

Epstein's memoir *Rise Again* offers insightful look at politics

MICHAEL LIGHTSTONE

Published March 29, 2015 - 5:30pm



Howard Epstein takes notes during a news conference in September 2004 at Province House in Halifax.

Sometimes, first impressions prove to be accurate.

In 1994, when city hall observers listened to Howard Epstein during his initial sessions as a rookie Halifax council member, a couple of thoughts came to mind: if this articulate guy wants to play the game of politics at a higher level, he won't have much difficulty. He won't be a lifer at city hall.

Epstein, of course, did jump to a bigger arena – provincial politics – and became a multiple-term MLA for the New Democratic Party. First sent to Province House in 1998, he represented the city’s west end, home to such voters as taxi drivers, postal workers, post-secondary students, teachers, civil servants, nurses and lawyers.

A lawyer himself, Epstein used his verbal and written skills well during his political career. When he bowed out of electoral politics, deciding not to run in the 2013 provincial election, he kept writing.

Last year, Epstein wrote a review of *What I Learned About Politics*, the memoir penned by his former NDP government colleague, Graham Steele. Epstein’s cheeky critique was posted on the Halifax Examiner, a website providing news and commentary, and it ended this way: “The Nova Scotia NDP in and out of power deserves quite a different book. I may write one myself.”

He has.

Epstein’s *Rise Again: Nova Scotia’s NDP on the Rocks* was published this year. It’s a somewhat therapeutic political memoir, not an autobiography, the author says early in his book. Its appearance in the marketplace comes about a year before candidates shop for support at the provincial NDP’s leadership convention next spring. (As a retired politico, Epstein won’t be one of them.)

The book takes a careful look at how the NDP in a status quo-supporting province evolved, and finally came to power in 2009, and why the party essentially imploded during its one-and-only term. It now has third-party status in the legislature and is trying to rebuild.

So what went wrong for the New Democrats? Several crucial matters were not managed well, readers learn, and then there was the all-party MLA expense scandal.

But what really did them in was resembling all those new-boss-same-as-the-old-boss (apologies to Pete Townshend) administrations that have ruled this province, Epstein writes. The NDP had a chance to show Nova Scotians a different way of doing things with a

government uncontaminated by previous power, but they blew it.

“The failure to act as a government in the ways suggested when we were the opposition proved fatal,” Epstein says, in a chapter called *Why We Lost in 2013*. “Higher expectations for government is something the NDP promoted while in opposition, benefited from in 2009, and then suffered in 2013 as voters slumped in their support through disappointment.”

When he quit politics, Epstein had been a member of the NDP for decades. In his book, the 66-year-old says there were times he considered leaving the New Democrats to sit as an independent. This was not because he was left out of cabinet – Epstein has acknowledged more than once being disappointed about that – but it was over the direction former premier Darrell Dexter was taking the province and his party.

Rise Again is divided into five parts; the fourth includes an examination of internal party dissent. There’s candid behind-the-scenes material here for the New Democrats’ political opponents or bitter NDP members who like to hit themselves over the head with a stick. It includes a June 2012 letter that 50 longtime NDP backers sent in confidence to provincial caucus members.

“If the NDP now actually stands for anything fundamentally different, for any change from previous governments, it is hard to see what it is,” the letter says. “And if the NDP is not a party of change in Nova Scotia, why should those who want change support it.”

A meeting was set up in Halifax. Epstein says about 19 of the letter’s signatories showed up, as did party president David Wallbridge. “The discussion became testy,” the book says.

Later, a second get-together was organized and it wasn’t much smoother than the first. “It was not a happy event,” Epstein says in his memoir. But there was some agreement reached between the two sides.

According to Epstein, Dexter’s view of the 50 unhappy campers was

this: “All our critics live together within five blocks of one another.” In other words, Epstein writes, the former premier saw them as “a small clique of little account.” It turns out there were a lot more New Democrats in this province upset with the way their ship was heading and with its captain.

And what about that expense scandal? Epstein says it showed him and his fellow MLAs “just how little we knew about our colleagues.” He adds: “We deal with each other every day, yet much remains hidden.”

For political junkies, NDP soldiers, policy wonks and students of recent Nova Scotia history, Epstein’s book is a good read. However, this slice of political life is not likely to appeal to many beyond that cohort.

As a narrative, the book reads almost exactly the way Epstein speaks – at least publicly, to reporters and such – which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. There’s plenty of plain English, some lawyerly words and phrases and passages sprinkled with humour.

In the coming months or years, might there be other accounts of Nova Scotia’s NDP-in-government experiment? Epstein says in his book that he hopes there will.

Michael Lightstone is a freelance journalist living in Dartmouth.

<http://thechronicleherald.ca/thenovascotian/1277510-epstein’s-memoir-rise-again-offers-insightful-look-at-politics>