9

Ideological Moderation and Professionalization: The NDP under Jack Layton and Tom Mulcair[1]

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COMPARED TO THE 1990s, THE FEDERAL New Democratic Party of Canada (NDP) has been quite successful over the past 15 years. When Jack Layton became the leader of the NDP in 2003, he inherited a party that had just won under 10 per cent of the popular vote in the previous federal election and had been relegated to fourth party status in the House of Commons. Less than 10 years later, the NDP scored a historic breakthrough in the 2011 federal election, forming the Official Opposition for the first time in its history and winning a large majority of the seats in Quebec. At the beginning of the 2015 federal election campaign, the NDP was riding high in the polls and was a legitimate contender to form government. While the Liberals eventually won a sizable majority and the NDP lost approximately half its seats, Tom Mulcair still led the party to one of the best electoral performances in its history, with 19.7 per cent of the national vote and 44 seats. Although the 2015 election results were disappointing to many in the party who dreamed of forming the first NDP federal government in Canadian history, the party was still successful in a certain sense. After almost drifting into irrelevance during the 1990s and early 2000s, it has firmly reasserted itself as an important player in Canadian politics and a party that impacts Canadian political discourse.

This chapter seeks to place the NDP's success during the Layton years and the party's loss of seats in the 2015 election into historical perspective. The main argument is that, under Layton and Mulcair, the NDP has simultaneously undergone the twin processes of ideological moderation and professionalization. The chapter begins with a section exploring the history of the NDP before Layton assumed leadership of the party, with a specific focus on ideology and internal organization. The sections that follow examine the professionalization of its campaign machinery and the transformation of the NDP's ideology during Layton's time as leader and during the first part of Mulcair's leadership. The chapter ends with an assessment of the party's position in Canadian politics following the 2015 federal election and a discussion of its prospects for the future.

Historical Roots: The Legacy of CCF-NDP (1932–2002)

During the 1920s, a large number of intellectuals, labour parties, farmers' movements, and Christian groups (known as *social gospellers*) who were critical of the existing inequality within the capitalist economic system emerged in Western Canada and Ontario (Penner 1992). Several Members of Parliament (MPs) from labour parties and farmer parties were subsequently elected to the House of Commons and eventually came together to form the "Ginger Group," which acted as an unofficial caucus of independent MPs who shared adhesion to socialism, social democracy, or left-leaning liberalism (McNaught 1959, 209–14). Eventually these MPs and groups critical of economic inequality came together to form the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) as a "farmer-labour-socialist party" at a meeting in Calgary in 1932 (Lipset 1950, 114). Despite the fact that the CCF saw itself as a labour party, it is important to note that trade unions were almost completely absent at the founding of the party, and most unions continued to cooperate with the Liberals or maintain nonpartisan stances.

The ideology of the new party was outlined in the *Regina Manifesto,* which was adopted at the party's second convention in Regina in 1933. By today's standards, the manifesto employs what could be considered strident socialist language. The manifesto famously ends by promising that "No C.C.F. Government will rest content until it has eradicated capitalism and put into operation the full programme of socialized planning which will lead to the establishment in Canada of the Cooperative Commonwealth" (Young 1969, 313). Preceding this bold statement, the manifesto makes wide-ranging policy suggestions. Some of these suggestions are still considered quite radical today: state planning of the economy; government boards to control exports; state regulation of all wages; and the nationalization of all banks, natural resources, and the distribution systems for milk and bread. On the other hand, the manifesto makes some suggestions that have gradually came to be accepted by all political parties during the twentieth century, such as medicare, government-owned crop insurance, human rights for racial minorities, and unemployment insurance.

The CCF was organized as a "mass party" and prided itself as being controlled by its membership, in contrast to the autocratic Liberal and Conservative parties (Young 1969, 139–79). A *mass party* is issued from and affiliated to extra-parliamentary movements, such as churches or trade unions; encourages a large and active membership; ensures that party policy is determined by party members; possesses a rigid, doctrinaire ideology; and its election campaigns are run by volunteer local activists (Duverger 1963, 63–70). A *cadre party* has the opposite characteristics: parliamentary origins;

a small and inactive membership; party policy made by leaders; a flexible, catch-all ideology; campaigns run by a centralized group of professionals; and no formal affiliations to extra-parliamentary groups (Duverger 1963). In mass party fashion, CCF members were organized into local clubs that sent representatives to the national convention, where party policy was determined and the leader had to face re-election and could be challenged by any delegate from the floor of the convention. Since the CCF saw itself as a federation, it is important to note that power was very decentralized, with each province having its own self-functioning party that would send representatives to the CCF national convention, council, and executive.

The CCF contested seven federal elections from 1935 to 1958, averaging only 11 per cent of the popular vote and 16 seats per election. Its electoral high point was the 1945 election, when it received 16 per cent of the popular vote and 28 seats. The CCF's vote was highly regionalized. It obtained its highest popular vote and nearly all of its seats in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Its popular vote hovered just above 10 per cent in Ontario, but that support translated into only eight seats in that province over the party's history. East of Ontario and in Alberta, the party was simply not a factor in federal elections.

In 1958, the CCF was approached by the newly formed Canadian Labour Congress to form a political party that would combine "the CCF, the labour movement, farmer organizations, professional people and other liberally minded persons interested in basic social reform" (Knowles 1961, 127). It was hoped that the new party would attract more unionized voters through its official affiliation with the labour movement, represent a fresh image as a party that was embracing postwar prosperity as opposed to being mired in Depression-era thinking, and become a fully bilingual party that recognized the nationalist aspirations of the Québécois (Bickerton, Gagnon, and Smith 1999, 102; Erickson and Laycock 2014, 15). After extensive debate and consultation, the new party was finally created in 1961 and given the name "New Democratic Party" (Morton 1974, 27).

While it is difficult to summarize all of the nuances of the NDP's ideology from its founding to when Layton took over as leader, it is safe to say that the NDP struck a more moderate tone than the CCF. The language of the declaration adopted at the NDP's founding, the *New Party Declaration,* is noticeably more optimistic than the *Regina Manifesto.* Instead of condemning the evils of the existing economic system and aiming to eradicate capitalism, the purpose of the new party was to "achieve a fully free and just society in which all citizens participate, and all share equitably in its fruits" (Knowles 1961, 7).

From 1961 to 2000, the NDP's ideology could be summarized as embodying four elements. First, there was an emphasis on full employment

achieved through direct subsidies to the private sector and Keynesian countercyclical spending on public goods such as infrastructure, hospitals, and schools (Evans 2012, 57). Countercyclical spending means that government spends heavily during times of weak economic growth to get the economy moving, even if it means going into deficit. Any public deficits incurred during times of slow economic growth could then be reduced once the economy regains strength. Second, public ownership remained an important part of the NDP's ideology, but its scope was constrained to selected industries, such as railways and the distribution of gasoline (Laycock 2014, 114). Third, the party favoured creating greater economic equality through the large-scale expansion of the welfare state financed by higher taxes on corporations and high-income earners (Whitehorn 1992). Fourth, the NDP came to embrace improvements to Canada's liberal rights regime to reduce the discrimination faced by women, Indigenous peoples, gay and lesbian individuals, the disabled, and visible minorities, as well as promoting the need for environmental protection (Wiseman and Isitt 2007, 583–84). As such, the NDP's ideology during this period was consistent with Moschonas's (2002, 15) classical formulation of postwar social democracy as "political liberalism + mixed economy + welfare state + Keynesian economic policy + commitment to equality."

While the Liberals and Conservatives are seen as cadre parties, the NDP has generally been considered the prototypical "mass party" of Canadian politics during the second half of the twentieth century (Sayers 1999; Whitehorn 1992). The NDP was explicitly linked to Canada's union movement through exchange of personnel, financial contributions, and formal affiliation, as well as unions wielding considerable influence over party policy through their large number of delegates at conventions (Archer 1990, 27–40). NDP members and candidates were expected to show a high level of commitment to the party, and NDP riding associations were very active between elections in terms of holding events, signing petitions, participating in local labour strikes, and organizing protests (Sayers 1999, 35–36). Like the CCF, the conventions of the NDP were the ultimate source of establishing party policy, and the NDP leader was required to stand for re-election at every convention and could face a challenge from any delegate (Whitehorn 1992, 113–14). The important role played by the convention in shaping party policy was meant to ensure that the NDP did not stray too far from its social democratic roots.

The campaign structure of the NDP before Layton was quite decentralized and volunteer driven, with each riding association running its local campaign and the staff of each provincial wing in charge of coordinating how the local campaigns were structured in their province. Nonetheless, beginning in

the 1980s under the leadership of Ed Broadbent, more centrally controlled campaigns emerged. A small election planning committee made up of MPs, party staff, labour leaders, and members of the federal executive took over the creation of the election platform and overall election readiness. An even smaller group of key advisers surrounding the leader and officials in party headquarters were placed in charge of polling, campaign strategy, media relations, and the Leader's Tour (Whitehorn 1992).

Overall, the NDP was more electorally successfully than the CCF. During the federal elections held from 1962 to 2000, the NDP averaged 15 per cent of the popular vote and 23 seats per election. The party's electoral strength remained in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, where over two-thirds of NDP MPs were elected during this time period. There was a marked improvement in Ontario, where the party won 81 seats from 1962 to 2000. However, the party was largely irrelevant in provincial and federal elections in Quebec, Alberta, and Atlantic Canada. It was not until the 1997 federal election that the NDP was able to establish a beachhead of seats in Atlantic Canada under the leadership of Nova Scotian Alexa McDonough.

Finally, it is important to note the ebbs and flows in the electoral support of the NDP from its inception to the 2000 election. With the exception of a tough 1974 election (when it received 15.6 per cent of the vote), the NDP's popular vote remained remarkably steady at 17 to 20 per cent from 1965 to 1988. This level of support produced anywhere from 21 to 43 seats in the House of Commons (again, in 1974 the NDP won only 16 seats). However, the 1990s were particularly hard on the NDP. Given its past electoral scores, the party was psychologically unprepared for the electoral disaster that it endured in the 1993 federal election, when its popular vote plummeted to 7 per cent and it won only nine seats. After bouncing back slightly in 1997, the NDP registered another disappointing result in the 2000 federal election, when it fell back to 9 per cent of the popular vote and secured only 13 seats.

Ideological Moderation of the NDP under Jack Layton

Koop and Bittner (2013, 320–21) and Pétry (2014, 145) have performed content analysis on recent federal NDP platforms. Content analysis involves assigning passages of text certain codes and then aggregating the codes together to identify patterns. Based on their coding schemes, both researchers found that NDP platforms moved to the right during the time that Jack Layton was leader. However, this quantitative approach is summative and does not specify the ways in which NDP platforms moved to the right under Layton. This section briefly describes policies in the NDP's platforms

NDP's ideology.[2] It then illustrates how the 2015 NDP platform moved the party slightly back to the left, even if it did not reverse the party's ideological moderation.

Some elements of NDP platforms from 2004 to 2011 were remarkably consistent. All of these platforms featured an activist state that would intervene in the economy through tax credits to companies that create jobs, orderly marketing in agriculture, restricting foreign takeovers, industrial strategies for priority sectors, and various subsidies to promote the green economy. With the exception of the suggestion of new Crown corporations to invest in renewable energy and to make prescription drugs in the 2004 platform, the creation of new public enterprises was not mentioned in any of the NDP's platforms from 2006 to 2011. The party's consumer protection policies consistently addressed proper food labelling and food inspection as well as the lowering of fees related to airlines, credit cards, cell phones, Internet service, and banking. The NDP's infrastructure ideas repeatedly stressed giving municipalities additional federal gas tax revenues to attend to public transit systems. The party's policies on women and minorities were consistent in their advocacy of better pay equity and greater funding for women's groups, more family reunification for immigrants, recognizing Indigenous self-government and increasing funding to on-reserve education, and more government programs for disabled Canadians. In intergovernmental affairs, there was a constant message of creating frameworks for national standards that nonetheless respected Quebec's autonomy.

On other policies, there were minor shifts that can be discerned from 2004 to 2011. The NDP's arts and culture policies initially focused heavily on better funding for the CBC and encouraging Canadian content. Later platforms supplemented these ideas with incentives to improve artists' incomes and the promotion of the French language and Quebec culture. There was a subtle shift in how the NDP platforms dealt with deficits. The 2004 platform promised balanced budgets "exempting years of extreme revenue shortfalls and disasters and acts of God," while the other platforms simply committed to a balanced budget in every year of NDP government. The NDP also dropped some of its more ambitious democratic reforms, such as lowering the voting age to 16 and designating seats for Indigenous peoples in the House of Commons. However, under Layton the party did remain committed to a mixed-member proportional representation electoral system, abolishing the Senate, and restricting the power of the prime minister and lobbyists. Similarly, in foreign affairs, the NDP dropped some of its more daring ideas, such as a "Tobin tax" (placing a small tax on all international monetary transactions) and forgiving debt of developing nations, but maintained a commitment to more conventional ideas like

increasing foreign aid to 0.7 per cent of Canada's gross domestic product. While the NDP consistently advocated for higher corporate taxes, it did back away from its insistence on raising taxes on Canadians with higher incomes through initiatives like an inheritance tax. In terms of social policy, there remained a strong commitment to expanding social programs, but its scope was circumscribed. A few examples of the differences between the 2004 and 2011 platforms will suffice: the target of 200,000 new child-care spaces a year was reduced to 25,000 new child-care spaces a year; reducing tuition by 10 per cent and freezing it at that level was changed to making postsecondary education "more affordable" through increased transfer payments to provinces; a public prescription drug insurance program for all Canadians was replaced with an "aggressive" review of drug prices and hiring more doctors and nurses; and a 10-year strategy to build 200,000 new public housing units was reduced to a vague commitment of "new funding for affordable and social housing" and restoring funding to the residential rehabilitation assistance program.

The largest shifts in the NDP's policies during the Layton era took place in the areas of the environment, military, crime, labour policy, and trade policy. Earlier platforms stressed rehabilitation, restorative justice, and the underlying causes of crime, such as poverty. By contrast, the 2011 platform pledges tougher punishments and hiring more police officers as the primary mechanisms for reducing crime. On the environment, earlier platforms were stringent in calling for moratoriums on certain types of economic activity (e.g., new development of the oil sands) and completely removing government subsidies to the oil, gas, and nuclear sectors. Later platforms focused on the NDP's ideas for a cap-and-trade system as well as fostering research in green technology and renewable energy. The NDP's 2004 platform had a relatively strong emphasis on labour policy, with suggestions for anti-scab legislation, new national holidays, and a federal minimum wage. Similarly, the NDP called for the replacement of "undemocratic, corporate-driven trade deals" like the North American Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization with fair trade agreements in 2004. However, the 2011 platform mentioned neither labour policy nor trade policy. When it comes to the military, earlier NDP platforms put forth minimalist and vague ideas of a stronger commitment to peacekeeping and increasing the pay of members of the Armed Forces. By 2011, the NDP's platform on the military had evolved considerably by identifying three priorities for Canada's military (peacekeeping, natural disaster relief, and defending Canada) and putting forth specific plans for purchasing more military equipment and improving services for Canadian veterans.

Overall, our examination of NDP platforms during the Layton years illustrates the moderation of the party's ideology. The party quietly removed

many of its ambitious left-wing policies. As the 2000s progressed, NDP platforms also allocated more space to traditional concerns of right-wing parties like crime, infrastructure spending, and military policy while de-emphasizing traditional left-wing concerns like trade, labour, and the environment. There was a change in the tone of NDP platforms during the Layton era. The number of commitments involving "national" strategies, plans, and standards was steadily reduced and replaced with commitments that were introduced by expressions such as "as a practical first step toward" and "as finances permit."

However, it is not accurate to suggest that the NDP's ideology went through a wholesale transformation during the Layton years. Social policy and policies relating to women and minorities continued to make up large portions of the party's platform. Commitments to promoting economic equality, expanding social programs, and deepening Canada's liberal rights regime endured. Further, the 2011 platform did not represent a radical departure from previous platforms. Indeed, approximately 70 per cent of the policies in the 2011 platform can be found in the 2004, 2006, or 2008 NDP platforms. Rather than being a complete makeover of the party's ideology, the 2011 platform streamlined the party's focus and selected the most realizable and practical suggestions from previous platforms.

The NDP's 2015 platform was consistent with its 2011 platform and did not represent a major reversal of the party's ideological moderation. Policies around reducing small business taxation, raising the corporate tax rate, balancing the budget, introducing a mixed-member proportional representation system and a cap-and-trade system to reduce greenhouse gases, hiring more police officers, and hiring more nurses and doctors were virtually identical in 2011 and 2015. Nonetheless, in certain areas it could be argued that the NDP's platform in 2015 was more ambitious and left wing than the party's 2011 platform. The 2015 platform promised 1 million child care spaces over eight years at $15 a day compared to the 2011 promise of 100,000 spaces over four years with no mention of regulating the cost of those spaces. Whereas the 2011 platform contained a vague pledge to lower prescription drug costs when finances permitted, the 2015 platform boldly claimed that an NDP government would work toward universal public drug coverage for all Canadians that would lower prescription drug costs by 30 per cent. The 2011 NDP platform had been silent on labour policy, free trade agreements, and illicit drugs. The 2015 NDP platform committed to the decriminalization of marijuana and ensuring that trade agreements improved social, environmental, and labour standards in partner countries. The NDP also came out strongly against the Trans-Pacific Partnership during the final two weeks of the 2015 election campaign because it feared a loss of jobs in the dairy and auto sectors. Interestingly, the 2015 NDP platform pledged not only

to repeal several pieces of labour legislation passed by the Harper government, but also to introduce anti-scab legislation and a $15 per hour federal minimum wage.

Professionalization of the NDP during the Layton and Mulcair Years

Professionalization has been a key concept in research on contemporary political parties. The basic premise of most research on professionalization is that a fundamental shift has occurred over the last 20 years. In the past, local volunteers and part-time party employees would gather together at election time to organize fundraising, identify supporters, and distribute campaign literature in the area in which they lived. The central party office dealt with national advertising like television commercials and organized a Leader's Tour, but generally let local volunteers and part-time employees run their campaigns how they saw fit (Plasser and Plasser 2002). Over the past two decades, campaigning has becoming increasingly organized by professionals employed full time at the central offices of parties. From fundraising to policy development to campaign strategy, these professionals have taken over tasks traditionally performed by volunteers and local party activists (Gibson and Rommele 2009).

The Layton era coincided with the acceleration of the professionalization of the federal NDP. The largest alteration in the party's organization was the decoupling of the federal and provincial NDP structures. Before the Layton era, provincial sections and local NDP riding associations were responsible for all fundraising, and these local entities were in charge of campaign organizations whenever a federal election rolled around. During Layton's time as leader, the federal NDP began to centrally fundraise out of its Ottawa headquarters using paid telemarketers and direct mailing; it also started receiving annual per-vote subsidies as part of the party financing reforms of the early 2000s.[3] With these increased revenues, the federal party hired field organizers in each region of the country reporting directly to Ottawa. New rules around party financing also forced NDP provincial offices to remove themselves from the organization of federal election campaigns as well as the daily operation of federal riding associations. The result was that the NDP headquarters in Ottawa assumed responsibility for all fundraising and local campaign readiness.

Local NDP activists traditionally organized the nomination of candidates with little interference from Ottawa. During Layton's years as leader, party headquarters became very involved in candidate searches. Starting in 2008 all candidates in NDP nomination races had to be "vetted" by party

headquarters in Ottawa, and candidates could be prohibited from entering the nomination race if the central party office felt that they could embarrass the party or become a distraction during the election campaign. The central office was given the power to disallow a nomination race from proceeding until at least one candidate from an equity-seeking group had entered the race or it had been satisfied that an adequate search for such candidates had taken place.

In the past, NDP campaigns had been organized by an election planning committee (EPC) that was struck close to an election and made up of volunteer members of the party executive along with party staff, representatives from the labour movement, and a representative of the party's parliamentary caucus. As the election approached, the EPC would hire a national campaign manager and ensure that the provincial sections were ready with their individual campaigns. A subcommittee of the EPC would usually peruse the policy coming out of recent conventions to create the platform and embark on a consultation with the party membership. For instance, in 2004 the platform was approved by a meeting of the Federal Council on the eve of the election call (Whitehorn 2004, 111). During that campaign, the EPC convened three times to give advice to the national campaign manager.

Following the 2008 election, the NDP Federal Council passed a motion to simply designate the Party Executive as the EPC for the next election. While the Party Executive set the overarching goals, the real strategizing to achieve these goals was done by a coterie of professional party managers, referred to as the "senior campaign team." The advent of the senior campaign team meant that the NDP was in permanent campaign mode. The team met weekly and did not report to the caucus or anyone within the party's organization. The policy staff in the leader's office devised the 2011 and 2015 NDP platforms after minimal consultation with the Party Executive, Federal Council, caucus, and NDP provincial governments. The themes of the platform were extensively tested using market research techniques such as polling and focus groups. The final platforms were presented to Layton or Mulcair, who retained the power of final approval. In both 2011 and 2015, the senior campaign team ran the campaign out of party headquarters in Ottawa, and the EPC was not convened at any time.

Whereas volunteers like the presidents of local riding associations had traditionally been in charge of communicating with members, NDP headquarters increasingly took over this role by establishing an email subscription list that it used for fundraising appeals and "calls to action"—such as signing a petition being circulated by an NDP MP or mobilizing volunteers at election time. As social media and websites became more prominent at the end of the 2000s, staff at party headquarters became responsible for establishing

and monitoring the NDP's online presence. To create material to disseminate electronically, party headquarters hired paid staff to conduct opposition research and formed a "rapid rebuttal unit" to combat the "spin" of other parties within the social media sphere. Clearly, social media professionals had replaced letters to the editor from rank-and-file party members. Similarly, in contrast to the era when local NDP campaign managers kept paper records of voter contacts from election to election in their basements, the party office in Ottawa developed computerized voter contact databases that collected information from paid telemarketers in Ottawa as well as aggregated all of the contacts made by local volunteers. By the 2015 election, the party headquarters' database was able to provide lists for the sophisticated targeting of specific demographic groups of voters in priority ridings. As such, decisions on key parts of local campaign strategies, such as which area of the riding to prioritize, were increasingly being made in Ottawa.

For its part, the labour movement continued to support the federal NDP during the 2000s (Jansen and Young 2009; Pilon, Ross, and Savage 2011). However, unions began running their own independent campaigns during federal elections as opposed to being completely integrated with the NDP's campaign. Some unions, such as the Canadian Auto Workers, ran campaigns centred on encouraging their members to vote strategically for the Liberal or NDP candidate that had the best chance of defeating a Conservative in their riding. Other unions set up offices in targeted ridings, independent from the NDP campaign, to communicate with local union members to outline the reasons that they should vote for the NDP (McGrane 2011, 97–98).

In sum, the professionalization of the NDP meant that it became more of a cadre party and less of a mass party during Layton's and Mulcair's time as leader. Professionals in Ottawa increasingly controlled the party's campaign machinery, and the labour movement became more of an independent player during federal election campaigns, even to the point that some unions embraced strategic voting. Still, the NDP maintained some characteristics of a mass party. The NDP's central office worked hard to encourage a large and active membership. As opposed to policy development or setting local campaign strategy, the activity that members were called to undertake involved sharing NDP messages on their social media networks and forming neighbourhood teams of foot canvassers. While the NDP did make some adjustments to the ideas in its platform during the Layton era, it cannot be said to have adopted a "flexible, catch-all" ideology. As Laycock (2014) argues, some of the NDP's policy instruments to achieve its social democratic goals may have been altered during the Layton era, but its core values, such as a com-

The Electoral Success of the NDP in the 2000s and the Disappointment of the 2015 Election

Table 9.1 depicts the electoral results of the NDP during Layton's and Mulcair's time as leader as well as the results from the 2000 election, which was Alexa McDonough's last election as leader of the party. In many ways, the degree to which the NDP's 2015 results were disappointing depends on if one compares them to the party's results from 2000 or the party's results from 2011.

Table 9.1 illustrates that the NDP improved its percentage of the popular vote and number of seats in every election that Layton contested as leader. The 2004, 2006, and 2008 elections gradually re-established the NDP to a level of electoral success that it had routinely experienced during the 1970s and 1980s. Evidently, the 2011 election represented a historic breakthrough for the party. The NDP established itself as the dominant party in Quebec. In English Canada, the 2011 election results mirrored closely the NDP's best-ever electoral performance, which was 1988. Whereas the CCF-NDP had always depended on its regional stronghold in Western Canada for a large

Table 9.1 Federal NDP Vote and Seats (2000–2015)

Province	2000		2004		2006		2008		2011		2015	
	Vote (%)	Seats	Vote (%)	Seats	Vote (%)	Seats	Vote (%)	Seats	Vote (%)	Seats	Vote (%)	Seats
NL	13	0	17	0	14	0	34	1	33	2	21	0
PE	9	0	12	0	10	0	10	0	15	0	16	0
NS	24	3	28	2	30	2	29	2	30	3	16	0
NB	12	1	21	1	22	1	22	1	30	1	18	0
QC	2	0	5	0	7	0	12	1	43	59	25	16
ON	8	1	18	7	19	12	18	17	26	22	17	8
MB	21	4	23	4	25	3	24	4	26	2	14	2
SK	26	2	23	0	24	0	25	0	32	0	25	3
AB	5	0	10	0	12	0	13	1	17	1	12	1
BC	11	2	27	5	29	10	26	9	33	12	26	14
YT	32	0	26	0	24	0	9	0	14	0	31	0
NT	27	0	39	0	42	1	41	1	46	1	27	0
NU	18	0	15	0	17	0	28	0	19	0	20	0
Total	9	13	16	19	17	29	18	37	31	103	20	44

number of its seats, the 2011 election established the NDP as much more of a national party. As would be expected of a party with widespread support across the country, the NDP's caucus became increasingly dominated by MPs from Canada's three most populous provinces (Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia). Further, under Layton the NDP became increasingly competitive in every province and even in the Northwest Territories. By 2011, the NDP scored less than 20 per cent of the popular vote only in Alberta and Prince Edward Island. With the Liberals relegated to third party status in the House of Commons and the NDP assuming the mantle of the Official Opposition, the prospect of a NDP federal government became a realistic possibility as the 2015 federal election approached. A poll taken on the day that the 2015 federal election campaign began was especially heartening for the party: the poll placed the NDP's support at 39 per cent, found Mulcair was the most preferred prime minister, and projected that the NDP was only 10 seats short of a majority government (Forum Research 2015).

However, the results of the 2015 federal election turned out to be bitterly disappointing for the NDP. The party saw its popular vote decrease in every province except PEI, and it lost over half of its seats. The NDP was wiped out in Atlantic Canada, where it lost all of its seats to the Liberals. Similarly, the party lost two-thirds of its seats in Ontario and saw its popular vote drop from 26 per cent to 17 per cent. In Quebec, the party lost 43 of its seats and placed second behind the Liberals in popular vote. The NDP's results in Western Canada were not as disastrous as its results in the rest of the country. While the NDP's popular vote decreased in all four Western Canadian provinces, it actually picked up a handful of new seats in Saskatchewan and British Columbia while retaining the same number of seats in Manitoba and Alberta. Nonetheless, holding no seats in Atlantic Canada and having its vote drop under 20 per cent in 6 out of 10 provinces makes it more difficult now to call the NDP a "national party."

What accounts for the NDP's loss of popular vote and seats in the 2015 federal election? While the answer to this question will become clearer as political scientists begin to analyze the election in greater depth, some preliminary conclusions can be made. In light of its lead in the polls, the NDP initially adopted a "government in waiting strategy" that presented itself as a safe and credible alternative to the Conservatives in contrast to the risky change represented by Trudeau and the Liberals. Party strategists decided not to initially attack the Liberals in the hopes of setting up the narrative of a two-way NDP/Conservative race (McGrane 2016). As the campaign wore on, the weaknesses of this strategy became apparent. In seeking to [illegible] safe and credible, the NDP ended up not being able to clearly

outline the differences between itself and the Liberals. Particularly after the NDP promised balanced budgets and the Liberals pledged to run deficits, the two parties may have appeared to voters to be equally progressive. In the middle of the campaign, the NDP's support in Quebec suffered because of the party's opposition to a ban on wearing a niqab at citizenship ceremonies. Polls found that 91 per cent of Quebecers supported the banning of niqabs at citizenship ceremonies, and the NDP suddenly appeared to be offside with commonly held values in Quebec (Blais 2015). As the NDP's support in Quebec eroded, the narrative of a two-way NDP/Conservative race seemed increasingly implausible. NDP party strategists noted that their party's support went into a downward spiral after the niqab episode, as the "Anyone but Conservative" voters who were hesitating between the NDP and the Liberals starting getting behind the idea that only Trudeau could stop another Harper majority (McGrane 2016). As such, the NDP entered the final phase of the campaign with little momentum and unable to differentiate itself from the Liberals, who appeared to represent a bolder and more exciting prospect of change from the way that the Conservatives had governed for the past 10 years. In short, it is possible that the NDP's poor strategic positioning at the end of the campaign really hurt the party as it battled with the Liberals for the votes of the large number of Canadians who had grown tired of Harper and were yearning for a change in government.

Appearing to be within the grasp of victory at the beginning of the 2015 election only to fall to third place by the end of the campaign was undoubtedly frustrating for NDP activists, candidates, and staff members. However, if one compares the NDP's 2015 results to the party's results in the 2000 election, the situation appears less grim. Following the 2000 election, the party barely clung to official party status in the House of Commons and it was the fourth party, holding only one more seat than the fifth-placed Progressive Conservatives. Now the NDP is firmly established as the third party in Parliament, and the Liberals and the Conservatives are the only other parties with official party status. Indeed, 44 seats is the second-highest seat total coming out of any federal election in history for the CCF-NDP. Most importantly, the NDP is competitive in Canada's three largest provinces. The party now has eight seats in Ontario compared to one in 2000 and fourteen seats in British Columbia compared to two in 2000. One out of every four Quebecers voted for the NDP in 2015, compared to only 2 per cent of Quebec voters in 2000.

In summary, the results of the 2015 election were certainly discouraging for the NDP. However, taking a longer-term view, the 2015 results can be characterized as a completion of the party's comeback in Canadian politics.

After coming close to extinction following the 2000 election and soaring to euphoric heights in 2011, the party has now returned to the level of electoral performance that it enjoyed during the 1980s, which previously had been the party's most electorally successful time period, with the notable difference between the current era and the 1980s being that the NDP is now electorally competitive in Quebec. Therefore, the party no longer flirts with irrelevance as it did in the 1990s and early 2000s. It has reasserted itself as Canada's only strong "third party" and re-established its importance to Canadian political discourse.

Conclusion

Layton was undeniably a successful politician. Under his leadership, the NDP went from nearly being wiped off the political map to a legitimate contender to form government. After Layton's death, Mulcair continued the professionalization and ideological moderation of the party that Layton had begun. However, he has not been nearly as electorally successful as Layton, as the 2015 election proved.

More research remains to be done to pinpoint the reasons for the NDP's loss of seats in 2015 and its return to its traditional position as the "third party" of Canadian politics. However, what is clear is that the party has undergone a transformation. Going into the future, the NDP is fundamentally different than it was in 2000. It is more independent from the labour movement and its provincial wings; it has retained an electoral base in Quebec in two consecutive elections; party headquarters in Ottawa has been thoroughly modernized and uses the latest campaign techniques and technology; and it adheres to a practical and moderate version of social democratic ideology. The party has much greater financial resources than in 2000, and it has developed a core of talented permanent political staff in the party. As one NDP political operative observed after the 2015 election, "We have learnt how to play with the big guys."[4] What remains to be seen is whether these changes can prevent a return to the electoral weakness of the 1990s, take it back to where it was in 2011, or simply allow it to maintain its current third party position.

Suggested Readings

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Notes

1 For more information on research on the federal NDP, visit the website of the Canadian Social Democracy Study at www.canadiansocialdemocracy.ca.
2 Federal NDP platforms can be downloaded from www.poltext.org.
3 For a description of the changes to federal party financing during the 2000s, see Young and Jansen (2011).
4 George Soule, director of media for the federal NDP during the 2015 election, interview with author.

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