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Whack-a-Mole

It began to be clear a full eighteen months before the 2009 election that the Tories were declining in popularity and the NDP was rising. Very good poll numbers for us came out in January 2008. At caucus, Bill Estabrooks enthused that, “Darrell Dexter walks on water,” to which John MacDonell replied, “Well, it is January – come on.” But now with the possibility of forming government becoming a tantalizing reality, what we were going to do became a major preoccupation for the party membership. By the May 2009 Provincial Council meeting there was some concern over the adequacy of the platform. Taking the pragmatic line, Dan O’Connor said, “There’s not much point in having details about what we would do as government if we don’t win government. So helping us win government is job one for the platform.”

The internal rhetoric about what the new Nova Scotia NDP government would be had, in essence, two components. The first was to exhibit fiscal soundness through achieving a balanced budget. The second was to move towards progressive NDP ideals of social change, but to do so step by step. The plan was to imitate the NDP governments of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Tommy Douglas, we were told, did not bring in Medicare until the province’s books were balanced – fiscal discipline first. In both provinces successive governments had been elected. The plan for Nova Scotia was for three terms in a row. In fact, it is not so obvious that this second branch of what was said, was actually the plan. Looking objectively, the preoccupations were a balanced budget and job creation.



Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, Nova Scotia Premier Darrell Dexter, and Québec Premier Jean Charest at the Council of the Federation meeting in Halifax in 2012.

The actual story was of course entirely different. The attempt to show that a NDP Government could be fiscally disciplined was hopelessly compromised by the promise to balance the books in the first year of government, and to do so without raising taxes or cutting services. This was such a profoundly ridiculous, unachievable objective that it should never have been made in the first place. Trying to live up to the promise even in its modified form (back to balance in four years with a temporary increase in the HST) was also unachievable and had the unfortunate consequence of driving the rest of the policy agenda. It drove policy by requiring cuts to be made to the cost of services. This became, more than the broken promise, part of what offended voters.

Unfortunately, the Dexter government did not seriously lead public opinion into adopting a vision of where the NDP would go. In their 1999 winning election, the Hamm PCs talked about a ‘plan’ for Nova Scotia. Their plan was pretty thin, and focused mostly on managerial objectives. A plan, however, is not a vision. Visions are transformative. Visions invite hope. Visions invoke the future. Visions promise that we can all do better. Our government was not visionary. To the extent that ministers came up with policy documents, for the most part they were modest (immigration), late (housing; aquaculture; “Kids and Learning First”), or misconceived (jobsHere). What did characterize our time in government was

being reactive to events as they happened to occur, rather than setting our own course.

The two policy documents that had actual substance, “Better Care Sooner”¹ and the Natural Resources Strategy² suffered different fates. The health policy, mostly about the delivery of emergency services outside of HRM’s main hospital complex, and built on the basis of the Ross Report,³ was implemented, though not without some difficulties. However, Collaborative Emergency Centres were not what many communities expected from the NDP after its time in Opposition and election talk of “keeping ERs open.” As for the natural resources policy, hardly any of it was implemented. The section dealing with forestry was made completely subordinate to the desperate search for jobs.

Our four years in office were a lurch from one crisis to the next. The Province’s books are found to be a mess? Panic. All hands on deck to get “Back To Balance.” The Auditor General finds serious problems with the MLA expense system? Panic. All hands on deck to show that we can be as petty as anyone about spending by elected officials. Two pulp and paper mills are about to close? Panic. Never heard of this before, but all hands on deck to show that we can shovel out the cash with the best of them.