NDP of the early 21st century has been an unmitigated disaster. Sure, the Orange Wave breakthrough in Québec in 2011 was exciting, but it turned out to be built on a foundation of sand (from 59 NDP MPs in Québec in 2011, to 16 MPs in 2015, and just 1 MP in 2019). And we should still honour the late Jack Layton’s many contributions as a left-wing community activist and municipal politician extraordinaire while recognizing that he enabled the construction of a Trojan Horse filled with an army of political operatives who had no problem with adopting many elements of Third Way social democracy as long as it seemed like it would win them more votes and seats. If forced to make an either/or choice, I would choose a party of conscience with a commitment to winning Canadians over to transformative social-democratic/socialist ideas over an election-focused party geared to winning over swing voters through focus-group-tested sloganeering and disingenuous efforts to make other parties look like the devil incarnate.

However, there is no need to make an absolute either/or choice. Some of the features of the new NDP are sensible (e.g. building good media relations,

33. Robert McDonald, “Fabianism and the Progressive Left in British Columbia: The ‘New Party’ in Historical Perspective,” in Lexier, Bangarth & Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience*, 64; Christo Aivalis, “Tommy Douglas, David Lewis, Ed Broadbent, and Democratic Socialism in the New Democratic Party, 1968–1984,” in Lexier, Bangarth & Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience*, 96–97; Roberta Lexier, “Challenge from Within: The NDP and Social Movements,” in Lexier, Bangarth & Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience*, 121; Erika Dyck & Greg Marchildon, “Medicare and Social Democracy in Canada,” in Lexier, Bangarth & Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience*, 176–180.



running effective social media feeds, developing election advertisements that make voters feel good about the party and its leader, making sure that party spokespeople are well prepared to explain NDP positions on issues, and organizing a smooth leader's tour during an election campaign). Such features need to be continued into the future. In addition, the new NDP's laser-like political market focus on voters will need to be resurrected in every election cycle, albeit guided by a platform containing policies that have been honed through inner-party grassroots democracy. At the same time, numerous other features of the new NDP are objectionable and/or counterproductive and need to be jettisoned (e.g. undermining EDA democracy by taking an inexcusably long time to vet candidates, stifling the initiative of parliamentarians by stage managing everything that is said in question period, and letting political operatives run the show rather than members who have been elected to governing bodies).

In the end I am arguing *not* for a synthesis of the new NDP and classic NDP but rather for a return to the orientation of the classic NDP while at the same time incorporating the professional skills of the new NDP into that classic foundation. The 2019 federal election demonstrated that it is possible for a cash-poor NDP to run a low-budget campaign that is every bit as professional as those of its main competitors. This shows that the party, going forward, does not need to raise money just so that it can compete with the election spending of the Conservatives and Liberals. Rather, a sizable proportion of the party's resources should be directed to membership recruitment, membership political education, and grassroots participation.

In the mid-1970s, when Allan Blakeney was the premier of Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan NDP had 26,000 members – approximately 4 per cent of the adult population of the province. If just 2 per cent of adult Canadians belonged to the NDP of 2019, party membership would stand at 630,000 – approximately five times the number of people who were eligible to vote in the federal party's 2017 leadership race.<sup>34</sup> Recruiting so many new members, and then retaining these recruits, can only be accomplished by empowering the membership in both small and large ways. People should be able to manage their membership account online and take charge of dictating how and how often the party contacts them. At the same time, members should be given access to

34. Desmond Morton, *NDP: Social Democracy in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Samuel Stevens Hakkert, 1977), 202. In 1976 there were 661,975 people aged sixteen years and older living in Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics, "Saskatchewan Population by Age and Sex – 1971 to Date," Excel spreadsheet, n.d., Demography and Census Reports and Statistics, Government of Saskatchewan, accessed 9 February 2020, <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/government-data/bureau-of-statistics/population-and-census>. The federal NDP membership was 124,000 in 2017. "NDP Triples Membership ahead of Leadership Vote," news release, NDP, 29 August 2017, <https://www.ndp.ca/tripled-membership>. Statistics Canada estimates the number of people aged fifteen years and older living in Canada on 1 July 2019 at approximately 31.5 million. Statistics Canada, "Population Estimates on July 1st, by Age and Sex," table 17-10-0005-01, accessed 9 February 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710000501>.



educational materials that reflect a range of social-democratic/socialist viewpoints, encouraged to take part in setting the policy directions of the party, and given opportunities to volunteer in many different ways. If Avi Lewis is correct, then a grassroots-guided party would likely favour innovative ideas for a quick transition to a low-carbon, green economy (potentially involving new Crown corporations and a range of egalitarian initiatives, including an update of medicare, a wealth tax, and renewed efforts at truth and reconciliation). At that point, a revamped classic NDP would no longer seem like a slightly-more-progressive-on-some-issues Liberal Party.

Reclaiming the NDP from the abyss of Third Way irrelevancy will not be easy. Indeed, there might well be another political road toward a society with low-carbon systems, greater equality, and enhanced democratic participation. But given the urgency of the climate crisis, and the respected history of the classic version of the party, the NDP seems the best bet for a leftist organizational vehicle that Canadians will take seriously.