The CCF-NDP in Quebec: The Lessons of History

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In September 1984, the New Democratic Party, which many had predicted would be erased from the political map, withstood the Conservative onslaught and captured essentially the same number of votes and seats as in the previous election. NDP members elected to the House of Commons represented areas which had traditionally supported the party, namely Western Canada and Ontario. The NDP failed to return any members east of Ottawa. In Quebec, they won about 9 per cent of the popular vote, less than half of the national average. Since it was founded in 1961, the NDP has never been able to improve its 1965 performance in Quebec when, under the leadership of Robert Cliche, it garnered about eleven per cent of the popular vote.

Canadian history has shown clearly that a federal political party cannot hope to govern without a certain number of seats in Quebec. If the NDP aspires to be more than just a mere pressure group, it must work to broaden its base in Quebec. Not everyone in the party shares this ambition. Some party members and even some MPs would be uncomfortable with the prospect of one day holding power. Most leaders of the party are, however, growing impatient. They are aware of the stakes that Quebec represents.

In a recent book, *Crisis of Clarity*[1], Michael Bradley, a former NDP party member, blames the party's failure to gain power partly on its working class ideology which is difficult to reconcile with the complex Canadian reality. He advocates a back to basics approach, humanism infused with the religious values of the CCF. His analysis might explain why NDP support in English Canada has levelled off, but it in no way explains the weakness of the social democratic movement in Quebec. Indeed, when Woodsworth and Coldwell were at the helm of the CCF, their voices fell on deaf ears in French Canada.

The CCF (1932-1961)

In the early 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, labour MPs and representatives of Prairie and Ontario farmers had been elected to the Commons. The leader of this group, J.S. Woodsworth, proposed establishment of a co-operative federation. Thus, various labour and farmer organizations gathered in Calgary in 1932 to found the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the CCF. A few delegates from Quebec were in attendance, mainly union representatives from the Canadian Congress of Labour and English-speaking members of the academic community representing the League for Social Reconstruction. In 1933, th Federation adopted a fourteen point manifesto. Known as th *Regina Manifesto*, this document set out the basic tenets of th CCF program. Twelve of the fourteen clauses were drafted by committee headed by Frank Scott of Montreal, a distinguishe member of the League for Social Reconstruction. As historia Andrée Lévesque noted, the first CCF members in Quebec wer intellectuals rather than members of the urban working class, a was the case in British Columbia, or farmers as was true in th Prairies.[2] The noble intention of party founders to recruit Frar cophone workers from Montreal fell by the wayside. Nor did th CCF find a voice to speak for French Canada.

The party was slow to produce translations of literatu and speeches originally drafted in English. Worse still, the fled ling movement was viewed with contempt by the powerful Cat olic Church. Father Georges-Henri Lévesque had the following t say about the party in *L'Action nationale*: "This new political, an frankly, socialist party . . .is the true incarnation of socialism i Canada. A pity, really. True socialism is nothing more than late communism. Without really intending to be most of the tim socialism is the surest precursor to communism. The experienc of other countries amply demonstrates this".[3]

The CCF was also denounced by the Archbishop Montreal and by Cardinal Villeneuve. Conciliatory efforts on th part of CCF leaders proved unsuccessful. It was not until th 1950s that the Church adopted a neutral attitude toward the CC Even after the open denouncements of the Church ceased to be problem, the philosophy of the CCF continued to go unheeded Quebec, since it ran counter to the prevailing Catholic spi itualism which focussed on happiness in the hereafter rath than on a better life here on earth.

The Great Depression should have helped the socialis cause. Instead, two factors combined to hinder it. The first w felt on a national scale. Economic conditions revived regional i terests. What was perceived as provincialism in English Cana became a quest for independence in Quebec. The centralist sol tions of the CCF clashed with these aspirations. The second fact pertains to the unique nature of the working class in Quebec. members, who had poured into the cities on the wave of indu trialization and urbanization, still clung to traditional values a were not inclined to display class solidarity.

Other characteristics of the CCF party also clashed w the political habits of Quebeckers. As one author pointed o "the CCF did appear odd: it actually sold membership cards a expected its members to raise money for the party. No rewar were promised or forthcoming at election time".[4] Furthermo the methods of the CCF and its speeches, which were remin cent of those delivered by fundamentalist preachers in Weste Canada and which were given during public meetings in Englis held little attraction for Quebeckers.

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A convention of the CCF in Montréal in 1958. L-r David Lewis, unidentified, M.J. Coldwell, and Thérèse Casgrain. (Public Archives of Canada).

The origins of the party, its platform, its methods and its speeches all conspired to put French Canadians ill at ease. The party's foreign, even hostile image was further exacerbated by unpopular stands and misguided statements. Following the invasion of Poland, a divided CCF supported Canada's limited participation in World War II. It also spoke out against bilingual bank notes and provincial taxes. Some of its leaders were disdainful of French Canadians. Woodsworth referred to Quebec as the happy hunting ground of English Canadian capitalists. H.H. Haydon, a member of the first CCF council of Montreal, described French Canadians as an illiterate class, more likely to be governed by their emotions and to bow to the will of the authorities. During the 1950s, statements with regard to Quebec made by CCF MPs like Harold Winch, Erhart Regier, Hazen Argue, Angus MacInnis and later Douglas Fisher roused the consternation of Quebeckers. Despite the apologies of party leaders, many Francophone rank-and-file members abandoned ship.

The CCF's unfamiliar image was softened a little by the presence of Thérèse Casgrain, provincial party leader from 1953 to 1957. Her greatest contribution, aside from securing more funding for the Quebec wing of the CCF and more autonomy for Quebec within the Federation, was to attract several young intellectuals who were searching for a niche in a society where the Church dominated society's institutions. Individuals such as Gérard Pelletier, Pierre Juneau, Maurice Sauvé, Guy Rocher, Maurice Lamontagne, Jean-Charles Falardeau and Pierre Trudeau scorned Duplessis and flirted with the idea of joining the party but soon looked elsewhere because of the lack of opportunities available to them. Some went on to found *Cité Libre*, a magazine which focussed primarily on provincial politics. Other disappeared into the neutral territory of the academic community or went on to lend their talents to the federal public service or become active in the labour movement. Despite her good intentions and support, Casgrain, who was born to a wealthy family, was unable to make inroads in labour circles. In 1957, she was replaced by Michel Chartrand.

The intellectual upheaval of the late 1950s benefitted the Liberal Party of Jean Lesage. It was in a better position to push the Union Nationale out of office. At no time did membership in the CCF exceed 900 in Quebec and only a quarter of the members were Francophones. By comparison party membership in Ontario rarely dipped below the 4,000 figure. The CCF was more of a political movement than an actual political party in Quebec.

Professor Walter Young put his finger on the CCF's problems when he said, "There was nothing in the CCF as a political movement that was really consistent with attitudes that prevailed in Quebec. It was a foreign element, it was opposed by the Catholic Church, it preached centralism, and it had in it English Canadians who frankly demonstrated great ignorance and prejudice where Quebec and French-Canadian rights were concerned. Throughout its sickly career in that province, the CCF spoke to Quebec with an English accent. It made no difference that Lewis and Scott were fluently bilingual; the CCF simply had no roots in Quebec and was unable to demonstrate effectively any reason why there should be any".[5]

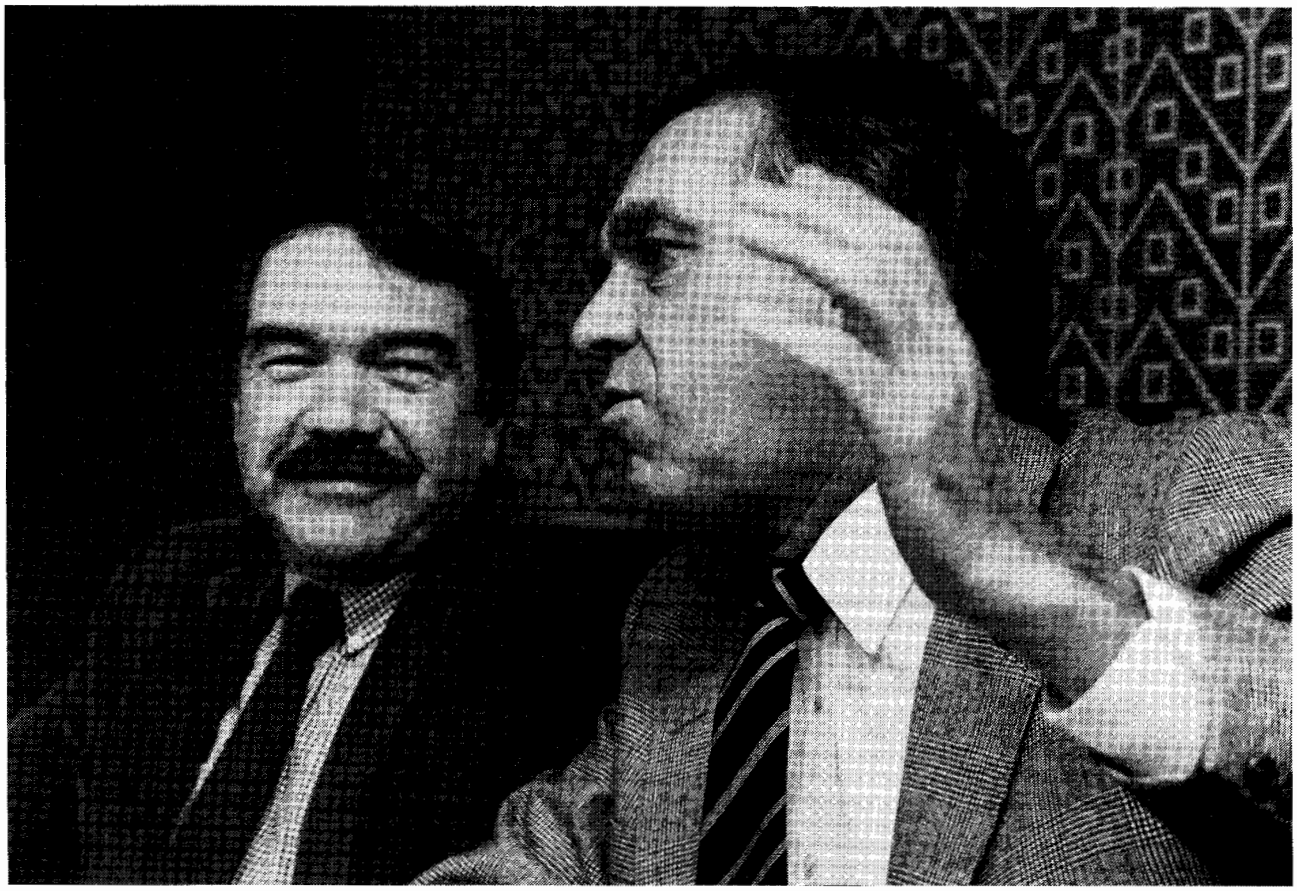
The NDP (1961-1984)

At the end of the 1950s, renewed recession, increasingly repressive labour legislation in a number of provinces including Quebec, disenchantment with the traditional parties, awareness of the eroding support for the CCF and the need to enlarge its

base, triggered a movement in favour of a New Party. This time the *Fédération des travailleurs du Québec* (FTQ) sent a strong Quebec contingent to the founding convention of the New Democratic Party in late summer, 1961. Quebec's social democrats were characterized by their nationalism, a reflection of the social movement that was gaining support among them in the early 1960s. They were determined to get off on the right foot and to make sure that the New Party did not repeat the mistakes of the CCF. They had the Party's National Council re-named the Federal Council; obtained recognition for Canada's bi-national character; and insisted that one of the five Party vice-presidents be a francophone.

policy convention in June 1963. Two subjects were discussed: the relationship between the provincial wing and the federal party, and that between Quebec and Canada. The resulting schism produced the *Nouveau Parti Démocratique-Québec* (NDP-Québec), which leaned toward federalism, and a *Parti Socialiste du Québec*, which was intended to be active provincially and contested the 1966 provincial elections.

Permanent NPD-Québec structures were set up in March 1965. The election of Robert Cliche as leader was enthusiastically received both in English Canada and in Quebec. In the 1965 elections, the Party won almost 12% of the vote in Quebec and 18% in Montreal, almost the Canadian average. New recruits joined the



Jean-Paul Harney, leader of the NDP in Quebec and federal leader Ed Broadbent. (Canapress)

But these concessions in principle, accepted reluctantly by the Western delegates to avoid splitting the newly-formed Party, did not really alter the plainly federalist stance of the New Party. This was to cause problems for the NDP as Quebec's demands became more pressing.

In 1962, while the New Democratic troops in Quebec were mustering, a statement by federal Party leader Tommy Douglas on provincial powers revived the debate. The Quebec members protested, and prudently distanced themselves. The federal Party called for a wideranging inquiry into bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada.

During the June 1962 election the NDP took 4.4% of the Quebec vote as opposed to 13.4% nation-wide. In the election of April 1963 its share of the Quebec vote had climbed to 7.1% while overall results remained virtually the same. The provincial NDP was still being directed by a provisional council, which held a

Party whose constitutional stance was veering more toward au tonomy for Quebec. At its 1967 convention even the Federa Council, faced with the success of the NPD-Québec, accepted th idea of special status for Quebec. Enthusiasm reached unprec dented heights.

In the federal election of June 25, 1968, although suppo for the NDP stayed at 17% nation-wide, it fell by 5 points i Quebec to just over 7%. Trudeaumania was too strong for Robe Cliche, who resigned the presidency of the NPD-Québec. A ver ture into the provincial arena in 1970 proved disastrous: the Par Québécois by then claimed to represent nationalists and labou alike. The FTQ, battle-weary, gradually withdrew its formal suj port from the NDP.

At a federal convention in Ottawa in 1971, the Quebec del gation wanted to obtain recognition for Quebec's right to sel determination. They were supported by the Party's radical win

the Waffle Group. The resolution was rejected by a vote of 2 to 1, and the Party reaffirmed its faith in a united Canada. The new leader, David Lewis, said that the NPD-Québec and the Waffle would have to accept Party policy as decided by the convention.

The NPD-Québec included self-determination in its platform during the 1972 federal elections, and was repudiated by the federal Party. The results of the 1972 and 1974 elections confirmed the NDP's stagnation in Quebec. A renewed venture on the provincial scene failed in 1976 when the FTQ supported the Parti Québécois, which won the election.

In 1977, resolutions from a number of local and provincial NDP groups in different parts of Canada recommended that Quebec's right to self-determination be recognized, but the resolution was defeated at the convention. Instead, another resolution was passed affirming that the people of Quebec had a right to make their choice without constraint. Ed Broadbent asserted that this did not mean that Quebec could be sole judge of the terms of its independence. The Quebec wing interpreted the vote as a recognition of Quebec's right to self-determination. Despite this ambiguous resolution, the federal Party worked for the "No" committee during the referendum campaign, and its caucus, with two exceptions, supported passage of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, even without Quebec's assent.

Support for the NDP in Quebec remained stable in the 1979 and 1980 elections despite the Party's severely reduced provincial organization. Throughout the 1970s, the political arena was dominated by the Pierre Trudeau-René Lévesque duel over federalism versus sovereignty. The New Democratic Party, a small party without any high profile supporters in Quebec, was not very visible.

The Present and the Future

Of the obstacles that littered the CCF's path before 1960, some have disappeared; others have remained. Counting on a more militant working class, in a society freed from the grip of the Church, the social democratic movement in Quebec thought the time had come for an advance. But the New Democratic Party was unable to shake off the mistrust engendered by its Anglo-Canadian origins, the reaction against its centralist solutions and the indifference resulting from a lack of well-known faces in the Party's ranks.

Despite the presence of Robert Cliche between 1965 and 1968, it would seem that Quebec's workers did not have confidence in the NDP's ability to bring about social reforms. The Party's best ideas were put into application nationally by the federal Liberals and provincially by the Liberal Party under Jean Lesage and the Parti Québécois under René Lévesque. Generally the unions preferred not to alienate the major parties at election time, and concentrated their efforts in union action. Their members preferred to support the traditional parties.

The referendum of 1980, the *Constitution Act, 1982*, the economic crisis at the beginning of the decade, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's retirement, labour's dissatisfaction with the second Lévesque administration, and Quebecker's apparent indifference to the constitutional debates gave new hope to the NDP's leaders. They appeared willing to soften the Party's constitutional stance, as they had at the time of the Party's founding in 1961 and again when Robert Cliche gave it momentum in 1968. Once again they believed that circumstances favoured the NDP. A political vacuum appeared to be developing in Quebec, both federally and provincially, and the NDP leadership talked more and more about the right to self-determination, and opting-out with financial compensation.

An effort was made to revitalize the Quebec wing of the NDP. John Harney, a former NDP Member of Parliament from Ontario, was entrusted with the responsibility of rebuilding the Party. He hastily set up riding organizations for the September, 1984 federal election.

The NPD-Québec also re-entered provincial politics with the hope of making gains at the expense of the PQ. It flung its faithful into the December 1985 election (fielding ninety) candidates but only won 2.5% of the vote.

In 1986 some polls have put the NDP in second place in Quebec federally with 27% of the decided vote. It plans to hold its next convention in Montreal in the spring of 1987, and looks forward optimistically to the elections of 1988, in which it expects NDP candidates to be elected from every region of Canada. But many questions will have to be answered before this can happen. Does this 27% represent disenchantment with other parties or genuine support? Can the NDP capitalize on this to attract prominent candidates? Is the Party ready to invest the amounts needed to set up a competitive electoral machine even if the seats to be won from Quebec are marginal? Would it make concessions in its constitutional stance that will rally its Quebec wing and attract a solid segment of Quebec's voters? Would such concessions affect the NDP's traditional bases of support in the West? Can it become as effective a presence at the provincial level in Quebec as it has in several other provinces, given that Quebec has a tendency to support parties that are either unique to Quebec or are independent of their federal counterpart? In short, history has pointed out the obstacles to be overcome if the NDP is to become a viable force in Quebec politics. It remains to be seen if the lessons can be used to attain electoral success. ■

Notes

[1]Michel Bradley, *Crisis of Clarity. The New Democratic and the Quest for the Holy Grail*, Toronto, Summerhill Press Ltd., 1985, p. 224.
[2]Andrée Lévesque, *Virage à gauche interdit. Les communistes, les socialistes et leur ennemis au Québec*, 1929-1939, Montréal, Boréal Express, 1984, p. 72.
[3]See Georges-Henri Lévesque, "Socialisme canadien", *L'Action Nationale*, Vol. II (october 1933), p. 92.
[4]Susan Mann-Trofimenkoff, "Thérèse Casgrain and the CCF in Quebec," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 66 (no. 2., 1985) p. 137.
[5]Walter D. Young, *The Anatomy of a Party: The National CCF, 1932-61*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1969, p. 215.