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Howard Epstein's Book Trashes NDP Record

Brian Flinn

Howard Epstein says the NDP needs to end its "drift to the middle" if it wants to avoid electoral oblivion.

The former Halifax Chebucto MLA has written a new book to explain why he believes the Darrell Dexter government became Nova Scotia's first one-term regime in 131 years.

Rise Again: Nova Scotia's NDP on the Rocks portrays the party's four years in office as a missed opportunity.

"The party is at a moment of crisis. Party memberships have dwindled to a pretty well historic low; the party is financially in a really rocky place. We're kind of adrift at the moment," Epstein said in an interview Thursday.

Epstein said the NDP rose to official opposition and finally government because Nova Scotians were ready for change. They turned to a party that had presented a different point of view and fresh, progressive ideas.

But Dexter and his inner circle had a different idea, he said.

They believed the key to getting elected and remaining in power was demonstrating that the NDP was only slightly different from the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives.

The Dexter government offered an open hand to large corporations including pulp and paper manufacturers and Irving Shipbuilding

It financed a new highrise convention centre in downtown Halifax and created a natural resources policy that continued to allow widespread clearcutting.

"There were a number of things that I found profoundly offensive," Epstein recalled.

He said a number of like-minded New Democrats left the party over those decisions, and there were several occasions when he considered sitting as an independent.

Members of his riding association and other MLAs helped convince him to stay, he said.

Left Out of Cabinet

Epstein, who is now 66, had arguably the most impressive credentials in the NDP caucus.

A law professor and former executive director of the Ecology Action Centre, he spent a term on Halifax Regional Council before being elected MLA on Halifax Regional Council before being elected MLA in the NDP's breakthrough election in 1998.

When the party formed government 11 years later, Epstein was the only veteran from that election who was excluded from cabinet.

He said he was not surprised that Dexter did not give him a portfolio, but it was a great disappointment to be left out.

It also sent a strong message to the party's left.

Epstein said he was one of about 10 backbenchers who regularly met to discuss government policies and complain about the direction imposed by the Premier's Office.

He recounts in the book how he came closest to quitting in 2012 after the Premier's Office asked him to rebuke former auditor general Jacques Lapointe for straying into a critique of economic policy.

When reporters asked about the exchange, Dexter belittled the points he made as typical Epstein.

Epstein protested the treatment by resigning as a government member of legislative committees. He decided not to run for re-election.

The former MLA said he is not impressed by the performance of the seven-member NDP caucus since the 2013 defeat.

He feels interim leader Maureen MacDonald is too focused on defending a record that voters have already rejected.

Epstein said the only way to rejuvenate the NDP is to look outside the Dexter cabinet when the party chooses a new leader in the spring of 2016.

He's backing Gary Burrill, another former backbencher who has yet to officially enter the race.

Book Launch Thursday

Epstein is launching his book March 19 at the Women's Council House on the corner of Inglis and Young streets.

Published by Chris Majka's small Empty Mirrors Press, its 348 pages. It will retain for \$24.95.*

Epstein contrasted it with former colleague Graham Steele's thinner 2014 book, What I learned About Politics.

"For a few dollars more, you get twice the book in all respects," Epstein chuckled.

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* In the article, erroneously given as \$30.