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A Taste of Bitterness: Internal Dissent

As the party entered its third year in power, many long time NDP members became agitated. Resignations started. Complaints were common. Where were serious anti-poverty measures? Why had we adopted the tax policies of the Tories? Why were we not being clear with respect to fracking? Why were fish farms being approved? Why the support for the Convention Centre? Pick an issue, and the government had its critics. And the critics were especially sharp from inside the party. Cliff White, a long-time activist (Ecology Action Centre, Council of Canadians) resigned. Donna Parker, a long-time Halifax Chebucto volunteer, and latterly my constituency assistant, resigned. Later on Margie MacDonald a NDP stalwart and executive assistant to the Minister of Community Services, reduced her monetary contributions to the party to a minimum. At some point “used to be NDP” buttons were printed and worn. Mary MacLachlan (an art history professor at NSCAD) wrote a critical letter because of the government’s position on NSCAD. Leonard Preyra’s constituency executive members, David and Jodi Asbell-Clark, resigned.

In fact, well before 2012 the caucus itself had become uneasy. At various meetings starting in early 2010 caucus members identified two main problems; one was a lack of wider involvement for caucus in decision-making, and the other was insufficient emphasis on traditional NDP policies. “We are not part of a team; we are just on the bench,” said Jim Boudreau (MLA for Guysborough) at a March 2010 discussion of the budget.

Gary Burrill noted that the distressing cynicism about all politicians that had surfaced during the Expenses Scandal over the previous few months made it all the more important that the NDP show itself as different. It was a tough situation. Any government faces a wide range of difficult issues and it is easy to be distracted and swamped. The reaction of some Cabinet members was a mixture of clichés (“We are family”), criticism (“You need a thicker skin. It’s not a cakewalk. If you can’t take it, maybe you’re in the wrong business”), and reassurance (“We are defining ourselves. We are moving ahead in a limited way. If Nova Scotia had a Liberal or PC government you would see a major attack on the public sector. We do have a different set of values.”)

A group of about ten backbench MLAs began meeting in the caucus room to talk amongst ourselves. This made the Premier’s Office nervous. Staffers were sent to monitor the talks. Conversation initially focused on anti-poverty issues. But requests for data to help the discussions were ignored or were slow to be answered. The group moved out of the caucus office for its meetings, then held them without staff being present. There was acknowledgement that better communication internally was desirable. Darrell held some stilted meetings with backbenchers that accomplished little. Caucus started to be given “Issues Summaries” that previously had circulated only to Cabinet. But all of this did little to deal with the core problems.

In the summer of 2011 three of the MLAs (not including me) wrote to Darrell to again urge some change in direction. I have these letters. The authors wish to remain anonymous; however, here are some extracts: **MLA “A”** wrote: “There are two years left in this mandate. We have the time to come up with a distinct and unique NDP initiative, which will be a beacon to rally the grassroots troops and energize those of us who need to see the advancement of the NDP principle of greater social equality. To date, our initiative has been to balance the budget. This will not be enough to get us re-elected.” **MLA “B”** wrote: “We have indeed honoured our careful election commitments by making a point of ticking them off one-by-one. But despite our central principles ... social justice issues and poverty concerns appear to have been considered only after considerable backbench effort. In my view, our business-focus and our careful

incremental approach are helping traditional foes ... while our neglect of a social justice agenda ... discourages our traditional political base.” **MLA “C”** wrote: “Speaking for myself, I find our present mode of operation, in which we are constantly called on to defend various expenditure restraints, etc., simply not adequately worthy. This malaise of morale is much in evidence amongst party activists, and more in evidence in our caucus than [the Premier] may be aware. The undertow force in our situation is the unique way in which collective negativity functions in Nova Scotian political culture. [Voters are] poised to say ‘See, we told you; those guys are no good either.’ This deadly cultural propensity to the negative is not very amenable to incrementalism. Small measures, with scattered focus, are not capable to re-direct it.”

There was a mantra that emanated from the Premier’s Office: “Don’t let the perfect get in the way of the good.” This message came regularly. Joining it was a message from long-time Manitoba cabinet minister Gord Mackintosh who was invited to give caucus a pep-talk in January 2012. The Nova Scotia NDP has had a close relationship with Manitoba Dippers. Dan O’Connor worked there for a while. He brought two talented Premier’s Office staff from there – Shawna Martin and Wade Dirksen. And of course the NDP has won four elections in a row in Manitoba, something our planners aspired to. Mackintosh told us, “The most effective change is incremental change. It takes a long time to make real change. One term is not enough.” In a way this appears to set up a contrast with what critics inside the party were saying, but it is not necessarily the case. Party stalwarts were not opposed to incrementalism. What troubled critics were that the wrong priorities were favoured, and that no clear long-term vision appeared that would inspire members.

In the summer of 2012 a group of fifty NDP supporters, long time members who had worked hard to support the party to the point of gaining government, signed a letter written primarily by economist Lars Osberg. The main point was that in proposing to reduce the HST revenues, and in reverting to the *status quo*, the government was heading down a path of not being able to afford new social spending, and in effect we would be simply adopting Tory tax structure and policy instead of crafting our own.